

ON MOTOR ROW

THE CHICAGO LOFT THAT **NICK CAVE** AND **JEFFERY ROBERTS** HAVE CREATED SERVES AS A METAPHOR FOR WHAT CAN ONLY BE CALLED AN AESTHETIC TRANSFORMATION.

BY POLLY ULLRICH / PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAMES A. SMESTAD

Nick Cave in his Chicago studio passing in front of *Galaxy*, a beaded and sequined cloth collage sphere. A second collage, *Plot*, is on the right. Nine-feet in diameter, they are the first in a planned series of 12. OPPOSITE PAGE: Fourteen-foot ceilings and a bank of windows nearly as tall create the airy openness of the living room spanning the width of Cave and Jeffery Roberts's loft. The African money bells and a beaded ceremonial cape from Ghana are among the many unusual objects the two have collected.

On a dingy, rainy Monday morning in 1998, the designer Jeffery Roberts gloomily drove down South Michigan Avenue in Chicago. Roberts and the artist Nick Cave, who had collaborated for eight years in the now-defunct Chicago clothing and design enterprise called Robave, were about to invest a lot of money in a building that they didn't really like. They had slogged their way through more than 45 places throughout the city, searching for a loft building with studio, living and display space, and had settled for something they both thought of as "blah."

Roberts had driven hundreds of times up and down this part of Michigan Avenue. He and Cave had once lived nearby. The street was a canyon of crumbling, early-20th-century commercial buildings, primarily housing pigeons that swooped in and out of dark, shattered windows and skylights. The area was informally called "Motor Row," for the stretch of sales and repair establishments set up shortly after 1900 along the street by car companies who were marketing the newly developed automobile. It was an easy two and a half miles south of the Loop, the city's main business district, but the street by now had distinctly gone to seed.

At 2251 South Michigan, Roberts peered through his wet windshield at a dilapidated three-story loft building with a white terra-cotta facade that he and Cave had long admired. There was a small "For Sale" sign in front. "That's our building," Cave told Roberts when they rushed back to inspect it. And exactly four days later, the two signed a contract and delivered a check for what is now officially designated a historic landmark, the Kelly Springfield Tire Company Building. Designed in 1914 by the well-known architect Alfred Alschuler, it is located in the heart of more than 50 landmark buildings in Chicago's newly designated Motor Row Historical District.

Alschuler might well be intrigued with his building today. Cave and Roberts have given the 24,000-square-foot structure a postmodern renaissance, while the surrounding neighborhood also moves beyond its derelict condition as urban renewal creeps south from the Loop. They hired an architect to draw up plans from their design and gutted the building extensively, paring it back to its terra-cotta facade, rubber-splattered maple







floors (from tire manufacturing), weathered brick walls and unusual combination of wood-and-steel supporting beams. They constructed 12 units, but reserved a sun-filled 5,000-square-foot space on the top floor overlooking Michigan Avenue for themselves. This airy loft, with front windows which leap up to the 14-foot ceiling, sets the stage equally for their personal lives and their careers in art and design.

When Cave and Roberts are asked about their loft during a recent visit, they talk about their desire for an open, volumetric flow of space throughout, punctuated by walls which act as dividers for private rooms and for displaying art, but which do not reach to the ceiling. Entering from the back of the loft, one takes in the central, unimpeded sweep of a 100-foot view toward the front windows. This is what Cave calls the “spine” of their design. It also serves as a dining area. The layout is essentially in a T formation, with the 1,100-square-foot cross of the T aligned along the entire bank of front windows. That area is the main living room—and it is filled with towering plants, Cave’s wall assemblages and eccentric objects that both men have collected and then deftly placed in a new aesthetic context. The overall impression is of a dense, vegetal lushness combined with a radically minimal editorial eye.

