

## Nick Cave's SOUNDSUIT 2010

**Accession Number:** 2011.12a,b

American, born 1959

G280

### **LABEL:**

Nick Cave makes his Soundsuits from cast-off goods and clothing scavenged from thrift stores, flea markets, auctions, and art fairs. Drawing on his experience as both fiber artist and dancer, he assembles each suit with attention to both design and function. While the Soundsuits can work as freestanding sculptures, Cave intends for them to be worn. He has staged numerous events in which the Soundsuits become moveable collages of material and history, each "enacted" by a performer who takes on its unique character. In its fusion of fiber textile art, performance, and found objects, Cave's *Soundsuit* has been described as lavish and shamanistic. Indeed, it is a larger-than-life mash-up of African tribal ceremonial dress, carnival costumes, and hand-made elements that carries and conveys the (absent) wearer's physical energy.

**Medium:** Sculpture | Metal, wood, plastic, pigments, cotton and acrylic fibers

**Size:** 97 x 48 x 42 in. (246.38 x 121.92 x 106.68 cm) (approx.)

**Creation Place:** North America, United States

**Culture:** North America, United States

**Style:** 21st century

### **Physical Description:**

a wire framework in organic shape with printed tin, plastic and wooden toys and noisemakers attached--Jack-in-the-boxes, various shapes of noisemakers, drums, clickers, tops and tambourines; b: suit installed over black plastic mannequin; colorful sweater fragments pieced together to create a bodysuit with head and face covering; bodysuit covered overall with crocheted doilies and hot pads, embroidered felt fragments and pieced stitched pieces; pink and white doily over face area

### **BIOGRAPHY:**

Nick Cave (not to be confused with the Australian musician of the same name) was born in Jefferson City, Missouri, in 1959, raised by a single mother, one of seven male siblings in a family of very modest means. Graduated from the Kansas City Art Institute in 1982 - where he learned to sew and also began studying dance with Alvin Ailey in New York and Kansas City - and obtained his master's degree at Cranbrook Academy of Art in Michigan. Shortly thereafter, started teaching at the Chicago Institute of Art and is now the director of the graduate fashion program.



## **SOUNDSUITS - Their beginnings:**

His first Soundsuit was made of twigs. As he tells it: "It was a very hard year for me because of everything that came out of the Rodney King beating...I started thinking about myself more and more as a black man - as someone who was discarded, devalued, viewed as less than." He started thinking about the role of identity, being racially profiled, feeling devalued, dismissed. One day, sitting on a park bench in Chicago, he saw twigs on the ground in a new light: they looked forsaken, too, discarded, insignificant. He gathered them up, cut them into three-inch sticks, then drilled holes through the sticks to wire them to an undergarment of his own creation, completely covering the fabric. As soon as the twig piece was finished, he realized that he could wear it as a second skin. "I put it on and jumped around and was just amazed. It made this fabulous rustling sound. And because it was so heavy, I had to stand very erect, and that alone brought the idea of dance back into my head."

The twig Soundsuit, currently in a private collection, was the first of hundreds of these pieces. He and his assistants have made suits out of everything from sisal to hundreds of plastic buttons topped by an abacus found in a flea market, beads, sequins, feathers, human hair, and objects found, shopped for in thrift stores and flea markets.

The suits are always sewn, never glued. Some are made for performance, and others go straight into the gallery system.

Cave actually credits his mother with kick-starting his career with her enthusiasm over his first works of art: handmade birthday cards. He says that it also helped to be raised in central Missouri without much money, wearing lots of hand-me-downs, and having to figure out how to make that second-hand clothing your own - which he did using things found around the house. Which ultimately led years later to his Soundsuits.



## **SOUNDSUITS - Now:**

These pieces have been exhibited in a variety of venues, including art galleries, cultural museums, and art museums - and can even be found in airports (as I witnessed). They are also found in schools - Cave regularly works with high school students doing choreography with the Soundsuits.

One venue is the Fowler Museum at UCLA, which explores art and material culture primarily from Africa, Asia, the Pacific, and the Americas, past and present. Not hard to see why this venue was appropriate, since so many of the Soundsuits resemble African ceremonial costumes and masks. This museum seeks to enhance understanding and appreciation of diverse peoples, cultures, and religions from around the world.

The director of San Francisco's Yerba Buena Center for the Arts - who described his art center as "deeply multidisciplinary" says of Cave: "So many visual artists cross over in a way that the performance world would be aghast at; Nick is one of the rare artists as strong in his secondary field as he is in his home art form."

Cave is credited with the resurrection of "traditional craft forms like macrame and crocheting, while others have described his work in the context of the social sculpture of Joseph Beuys, the legacy of the drag queen Leigh Bowery in the London underground performance scene and the ornate costumes of African-American Mardi Gras Indians. As the New York curator Dan Cameron says, "...he has picked up the threads of these...slightly marginalized...traditions and pulled them into the front and center of museum culture."

## **ACCORDING TO NICK CAVE:**

When you see one of his Soundsuits, Cave wants you to wonder, "What am I encountering?" "What am I encountering at this very moment?"

"I'm always looking for projects that I can put out into the world, into the public sphere, and to somehow cause an effect."



**REFERENCES:**

ArtsConnectEd  
New York Times  
Websites

**FURTHER READING:**

*Nick Cave: Meet Me at the Center of the Earth*, Dan Cameron, Kate Eilertsen, Pam McClusky, Nick Cave [ISBN 978-0-615-24593-5](#)

**FURTHER SEEING:**

Google Nick Cave Soundsuit Images for a cavalcade of Soundsuits

[http://www.openculture.com/2012/09/wearable\\_sculpture\\_by\\_nick\\_cave\\_invade\\_microsoft.html](http://www.openculture.com/2012/09/wearable_sculpture_by_nick_cave_invade_microsoft.html)