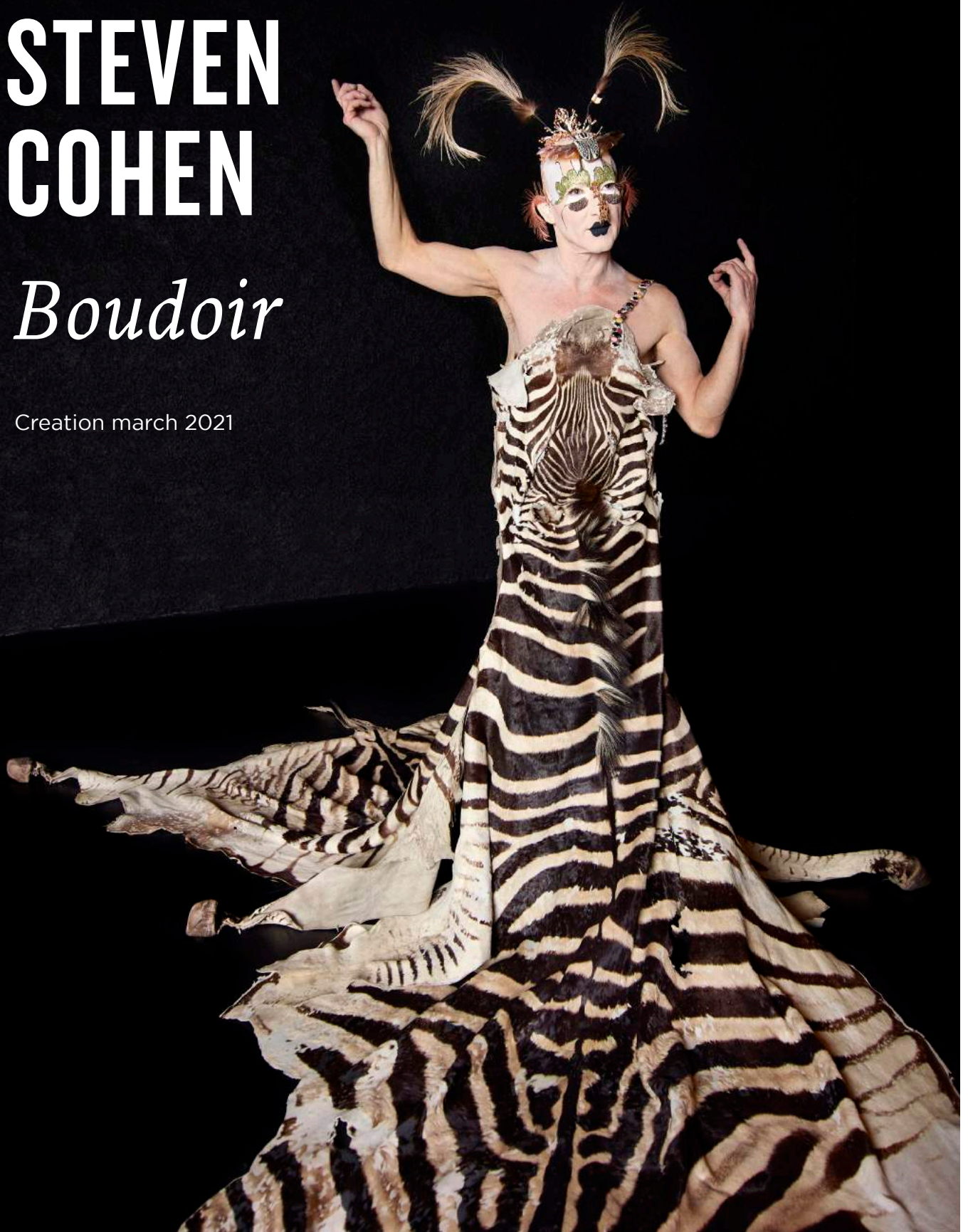


**STEVEN
COHEN**

Boudoir

Creation march 2021



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BOUDOIR

Installation/Performance

Created and Performed by

Steven Cohen

Production:

Théâtre Vidy-Lausanne

Cie Steven Cohen

Coproduction:

Bonlieu, Scène nationale Annecy

Théâtre Saint-Gervais Genève

BIT Teatergarasjen

(coproduction in progress)

This performance is supported by PEPS, through the program of cross-border cooperation, Interreg France-Suisse 2014 -2020.

