

There's nowhere to hide in Nick Cave's latest installation, writes Charles Shafaieh

Calling something useless has a touch of criminality to Chicago-based artist Nick Cave, as if the act of throwing away means forever losing a potential revelation. Dismissing the seemingly mundane — sequins, plush toys, even shoelaces — reveals an unwillingness to dream and imagine that everything has more than one dimension.

This sensitivity to all objects, however inconsequential they may appear, was nurtured in Cave, 59, throughout his childhood in Missouri. “There was one moment when we didn’t have any food, and the only thing in the house was popcorn,” he says, recounting a story his mother told that still fascinates him.

“She didn’t know what to do and just decided that we were going to watch TV and have a popcorn party. She was able to illustrate, or hide the fact, there was no food in the house through a party. I thought that it was so interesting, that she had to work through a scenario to create an experience, a performance, and we never knew. I was fascinated by the idea that ways of being proactive and making a difference don’t have to be big and celebratory.”

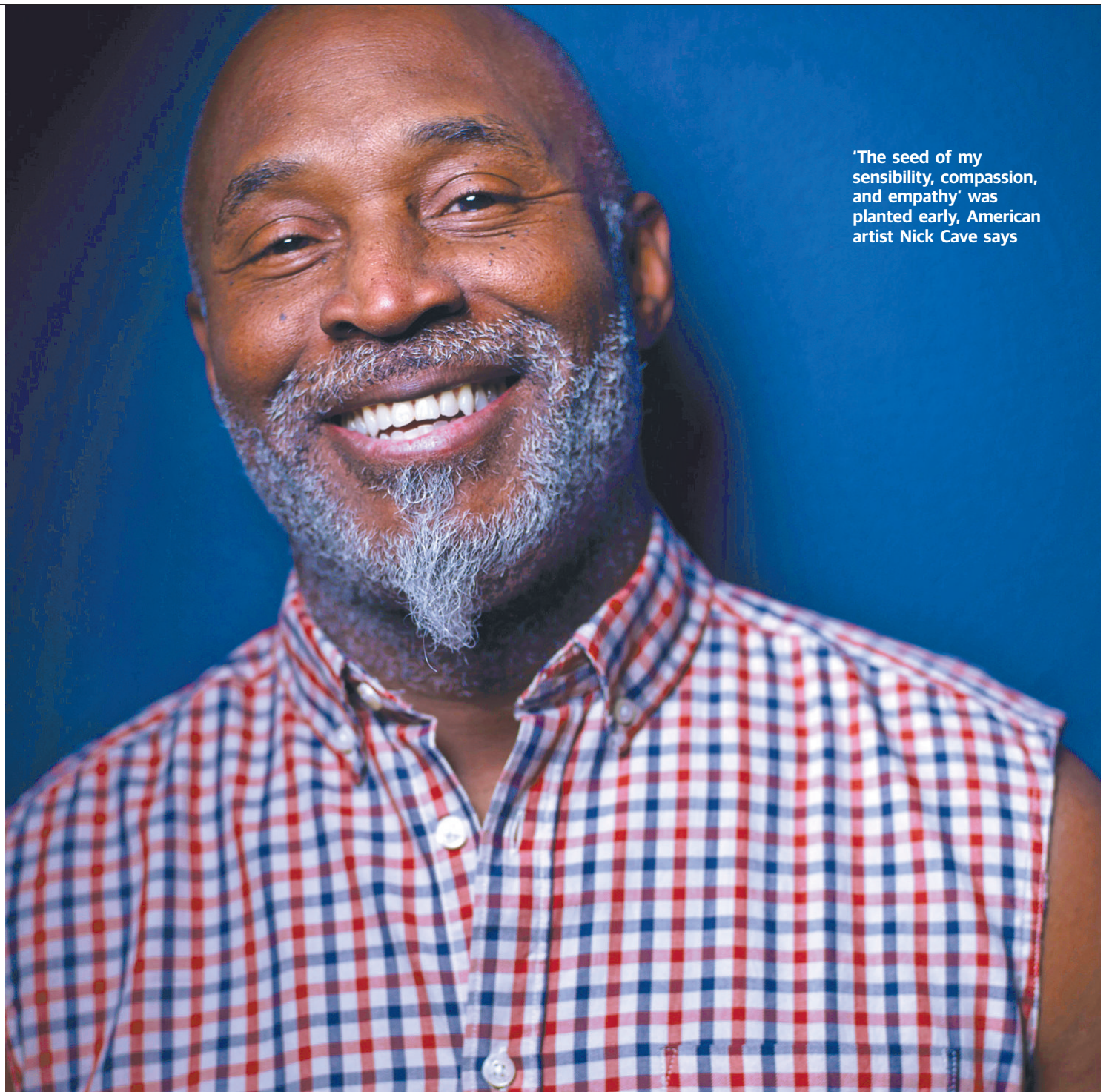
Cave’s ethos of reappropriating and elevating even the smallest objects manifested itself in an epochal way in 1992 after he watched the video of four Los Angeles policemen beating black motorist Rodney King with batons — an act that led to deadly riots after a grand jury refused to indict any of the officers who bore witness to the violence and the officers directly involved were acquitted.

