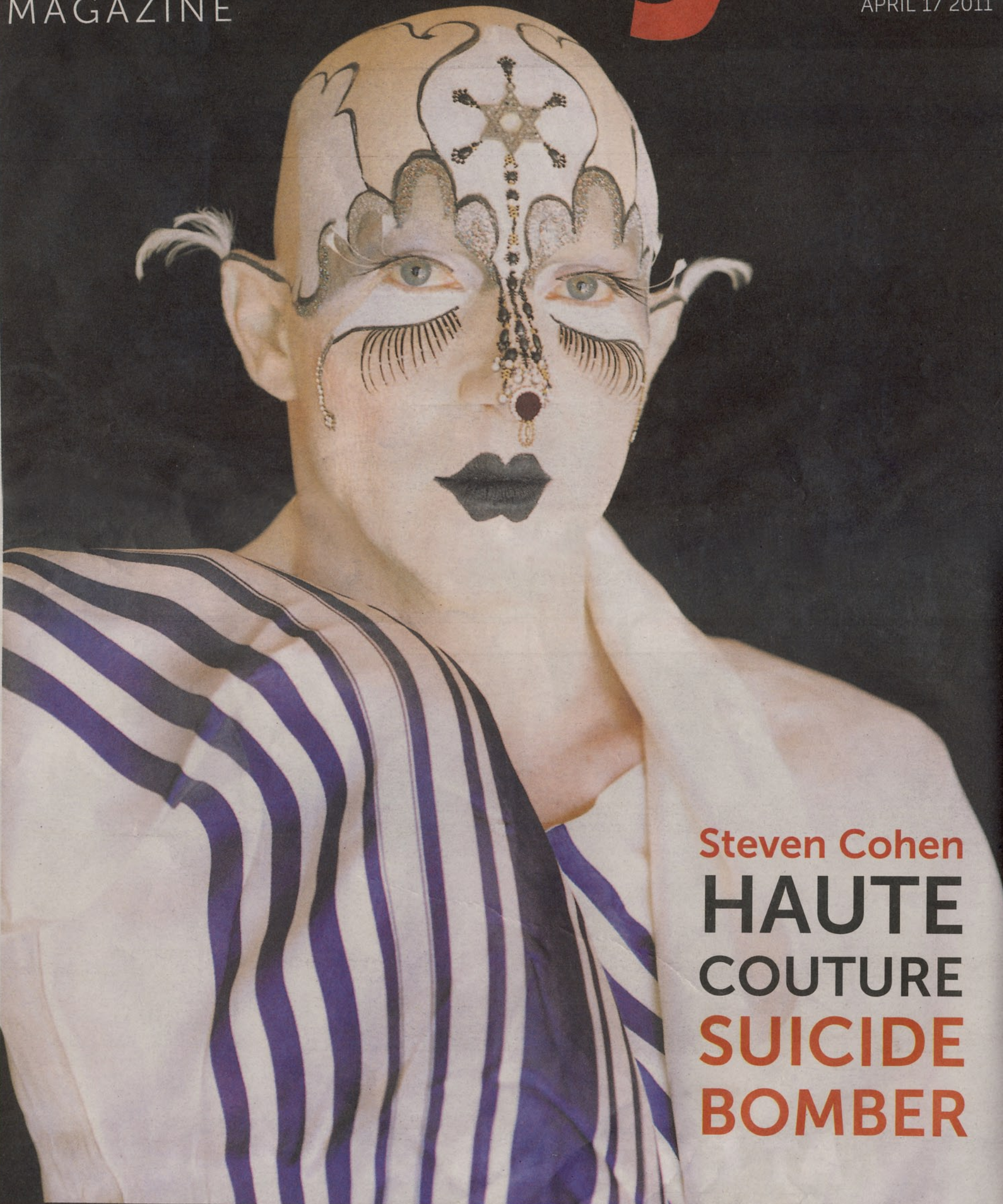


lifestyle

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MAGAZINE

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Steven Cohen
HAUTE
COUTURE
SUICIDE
BOMBER

PLUS: Thomas Falkiner — No sex please, I'm a racing driver

WAKING THE DEAD



Steven Cohen is on his way to becoming an international art star, but back home he's still banned from the school syllabus. *Charl Blignaut* joined him in Europe for the final tour of his performance piece *Golgotha*, in which he dances with the dead.