With the support of Pro Helvetia, Swiss Cultural Foundation.

**With the production, technical, communication, and administration teams at the
Théâtre Vidy-Lausanne**

Premiering March 2021, Lausanne.

PRÉSENTATION

For this new work, Steven Cohen will be receiving the audience in his *boudoir*. If up until now his performances have consisted of exposing or even over-exposing himself both on stage and in public spaces, this time he will welcome the audience into a space both intimate and reserved, like a chapel or sanctuary intended to house his memories as well as welcome his visitors.

The boudoir is traditionally a room within a bourgeois house reserved for feminine conversations, between living room and bedroom – the inverted double of the predominately masculine sphere of public and social spaces – a space whose easy, even contemptuous reputation Sade recast, making it a place of new-found and affirmed liberty through the drawing together of sexuality and philosophy, intimacy and a social critique of restrictive dogmas and powers.

This performative-installation is conceived as the culmination of precedent works created by the performer and visual artist, born in 1962. **Steven Cohen will be present in the space, alone, as much host as a piece of furniture among other furnishings. He will welcome the audience into an intimate space he has created and with which he will interact:** a scenographic and decorated place, a chamber of memories as well as an elegant old-word salon containing diverse objects and pieces of furniture (his visual artworks include furniture he has transformed, adapted and re-imagined), paintings and candelabras, graphic works and animal statuary.

Each element harbours fragments of memories that re-emerge from a collective past life (bourgeois sociabilities, contraptions and costumes, relics of religion and war, trophies celebrating man's domination of nature, of animals or bodies and far-off cultures...) Through the collage or convergence of contradictory memorial references, the objects, furniture and costumes together generate hybrid and metamorphic forms. The ensemble of elements creates an intimate even mental space and one that is moreover both elegant and delicate. Like an invitation to meditation, introspection and perhaps appeasement, offered and open to the imagination of each visitor.

Steven Cohen will juxtapose this intimate space simultaneously or successively with video recordings of actions effectuated outside in symbolic and memorial places: the inverted double of the boudoir, in which actions from the public sphere will be introduced into the private sphere, actions which were on the contrary based on the exhibition of the private or intimate within the public space. In both cases, the forms and actions – which centre on the metamorphosed body of Steven Cohen – reveal how interior conflicts, representations, oppressions and laws all intertwine.

With *Boudoir* he thus continues his research into the mark different powers and history make upon the body, as well as the mark of death on life. As in his precedent works he confronts and transcends this through the concrete, visual and sensual invention of hybrid and fluid identities born

out of the meeting of opposing behaviours - which are thus *incorporated* or *metabolized*. This union of oppositions is something he would call *transgression*: violent and delicate, trivial and elegant, simple and savant, intimate and public, personal and collective, sacred and profane, life and death, feminine and masculine. **The ensemble gives rise to the emergence of a truly free being, both delicate and ethereal yet fully conscious of the world's many horrors.**

ARTWORKS BY STEVEN COHEN AND PLACES OF INSPIRATION FOR BOUDOIR



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1. At Steven Cohen's home, in his *boudoir* in Lille.

2. Steven Cohen, *Fallen Soldier*, silk-screen c.1993. Courtesy of the Stevenson Gallery, Johannesburg.

3. The White Queen's black bedroom in the Château de Chenonceau. The bedroom of Louise de Lorraine (1553-1601, widow of Henri III), painted black and adorned with silver drawings (cornucopia overflowing with tears, bones, shovels and burial remains...)

4. Steven Cohen, *La chaise d'Elu*.

5. Steven Cohen, *Cornes de vache (I wouldn't be seen dead in that!)* 2003-2006.

6. Jewish tombstones shaped like boots, Berdychiv, Ukraine.

“Corset the bodies, compress them. Gather together fragments of stuffed animals, crippling accessories, costume-objects. Prosthetic bodies for composite beings. Carry the dead weight. Prop up the living. Restrict and redefine movement, impede and hinder the dance (...) Draw opposites together, the living with the dead, the human with the animal, the feminine with the masculine. Explore the ambiguities between the foul and the sublime, the sacred and the profane, gentleness and cruelty. Confront paradoxes. Overcome the encumbrance of the weight of dead bodies. Seek out a language that is brutal, uncouth and elegant.”

