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PHOTO: ALLAN THIEBAULT

'At the fulcrum of vulnerability and power': Steven Cohen in his performative installation *Boudoir*

## Invitation to an intimate encounter

# Steven Cohen's *Boudoir* is both a culmination of preceding works and a radical departure in form

Steven Cohen's *Boudoir*, currently touring Europe, is the artist's most intimate work to date. Following decades of provocations in public space and conventional theatres, audiences are now invited to dwell *inside* the work rather than spectate from afar, in what Cohen calls an 'operatic scale studio visit'.

*Boudoir* comprises both the screening of performed actions and a close encounter with objects from Cohen's personal collections, artworks and his own body in an ethereal, old-world salon. Unlike

previous works, his point of departure is not a direct examination of set concepts such as loss, the complexity of visibility and connection or class and cultural identity. Here, Cohen offers a hybrid amalgam, while revealing how interior conflicts, representations, oppressions and laws all intertwine. He writes:

'Realising *Boudoir* was less about having an idea than finding a form for the thing I had to do ... I don't know if it can be called an experiment because those are conducted to prove something or to conclude something and *Boudoir* aims at the inverse of that – even the videos feature as an element of imagination, intervention, documentation and elaboration of the concerns of the work.

'I used to want people to leave my performances changed – reformed, deformed, transformed, contented, discontented – in any other way than that in which they came in, but I no longer have any expectations over the form or content of the response to the work. I would appreciate it if people left with a slightly softened sense of whatever was hardening in themselves.

'I try to position my work exactly at the fulcrum of vulnerability and power ... For me, to create is to militate ... but make no mistake, I am out to fuck with the heteronormative patriarchy from within the system.'

For a full list of dates see <https://steven-cohen.com/en/calendar/>

## When 2x2 leads to 5

# For Stevenson's second outing at Art Rotterdam, alongside recent works on paper by Moshekwa Langa, the gallery presents assemblages from the archive of Oey Tjeng Sit. Noëlle de Haan explains our fascination with the 'pharmacist-artist' whose storefront on Prinsengracht doubled as a space to display art



Oey Tjeng Sit at work in his former pharmacy in 1986

PHOTO: NIELS WESTRA, COURTESY OF RENÉ OEY

Moshekwa Langa (born 1975) and Oey Tjeng Sit (1917-1987) are two artists from elsewhere, generations apart, who have made the Netherlands their home. At Art Rotterdam, Oey's presentation comprises archival assemblages that have spent almost four decades out of public view. Oey was born in Purwokerto on the island of Java, and came to the Netherlands aged 21 to study pharmacy. Dipping into and out of these studies until his graduation, he grew disinterested in Western medicine, finding more intrigue in Dadaism, Fluxus and other avant-garde art movements. Between 1958 and 1980 he ran Apotheek Oey, his pharmacy-cum-gallery a stone's throw from Stevenson's Prinsengracht address, becoming known as 'the doyen of window art' as his storefront housed radical performances and installations.

A combination of the personal and philosophical led to Oey becoming a household name in our gallery. In the spring of 2021,

director Joost Bosland came across 2x2=5, the catalogue for Oey's first institutional exhibition, which took place at Museum de Lakenhal in 1980. We found resonance with the ethos of unconventionality expressed in Oey's first line, '2x2 leads more often to 5 than to 4,' the uncanniness of the connection showing itself in the discovery that my maternal grandfather, of the same Chinese-Japanese heritage, had been pharmacological studymates with the artist. Just as we came to know of Oey's legacy and his hidden presence in (inter)national collections, the artist's son published a book on his family history, allowing a curiosity to become an art-historical pursuit.

Like Langa, Oey creates works on paper, making lithographs, and collages that feature his signature black, white, beige and Gaulois-blue tones. Consciously navigating and melding his heritage with various cultural artistic influences, he drew, sketched and used

frottage techniques on the street's cobblestones, in addition to creating elaborate installations and poetic interventions. The tension between reality and illusion is a key theme in Oey's work. Newspaper and other ethereal materials recur as an extension of his aims, of which he says, 'My work must activate people. There are a lot of artworks perfectly made, that I find very dull, as they don't want to say more than their perfection. In my opinion art should cause agitation.'

Oey's last exhibition in the Netherlands took place in 2003 at Kunstmuseum Den Haag, where Langa had his first survey in 2022. After spending two years immersed in Oey's world, putting the pieces together with his family's support, it's a privilege to share his story and to find convergences between these two artists' journeys.