Photographs by *Marianne Greber*

'HAVE you noticed there are no ants?" asks Steven Cohen as we walk along a pavement in Bordeaux in France. I look down.

"No flies, no mosquitoes. They killed them... These towns in the South were built on the slave trade, especially the ports. Some had Nazi leanings, like this one."

I stop in a small park up ahead and stare at the ground. It's true. There are many dogs and a great many dog turds, but no ants on the streets of Bordeaux, no bugs of any sort and virtually no birds. There are certainly no *hadedas* and *Highveld* storms. I realise then what a long way from home we are and how displaced Cohen must feel, living in France or out of a suitcase for a decade.

We're on our way to an exhibition at the contemporary art museum and, as if to drive a point home, it's where he was invited to present his work when he first arrived in France. He'd found a niche for his performance art in the dance world, but at a conference on African choreography in Bordeaux he faced attack from a room full of furious African artists.

"I was told in no uncertain terms my work is not dance, not art and definitely not African," he recalls.

He'd met similar resistance back home in South Africa, not least from the gay and Jewish communities, and he took it on the chin, because this stuff happens when you're a gay white Jewish art activist challenging socio-political taboos. Especially when you create yourself as a terribly beautiful monster called *Princess Menorah*, provocatively dressed in

political symbols and impossibly high heels. A menorah is the holy Jewish candlestick. It's also a make of razor blade.

Some of the longest steps I ever walked were in Pretoria in 2002, when I went with Menorah to visit a right-wing celebration at Fort Klapperkop. "I'd hit you, but I don't want to get Aids," said the man with the inverted swastika armband, who blocked us from entering. My heart was in my throat when we drove away.

Now in his late 40s, Cohen is a psychology major and self-taught artist who started out making politically radical fabrics when he was conscripted to the army. Fabrics evolved into costumes and Menorah began to make appearances where she was least wanted. The artist presented himself at a dog show as a trick-performing dildoe slave; at the Durban July with a saddle for a dress; at a Blue Bulls match as a homophobic's worst nightmare. He turned a grand old chandelier into a tutu that lit up and wore it to a squatter camp as it was being dismantled by the Red Ants.

"I've faced (the public), not as a rebel, as an outlaw, as an asshole; never a hero, only as art," he wrote of his "living art" interventions. Today they're at the centre of his work, videotaped and incorporated into stage performances and gallery installations.

But it's what happened three years ago in Vienna while working with Austrian photographer Marianne Greber that sums up what's happened to Cohen's career.

In his video *Cleaning Time (Vienna)* he is crawling painfully on bare hands and knees over the antique cobbles of the Judenplatz. He

looks like a giant insect, of a rare and poisonous variety, in his flaming red shoes with a menorah on his head. His codpiece is fashioned from a gas mask, revealing a naked bum. From that protrudes a huge diamond. What appears to be a red claw is in fact an outsized toothbrush that he's using to clean the streets.

Passing citizens stop to stare with thinly-disguised disgust. No one asks the artist why he's doing this. If they did, he might have explained about the photograph he found from 1939. In it, Jews are forced to clean the streets of Vienna with toothbrushes while a crowd watches. He'd say the diamond symbolises the Jews being screwed by their own wealth. The Nazis exterminated their bodies, but kept their

The Judenplatz was once the heart of a thriving Jewish community. Today it is bleak and sterile and houses a concrete memorial for Vienna's Holocaust victims.

Cohen's monstrous Jewish body makes the Judenplatz suddenly relevant, a kind of memory activism. "He confronted me with the greatest shame of my nation," says Greber when I ask about the shoot.

Then the police arrive and remove him. It

wasn't Cohen's first run-in with the authorities — he's been yanked from a shopping mall in South Africa, escorted from a train station in Japan, thrown to the ground and handcuffed in France — and it won't be his last. It's what happened next that matters.

He was challenged to a discussion on Austrian TV. The prestigious national gallery *Kunsthalle Wien* supported the debate that Cohen's work had brought to town and the City of Vienna bought Greber's photo of the diamond. Then the government of Austria bought prints. Now Cohen has been invited to show with Greber at the *Kunsthalle*.

It's happening wherever he goes. In the past few months he has been approached to show pieces at the Tate Modern in London and the Reina Sofia in Madrid. In New York last year his work was placed on an exhibition between pieces by Andy Warhol and Matthew Barney. He triumphed at the world-famous Centre Pompidou in Paris.

