



Title

Marc Camille Chaimowicz: Nuit américaine

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Cover image:

Marc Camille Chaimowicz: Nuit américaine

by Lisette May Monroe • 13.07.2023

In his solo exhibition at WIELS, Brussels, Marc Camille Chaimowicz (b.1947) explores portraiture, intimacy and the politics of sentimentality. A constant running throughout his practice is a camp devotion to the decorative: his work is imbued with a controlled flair, each element qualified with a subtle melodrama. As Susan Sontag writes in 'Notes on "camp"', 'the essence of Camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration'.¹ Camp is something one exhibits. Indeed, Chaimowicz embraces such theatricality and ambiguity in his own artistic persona, often adopting the position of a 'discreet dandy'. His installations, which are composed of the disparate objects and ephemera that one learns to define oneself by, are constantly performing for the audience.

Nuit américaine brings together three bodies of work: *Celebration? Realife Revisited* [FIG.1](#), *The Hayes Court Sitting Room* (1979–2023) and *Dear Zoë (Emma Bovary collages)* (2020–23). Chaimowicz created *Celebration? Realife Revisited* shortly after completing an MA in the painting programme at the Slade School of Fine Art, London, where he rejected traditional formalist practices in favour of installation. Comprising a litany of objects, including a glittery cowboy hat, a cactus, a small bust of Frédéric Chopin [FIG.2](#), flowers, beads and a single shoe, the work is replete with hesitant potential. Simultaneously contrived and relating to the everyday, the installation incorporates many elements that the artist found in the street. The surrounding walls have been painted silver, an overt reference to Andy Warhol's Factory, while two mirror balls hang from the ceiling at varying heights; on the wall, a postcard of the Arc de Triomphe, Paris, is momentarily illuminated by one of many spotlights.



Fig. 1 *Celebration? Realife Revisited*, by Marc Camille Chaimowicz. 1972–2000. Mixed-media installation, dimensions variable. (Photograph We Document Art; exh. WIELS, Brussels).

In *Celebration? Realife Revisited* pop culture is used as a device to address the emergence, or construction, of identity, specifically evoking the nostalgia of early, burgeoning indicators of selfhood. The work embodies nightlife culture, which plays a crucial role in Chaimowicz's practice – for, the club is an environment in which darkness acts as an escape from the confines of the day to day, providing opportunities to exist as a sincere emerging self. The installation frames parties and revelry as acts of communion, where one exists somewhere between prominence and anonymity. Swathes of glitter on the floor create paths among kitsch religious icons and candles; music blares out of speakers, causing confetti to vibrate on the floor. Each object manifests as a portal into a different culture or festivity, provoking a desire to touch and to belong.



Fig. 2 Detail of *Celebration? Realife Revisited*, by Marc Camille Chaimowicz. 1972–2000. Mixed-media installation. (Photograph We Document Art; exh. WIELS, Brussels).

In *The Hayes Court Sitting Room* **FIG.3**, although this enticement to engage directly with the work disappears, there is nonetheless a life on show. The mixed-media installation is a recreation of the artist's old living room in London, in which he lived and worked for over four decades. Rather than a closed room, the walls are opened out, so that it resembles a stage set, which is decorated with hand-printed wallpaper, prints, postcards and paraphernalia relating to his previous exhibitions. A fabric rose sits on a glass table; the outline of a cross can be seen on a wall, as though the object has recently been removed; a small replica of Auguste Rodin's *The Kiss* (1882) is nestled in the corner by the skirting board. It is in these objects, and their interplay between theatre and reality, that the idea of camp re-emerges. Although the items are taken from Chaimowicz's home, there are also placeholders and 'inauthentic' interventions, such as a mounted photograph of dried flowers emerging from a glass vase, placed on the mantelpiece. There are also reproductions and works by other artists, such as a table by Eileen Gray and a photograph of casts of Jean Cocteau's head and hands **FIG.4**. The room is full of suggestion as well as fact.