“I thought I was awake, but that woke up my consciousness in a different way,” he says. “It changed how I saw myself. Tragedy can inform how we exist in the world.”

He began collecting a huge mass of twigs in a Chicago park and, by linking them together, created an armour-like, wearable sculpture that made its own music as he moved inside it. This was the first of his fantastical soundsuits, each of which hide the skin colour, age, sex and any other identifying marker of anyone who dons them. In other words, they conceal the traits at the foundation of racial profiling — in the US and elsewhere, then as now — that could put Cave in the same position as King, Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, and thousands of other black men and women who have been jailed, beaten or killed.



Is there racism in heaven? The question came to Cave following yet another tragedy — the 2014 shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Miss-



‘The seed of my sensibility, compassion, and empathy’ was planted early, American artist Nick Cave says

THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

ouri — and became the catalyst for his largest project yet: the multi-room, mixed-media installation *Until*, which opens this week at Sydney’s Carriageworks after showing for nearly a year at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art.

With *Until*, Cave has pushed his collecting impulse to extreme levels. Sixteen-thousand wind spinners hang from the ceiling of the vast common space at Carriageworks, twirling together as a kinetic, kaleidoscopic force.

A path within them leads towards an object at once cloudlike and alien that seems to hover in the air. Its bulbous underside teems with a collection of 24 chandeliers surrounded by more than 16km of crystals. The top level, reached by a series of ladders that surround the structure, is a hyper-dense, fabulous forest floor of sorts, comprising what seems like the collective contents of the world’s flea markets: ceramic birds, wire animal sculptures and metal flowers; but also phonograph horns, crowns and much

more. Elsewhere, more than 10 million coloured beads create a technicolour, porous wall, a video installation featuring a soundsuit in motion accompanied by a projection that turns the floor into moving water, and a blue, black and silver Mylar wall emblazoned with the words “Flow/ Blow” that billows resplendently as a series of high-speed fans whirl behind it.

Though awe-inspiring in terms of the sheer amount of work this project requires from Cave and his team of artisans, the whimsy contains

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WHAT IS SAFE? I DON'T KNOW IF ANY PLACE IS ANY MORE

NICK CAVE

Cave's MASS MoCA installation, above and right, used thousands of found objects and millions of beads



an ever-present violence. Inside some of the spinners are images of guns; others hold bullets, while many represent shooting-range targets. And among the bric-a-brac on the bursting cloud top are 17 cast-iron lawn jockeys: caricatures of black men with thick crimson lips and bulging eyes, leaning forward in a subservient stoop. While some believe these ornamental statues were once used clandestinely as signals for those escaping slavery on the Underground Railroad, these figures' continued existence on American lawns also help expose the preposterousness of pundits' and politicians' claims regarding a post-racial US.

"I try to establish a seduction based on the sort of images or materials that lend themselves to two or three different narratives or ways of responding," Cave explains, his tone both warm and matter-of-fact. "It's about taking an object out of its context and renegotiating its position, forcing us to question what it is I'm encountering. The things we dismiss are the things I'm most attracted to because I identify with them in terms of the practicality of their use."

Cave's work unsettles, which is not to say that it is necessarily disturbing — though it certainly can read as such, both in its explicit content and through whatever lens a person brings to it. Rather, unsettling seems for him a prerequisite, in that pushing against convention and rustling people from their everyday monotony, which their senses consider a kind of white noise, may be the only way he can spur discussion and instigate a transformation in audiences.

By surrounding these symbols of racism and violence within an atmosphere of overwhelming playfulness, Cave in part heightens their impact. That the lawn jockeys, regardless of their possible history, remain grotesque caricatures makes any failure to acknowledge their presence, and the history of racism they represent, unsettling and alarming. The same can be said about ignoring racism's presence ingrained in everyday American life, too. "It's sort of the elephant-in-the-room syndrome — we know what we all need to be talking about but we're not," he says.

Creating safe spaces for dialogue, about these issues and any others that arise from his work, has been a primary goal throughout Cave's practice.