"They are very important venues, but what I'd really love is to show at the Joburg Art Gallery," he says.

In South Africa, Cohen has been removed from the school art syllabus and was never properly included in the

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RADICAL: Left, Steven Cohen's 'Golgotha' skulletoes in New York — they are real skulls; and a portrait taken by photographer Marianne Greber. Below, Princess Menorah being escorted by police in Vienna

art books, yet in Holland he's on the cover of a recent study of performance art and in France he features in a new book called *Eccentrics* — *From Boy George to Steven Cohen. People who shook their era.*

His breakthrough was *Dancing Inside Out*. To a recording of Hitler addressing a Nazi rally, Cohen strips naked and then, using a sex shop camera, explores every pore of his body, eventually inserting the camera as a dildo. The fragility of the human body is projected onto a giant screen and offers a terrible poignancy when it meets Hitler's voice.

Newspapers such as *Le Monde* and the *New York Times*, that at first had found Cohen's work unsettling and difficult to reconcile, now raved. "The spectator does not remember having been confronted with such a radical and disturbing performance — as opposed to the usual dithering in a theatre — for a very long time," wrote dance bible *Mouvement*.

"Cohen explodes history, literally throwing his body into battle," wrote the celebrated cultural writer Gerard Mayen.

It's gruelling work and Cohen suffers from a back injury, yet he never compromises.

"I'm exhausted and depressed and a big success," he says with typical self-denigrating candour, as he unpacks his make-up in another change room, this time in Poitiers. "In a sense, if the work is a success, then it has failed. I want it to make people question things, I don't want them to love it."

Cohen wrestles with contradictions. He acknowledges being born a white oppressor during apartheid while working on a piece about his gay and Jewish oppression, using his body as a site of conflict. He flummoxes his audiences.

In his best work there's a perfect balance of political ideas, physical challenge and aesthetic beauty. All of these are informed by the one thing the artist loves more than cream cakes — shopping for rare, difficult and exquisite objects to display or transform. It's how he made a living as a struggling artist in Joburg, finding treasures and reselling them.

"I'm surprised you are so quiet and gentle

and not at all like on stage," says a reporter from the local paper. "You haven't seen me at a flea market," he replies.

Shopping is how he met his co-stars in *Golgotha* — a dead Asian man and woman. Their skulls were for sale at a trendy home décor store in SoHo, New York, and he converted them into dangerously high-heeled shoes.

He knows they're Asian because the shopkeeper told him, saying he sold only Asian and African bones as decorative curiosities, not American ones.

"Is this not the ultimate insanity of consumerist culture — selling the dead? And the American government taxed the purchase, so they are complicit in selling human remains — which is for the most part forbidden across the planet," says Cohen over breakfast at our

Poitiers hotel. "It's a civilised form of savagery. And I was as complicit buying them as they were selling them. Every step I take makes me feel like a criminal, like a *haute couture* suicide bomber."

As he talks, he eyes the basket of buttery croissants, but is on a diet because he is worried about how much weight the female skull can handle. During performances she creaks a little, like she's talking.

The videos in *Golgotha* were filmed in New York. In the skulletoes, Cohen walks through the city's commercial lung, from Times Square along Wall Street. He keeps going until Ground Zero, the site of the 9/11 attacks. By then his American crew have abandoned him, refusing to engage with a place of so much suffering.

For the first time in his career, he is wearing

a suit. "I didn't want the outfit to distract from the image of three skulls — their two and my living one."

On stage he is literally dancing with the dead — and it's not just the three of them. The fourth performer in *Golgotha* is his brother Mark, who committed suicide. He's why Cohen created the piece, and why it's "more of a ritual than a performance".

Over the years Cohen has collected a range of valuable vintage ceramic lamps. In *Golgotha* a dozen are lit and arranged in the shape of a cross. In a brutal display of grief, he stomps on them. Later he hangs suspended while behind him plays actual video footage of a man being executed in the electric chair. This was also available for sale in New York.

Yet the climax of the piece is when, still suspended, he runs his hands over his make-up and shards of butterfly wings fall to the floor in slow motion. It mirrors what happened when his mother called, saying: "Mark's dead! He hanged himself!"

"I remember dropping everything I had in my hands. Not violently, just numb," he tells me when we are back in Lille, where he has bought a home and lives with his cat, Remy.

It's only when we have reached Spain that he tells me more. "My brother e-mailed and said I'm going to kill myself and I talked him out of it. A year later he wrote again and said I'm going to kill myself and I said I don't have time for this. You can't do this by e-mail, you must call me."

