

NICK CAVE

FEAT.





Fig. 1

The morning that Chicago-based artist Nick Cave arrived in Nashville to scout sites for the performance being presented in conjunction with his exhibition *Feat.*, we woke up to the news that fourteen policemen in Dallas had been shot (five fatally) by a man enraged over the deaths of unarmed African Americans by law enforcement officials. That evening, Cave, his longtime collaborator and partner Bob Faust, and some Frist Center staff attended a Black Lives Matter vigil at Public Square Park. The gathering underscored the relevance and importance of the projects that had brought Cave to our city and of his practice as a whole, which he had largely developed in response to Rodney King's beating by members of the Los Angeles Police Department more than twenty-five years ago. As acts of hate continue to threaten dreams of true and sustainable change, society perhaps more than ever needs opportunities to heal from the wounds of racism.

On one level, Cave's creations, bursting with color and texture, are optical delights that can be enjoyed by audiences of all ages and backgrounds. On another, they speak to issues of identity and social justice—specifically race, gun violence, and civic responsibility. His trademark

human-shaped sculptures, made from upcycled everyday materials such as buttons, plastic hair-beads, old toys, and domestic textiles, can be viewed as playful, but began as a form of social critique (fig. 1). They were originally conceived as a protective type of armor in the wake of the King incident, when Cave felt particularly vulnerable as an African American man. He has stated, "I started thinking about myself more and more as a black man—as someone who was discarded, devalued, viewed as 'less than.'" Sitting in a Chicago park, Cave began to gather twigs and sticks (also discarded and devalued), eventually stringing them into a wearable sculpture. When he put it on, he realized he had created a second skin that camouflaged his race, gender, class, and sexuality, thereby shielding him from judgment. He called the work a "soundsuit" because of the rustling noise generated as he walked around in it. While soundsuits mask physical features of wearers, their "loud" auditory and visual presence boldly expresses alternate identities. This negates the possibility of being classified as an "invisible man," a condition lamented by Ralph Ellison in his landmark 1952 novel.

Aesthetically related to Mardi Gras Indian costumes, African ceremonial



attire, and Tibetan folk costumes, soundsuits illustrate how Cave straddles the visual and performing arts. In motion, they are a seamless combination of sculpture, dance, and fashion—a blending of genres that reflects his MFA in fiber arts from Cranbrook Academy of Art, his studies with Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, and his position as a professor in the fashion design department at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. The now five-hundred-plus specimens in the expansive and ongoing series have become a collective army of resistance to profiling and violence, responding not only to police brutality but any crime motivated by hate—from the killing of Emanuel AME church members in Charleston to the Pulse nightclub massacre in Orlando. Like the rest of Cave's recent work, they broadcast an increasingly urgent call for justice.

Transformation is a theme that runs throughout Cave's work. In addition to offering a shapeshifting shamanistic-like experience through soundsuits, most of his sculptures are made by transforming unwanted objects into "fine" art. This mediation bestows value on these objects and, by extension, associated memories and people that may be overlooked by mainstream society. Cave traces

the use of cast-off items to his childhood, when he carefully altered and patched together hand-me-downs from his brothers to make them his own. In some ways, he sees himself as rescuing the objects he purchases from flea markets, antique malls, and thrift stores by giving them new life and purpose, a notion underscored by a series devoted to found dog figurines (fig. 2). Cave has a nostalgic connection to many of the items, especially the ceramic birds and flowers that remind him of those admired and collected by his grandparents. Even before he incorporates "rescued" objects into an artwork, Cave carefully houses them in neatly organized spaces in his studio.

Transformation can also occur during the viewing experience itself. Cave sees a need for more time and space in contemporary society to cultivate personal dreams and aspirations. Through immersive installations of his work, he wants to transport viewers to a dream state—away from the complexities of our contemporary lives—where we can get lost in our own imaginations. Cave's emphasis on the imagination is not to escape reality, but to create new ideas to help us navigate, maybe even improve, our condition. Visitors to *Feat.* immediately encounter a fantastic



Fig. 2





Fig. 3

environment. A runway of otherworldly-seeming soundsuits is surrounded by walls covered with thousands of shimmering buttons attached to black fabric. These “button walls” and a round work made from scraps of discarded beaded and sequined formalwear (fig. 3) are meant to suggest a starry night sky. For Cave, they conjure happy memories of lying in his grandparents’ fields as a child in the Missouri countryside with his six brothers and the awe they felt while looking for constellations and shooting stars.