The family history can be found in René Oey, *Apotheek Oey* (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij De Vita, 2020). See also <https://oeytjengsit.com/>

## Three panels, a crowd

# In an extract from a talk on her exhibition *Vertigo*, Deborah Poynton describes the making of her *Meaning and Purpose Triptych*

I mostly use my family as models, but from time to time I have also done crowd paintings, I suppose because it accentuates the idea that we are hive creatures, profoundly reliant on each other as we all occupy our little bubbles of hope, sadness, joy, meaning. I particularly like the crowd paintings of the 16th century painter Breughel, who painted people in the context of their environment and society. He was less interested in individuals, more in everyone's predicament in relation to each other.

In order to do the triptych, I approached a friend who teaches

at City Varsity, and she organised a shoot with the drama students and any staff who were prepared to join in. Some students did not take part on the day, others entered into it with great generosity and enjoyment. The selection of people is therefore random – it was whoever was there and willing. I photographed them one by one, or in twos or threes if they were holding each other, and gave instructions like, pretend you are running from something, or in pain, look back, look forward, and so on. I'll take several details and sometimes use one head angle with another body position, depending on what works in the composition.

Once I have all the photos I usually work on a few drawings until I come up with a more detailed composition. I find that a preliminary drawing is essential with figures. And often, even if it looks correct in the drawing, once it is large on canvas I have to readjust. I was in my studio in Germany when I started this work, which was lucky because I have the space there to step right back. Some heads will look too large, others too small, so after the first layer of underpainting is on I

have to push and pull it around until it is sitting comfortably. Once the undercoat is on I can start having a conversation with the painting. That means it starts to dictate to me how the textures and colours can work together. The ground and details of animals and plants are constructed directly on the canvas.

I called this work *Meaning and Purpose Triptych* because I feel like we sort of act out our meaning and purpose as it comes to us, in an almost burlesque procession through life, helping and hindering, lost in our own compulsions and regrets, believing that we have all this choice, that we will live forever, that we are independent, and all the while completely relying on other *Homo sapiens* for our shelter, food, objects, entertainment, waste removal, for absolutely everything that contributes to our survival. We rely on others for all this concrete help, and we also rely on others for our context, our meaning and purpose.

Poynton will give her talk, titled 'The Compulsion to Paint', at Stevenson, Cape Town, on 18 February at 11am. Her exhibition *Vertigo* is on view at the gallery until 11 March



Deborah Poynton with the *Meaning and Purpose Triptych* in progress in her studio in Germany

PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

# Calendar Feb-May

## 1 February

Last week of the Rencontres de Bamako photography festival, where Jo Racliffe has a small survey TO 8 FEB

## 2 February

Last chance to see *Down North*, the North Atlantic Triennial, with work by Frida Orupabo, at Reykjavik Art Museum TO 5 FEB

## 4 February

*Vertigo*, an exhibition of new paintings and drawings by Deborah Poynton, opens at Stevenson Cape Town TO 11 MAR

## 7 February

The 15th Sharjah Biennial, *Thinking Historically in the Present*, opens. Thenjiwe Niki Nkosi and Mame-Diarra Niang participate TO 11 JUN

## 9-12 February

Stevenson presents mixed-media works by Moshekwa Langa and assemblages by Oey Tjeng Sit at Art Rotterdam

## 10-11 February

Steven Cohen's performative installation *Boudoir* shows at BIT Teatergarasjen in Bergen, Norway 7PM

## 11 February

A solo exhibition of new paintings by Ian Grose, *People and Time*, opens at Stevenson Johannesburg TO 18 MAR

## 15 February

Penny Siopis's 1997 *Ongoing*, featuring the seminal works *Charmed Lives*, *Will* and *My Lovely Day*, opens at the Michaelis Galleries, Cape Town TO 20 FEB

## 15 February

Simphiwe Ndzube takes part in *Boil, Toil & Trouble* presented by Art in Common (708 N Manhattan Pl), Los Angeles TO 26 FEB



## 17-19 February

The Investec Cape Town Art Fair takes place at the CT Convention Centre. Find us at booth C9 with works by many of our gallery artists (including Portia Zvavahera, above). VIPs are invited to a studio visit with Penny Siopis on Friday at 11.30am

## 18 February

Deborah Poynton gives a talk titled 'The Compulsion to Paint' on her exhibition at Stevenson Cape Town. All are welcome 11AM

