



ART

Came So Far for Beauty

A new exhibition devoted to Leonard Cohen, in his hometown of Montreal, demands a pilgrimage

➤ HIS GRAVE SITS WITHIN THE Cohen family plot, near the front gate of the Congregation Shaar Hashomayim Cemetery at the slope of Montreal's Mount Royal. The headstone—near that of his great-grandfather Lazarus, buried here a century ago, in 1917—is surrounded by flowers, fan art and yahrzeit candles. But even without that makeshift shrine, you would recognize Cohen's marker, engraved with his Unified Heart (two hearts, one upside down and superimposed over the

other, resembling the Star of David), which he designed for the cover of his 1984 poetry collection, *The Book of Mercy*. It's a symbol that is all over Montreal this month, as the 375-year-old city fêtes the late singer-songwriter on the first anniversary of his death, at 82, just weeks after he released his final album, *You Want It Darker*.

Adam Cohen, Leonard's son, returned to the Cohen family home, at 6 Rue Vallières, in the Le Plateau-Mont-Royal neighborhood, to help with the festivities (including a star-stuffed November 6 tribute concert at the city's Bell Centre). "I'm looking at my father's guitar on a green velvet chair that belonged to his father. I'm literally sleeping in my father's room, on his mother's carpet," says Cohen, a singer-songwriter himself. "There's this familiarity, romance and bittersweetness of all the heirlooms and family objects."

Adam grew up hearing about "the magic" of Montreal. "There was a lot of propaganda about this beloved city we Cohens were all born in but didn't spend a lot of time in," he says. "Like anybody in the diaspora, we romanticize and hold our traditional values in a much more concentrated fashion than the people who actually live here, and almost uphold the traditions more fastidiously."

As often happens, Cohen's early desire to escape his birthplace softened as he aged. "I feel at home when I'm in Montreal—in a way that I don't feel anywhere else," Cohen said in 2006. "I don't know what it is, but the feeling gets stronger as I get older."

The artist began writing poetry in the early '50s, only turning to music in the '60s, when he was in his '30s, and poems, like "The Best," reflect the poignant tug of the city:

BY

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Have we finally

*I died when I left Montreal
I met women I didn't understand
I pretended to get interested in food
But it was all The Fear of Snow
It was all the Will of G-d
It was all The Heart
swallowing The Other Organs*

You can hear the poem read by Leonard Cohen—with that sonorous, rumbly, meditative voice—in a piece called “The Poetry Machine,” by Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller, featuring recordings of much of his work. It is one of 20 works in “Leonard Cohen: Une brèche en toute chose/A Crack in Everything,” at Musée d’Art Contemporain de

Montréal, which runs through April 9, 2018. Six of MAC’s galleries are devoted to the exhibition, a massive undertaking incorporating music, video, writings, virtual reality and performance to re-create Cohen’s work through 40 artists from 10 countries. Planning began three years ago, well before the artist’s death on November 7 last year.

Cohen’s diaspora is reflected in the Sanchez Brothers’ “I Think I Will Follow You Very Soon,” a re-creation of the Los Angeles room where Leonard spent the final years of his life. Elsewhere, Michael Rakowitz’s “I’m Good at Love, I’m Good at Hate, It’s in Between I Freeze” presents a film

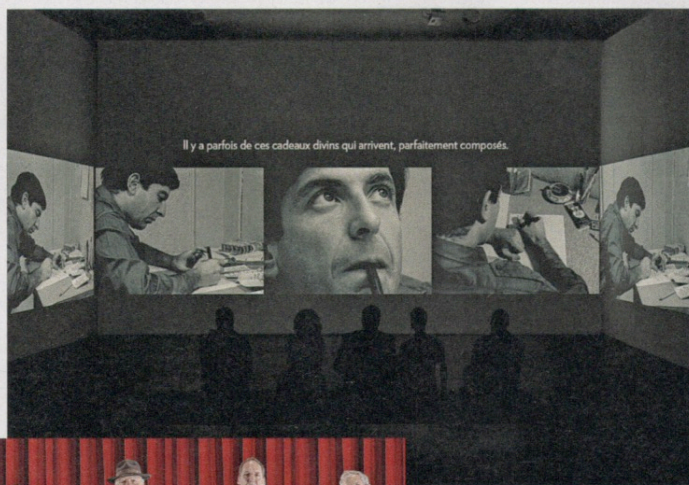
about Cohen’s time in Israel during the Yom Kippur War in the ’70s, a moment of internal crisis for him, putting his strong sense of Jewish identity and his love of pacifism at odds.

Other works include a loop of 18 musicians (the National, Moby and Feist among them) covering classics like “Hey, That’s No Way to Say Good-bye.” And performance artist Clara Furey, daughter of celebrated Montreal composer and filmmaker Lewis Furey (who collaborated with Cohen on the screenplay for the 1985 film *Night Magic*), has a work inspired by Cohen’s poem “When Even The.” Wearing only a pair of jeans, she performs a slow-moving, intimate meditation on sensuality and death, two themes that informed much of Cohen’s work.

The exhibition’s variety of mediums and moods reflects Cohen’s interdisciplinary oeuvre, managing to capture his singular mix of sorrow and hope, spirituality and sensuality. It also neatly sidesteps the trite and fawning. “This was never a sycophantic exercise,” says MAC Director and Chief Curator John Zeppetelli. “We weren’t interested in presenting Leonard’s beautifully cut suits or his fedoras.”

Adam Cohen, who, with his sister, Lorca, has given his blessing to the show, describes it as an immersive testament to his father’s lifelong irreverence—as critical to his art as romance and humor. “He was trying to avoid the categorization of either his writing or his music,” he says. “He was never interested in genres, neither political nor ethereal nor astral—nothing.”

Leonard Cohen’s disdain for orthodoxy makes him seem particularly apt right now, as well as prescient. He died the day before the 2016 U.S. presidential election. “My father called it all, man,” says Cohen. “He’d been postulating about the breakdown in social order since the ’70s.”



HELLO DARKNESS
Clockwise from left: At MAC, Kara Blake’s “The Offerings,” a montage of Cohen’s creative process; Cardiff and Miller’s “The Poetry Machine”; and Candace Breitz’s “I’m Your Man,” in which elderly Cohen fans sing the album *You Want It Darker* straight through.

