

Nick Cave: Master of Celebration and Transparency

By Ricki Morse



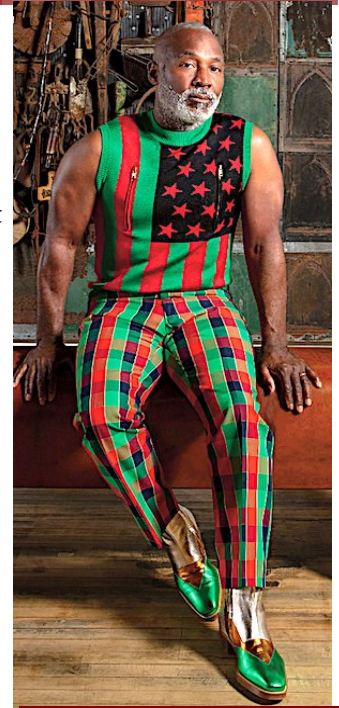
Nick Cave (b. 1959) sees himself as a messenger, bringing people together in celebrations of connectedness and confrontation with reality, rejecting denial as a betrayal of life. His optimistic, joyful spirit was buoyed as the third of seven brothers in Fulton, Missouri, and later Columbus, tightly knit communities that watched after all the kids. His mother was a single mom, a medical administrator, who often took the boys to her parent's local farm, sharing chores, caring for the animals. Today he marvels at the "unconditional love" surrounding their childhood and the prominence of handywork in the household, including grandmother's quilts and aunts' skilled needle work, a necessity for hand-me-downs among the seven boys. Nick remembers removing the sleeves from an older brother's jacket and replacing them with plaid fabric, and his mother entertaining the boys with handmade sock puppets.

Nick's innate talents guided his educational choices, from entering the Kansas City Art Institute to meeting Alvin Alley when he was 20 and attending the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre summer schools in New York City for the next several years, polishing his skills as a dancer and experience as a performer. After graduating from the Art Institute in 1981, he worked professionally as a fashion designer, including a stint at Macy's designing displays, continuing his pursuit of a career as an artist and dancer at the Cranbrook Academy of Art in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, in 1988. Upon graduation he accepted the chair of the Fashion Design Program at the Art Institute of Chicago, the first of many academic positions he has held through the years.

Soundsuits

As a black, gay man, Nick's personal identity was intertwined with racial and gender inequalities which coalesced around the 1991 LAPD beating of an unarmed black man, Rodney King. Nick wrote, "*I started thinking about myself more and more as a black man – as someone who was discarded, devalued, viewed as less than. I started thinking about the role of identity, being racially profiled, feeling devalued, less than, dismissed. And then I happened to be in the park this one particular day and looked down at the ground, and there was a twig. And I just thought, well, that's discarded, and it's sort of insignificant. And so I just started then gathering the twigs, and before I knew it, I was, had built a sculpture.*"

Nick Cave, *Soundsuit*, 1992, collected twigs, Torrance Museum, CA.



One of the covers for the 2019 *NY Sunday Times Magazine* series *Four Greats*, photo by Renée Cox. Cave's costume fabric is his adaptation of David Hammon's *African-American Flag*, 1990.



Cave's mother taught him that you can create something magical out of something mundane.



Nick Cave, *Foreoftermore*, 2022, Guggenheim Museum, NY. *Soundsuits* displayed in Cave's retrospective.

He hadn't thought beyond the moment of capturing his separateness, his insignificance in the twigs. But when he tried it on, its meaning began to expand. The suit made rustling noises, increased and amplified by his dance movements. He became invisible as a black man, or as gay, free to move through the world creating his own sound, being his own unique individual. *Soundsuits* began, then, as disguises, providing the wearer with protection from judgment or marginalization. The universality of the *Soundsuits* expanded with Cave's imagination, from African shamans to

Ku Klux Klan robes, without gender or skin color, they provided the artist with widely varying costumes in which to embody human dilemmas, leading to his production of over 500 iterations. With the 1992 release of the LA police officers, the need for protection was magnified, as was the significance of the *Soundsuits* and heralded Cave's elaboration of *soundsuits* into choreographed performances.

Heard.NY

In 2013 Cave was commissioned by the MTA to design a seven-day performance commemorating the centennial of Grand Central Station in collaboration with the Alvin Ailey Dance Company. He designed and constructed a herd (note the pun) of 30 synthetic raffia encrusted horses, each manned by two dancers, who enacted "crossings" twice a day in Grand Central's Vanderbilt Hall for just a week. Accompanied by music, one dancer manning the head, the other the body, the cavorting, swirling figures filled the space with color and motion, creating a space for an African inspired dream, vision, in the hub of New York City bustle. Requests from around the world ensued, and Cave designed dozens of "crossings" including *Heard.SYD* performed



Nick Cave, *Heard.SYD*, 2016, *Soundsuit* horses, performed on streets of Sydney.

in the streets of Sydney, Australia.