STEVEN COHEN



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STEVEN COHEN AND THE TRANSMUTATION OF BEING AND HISTORY

The work of Steven Cohen may take the form of both visual art and performance art. His paintings and silkscreen prints are much like collages in which diverse iconographies coexist, making reference to art history, religion, pop culture and the discordant memory of social history. He also creates furniture, restoring or “augmenting” existing objects – ecstatic faces or phalluses on seat upholstery, horns that prolong the back of a seat, feathers that lick the long of an armrest, etc. – primarily by re-upholstering antique frames with canvas, which he then photographically silk-screens and hand paints with original imagery. For the creation of *Boudoir* he will revisit different visual arts techniques he began employing early in his career. These furniture-objects are often inspired by or drawn from the Art Nouveau or Liberty movements, in which eccentricity, extremely refined craftsmanship and the free imitation of natural or animal forms could be found within a single object: chimeric furniture that revealed an alchemy both delicate and provocative (for its boldness of form). It was a time when the nascent technology of gramophones encouraged a growing interest in spiritualism and the possibility of dialogues with the departed. It was also the time of triumphant colonialism, of exhibitions displaying human beings, of the excessive exploitation of the working class for the profit of the bourgeois and privileged classes. In South Africa, British domination was affirmed through the massacres of Zulus and Boers (Franco-Dutch farmers), while the first concentration camps appeared with a gold rush or financial crisis as backdrop.

It is precisely the horizon found in Steven Cohen’s work: how the sophisticated coexists or is in dialogue with the horror and can be simultaneously its expression and antidote.

The artist confronts social, racial and sexual oppression as well as the forces of exclusion and difference – all of which he is intimately acquainted with and has experienced as someone who is white, South African, Jewish and *queer* (something more than gay): the memory of the Jewish genocide as a rejection of sexual difference marks the ensemble of his work. He does not speak for others – neither for black women, nor the poor for example. Yet his denunciation of the mechanisms of patriarchy and other oppressive powers – from his point of view thus – resonates beyond his own situation, because of how he reveals the responsible structures, machinations and social aporia. He expresses himself as a white man and an artist, which he considers to be two positions of privilege, a kind of luxury from which he seeks to fully profit without compromise or condescendence toward his own self. It is a luxury that is at times elegant and at others quite radical.

Finally, if he defines himself as *queer* it is less about underlining one category of affiliation and more about the absence of assigned identities – he prefers to disconcert rather than make reclamations. It is another essential aspect of his protean body of work: the undoing of assigned identities in order to reveal mechanisms of power and reopen conceptions of what is possible.

The undoing of assigned identities goes as much for him as it does for those who are dear, for history and artistic imagery (cultural, religious...) If Steven Cohen maintains such an intense link with art history (representation and practice – religious, savant as well as popular and vernacular) with history (notably through the places he chooses for his public performances) and more generally with death, it is never nostalgic or elegiac. On the contrary, he succeeds in “losing the lost” and thus sustaining awareness and memory so that something new may emerge.

The figures into which he metamorphoses are strangely similar and always different – as light as the butterflies whose wings he uses to decorate himself – simultaneously mortuary and catalytic, the anonymous *alephs* and sorcerers of memory-future.

ERIC VAUTRIN

DRAMATURGE, THÉÂTRE VIDY-LAUSANNE

ACTIONS REALIZED IN PUBLIC MEMORIAL SITES



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1. *Golgotha - Dead man dancing*. Times Square, Wall Street, New York City 2007. In this performance Steven Cohen wore stilettos (or more precisely "skullettos") made from actual human skulls bought legally in New York.

2. *Voting*, 1999/2010. In the long line at the voting bureau in South Africa.



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3. *Coq/Cock*, Paris 2013, for the Festival d'Automne his genitals attached to a rooster on the esplanade of the Trocadéro in Paris. The symbolic animal made its way freely around this highly charged historical site - facing the Eiffel Tower (triumphant industry and mass tourism) and the warrior of Champ de Mars, in front of buildings marked by a double memory, both colonial and cultural, of the Palais de Chaillot.

4. *Cleaning Time*, Heldenplatz, Vienna, 2007. On this square, in 1938 (Germany had recently annexed Austria), Jews were forced to clean the ground and sidewalks with toothbrushes - an extreme form of public humiliation that would not be implemented in any other German city.