From the front to the back of the loft, along either side of the “spine,” bedrooms, bathrooms, kitchen and studio space open from the right or the left into more private, utilitarian areas. There are five paint colors—a faded lobster red, a pale robin’s egg blue, a light gray, school bus yellow and raw umber—each one to a wall. These are seen only when one faces away from the front windows. This allows the luminous expanse of the space, not color, to dominate when one first enters. With the exception of yellow, a sentimental reminder of his deceased younger brother, Cave says that the palette comes from the cerulean sky glimpsed through the windows and the alluvial colors of the interior brick walls.

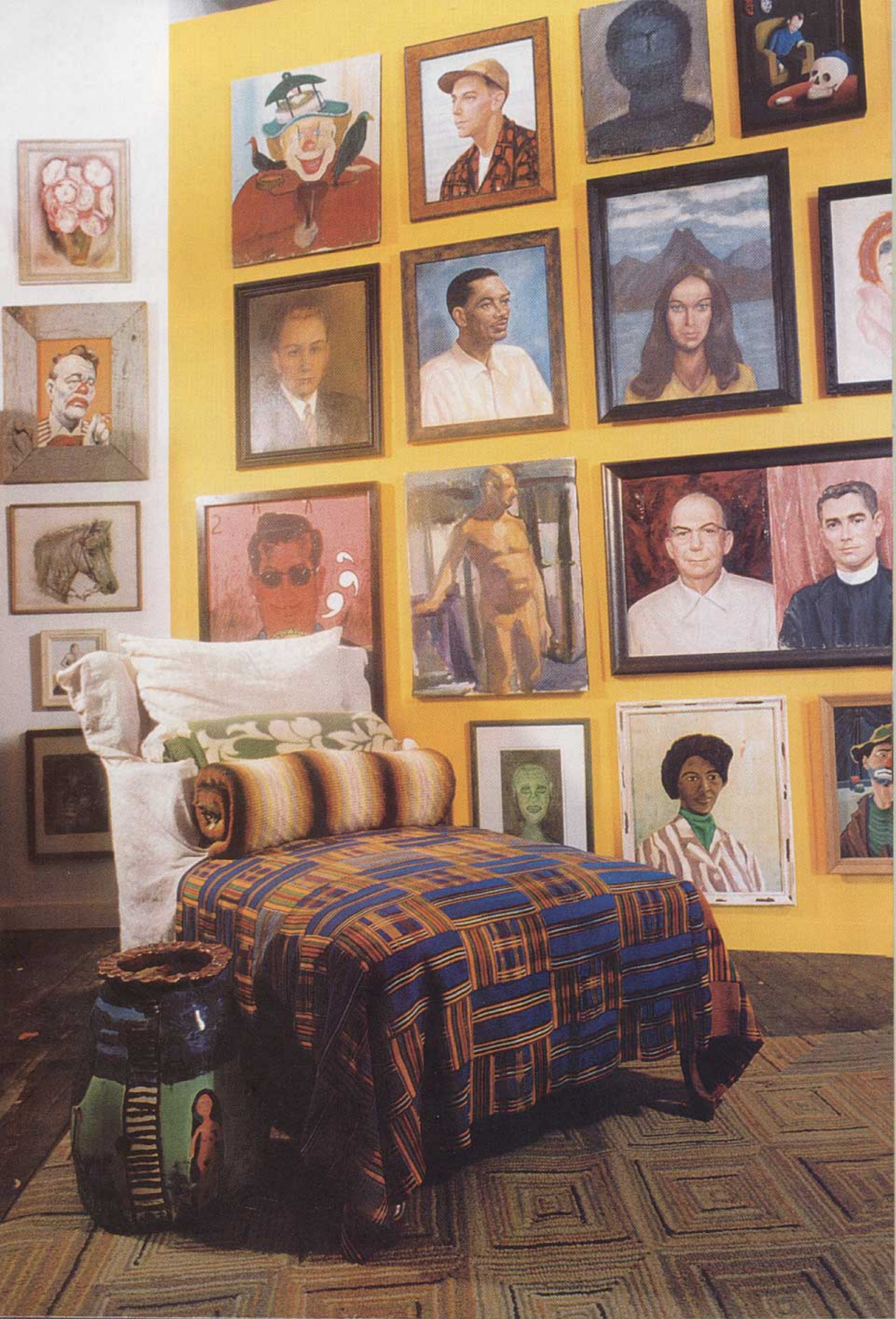
The loft represents a heady mix of art and private life. Roberts specializes in interior design and fashion. Cave, a professor of fashion design at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, is particularly known for his performance art, using his intricately embellished costumes called Sound Suits. He also maintains a list of clients who buy his clothing and assemblage art. They both use the loft to demonstrate how their designs and art can be displayed and incorporated into daily life. While the space has an air of pristine calm, Cave insists that they clean it themselves and cook in its sleek kitchen on a daily basis.