## 18 February

Art-worlders come together to play football in the 2023 iteration of *Exhibition Match* at Grand Central, Cape Town 8PM

## 20 February

Last week of Barthélémy Toguo's first institutional solo in Spain, at the Picasso Museum in Barcelona TO 26 FEB

## 23 February

Last days to see the Stevenson/Kiang Malingue collaboration, with Frida Orupabo, Mawande Ka Zenzile, Simphiwe Ndzube and Thenjiwe Niki Nkosi showing in Hong Kong. Tao Hui, Tromarama and Wang Zhibo show in Amsterdam for another week TO 25 FEB/4 MAR

## 23-25 February

Steven Cohen's *Boudoir* continues its European tour at Schauspielhaus, Zürich

## 28 February

Last days to view *Scenorama*, a 'collaborative platform for experimentation' by artists including Paulo Nazareth, at Javett-UP, Pretoria TO 1 MAR

## 1 March

Last week to view *Pattern Recognition*, from the collection of Kunstpalais Erlangen in Germany; Frida Orupabo is included TO 5 MAR

## 1-3 March

Steven Cohen's *Boudoir* travels to Bonlieu Scène National in Annecy, France

## 2 March

Thenjiwe Niki Nkosi's *Suspension* screens on *Champs* at Granville Centre Art Gallery, Cumberland, Australia TO 24 JUN

## 2 March

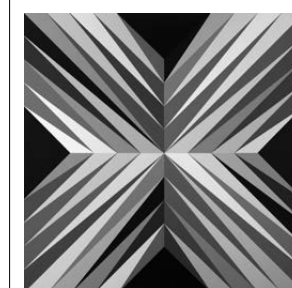
Last chance to see Frida Orupabo's work in *Afterimage* at MAXXI L'Aquila TO 5 MAR

## 3 March

The Deutsche Börse Photography Prize exhibition opens at the Photographers' Gallery in London. Frida Orupabo is one of four short-listed artists TO 11 JUN

## 4 March

Deborah Poynton gives a walk-about of her exhibition *Vertigo* at Stevenson Cape Town for the Friends of the South African National Gallery 11AM



## 10 March

Odili Donald Odita exhibits new paintings at Stevenson Amsterdam TO 8 APR

## 11 March

Serge Alain Nitegeka's video *BLACK SUBJECTS* screens as part of the Spier Light Art festival TO 12 APR

## 16 March

Following a month-long residency, Mawande Ka Zenzile has a solo exhibition at 31 Project, Paris TO 16 APR

## 18 and 25 March

An exhibition of Penny Siopis's films opens at Stevenson Cape Town, followed a week later by a focus on her paintings in Johannesburg. A discussion about her films will take place during the Cape Town show TO 29 APR

## 21 March

Human Rights Day, South Africa

## 23 March

Last day to view *New Formations*, exploring athletic performance, with work by Thenjiwe Niki Nkosi, at deCordova Museum in Lincoln, Massachusetts TO 23 MAR

## 24 March

*Seeds of the Fig*, curated by Reservoir, draws to a close at Twee Jonge Gezellen Farm in Tulbagh. Wim Botha and Serge Alain Nitegeka are included TO 31 MAR

## 25 March

*Hylton Nel: This plate is what I have to say* opens at Charleston, East Sussex, UK. The show looks at 60 years of practice through the lens of Nel's plates TO 10 SEP

## 3-4 April

Steven Cohen's *Boudoir* travels to the Théâtre Auditorium de Poitiers in France

## 7-10 April

Easter weekend

## 15 April

Cian-Yu Bai has her first Amsterdam solo at Stevenson, showing new works on canvas and paper

## 23 April

Last week to view *Labor & Materials* with work by Pieter Hugo and Serge Alain Nitegeka at 21c Museums, Kansas City TO 30 APR

## 26 April

Last chance to see *The Future is Behind Us*, 'about time, tense and tempo', at A4 Arts Foundation, Cape Town; Jo Racliffe is included TO 26 APR

## pril

Freedom Day, South Africa

## 1 May

Workers Day, South Africa

## 6 May

Sosa Joseph opens her first exhibition with Stevenson in Cape Town. *Juxtapositions*, with Unathi Mkonto and David Goldblatt, runs concurrently TO 10 JUN

## 7 May

Stevenson's 20th birthday

## 13 May

Guy Tillim shows new photography, accompanied by a *Stage* exhibition featuring Thato Toeba, at Stevenson Johannesburg TO 17 JUN