"We should be able to go to spaces when we need to because we may need to reconnect or find ways to reunify," he explains. "We use the churches as that — or we did, but now that's all in question." (Three days before this interview, 11 people were killed in a mass shooting at a

synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.) "How do we choose to identify those spaces and their purpose, and build them in a world through a collective sense of optimism? What is safe? I don't know if any place is any more. But we must continue to proceed forward and somehow come together, in spite of what we are up against."

Integral to *Until* — what Cave calls an "alternative town hall" — is the openness of ideas and interpretations, and the reactions they provoke, which he emphasises by eschewing the role of Artist. "I'm a messenger," he states simply. "I'm given an assignment. Right now, I'm in New York to deliver this deed [at the Jack Shainman Gallery], and then I'm in Australia. I'm providing a platform. This platform happens to be some sort of extreme space that transforms us — this other kind of environment that is not familiar, and yet we want to invest in it because it alters our way of existence."

Visitors therefore cannot process through the installation like the flaneurs of 19th-century France, observing from a detached position. Whereas Cave's soundsuits create novel encounters and experiences through an act of concealing, *Until* provides no room for hiding. Those entering what could also be called Cave's provocation are implicated by their presence within it — simultaneously being witnessed and bearing witness with their neighbours as they negotiate the space and its contents together. Even their bodies change.

"You have transcended into a different existence," says Cave, who trained as a dancer with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre and who often participates in performances with his soundsuits. "You find yourself shifting your demeanour: your shoulders come down as you surrender to the moment and find yourself accepting the experience."



Cave wants to create a safe space with his works

Through collaboration, Cave removes himself even further from his work and its myriad, open-ended interpretations. As at MASS MoCA, *Until* at Carriageworks will serve as a site for a series of "call and response" interventions, performances, and actions by numerous local artists, musicians, choreographers and spoken-word artists. Among those participating are R&B and future soul singer-songwriter Ngaiire, storyteller and poet Ileini Kabalan, interdisciplinary artist Bhenji Ra and fashion design duo Romance Was Born.

"I've been to Sydney seven times in the last three years, and I've been identifying and connecting with the indigenous community — thinking about its concerns, the violations they have endured, and about what any one of us can do to create a platform for acknowledgment and acceptance," Cave says. "It's extraordinary, the range of artists onboard who all work with the underlying political voice."

As with their American counterparts, who included performance artist Helga Davis and singer-songwriter Solange, this group's work will derive from their own experiences in the space and through conversations with Cave, who withholds comment on what any of them may do. "They all feel that they need this platform, for whatever reason, and I'm not sure how they see this opportunity," he explains.

The resonances they will create will be unique to Carriageworks, too, and likely quite different from any at MASS MoCA. "Gun is a metaphor that's going to be altered by how Australians look at violence, and what their concerns are around those issues," he asserts. "It's violence as broad as we can associate it."

Cave drew massive crowds to Carriageworks in 2016 for his soundsuit performance

HEARD-SYD, a fusion of modern dance, ceremonial African rituals and haute-couture fashion shows. He predicts *Until* will attract people differently. By having these diverse artists "activate" the piece, they will bring with them their own audiences. Cave hopes these supporters in turn will serve as ambassadors for the project, getting others to return with them and help create an infinite number of new connections, at Carriageworks and back home in their various communities.

"It's going to expand Carriageworks' audience and diversity in ways that has never happened before, because of the range of creative people involved," he says, hoping that it will continue his perpetual goal of reaching as many people as possible, with increasing diversity, through each new work and performance.

Cave's social and communal impulses trace back to his upbringing, too.

"There was this family that we would always feed during dinner," he remembers. "As a kid, I would always bring food to their house. That was so profound to me — helping someone. It was not like we had much growing up, but we had something. This need to help was set by that moment. It planted the seed of my sensibility, compassion, and empathy."

Emphasising compassion over anger can be a difficult choice in the US today. The statistics alone are enraging. From 2014 to last year, there were about 12,500 to 15,500 gun-related deaths each year, excluding suicides. More than half of the victims were black — a minority that comprises only 14 per cent of the US population. In Chicago alone, there were more than 6200 shooting incidents in 2016 and last year.

Yet when asked if he considers himself optimistic, Cave laughs: "Why not? What else is there?"

Embedded within that optimism, however, is not a foolhardy notion that his concerns will be assuaged any time in the near or distant future. Nor does he think the questions that preoccupy him, such as if there is racism in heaven, will be answered through *Until*, his soundsuits or any other work of art — by his hand or others.

"I don't know if we ever answer the questions," he ponders. "There's always another question that follows the question, right? Do we really want answers? I don't know. I want understanding."

Until is showing at Sydney's Carriageworks from Friday until March 3.