More profoundly, the space serves as a laboratory, and a metaphor, for what can only be called an aesthetic of transformation. “This was a discarded neighborhood. The city just ignored this part of the town,” says



The master bathroom. BELOW: An array of containers, which Roberts began to acquire as a teenager, in the master bedroom. The wall hanging is made of collars from religious vestments. OPPOSITE PAGE: The north wall of the living room, with Cave’s *Mobile Construction (Trees)*, part of his 80-foot-long installation at the Allentown Art Museum, Pennsylvania, in 2000. Riveted onto its wooden armatures are pieces of decayed aluminum from the roof of a demolished church.





Roberts. "To take a building that was insignificant and coming apart — nobody wanted it any more — to come in and say this has value and completely redo it into a whole new use, as we did, that totally fits the philosophy of our lifestyle, our thinking and design."

Cave has pointedly developed this concept in art: both his Sound Suits and sculptures are densely and attentively constructed, using cast-off idiosyncratic objects found in thrift stores, flea markets and auctions. Cave places his colloquial, utilitarian selections (a child's swing, a rusty pitchfork, a worn bit of denim) in a seductive aesthetic context, forcing the viewer to see these odd things freshly. There is a jarring discord between a typical assumption about an object and the way Cave reframes the object's meaning. This way, Cave sabotages the foundations of a world constructed in conventional terms — for suddenly, "one can see beauty anywhere," he says. "This is transformative. It shakes things up."

Examples abound. In Cave's studio, two enormous round collages sparkle from the walls. Nine feet in diameter, they are composed of beaded and sequined cloth remnants he has acquired piecemeal and then stitched together. *Plot* evokes the fertility and luxuriant color of a flower garden; *Galaxy* is a shimmering night sky constructed with crystal and black bugle beads, summoning the childhood evenings Cave spent flat on his back at his grandparents' Missouri farm, gazing up at the stars. The collages are the first in a series of 12 circular works.

Another assortment of objects holds sway in a bedroom: a rich collection of containers that Roberts inaugurated at age 14 with a metal chocolate box given to his grandmother by a beau during the 1920s. There are now 250 boxes, some contributed by Cave, which are rotated in and out of storage as they are cleaned. Each box, with its own patina and history, is carefully placed and ordered within a harmonious mass on a shelf of found embossed tin from a ceiling; how the grouping is aesthetically edited is as much the art as the boxes themselves.

The loft and its contents are based on a philosophy of "making something beautiful that no one else wanted," according to Roberts. In talking about discovering and then redefining the integrity of materials, Cave puts it this way: "We are working from a basis of simplicity, truth and clarity. It is important to see what grounds us, and then to find out our purpose in the world." ■

An exhibit of Nick Cave's Sound Suits and video installations will be at the Chicago Cultural Center in April 2006.

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In the hallway, Rod Guyer's tall ceramic forms. The fork-like tool is from Ghana. BELOW: The dining area and stairs leading to the roof are in what Cave describes as the "spine" of the loft. OPPOSITE PAGE: In the guest bedroom are some of the portraits Roberts and Cave have collected at flea markets and thrift stores and through Gallery 37, a student art program sponsored by Chicago's Department of Cultural Affairs.