## 26 May

*Down North*, with work by Frida Orupabo, travels to the Bildmuseet, Umeå TO 14 JAN

## 31 May

Mawande Ka Zenzile's first Amsterdam solo opens concurrently with Amsterdam Art Week (31 May to 4 June) TO 22 JUL

## Don't miss these ongoing shows

### → Until 11 June

*Brave New World: 16 Painters for the 21st Century*, featuring Portia Zvavahera and Neo Matloga, is on view at Museum de Fundatie, Zwolle

### → Until 27 August

*Time for Change: Art and Social Unrest in the Jorge M Pérez Collection*, at the Tampa Museum of Art, includes Barthélémy Toguo's installation *Road to Exile*

### → Until 3 September

*When We See Us* explores Black self-representation in painting at Zeitz MOCAA, Cape Town. Neo Matloga, Meleko Mokgosi and Thenjiwe Niki Nkosi are included



## Collect Call: Lindelwa Farisani

WE CHAT TO JOHANNESBURG-BASED COLLECTOR LINDELWA FARISANI

**Why art?** I see art as a form of expression, both for the artist and the collector. As an apartheid-born South African, I see art as a platform through which we can tell our stories, express parts of ourselves, our culture, history and identity, without

the need to conform to some enforced standard. This matters to me given our history, and how most of our stories and histories are rarely told by us. Art, therefore, is a way of taking back ownership and reclaiming our identity.

**What was the first work you bought from us?** It was *Everyone carries a Shadow 2* by Nandipha Mntambo, a photograph of two black people in an embrace. For me, the photograph exudes the essence of black love more than it does the heavy idea of a shadow; there is a certain sensuality to it that is hard to ignore. Perhaps it is because that is what I want to it to portray... Perhaps it is because I hunger for images of black people embracing in love as opposed to sorrow. Whatever the reason, when I look at it, I see black love.

**Are there any exhibitions you are looking forward to?** I am looking forward to the Sharjah Biennale for two reasons. One

is that one of my *Heroes* works by Thenjiwe Niki Nkosi is on loan for the exhibition. I have never had a museum or exhibition borrow from my collection before, so this feels like a significant moment and something of a rite of passage in my identity as a collector. It is also important to me that a black female artist is being showcased in the Middle East, providing that part of the world with a way to hear our voices through her art. The other reason is that the show's concept addresses important questions around how the past influences the present, dealing with issues of colonialism and tradition, and their impact on contemporary art and life, which resonate with me as an African collector.

**What hangs in your bedroom?** Nandipha Mntambo's photograph and two small Deborah Bells of people in a prayer position. I love what the two represent - love and spirituality respectively.



PHOTO: WONG PAK HANG

Works by Simphiwe Ndzube and Thenjiwe Niki Nkosi hang in the Hong Kong gallery of Kiang Malingue as part of an exchange with Stevenson. Kiang Malingue artists Tao Hui, Tromarama and Wang Zhibo show video installation, photographs,

paintings and reliefs at Stevenson in Amsterdam until 4 March, while Ndzube, Nkosi, Mawande Ka Zenzile and Frida Orupabo make their Hong Kong debuts, exhibiting in Kiang Malingue's gallery in the Blue Box Factory Building till 25 February.

## Siopis's radical cinema

# Penny Siopis's short films are the subject of a forthcoming book of essays. An extract from editor Sarah Nuttall's introduction establishes just how groundbreaking they are



Formally arresting: A still from Siopis's *Celluloid Body* (2021)

Penny Siopis's remarkable body of short films, made between 1997 and 2021, constitutes a centrifugal – and ravishing – intervention into the history of film today. The films, some twenty and others only five minutes long, situate Siopis in the front rank of artist-filmmakers working across the world today. In particular, she reworks the essay film genre so pivotal to late 20th-century thought and now finding its 21st-century dimensions.

Deleuze, Barthes, Adorno and the Surrealists before them were all captivated by cinema's potential to be an image of thought itself. Rather than the smooth and sutured narratives of mainstream film, they were drawn, in the post-war world of crisis and transformation they were so viscerally living through, to the cut, the gap and the interstice as places of radical disjunction from which they could produce thinking about the world before them.