Nick Cave's productivity is astonishing, particularly when we realize that each project generates a multitude of re-productions, major among these the ongoing creation of new *Soundsuits*, each unique. He rented an abandoned factory the size of a football field for his first installation of *Until* (2016-2017), a combined townhall



Nick Cave, *Until*, 2016, found objects, mementoes of racism and violence, scattered among decorative, playful objects, forcing us to acknowledge pain and suffering.

and performance space and a “sinister wonderland,” a play on the phrase “innocent until proven guilty,” or in this case “guilty until proven innocent” — he addresses issues of gun violence, gun control policy, race relations, and gender politics in America today. Entering through a hanging screen of glittering wind spinners, we come upon startling objects, caricatured African Americans, guns, the residue of violence. The Massachusetts Museum of Modern Art installed the exhibition in June 2017, followed by shows in Sydney Australia and Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Arkansas.

Foreoftermore

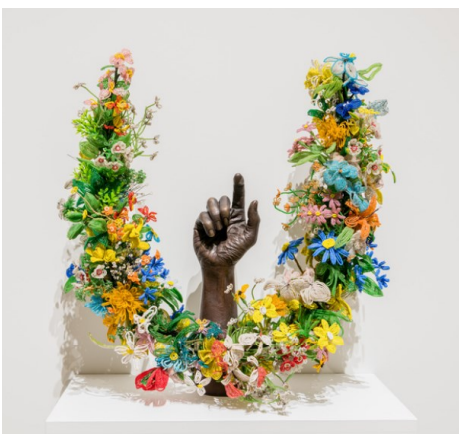
In May 2022 the first museum retrospective of Cave’s work opened at the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art.

foreoftermore dedicates his work to those who live their lives as the “other,” because of race, sexual identity, “difference,” and celebrates the power of art to envision a new future which honors the individual. From the harsh confrontation of the black head on American shells, we are lulled by the found thrift store paintings of ships and puffy



Above left: Cave’s Untitled (2018), features a found carved head and an American flag made of used shotgun shells, courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. Photo by James Prinz Photography. Right: Cave’s, Sea Sick, 2014, found objects: thrift shop ship paintings, gold hands, black head (originally tobacco container —later spittoon) assembled to re-enact not only the sea sickness of the enslaved Africans but the corruption masked by the romantic ships and billowing clouds. The gold hands cover the slave’s ears, warding off his fate.

clouds, rocking in various directions, suggesting the motion within the holds of ships carrying Africans toward slavery, the black man covering his ears against what comes next.



Nick Cave, Unarmed, 2016, cast bronze arm, glass-beaded flowers, a powerful contrast to the raised black fist.

In 2019 *The New York Times* described Cave as “the most joyous, and critical artist in America.” His optimistic energy fuels an innate transparency, allowing him to reveal his own sense of insignificance in the face of marginalization as a black man. His expressions of anger through the raised black fist soon evolved into the upward pointing hand, just as the *soundsuits* give anonymity to the performer, allowing him to express his individuality, to actualize himself. Cave’s fresh presence enlivens each image.

Amends

Nick Cave and Bob Faust, also an artist and designer, work from their studio in Chicago, called “Facility,” alluding to their commitment to be a facilitating energy in their community. In 2018 they acquired an 18,000 square foot abandoned textile factory in central Chicago. The first floor is home to the partners’ joint ventures, SoundsuitShop and the Facility Foundation, as well as exhibition space for emerging artists which can be seen from the street. The second floor is their home, housing their art

collections and providing a quiet haven midst their wide reaching projects and commitments. Long time partners, they are now married, and developed a project called “Amends” to introduce themselves to the community through a public high school across the street. Initially a response to the May 2020 killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police, Phase 1 was a display on the front windows of their building of comments on racism written by their friends and community leaders. Phase 2 offered members of the community yellow ribbons on which to write their comments on racism. Hundreds of these ribbon comments were tied to



“Letters to the World Toward the Eradication of Racism,” quotations by community leaders and friends written on the windows of the Nick Cave and Bob Straus Facility in Chicago as part of their *Amends* project.

clothes lines mounted across Carl Shurtz Public High School campus, facing the Facility. Phase 3 invited black artists, poets, performers and speakers to perform in the Facility, on view to the community. The deeply personal nature of the messages spread through the community, offering amends for racist acts or words, amends for remaining silent. The fluttering yellow ribbons and bold handwritten statement on their windows offered a tangible, vibrant amends from the people of this neighborhood. The Amends Project was re-enacted at the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, MMoCA, in May 2021.



Nick Cave, *Rescue*, 2014, mixed media including ceramic birds, metal flowers, ceramic Basset Hound, and vintage settee, SBMA.

Our recent acquisition of Nick Cave’s *Rescue* was installed in the Park Entrance two weeks ago and carries that same silken punch we’ve experienced that still leaves us breathless. The delicate, precise arrangement, the elegant velvet settee, the china dog all suggest wealth and indulgence, also an easy familiarity with the attention we give our pet dogs. Our desire to protect them is mirrored in the surrounding, carefully arranged vines. The underlying reality comes slowly, first that the dog is our possession, not our child, so perhaps our care is a little overdone. And with that the parallel with slavery becomes obvious. Then comes our treatment of black people as slaves, and now as fellow citizens. The title “Rescue” labels the dog as a fake. It is made of china. The complexity adds more dimensions, leading us to question the authenticity of ownership of another creature, unless, of course, it is China.

Nick Cave will have none of our glossing history or sidestepping personal responsibility, though he wrapped it such a pretty package he almost gets away with keeping it disguised. ■

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