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*Nuit
américaine*

Marc Camille Chaimowicz

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Introduction

Marc Camille Chaimowicz is an understated pioneer, who has steadfastly sailed against the prevailing artistic winds since the start of his career in London in the 1970s. Resisting claims for art's autonomy, he early embraced the decorative arts and intertwined design, installation, painting, print-making, collage and his daily life into a highly personal vocabulary. He continues to be of great importance to younger artists, not least due to his constant yet subtle challenging of the role of art and in his development of a camp aesthetic.

Like his refined yet playful work, Chaimowicz himself defies easy categorization. He embraces ambiguity in his persona as an artist, adopting the position of a discreet dandy, and in his practice, which in many ways prefigures recent investigations into gender and identity. Born in Post-war Paris to a Polish Jewish father and French Catholic mother, then educated in England, Chaimowicz inhabits a singular position at the crossroads of two art-scenes, cultures and languages.

Folding together past and present, this exhibition brings together one of Chaimowicz's earliest installations, *Celebration? Realife* (1972), a recreation of his sitting room of the past 40 years (1979–2023), and a series of collages inspired by Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (2020–2023). Of these three bodies of work, Chaimowicz writes: "the first was primarily construed as a gift for others, ...the second as a once haven, and the third as portraiture differed."

All three examine intimacy, domesticity, and the desire – or need – to create one own’s context.

Light plays a central role in Chaimowicz’s exhibition, which transitions from a dark space of festivity, to the half-light of a domestic interior designed for daydreaming, and finally to the filtered daylight of a reading room. Its title, *Nuit américaine*, is the French term for the cinematic technique of filming day-for-night, which here becomes a metaphor for presenting real life through the filter of art.

Curator: Zoë Gray

Room 1

Light is filtered in many, shifting colours in the sensorial installation that occupies the first room of the exhibition: *Celebration? Realife Revisited* (1972–2000).¹

Chaimowicz made this work in the aftermath of the May '68 student protests, which he had travelled to Paris to join. Upon his return, he burned his undergraduate work, joined the renowned painting course of London’s Slade School of Fine Arts – which was dominated by formalist painting – and, somewhat controversially, began making installations. He saw them as an expansion of painting into a spatial and social form, becoming a forerunner in this emerging practice. Interested in hospitality, he was originally present during the course of the exhibition, offering visitors conversation and cups of tea. As Kirsty Bell

has noted, this work is now considered to be a “precocious forerunner of the strain of participatory art that gained prominence in the 1990s.”²

As Tom Holert argues in his book dedicated to this one work, Chaimowicz’s post-Pop scatter environment owed as much to glam rock as to art practice. It raised questions about public/private dichotomies, art/design boundaries, and identifications based on gender, recasting the artist as an art director and stage designer.³ Installed in London in a former ballroom, the silver-painted walls echoed the silver-lined interior of Warhol’s Factory. As Jean Fisher put it, the installation was both “hermetic and intoxicating: as artificially gay and provocative as a bordello, yet as sombre and reverential as a church.”⁴

Many of the ‘low culture’ elements of the installation were found in the street, as Chaimowicz underlined when revisiting the work in 2000:

“The street, especially at night, constituted a material for this need to contest dominant cultural values. What needs to be realized now is how much this marginal position has been gradually appropriated by the dominant culture.”⁵

While *Celebration? Realife* embraces both the celebratory and the mundane, Chaimowicz stresses that it was always a fiction: “It just happened that many of the elements constituting the work belonged to everyday life: it was almost as if you started spacing out without

having taken even the smallest dose of an intoxicating substance. That means there was a transformation. The question mark was a metaphor for these gaps between art and life.”⁶

Room 2

From a party atmosphere, we shift into a quieter mode. While in the first gallery, there was no fixed point of view, but rather a distraction created by the diverse elements and their shifting reflections, here Chaimowicz offers an installation that is frontal, immobile and which encourages seated contemplation. We are, after all, in the artist’s sitting room, almost.