5. *Chandelier*, 2001, squatter camp in Johannesburg. "By my moving in a chandelier-tutu through a squatter camp being demolished, and filming it, I'm creating a digital painting of a social reality, half beautifully imagined, half horribly real. Through performance art, dance and film the work "Chandelier" reveals different contradictions between Europe and Africa, whites and blacks, rich and poor, shadow and light, private and public, the powerful and the oppressed, security and danger." (SC)

A HYBRID BODY, BETWEEN INTIMACY AND MEMORY



1. *put your heart under your feet and walk!* à Elu, 2017.
2. *Cradle for Humankind*, with Nomsa Dhlamini, 2011.
3. *Dancing inside out*, Kunsthalle Wien, February 2006.
4. *Az die Mutter Schreit Oifen Kind 'Mamzer', Meg Men Ir Glauben (When a Mother Shouts at Her Child "Bastard", You can Believe Her.)* C-print, 1999.

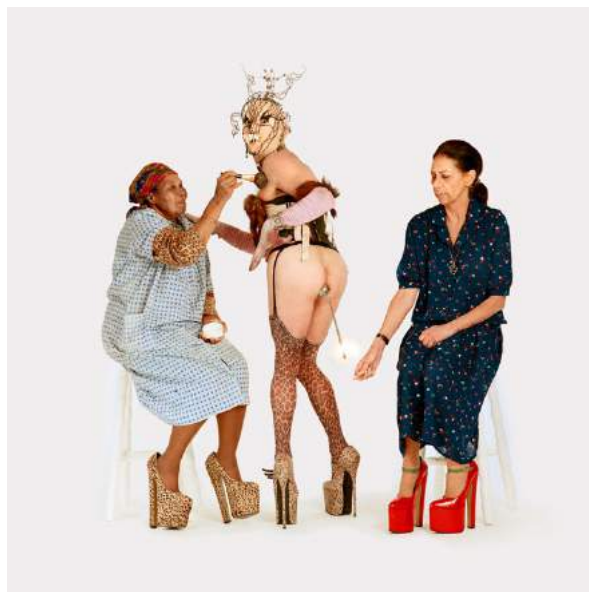
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INTERVIEW

CONDUCTED BY JULIEN BÉCOURT FOR MOUVEMENT N°99 (JANUARY 2019, EXCERPTS)

You compare the theatre to a temple in which death is part of a collective ritual.

It may seem cliché, but I really believe that theatres are our temples and that we can cry there collectively. I'm not trying to prove to the audience that "I'm sadder than they are". In the Jewish faith we lose contact with someone the moment they die. We no longer have the right to see or touch them. You are not the one next to the body during the wake, there's someone else specially designated for that role. When my brother committed suicide I really had to insist before I could kiss him one last time. He was barred from Jewish burial rites, not because he was gay or because he killed himself, but rather because he wished to be cremated.

This ritual could have remained something intimate.

I could have performed it in my bathroom, but then it would no longer have been a public ritual. I think that the most important art happens in private, in bedrooms, under the floorboards, wherever. But can we still consider it art? Art entails risk taking. You can make shitty drawings or brilliant drawings and never show them to anyone, there's no risk involved.

Do you make a distinction between art and life? Where do you place the border between your public life and your private life?

My life is what you see before your eyes. It's all I have. I'm not complaining, I'm grateful to be alive and yet when I go home I have nothing else. I think art, I fuck art... My life is art. That's why having Elu by my side was so important. We were a team; we formed an assembly with just the two of us. Now I feel really isolated within the art world. Today I continue to be asked where I draw my inspiration... I had no idea what performance was when I started out! It was free, instinctive; I didn't feel the weight that comes with being knowledgeable. If I had learned about all that was done before my time, a considerable amount of my work would never have seen the light of day. I didn't know about Leigh Bowery or Carolee Schneemann or even about Viennese Actionism. At the time I couldn't have cared less, I was convinced that I was inventing things. It stemmed from a form of ignorance. When you have the status of an artist it is imperative to question yourself. If you stop questioning yourself in regards to the nature of your work, you're finished. You can get lost in your certitudes. The principal function of art is to ask good questions. But I'm not a social worker, I can't fix the world.

We can feel a profound empathy for the living in your work, whether human or animal.

