

Sonic bloom

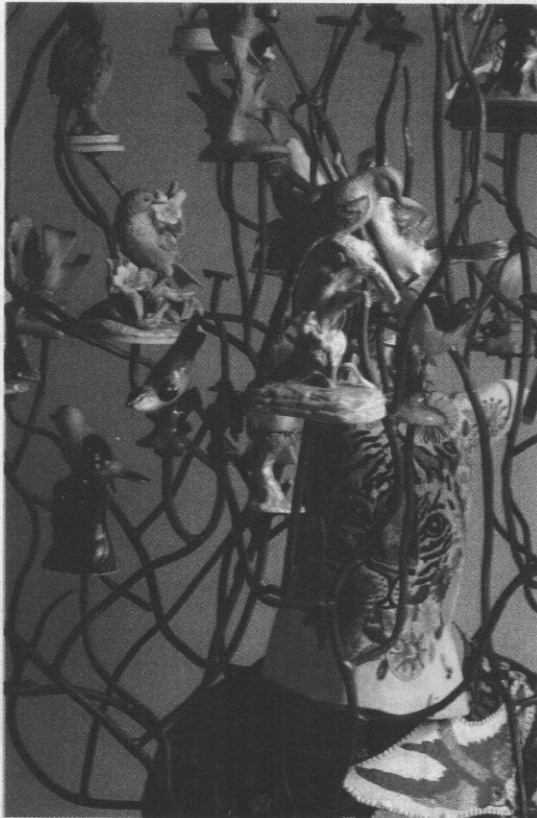
Nick Cave's soundsuits dress-up the Chicago Cultural Center

By Ruth Lopez

Even in average street clothes, Nick Cave makes a strong impression. Wearing one of his soundsuits—garments encrusted with found objects—he becomes a force of nature. The dapper artist, who chairs the fashion department at the School of the Art Institute, won a 2006 Joyce Foundation award for his work—lavishly detailed, full-body soundsuits inspired by ceremonial costumes. “Nick Cave: Soundsuits” presents 50 of these multimedia pieces, along with videos of the garbed artist in performance. The exhibition opens Friday 21 at the Chicago Cultural Center.

Cave studied at the Kansas City Art Institute in the early '80s and went to Cranbrook Academy of Art in Michigan for his M.F.A. In 1999 when he created his first piece, made entirely of twigs, he dubbed it a “soundsuit” after he put it on and realized that the noise it made as he walked across the room was overwhelming.

“A lot of the work comes from this nostalgic place that’s been dear to me,” Cave says during an interview in his studio. Nearby is an enormous headpiece with dozens of colorful ceramic birds affixed to the ends of metal branches. The birds, he says, remind him of the sort of objects his mother collected and placed in a glass cabinet that was off-limits to him and his six brothers. Those were treasures that the kids were warned not to touch. “I also want it to be about honoring



Nick Cave, *Soundsuits*, 2006.

this place of dream,” he says. “We are in a world where people don’t dream anymore.” It seems, we agreed, harder and harder to do so in this image-saturated, work-driven world. When it comes to art, Cave is looking for something specific: “I need to be affected.” Perhaps in the same way that viewers seem to be

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when confronted with his art.

Cave says being an African-American male also informs his work. Recently, the artist found himself surrounded by police officers while walking, portfolio under his arm, to his South Loop studio.

There had been a robbery nearby and the suspect was “a black man wearing jeans.” It was not the first time that’s happened to him. The officers, Cave says, couldn’t tell he was a professor and artist, just as, he points out, he wouldn’t know I was a journalist were we to pass by on the street. These ideas of identity have preoccupied Cave for years. Wearing a mask is one thing; putting on a costume can entirely change how one reacts physically. For Cave,

who also trained as a dancer, gravitating to creating soundsuits was utterly logical. Besides his study of physical movement, Cave has always loved fashion and design. Often, he goes to stores just to get a visual fix by looking at materials, textures and colors. Cave’s work is a blend of fiber art, outsider art and contemporary art—all things he has an eye for and collects.

“The soundsuits are like my second skin,” he says. “They are very big, very threatening to some degree, and yet people are seduced by them.”

Cave has since made suits covered with toys, beads, human hair, plastic flowers, scraps of vintage sequined sweaters and more. Most of the stuff comes from the street or thrift shops, where he is always in search of materials. He never

goes with a plan. “Sometimes I just know I am suppose to collect something,” he says. “I never sketch my ideas. I just make them as I go.”

The work tables in his studio are piled high with fabric remnants and, lately, tons of sequined clothing. The latter is for two large wall pieces, 16 feet in diameter. “It’s the same approach as a crazy quilt,” he says. Cave deconstructs sequined pieces and then stitches them together. “It elevates that whole low-craft concept to high art,” Cave says. “I love doing that.”

“Nick Cave: Soundsuits” opens Friday 21 at the Chicago Cultural Center. See Museums & Institutions.