The Hayes Court Sitting Room (1979– 2023), created on the occasion of this exhibition, is the theatrical evocation of the room in which Chaimowicz dreamed, worked, conversed, corresponded (and more) for over four decades. The importance of the domestic space was already clear in 1977, when he published an artist’s book titled *Dream... an Anecdote*. Writing in the third person, he says of his then apartment:

“it was here that he could shelter from the external world, it was here within this privacy that he gathered energy for his spirit and re-acquired contact with his self.”⁷

In her study of artist’s houses, Kirsty Bell writes of how historically the home has been a gendered realm: with the architectural exterior decided by

men, and the interior space shaped by women. “Decorative arts and textiles were not generally considered to be the domain of a male artist in the early 1970s, nor was the explicitly housebound setting Chaimowicz chose as his arena for creative production,” she writes. “Stepping gently over the demarcations that cordon off feminine from masculine, he offered instead the possibility of an androgynous zone of creative activity.”⁸

This room includes hand-printed “wallpaper”, furniture and soft furnishings designed by the artist, framed artworks or invitations to his previous exhibitions, assemblages of sentimental items as well as bouquets of dried leaves and flowers. In his all-encompassing approach to an interior, one could draw connections between Chaimowicz’s practice and that of Belgian architects such as Victor Horta (1861–1947) or Henry Van de Velde (1863–1957), who designed everything from the wallpaper and fabrics to the coffee service or items of clothing. However, in addition to elements of his own design, Chaimowicz’s sitting room also contains a table by Eileen Gray, a small reproduction of Rodin’s sculpture *The Kiss*, and a photograph of Jean Cocteau’s hands, thus blurring the boundaries of authorship and appropriation.

The domestic interior is for Chaimowicz an indirect self-portrait, a theatrical site for the performance of the self. This installation takes that theatricality a step further, as underscored by the room’s fragmentation into four units of a stage-set. It transposes a fragment of Camberwell (South-East London) to Brussels, but the original sitting room was in itself already a transposition of time and place: the insertion of a mid-twentieth century French interior into a turn of the century

English building. The room's recreation proposes a subjective and provisional experience, rather than the static, authoritative 'museumification' typical to preserved artist's studios and houses. To enhance this fictional aspect of the work, Chaimowicz staged what he describes as "a *fast-forwarded* photo sequence of two people, as yet unnamed, *animating* the work in what may be presumed to be a liaison..."⁹ The resulting photographs, shown here, function for the artist as the 21st-century activation of a 20th-century interior.

Room 3

Portraiture, fiction and domestic interiors also play a central role in the new body of work that occupies the third gallery of the exhibition. It is a suite of 40 collages, whose production began in October 2020, in the depths of the Covid-19 pandemic. Their starting point is Madame Bovary, the anti-heroine of Gustave Flaubert's 1856 eponymous novel. Chaimowicz has long been drawn to this character trapped into a narrow existence by the conventions of her epoch.¹⁰

In Flaubert's tale, which shocked readers at the time of its publication, Emma Bovary seeks liberation and excitement through romance and adultery, but meets a tragic end of betrayal, bankruptcy and suicide. In this new series of collages, Chaimowicz connects Emma's longings to recent experiences of containment, social isolation and the desire to escape, "If only!" appearing as an expression of yearning in more than one collage. As his source material, he used fragments from magazines, literary prints and

reproductions of works by other artists focused on the domestic domain, woven together with his own drawings and patterns. Many of the collages feature luxury items cut out from the *Financial Times*' magazine 'How to spend it' (a publication that Emma would have simply adored!), which connect her consumerist desires with our own era's attempts at distraction-through-expenditure.

Confined to his new London apartment throughout the pandemic, Chaimowicz worked – as has long been his wont – at the kitchen table. He produced the collages throughout the two years of the exhibition's preparation, sending them every fortnight to its curator, which gave the series its title: *Dear Zoë*. Letters have often played an important role in Chaimowicz's work and life, with postal correspondence better suited to the speed at which he likes to reflect and exchange than the brutal immediacy of emails. This 'drip-feed' of visual material is evoked in the collages' presentation here, clustered in small groups, to allow for individual perusal.