If Chris Marker's film *Sans Soleil*, set between Japan and West Africa, burst open the essay film

to its then most radical potential, alongside experimental works by Agnès Varda, Trinh T Minh-ha, the Black Audio Film Collective, the Otolith Group and many others, Siopis works in conversation with all of them – and drives film form decisively in her own direction. Crucially inflected by her location in the African and global South, Siopis's work deepens the registers of politics as form, in conversation with formlessness as such, as much as image as in text, to find the new. [...]

*Penny Siopis: Your History with Me* features new essays by academics, critics and artists including Laura Rascaroli, Griselda Pollock, Brenda Hollweg, William Kentridge, Pumla Dineo Gqola, Mark Gevisser, Zoé Whitley, Achille Mbembe, Katerina Gregos and Sarah Nuttall, as well as a conversation between Siopis, John Akomfrah and Zineb Sedira.

Siopis's short films emerge from a four-decade oeuvre which progressively pushes into the outer limits of matter and materiality. Already, in her 'cake paintings' and 'history paintings' of the 1980s, the tension between reference and materiality, historical depiction and the significance of the (painted) surface, between history and the history of art, was evident. Her turn to collage in its capacity to 'interfere with direct depiction' preceded what would become her interest in filmic montage.

In the course of all this work, including the movement from painting into film, she reaches in formally arresting ways far into the subterranean lives of others, elaborates the readymade as filmic form, arrives at a kind of cine-writing which is entirely her own, and draws celluloid to its most vital and often most broken edges.

An exhibition of Siopis's films opens at Stevenson Cape Town on 18 March, followed on 25 March by an exhibition of paintings in Johannesburg, a double showing in celebration of her 70th birthday.

# Reading matter

# New additions to our shelves



**Portia Zvavahera.** Published by David Zwirner Books, 2023. Essay by Meredith Brown and interview by Allie Biswas



**Ruth Ige: Freedom's Recurring Dream.** Published by Stevenson (cat. 99), 2023. Essay by Sihle Motsa

## WHAT WE'RE WATCHING

In the lead-up to the 2023 *Exhibition Match*, bringing together soccer and art, Alexander Richards recommends these films:

*È stata la mano di Dio/ The Hand of God* is an Italian drama by Paolo Sorrentino (2021). The film is set in 1980s Naples where Fabietto, an awkward teen, struggles to find his place, experiencing heartbreak and liberation after he's saved from a freak accident by football legend Diego Maradona. Sorrentino returns to his hometown to tell his tale of fate and family, sports and cinema, love and loss. I enjoyed its nostalgic feel and how it echoes themes in football like hope, learning from mistakes and powerful relationships of mutual benefit.

A film I've watched over and over again is Douglas Gordon and Philippe Parreno's *Zidane: A 21st century portrait* (2006). With immense detail and focus, it follows French icon Zinedine Zidane over the course of a single match in 2005. Gordon and Parreno conceived of it in relation to painted portraiture extending back to Goya and Velázquez as well as Andy Warhol's real-time filmic portraits. It's a deep study of one of the most creative and aesthetically pleasing players in a style that captures his physical movement and athletic wit.

## From the press

→ Miss Rosen on Pieter Hugo's *Polyphonic* at Stevenson, Johannesburg  
"It's a duty to experiment and get yourself uncomfortable; creativity comes from new things," says Hugo, who has followed this principle throughout his career. He points to a project he did years ago photographing blind people, an experience that taught him a tremendous amount about the nature of portraiture. "I felt incredibly self-conscious because you have to physically direct them to what you want," Hugo remembers. "There's an incredible discomfort one feels that has nothing to do with the person you are photographing. The discomfort is within you. It's your biases and issues. That was a major key that unlocked a lot in my practice and understanding. When we engage with people, there are so many small signifiers that go back centuries in evolutionary history about how we read people and situate ourselves to respond to them."

Hugo's portraits reveal the inherent paradox of photography: the ways in which the medium moves through liminal space of fact and fiction, image and substance, spirit and flesh. "What a photograph does is tell you about a surface of something, and we imbue meaning into that. Sometimes that meaning is accurate and sometimes it's not. Every so often it's read in a completely different way than what I intended it to do, and it acts as the start of a conversation about possibilities and limitations," he says. "I've always been interested in making pictures that hold you and don't let you go. I look for that exchange of energy between myself and the subject; it's non-verbal communication but still a collaboration. No matter who you are in that moment, it's you and I, and that's it. It's like a great equaliser in the world."

'Celebrating 20 Years of Pieter Hugo's Confrontational Portraiture', *AnOther*, 6 December 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/392x67xa>

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