Viewers may also feel enveloped by a life-size projection of the video *Blot* (fig. 4). Cave began working seriously in video around 2010 and sees the medium as a natural extension of his sculpture and performance art. Through movement, the soundsuits are able to fulfill their potential as instruments of transformation and creative expression. In *Blot*, a figure in a black raffia soundsuit continually evolves against a stark white background, like inkblots on a Rorschach test. Viewers can become absorbed in watching the shape endlessly morph before their eyes and listening to the exaggerated sound of the raffia swooshing through the air. A large-scale installation with thousands of brightly colored beads and almost



Fig. 4

psychedelically patterned strands of bamboo (fig. 5) encourages personal and interactive relationships as well. As visitors walk around the hanging elements, which collectively suggest an enchanted forest of sorts, their visual perception of its architecture repeatedly shifts, enhancing the sense of wonder and discovery.

At the heart of Cave’s practice is his belief that art can be an agent of connectivity and compassion. A self-described messenger, he wants his work to extend beyond museum and gallery walls to reach and include a population that may not often experience meaningful aesthetic or cultural events. Cave therefore directs major art performances that utilize local communities after many months of preparation and





Fig. 5





Fig. 6

engagement (fig. 6). In the spring of 2018, the Frist Center's project will culminate with two free public performances that feature a cross section of our creative community—dozens of professional and student dancers, musicians working in a range of genres, vocalists, poets, spoken word artists, and others—as well as ten social services organizations, including Conexión Américas and the Oasis Center. Cave's goal is to bring people of different backgrounds together, showcase underrecognized talents on a highly visible platform, and give participants a sense of their worth and potential.

The term *Feat.* refers both to the way acts are often listed in promotional materials—an appropriate nod to Music City—and to the exceedingly hard work that goes into attaining success (it takes, for example, roughly seven hours to hand-sew just one square foot of a button soundsuit). Through the exhibition *Feat.* and the accompanying performance, *Nick Cave: Feat. Nashville*, Cave hopes to provide a transformative, inspirational, and empowering opportunity for all.

Katie Delmez  
Curator

## ABOUT THE ARTIST

Nick Cave was born in Fulton, Missouri, in 1959. He received a BFA from the Art Institute of Kansas City and an MFA in fiber arts from Cranbrook Academy of Art, outside of Detroit. Cave's work has been featured in monographic exhibitions around the globe, at venues such as the Cranbrook Art Museum, the Denver Art Museum, the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, and the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, and is housed in the permanent collections of many major institutions, including the Brooklyn Museum, the Detroit Institute of Arts, the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, and the Museum of Modern Art. Cave has received several prestigious awards, among them the Joan Mitchell Foundation Award, the Artadia Award, the Joan Mitchell Foundation Award, the Joyce Award, and multiple Creative Capital Grants. He has lived and worked in Chicago since 1990 and is the Stephanie and Bill Sick Professor of Fashion, Body, and Garment at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. He is represented by Jack Shainman Gallery in New York.

**NICK CAVE: FEAT. NASHVILLE** at Schermerhorn Symphony Center on April 6, 2018. FREE. See [fristcenter.org/featnashville](http://fristcenter.org/featnashville) for more information.

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## ILLUSTRATIONS

**Fig. 1:** *Soundsuit*, 2016. Mixed media, including vintage toys, wire, metal, and mannequin, 84 x 45 x 40 in. Courtesy of the Lewis Family. **Fig. 2:** *Rescue*, 2014. Mixed media, including ceramic birds, metal flowers, ceramic basset hound, and vintage settee, 70 x 50 x 40 in. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. **Fig. 3:** *Tondo (Untitled)*, 2008. Mixed media, including beaded and sequined garments, fabric, and wood, 96 x 96 x 2 in. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. **Fig. 4:** *Blot*, 2012. Blu-ray, edition 1 of 5, with 2 artist proofs; 42 minutes, 57 seconds. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. **Fig. 5 and cover:** *Architectural Forest*, 2011. Bamboo, wood, wire, plastic beads, acrylic paint, screws, fluorescent lights, color filter gels, and vinyl, 136 x 372 x 192 in. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, in collaboration with the Fabric Workshop Museum, Philadelphia. **Fig. 6:** Performance still from *Heard*, University of North Texas, 2012.

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# NICK CAVE FEAT.

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#NickCaveFeat



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