In 1977 Chaimowicz wrote, referring to himself in the third person, that 'it was here within this privacy that he gathered energy for his spirit and re-acquired contact with his self'.² This privacy and certainty of self is disrupted at the back of his reconstructed living room, where a series of staged photographs of a young couple are mounted on the back of the wooden panels **FIG.5** in what appears to be the original Hayes Court sitting room. The Arts and Crafts flourishes of the now-familiar space are ruptured by their presence: these strangers transgress the stillness of the room on

the other side of the wall. Their identity is not revealed and it is unclear what their relationship is to one another – whether it is a big or small affair, or the kind of daily drama that is so often both.

The third gallery contains a suite of forty collages made by the artist over the last three years **FIG.6**. They centre on Emma Bovary, the anti-hero in Gustave Flaubert's 1856 novel. It is evident why Chaimowicz is drawn to the character of Emma, considering the distinct parallels in their consumption of the sentimental. Often considered to be overly earnest and unfashionable, sentimentality is openly employed by Chaimowicz, which, in turn, encourages the viewer to reassess their own engagement with such states of unabashed emotion. Emma imagines an idealised version of intimacy that she cannot access in her marriage, so instead uses novels to transport her to different worlds, and ultimately embarks on various affairs in an attempt to live through these fantasies. Her emotions reach fever pitch and she becomes unable to separate the real world from the aspirations she holds. It is this space, between the real and desire, the camp melodrama and the knowledge that there is a possibility of an elsewhere, in which Chaimowicz's latest work sits.

The collages, made during the confinement of lockdown, connect with Emma's desire for escape and for the romance of life. Each 'begin' with the phrase 'Dear Zoe' and after making them at his kitchen table, Chaimowicz scanned each work and emailed them to the WEILS curator, Zoë Gray. An immersion in yearning, they incorporate images from interior design magazines and the *Financial Times* 'How To Spend It' section, to create snapshots of desire and longing **FIG.7**. Chaimowicz has also drawn over the collaged elements, regularly repeating the phrase 'if only'. One reads: 'if only Emma had been aware of self-empowerment', while in another, hand-drawn birds are trapped under a red net drawn over the top, underneath the words read 'Emma Delirious'. The series engenders a sense of exhaustion: to be tired but unrewarded when a daydream has run out of momentum. Here, there is a synergy between the yearnings of artist and subject.



Fig. 3 *The Hayes Court Sitting Room*, by Marc Camille Chaimowicz. 1979–2023. Mixed-media installation, dimensions variable. (Photograph We Document Art; exh. WIELS, Brussels).

Nuit américaine is extravagant in emotion but subtly poetic in its execution. It is addictive and can leave the visitor feeling nostalgic for a life they did not live. It is generous in its romance and yet candid about the potential of disaster that such emotions can entail. Throughout his practice, Chaimowicz presents a desire that is not aggressive or accessed through the wants of others. Rather, it engenders a dedication to pursue one's own melodramas and face the consequences that this sentimentality might muster.



Fig. 4 Detail of *The Hayes Court Sitting Room*, by Marc Camille Chaimowicz. 1979–2023. Mixed-media installation. (Photograph We Document Art; exh. WIELS, Brussels).



Fig. 5 Detail of *The Hayes Court Sitting Room*, by Marc Camille Chaimowicz. 1979–2023. Mixed-media installation. (Photograph We Document Art; exh. WIELS, Brussels).



Fig. 6 *Dear Zoë (Emma Bovary collages)*, by Marc Camille Chaimowicz. 2020–23. Mixed-media installation, dimensions variable. (Photograph We Document Art; exh. WIELS, Brussels).



Fig. 7 Friday 15th October 2021 from the series *Dear Zoë* (*Emma Bovary collages*), by Marc Camille Chaimowicz. 2020–23. Collage on paper, 21 by 29.7 cm. (Courtesy the artist; exh. WIELS, Brussels).

Exhibition details

Marc Camille Chaimowicz: Nuit américai

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WIELS, Brussels

17th February–13th August 2023

Footnotes

- 1** S. Sontag: 'Notes on "camp"' [1964] in *idem: Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, London 2009, pp.275–92, at p.275.
- 2** M.C. Chaimowicz: *Dream: An Anecdote By Marc Camille Chaimowicz: Dreamt in the Winter and Remembered in the Spring of 1977*, London 1977, n.p.

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