

Rattling Cages

Installations featuring racist arcana are not the only unsettling works unleashed on America by NICK CAVE. PAYAL UTTAM meets the Missouri-born artist

NICK CAVE WAS rummaging around in a flea market when he came across a container shaped like a black man's head with its mouth wide open as if letting out a scream. A description below it read "Spittoon". Cave was aghast. "I said, 'What?'" he recalls incredulously. "That led me down this road of looking for [racially] inflammatory objects that were repulsive, extreme and just really shocking." Cave rented a cargo van and googled his way through stores in various states, uncovering an abundance of racist memorabilia. After examining the objects with a historian, he reappropriated the items to create a series of installations.

When we meet, the 55-year old African American is putting the final touches to his work in a two-part solo show at Jack Shainman

Gallery in New York City. Dressed in fluorescent orange sneakers, black cargo shorts and a tight black exercise top with a horizontal slit exposing his toned chest, Cave cuts a flamboyant figure. Thin-framed glasses rest on his nose and his boyish face is covered in a smattering of white stubble.

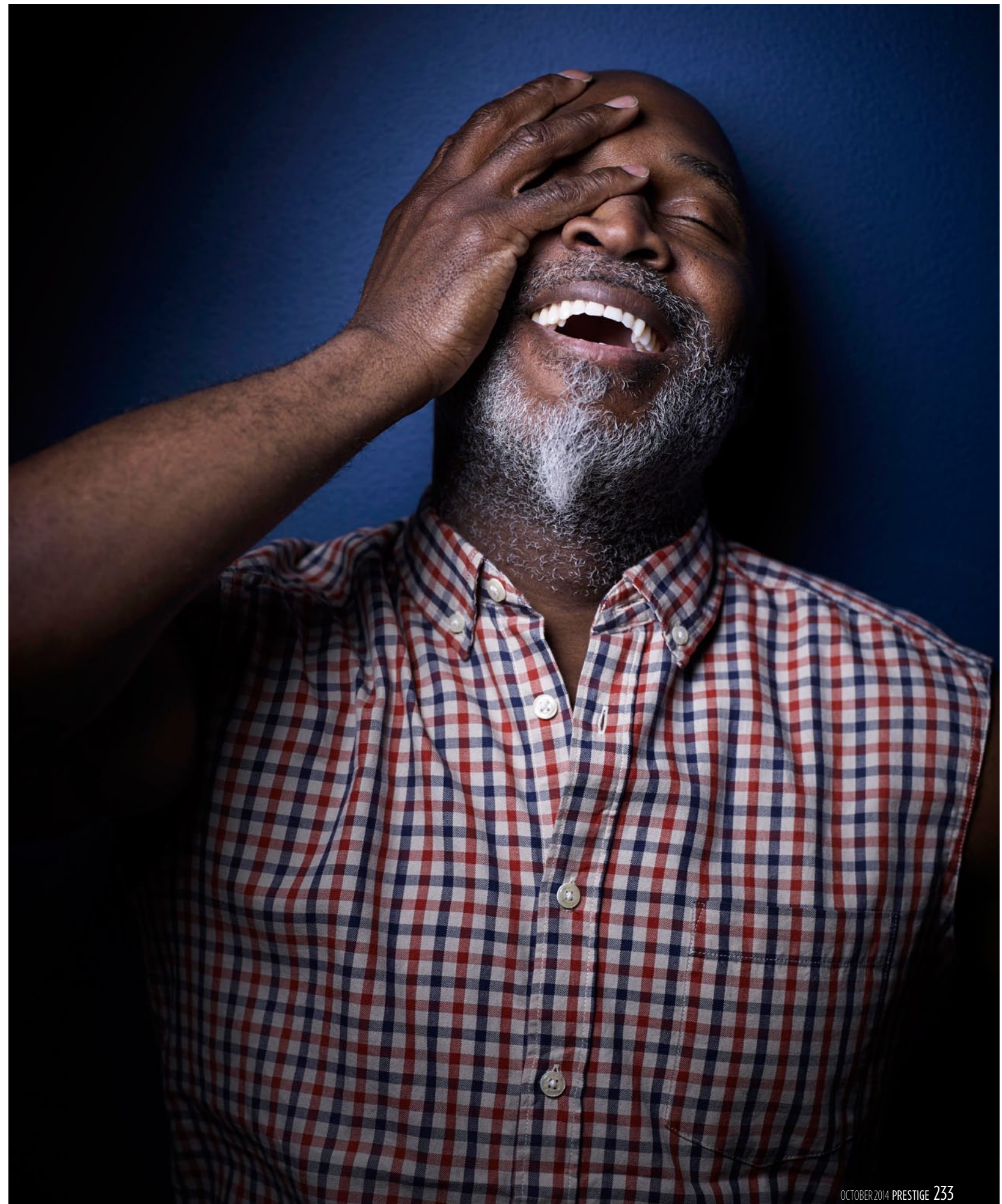
Upon entering the gallery, Cave plunges into a tour of the exhibition. Pointing at a sculpture of a crouching black figure, he says, "This was a mahogany carved piano stool, so just imagine him holding up someone's ass. Oh my God." Cave elevated the figure, placing it on a pedestal. "I wanted to take it off the floor and then create this amazing wonderland around him," he says, pointing to the lush assemblage of birds, branches and glowing chandeliers that are suspended above the figure's head.

