



'I would come back to SA in a heartbeat'

Steven Cohen says of his move to France: "Every inch and molecule of me is South African. Even if South Africa doesn't want me and says 'You are not African'. What else am I? I don't live in France. I pretend to be alive... I would come back in a heartbeat but I don't have a place here. My house is gone. I was in that house for 29 years. A good thing it went, else I would have been in there for 58 years like a real bobba, just never move out..."

Steven Cohen, best known perhaps for an incident in Paris involving a rooster and his penis, has a new show, full of blood and shoes, inspired by and dedicated to his late partner

Dancing past the end of love

By GILLIAN ANSTEY



KEEP ON MOVING Visual and performance artist Steven Cohen at the Stevenson gallery in Braamfontein, Johannesburg, where his show Put your heart under your feet... and walk! is on until November 17. Picture: Alaister Russell/Stevenson

● Steven Cohen the performance artist is larger than life. He crawled on his knees with gemsbok horns as footwear when he queued to vote in the 1994 elections; he wore a tutu-like chandelier attached to a corset as he teetered on heels around the Red Ants dismantling an informal settlement in Johannesburg in 2001; he seemingly emptied his bowels while suspended above his partner Elu during a dance festival; and he tied a live rooster to his penis at the Eiffel Tower in 2013, for which he was arrested and found guilty of sexual exhibitionism.

And these are just some iconic Steven Cohen moments. So when I finally meet this, um, dare one say, creature, who blurs the lines between life and art and does almost unspeakable things as part of a show, it is fascinating to discover he is almost unrecognisable, but just as entrancing, off-stage.

He has been living in France since 2002 when his life partner and artistic collaborator Elu was head-hunted by Ballet Atlantique for a six-month residency. Cohen later became an associate artist with the company.

It is Elu's death last year, or more precisely the exhibition inspired by his loss, that now brings Cohen back home. Titled Put your heart under your feet... and walk!, it opened at the Stevenson Johannesburg yesterday where it is on show until November 17.

Motto for motivation

The title refers to the response of Cohen's surrogate mother, Nomsa Dhlamini, then 96, when he asked her how he was going to survive without Elu (whose adopted name was an acronym for "Elephant Lion Unicorn").

"How do you function in the face of intolerable grief? I think the biggest mistake is not to keep moving. Rigidity and petrification are the enemy of life," says Cohen.

No wonder he has Dhlamini's words tattooed under his left foot, the stronger leg

which supports him when dancing.

The exhibition, as well as the accompanying piece of the same title that premiered at the Montpellier Dance Festival in June, is not about Elu. Instead, insists Cohen, "it is 'to', 'for' and 'because of' Elu".

He likes the headline of the French newspaper Le Monde's pre-Montpellier interview with him, "Steven Cohen dances the violence of absence". Georgina Thomson, artistic director of South Africa's Dance Umbrella, who saw the piece in Montpellier, described it as "like watching poetry in motion".

Glorious gore

Elu died after a six-week illness that began with him haemorrhaging in his bath. This image inspired the video projection that forms part of the exhibition: Cohen bathing in blood at an abattoir.

He says he wanted to "wash myself". "I was guilty of washing in the blood of the innocent. I am speaking also of injustice and suffering and ethics." Intellectualising aside, it was also traumatising, he says. And dangerous, as the blood and bile and vomit in which he is seen luxuriating contain harmful bacteria.

The other part of the exhibition is shoes. Ballet shoes, many of them Elu's, which Cohen has adapted in various ways.

The idea that they will be on the floor, rather than art on walls, rather tickles Cohen although he wonders about their perception.

"To people outside the art world they are going to look as far from art as Kendall's brick," he says, referring to artist Kendall Geers's 1988 artwork in the Joburg Art Gallery – a brick with a photostat of a three-paragraph news report pasted onto it, about a mother and her five children in then-Bophuthatswana who died from the smoke caused by a hot brick they put in the bed to warm it.

"The brick is very important but people say it's just a brick. People will say these are shoes. But it will be like seeing Elu's life flashing before my eyes."

In true Cohen style, everything is layered with meaning. Even the Atlas moth fashioned onto his face in the abattoir scenes has been chosen for its beauty yet brevity: it has the largest wingspan of any moth but, lacking a mouth, a very short life span.



I am so old for what I do. A 55-year-old man and I have dildos, high heels and makeup. Do I have a problem with customs!



Cohen wore a chandelier as he teetered on heels around the destruction of an informal settlement in Johannesburg in 2001. Picture: John Hogg

Genesis of genius

Arts critic and academic Robyn Sassen, who did her fine arts master's thesis on Cohen, says he has five qualities: "He is homosexual, he is Jewish, he is white, he is South African and he is middle-aged. All of those things – particularly being gay and Jewish and being skinny and short and red-haired as a child –

meant he was discriminated against and bullied, so when he developed as an artist, he came out in every possible way.

"He is a shock artist but there's depth and intelligence. He is not just doing it for pure sensationalism; there is a mind behind that."

The Cohen I meet is the mind and the passion, sans sensationalism. He laughs about how Geers, who lives in Belgium, invited him to give a talk at the fine art museum there. He arrived at lunchtime and, helping himself to a sandwich, overheard Geers commenting that the homeless had simply pitched up to partake of the food.

"I said: 'Hello Kendall,'" he relates, in a dramatically resonant tone.

"I don't dress right. This doesn't go as chic," he says, gesturing to his clothes, which include Japanese split-toe worker shoes and a somewhat tatty parasol.

"I love my invisibility," he says, although he does agree to be photographed without his paraphernalia.

One of the few other photos of him "naked" like this is of his lawyer and him arriving at court in Paris. He wanted to go in drag but his lawyer argued he didn't live in drag and that the basis of his defence was that it had been a performance.

Quite a lot to declare

The City of Paris bought the five-minute video of his performance for its municipal collection. The video included his arrest. He hoped he could get the sentence annulled, but the lawyer reminded him what he had done was illegal; the merits of it being good or bad art was not in question.

"How ironic," he says.

"I am so old for what I do. A 55-year-old man and I have dildos, high heels and makeup. Do I have a problem with customs!" he says with a smile.

"I am so ordinary and shlenky," he says, using a word he says means unimpressive but which is likely to be a Cohen invention.

"In France they are always so shocked. They are waiting for this 9ft drag queen, fire coming out of its mouth."

And so, in a way, was I.

A good boy's progress



Steven Cohen was born on August 11 1962 and lived in Hillbrow, Johannesburg, until he was about eight years old, when the family moved to Orange Grove. He says he was "the good boy who wanted to do everything well" and was particularly obsessed with gymnastics, which he did competitively at national level. He went to Highlands North Boys' High School. When many left for more expensive private colleges, he begged Eden College to take him for free, enticing them with his marks, which were never below As. They accepted him and he matriculated there, going on to the University of the Witwatersrand, where he did medicine for five days before realising it was mainly "genetic pressure" and not his choice to become a doctor, so he swapped to a BA in psychology. He has always worked as an artist. Initially he did silk-screens, until he got glandular fever at 33, nearly died, and decided to use his body as a medium for his art instead.