Chaimowicz would often work on several collages simultaneously and it is possible to see conceptual links and formal repetitions between different instances. They were not composed following the narrative order of Flaubert's novel, nor did their production follow thematic groupings. There were, however, certain telling coincidences of time: in the week that the Hayes Court sitting room was packed up, Chaimowicz sent the collage "Emma, now bereft of her worldly goods", with an image of an interior in which all the furniture has been labelled "REQUISITIONED", "RECLAIMED" or "TO BE SOLD".

As the pandemic stretched out from the initial naïve estimations of a few weeks to several months and then years, the scope, ambition and emotional charge of the collages changed. There developed a greater sense of connection between their author and the character of Emma, due perhaps to their shared sense of social isolation. Echoing Flaubert's statement "Madame Bovary, c'est moi", Kirsty Bell writes in her preview of the exhibition: "In Chaimowicz's dualistic cosmos, animated by the force of imagination, escape is possible. The artist himself *is* Emma. Camberwell New Road *is* mid-century Paris. Real life *is* celebration."¹¹

1. The work was shown in 1972 at Gallery House in London as part of *3 Life Situations*. It took on its current form in 2000, when its title was adapted inspired by Bob Dylan's album *Highway 61 Revisited*.
 2. Kirsty Bell, *The Artist's House: From workplace to artwork*, Sternberg Press, Berlin, 2013., p.189
 3. See Tom Holert, *Celebration? Realife*, Afterall Books, London, 2007.
 4. Jean Fisher, in *Past Imperfect Marc Camille Chaimowicz 1972–1982*, Bluecoat Gallery, Liverpool, The Orchard Gallery, Londonderry & John Hansard Gallery, 1983, Southampton, p. 8
 5. The artist cited in *Celebration? Realife Revisited*, Frac Bourgogne & Koenig Books, 2005., p. 95
 6. Ibid., p. 61
 7. *Dream, an anecdote by Marc Camille Chaimowicz, dreamt in the winter and remembered in the spring of 1977*, Nigel Greenwood Inc Books, London, 1977, unpaginated.
 8. Bell, op. cit., note 2, p.186. See also Beatriz Colomina, *Sexuality and Space*, Princeton Architectural Press, 1996.
 9. Artist's statement, 2022, unpublished.
 10. Flaubert's book features in *Celebration? Realife Revisited*, and Chaimowicz has created several objects related to her character. In 2008, a chapter of his artist's book *The World of Interiors* was titled 'Madame Bovary.' And in 2013, he realised 250 illustrations to accompany the entire novel published by Three Star Press.
 11. Kirsty Bell, 'Party Pieces,' in *The World of Interiors*, February 2023, p. 54
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ABOUT THE ARTIST

Marc Camille Chaimowicz was born in Paris and grew up in London, where he currently lives. He was educated at the Ealing School of Art, Camberwell School of Art and at the Slade School of Fine Art. His recent solo exhibitions include *Zig Zag and Many Ribbons...*, Musée d'art moderne et contemporain de Saint-Etienne Métropole (2022–23); *Dear Valerie...*, Kunsthalle Bern (2020); *Your Place or Mine...*, Jewish Museum, New York (2018); *An Autumn Lexicon*, Serpentine Gallery, London (2016); *Marc Camille Chaimowicz*, Secession, Vienna (2010); *To Furnish...*, Musée de la Piscine, Roubaix (2010), *Some Ways by which to Live...*, Frac Aquitaine, Bordeaux (2008); *...In the Cherished Company of Others...*, de Appel, Amsterdam & PMMK, Ostend (2008); *Zürich Suite*, Migros Museum Für Gegenwartskunst, Zurich (2006). His work has also been featured in numerous group exhibitions including Palais de Tokyo, Paris (2019), Le Consortium, Dijon (2019), MAMCO, Geneva (2018), Centre Pompidou, Paris (2016), Tate Modern, London (2012), Mu.ZEE, Ostend (2011). The artist is represented by Cabinet Gallery in London, Galerie Neu in Berlin, Andrew Kreps in New York, and House of Gaga in Mexico City/Los Angeles.

THANKS FOR YOUR VISIT

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Marc Camille Chaimowicz, *The Hayes Court Sitting Room*, October 2022. Courtesy of the
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