I don't think there's much difference between the two. We really are wild animals, an especially gregarious species. If we deplore society so much, it's because it prevents us from living in harmony with our natural environment and imposes rules that prevent us from maintaining a more

animalistic relationship with the world. When I observe how people feed themselves, move around en masse and do sports, I can't help but compare them to animals. When you evoke the spirit of animals, it's as much you who enters into the spirit of the animal as them into you. The worst thing someone said to me, (someone who happened to be my roommate), was "I hate animals". How can you possibly say something so stupid? If you hate animals you must not be far from hating human beings.

Do you think that an artwork can have a political impact?

Unfortunately a work of art will never be as efficient as a bomb, a suicide attack or armed insurrection. I think at any rate that we overestimate art. When you think about it, what has art ever changed in the world?

BIOGRAPHY

Steven Cohen was born in 1962 in South Africa and lives today in Lille. Performer, choreographer and visual artist, he has orchestrated various interventions in public spaces, art galleries and theatres. His work brings to light that which lies on the margins of society, beginning with his own identity as a gay, Jewish, white, South African man.

Far from being narcissistic, the staging of his body is influenced by his own story and history and constitutes a means to exploring the flaws and grace of humanity. His ultra-sophisticated make-up is as elegant as it is surprising. His eccentric costumes, intense and ethereal at the same time, borrow from the world of luxury and elegance, from archaic rituals, from a bourgeois or colonial past as well as diverse queer inspirations. They reveal more than they hide and restrict the body and the movement, as if to simultaneously mark both the weight of the world and the restraining force different powers exert on the body. They are also, above all else, montages or collages created with the body itself, that transform it into chimeras or hybrid-beings whose identity is uncertain, multiple and fluid.

In this way Steven Cohen dresses up or rather metamorphoses into creatures as disconcerting as they are colourful. By instigating interventions on stage or in public spaces, he creates breaches in the day-to-day and in the spirit as well; not to trip people up but rather in order to finish with preconceived certitudes and together face the indifference currently gaining ground within our societies.

He has exhibited and performed throughout the entire world. The Johannesburg Museum is currently preparing a retrospective of the ensemble of his work.



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PRESS REVIEWS

ABOUT PREVIOUS WORK

“There aren’t words to qualify the impact of Steven Cohen. 54 years old, he defines himself as a “*homosexual, Jewish, white monster*”. This man - who is rather slight, dissimulated under baggy clothes, bald headed under a knit cap, his face hidden by the hood of his sweatshirt “*because the sun gives him terrible eczema*” - has made a sumptuous work of art out of his body. Immense, perched high up upon corthurnus-sculptures that hinder as much as they sublimate and suddenly breath-taking in stature, he exhibits a face made-up like a painting with false, multi-coloured lashes - which entails four hours of preparation before going onstage. A body adorned with skins, feathers, lace, all found second-hand here and there, along with other rather sexual-looking contraptions. An uncomfortable beauty that can take your breath away, an affirmation of difference intensified by the fireworks of self-invention.”

LE MONDE, ROSITA BOISSEAU, 21 JUNE 2017

“In precarious balance, feet screwed into abhorrently high heels, Steven Cohen is perched above the world. The world, this place of putrefaction in which our dead have sedimented for thousands of years. What exactly are we walking on? What exactly is the substance we crush beneath our feet? On stage, Pina Bausch caught her dancers up in thousands of pink carnations in *Nelken*, had them exhaust themselves in the peaty dirt ground in *The Rite of Spring*, or play in litres of water or on soft, real grass. A few years later, in the very fundamental *Description d’un combat*, Maguy Marin, on her side, laid the stage bare, like one peels an onion: to verses from *The Iliad*, blue fabric covering the ground gave way to golden fabric which in turn revealed red fabric. Heroism and then the blood bath. On which ground is it still possible to advance, in life as well as in the theatre? When everything is already covered over? When you must step over the cadavers? Steven Cohen has always seemed to carry all the world’s solitude, all of man’s stupefaction, along under his feet. Year after year, he has invented hundreds of original shoes. Like the vertiginously high escarpments on which he traversed the rutted, uneven ground of a Soweto squatter camp, almost naked beneath the crystal chandelier he wore as a tutu for a filmed performance in 2002.”

LIBERATION, ÈVE BEAUVALLET, 26 JUNE 2017