Deeper inside the gallery, Cave has installed a bronze cast of his own hand holding up a shoeshine brush on the wall. Placing a floral oval frame around the brush, the piece evokes a mirror holding up a disturbing reflection to viewers.

On the wall beside it, on a stick, is a ruggedly carved black man's head made of wood. Cave added two bronze hands, which emerge from the wall cradling the head and suggesting an expression of anguish. "This was part of a carnival game. There would be a cigarette in the mouth then it would bob up and down and you would throw rings around it," he says quietly.

Is there still a big market for these types of artefacts, I ask. He nods his head. "Girl, I'm like, this is still happening?" replies Cave. "It's not that I'm smearing it in your face but I think there needs to be this conversation around the fact that a race can also be a by-product of a consumer compulsion," he says. Walking through the show, the objects leave one feeling rattled. I admit to him that looking at the

SANDRO





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images of the pieces beforehand didn’t have the same effect. “You don’t get the sincerity within the work [from photographs],” he agrees. “You know it’s an accumulation of objects put together but there’s a lot you don’t feel.”

Much of Cave’s work relies on this visceral tug that can only be experienced by encountering it first-hand. A dancer, fashion designer and sculptor, Cave first made a name for himself with his hallucinogenic soundsuits, full-body costumes festooned from head to toe with unusual materials ranging from sequins and sweaters to synthetic hair and vintage toys. Like a surreal body armour, the

otherworldly outfits were designed to create a defiant noise when worn.

“That started in 1992 in response to the Rodney King incident,” explains Cave. Shaken by police brutality against a black man, he began grappling with the implications of his skin colour and race. One day, he created a sculptural outfit covered in twigs and branches and used it to mask his body. Once he put on the ensemble, he discovered the twigs made a noise and from there the soundsuit series was born. Cave’s costumes became a shield of sorts concealing his race, gender, and class, allowing him to escape judgment.

Born in a town in Missouri, Cave grew up in a large family with seven brothers and was raised

by his mother, a secretary at the University of Missouri. His father, a factory worker, died when he was a teenager. Fascinated by art from a young age, it was only natural that he went on to enrol in Kansas City Art Institute. Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater was holding a workshop down the street from his university so Cave signed up. After studying further and completing a master’s degree at Cranbrook Academy of Art, he landed a teaching gig at the Art Institute of Chicago.

One evening, he was at dinner with friends and the idea to open a clothing boutique was hatched. “They said ‘We’ll sponsor you and

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back you for a store,’ I said ‘OK.” he recalls. Partnering with Jeffery Roberts, an architectural designer, they opened Robave in the ‘90s, which quickly became known for stylish womenswear and menswear. “So I had this amazing store and I was doing my artwork and showing but I was sort of like a closet artist,” he admits with a laugh.

Yet, once Cave began working on his soundsuit series, he realised that he had hit upon something big. “But I didn’t want to be known only for that. I was watching a lot of artists who were sort of pigeonholed and I thought there is more to me than that,” he says explaining why kept a low profile. “But I could tell things were happening with the whole experience. I was trying to keep the lid down but shit was popping off the chain. And so you just have to give in at some point and embrace it.”

It took about 10 years before Cave fully surrendered to his

creative impulses. “I just decided to fall into the abyss of the whole thing,” he exclaims. “One day I woke up and I said it’s now or never, and then my life changed literally overnight.” Cave’s career took off instantly. Not only did his soundsuit sculptures begin showing up in museums and galleries across the country but he also penetrated the fashion world with an eight-page spread in the September 2010 issue of *Vogue* and he began staging performances.

Last year, he staged one of his most talked-about performance pieces titled *Heard NY*. Taking over Grand Central station in New York for eight days, he unleashed a troupe of dancers wearing vividly colourful horse costumes. “We really wanted to infiltrate that Grand Central station experience and stop those individuals in their tracks,” he says. “It was really about how do we get ourselves back to this dream state. Everyone is so concerned with their well-being and their jobs. We don’t think about innovation and creativity.” Shaking commuters out of their everyday routine with an experimental dance piece, the work had a positive effect on the city and Cave. “It made me understand why I do what I do,” he says.

Next year, Cave is planning a show at



Cranbrook Academy of Art Museum near Detroit, where he will involve the local community. “Yes, I can bring in an entire troupe and a cargo van of everybody to do the performance and pack up and leave, but what does that leave behind? Just an experience,” he says. “I’m more interested in leaving an imprint versus an impression and so we bring soundsuits to a city and then we hire the community to build a performance – that’s really what it’s about.”

He’s also working on an exhibition at Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art. “The space is the size of a football stadium. I’m going to create an immersive environment that will put you in the belly of a soundsuit.” I ask how does it feel when you’re inside one of these costumes? “When you’re in a sound suit your inhibitions, your identity, everything, is hidden. There’s a sort of rejuvenation. There’s an ability to be more expressive. I think it’s an amazing thing to be able to have that kind of permission,” he replies. Is that the case with all of his art? Cave nods. “First you have to be willing to surrender, but once you do, honey, it’s fabulous.”



ABOVE: INSTALLATION VIEW OF NICK CAVE’S *MADE BY WHITES FOR WHITES* EXHIBITION AT 513 WEST 20TH STREET. RIGHT: PERFORMANCE OF *HEARD NY* AT GRAND CENTRAL TERMINAL. FAR RIGHT: *SOUNDSUIT* (2012), MIXED MEDIA INCLUDING FABRIC AND SEQUINS