"It was the last time I heard from him."

So, travelling with a work like *Golgotha*, it's sometimes a stretch to be greeted by adoring fans — and in Madrid there are many.

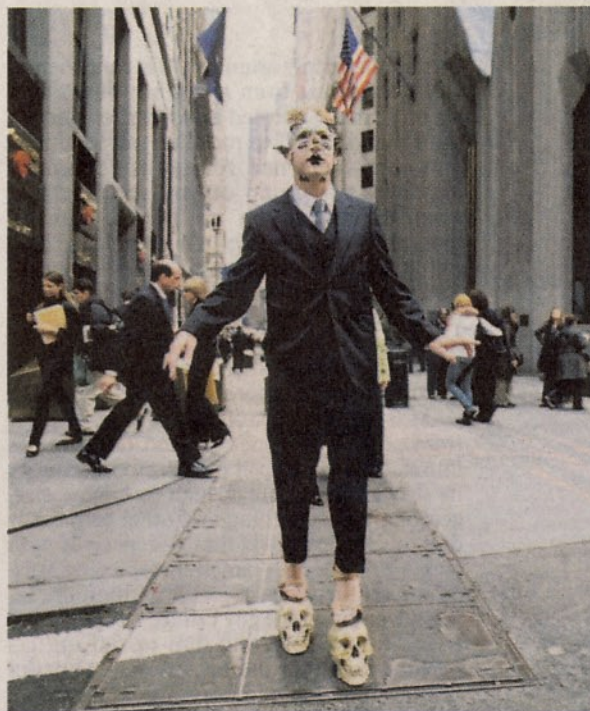
"Ah, the king," says the Spanish theatre technician, bowing deeply.

"I think you mean queen," replies Cohen, gently and wittily displacing the compliment.

On the night of the last performance of *Golgotha* there's a TV crew waiting when we get to the theatre. Producer and presenter Mach's Osinaga has an arresting angular bob and is as



Pictures: MARIANNE GREBER



MOVING FORWARD: Left, Steven Cohen performing 'Golgotha' in Wall Street. And 'The Wandering Jew — Temple Stairs in Osu, Japan. 'Oy vey, if you wake up and you're not in pain, watch out!' he says.



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skinny as a model, but she's no babe and asks some poetic questions.

"Is *Golgotha* a death piece or about rebirth?"

"It's a piece about cycles."

"To you, is the body a tool or a temple?"

"It's all I have. Using my body has more impact — the downside is the body doesn't last as long."

"What do you love and what do you hate?"

"I hate everything."

"Really?"

He changes the subject. "Come, film the shoes, they're the real stars of the show..."

The next day, my last in Madrid, we go for coffee and I ask Cohen if he meant what he said — that he hates everything.

"It's absolutely not true," he replies. "There are so many things that I love. But it's not by softly paddling in the things we love that we have any possibility of changing the world. For me it's about attacking the things I hate."

While touring with *Golgotha* he has been making trips home to create his next piece, *Cradle*. He's worried, because performing *Golgotha* has drained his energy.

"You're working too hard," I say.

"I'm just waiting for it all to end," he replies.

"Then you'll be dead."

"That's when you're sure you're dead! It's a very Jewish thing. Oy vey, if you wake up and you're not in pain, watch out!"

A few weeks after getting back home, I pick up a rave review of *Cradle* from Europe — it opened the important Anticodes festival in Brest at the end of March, and was already sold out at the time of the interview.

Twenty performances of the new piece were instantly snapped up by programmers after the Brest opening. In October it will headline at the all-important Festival d'Automne at Centre Pompidou.

In the piece, Cohen collaborates with 90-year-old Nomsa Dlamini, the domestic

worker who helped raise him. Inspired by a Nirox residency at the Cradle of Humankind, Cohen wears a stuffed baboon as a tutu. He blackens his teeth and whitens his body to look as if he fell from the stars. He reinvents Dlamini, at one stage naked in a fibre-optic tutu, as a kind of Saartjie Baartman, lobbing an ethical bomb at the audience, who have paid to see her.

"I didn't sleep for 10 days, but we got it together. In the end it kind of made itself," he mails me. "I feel like the dead are looking after me... and that I can make good work again. I finally feel like I'm moving forward." *Golgotha*, it seems, was more rebirth than death after all.