

GAGOSIAN

# FINANCIAL TIMES

**True bromance: Brad Pitt, Nick Cave and the artist helping them to heal**  
*In Thomas Houseago's WE collective, friendship and recovery are as important as the art*

Victoria Woodcock



© Maureen M Evans | Thomas Houseago, Brad Pitt and Nick Cave in Tampere

We're just three dudes, and we're just making stuff," says Leeds-born, LA-based artist Thomas Houseago. He's talking about himself, two of his closest friends – who happen to be the musician Nick Cave and the actor Brad Pitt – and their new collective art exhibition. The bizarreness of this trio is not lost on him. "We know we are totally ridiculous. But it's real," he adds, his voice full of energy. "If you see Brad Pitt – *the* Brad Pitt, right? You know, six pack, abs, whatever – that's a movie creation. It's fantastic, I love it. He's one of the greatest actors of his generation. But there's *another* human, that I know, who has enabled me to breathe in a new way. And I would like to think I've done the same for him."

The three men are gathered in the café of the Sara Hildén Art Museum in Tampere, Finland's second largest city, where the exhibition, of which Houseago is the linchpin, has just opened. The

artist is commercially represented by Gagosian but this is his first major museum show since 2019, and it encompasses both sculptural works, in wood, bronze and plaster, and paintings. It homes in on his “journey of the past three years” – a time during which he has suffered a serious breakdown and gone through recovery. “I’m sort of being rebirthed at the moment,” he says. “I’m not me any more. I used to be me. I remember that guy, but that’s not me. And if I’m going to do my first show after recovery – and this is a huge moment for me – I’m going to do it in safety and with my creative collaborators.”



*Houseago, Cave and Pitt at the Sara Hildén Art Museum in Tampere © Maureen M Evans*

The exhibition, titled *WE*, rejects the concept of the solitary artist in favour of a more connected, collective approach to art. It’s the first time Pitt and Cave have exhibited their artwork – Pitt is showing a number of sculptures, while Cave is exhibiting a darkly narrative series of ceramic figurines. Exploring their creativity together has forged an extraordinary friendship.

“We were thrown together in trauma and catastrophe,” says Houseago, referring to their shared struggles that run from addiction – Houseago and Pitt with alcohol, Cave with heroin in the ’80s – to Pitt’s much-publicised divorce and custody battle, the deaths of two of Cave’s sons, and Houseago’s realisation of childhood abuse. Such a series of raw and brutal circumstances has helped unshackle them of certain inhibitions, and they now share a relationship that might be described as a bromance.

“Can I tell you something that happened this morning?” says Cave, setting the scene of the lakeside house in which they’re all staying, and where they were celebrating the birthday of his wife – fashion designer Susie Cave – the night before. “This is what it’s been like: I woke up this morning, made a coffee in my underwear and noticed that Brad was sitting there. He started playing the guitar and sang one of my songs to me – “Palaces of Montezuma” – and then Thomas walked in [in his pyjamas] and joined in.”



*Devil As Child from the series The Devil – A Life, 2020-22, by Nick Cave Devil Returns From the War, 2020-2022, by Nick Cave*



*Thomas Houseago, Nick Cave and Brad Pitt in the exhibition space of WE at the Sara Hildén Art Museum, Tampere. Behind them is Houseago's Untitled (Abstract IV), 2015 © Maureen M Evans. Courtesy Houseago Studio*

While Houseago says they did “a pretty damn good” rendition, Pitt laughs and adds, “We actually did not! But I was more taken with the elegance, man. Thomas comes out with his hair out to here, I’ve got luggage under the eyes. And Nick comes out in matching shorts and a button shirt, a spectre of elegance.” At the exhibition opening later that day, a hearty whoop from Houseago signals the trio’s arrival. “We’re like a boy band!” he booms of the disparate crew: 65-year-old Cave, characteristically gothic, bordering on vampiric, in an ultra-slim dark suit (by his friend Bella Freud); Pitt, still ruggedly handsome at 58, in a jumpsuit and yet effortlessly cool; and Houseago, 50, wearing jeans with a white, stretchy button-down shirt – through which you can just make out his tattoos. “This strange cast of characters came into my life at an amazing moment,” says Houseago. “And they loved on me. Brad said, ‘I love you’. I said, ‘I love you.’ Without Nick and Brad, I literally wouldn’t be here.”



*Two artworks both titled Self-Inflicted Gunshot Wound to the House, 2017, by Brad Pitt © Courtesy Studio BeeP, Los Angeles*

Pitt and Cave have known each other for decades; they were both cast in the 1991 film *Johnny Suede*, but Pitt and Houseago were only brought together six years ago, at a New Year’s Eve party. Houseago was struggling with his mental health and Pitt had recently separated from his second wife, Angelina Jolie. A separation that has subsequently become a media frenzy. They hit it off immediately. “Our mutual misery became comic,” says Pitt, who began hanging out at the sculptor’s studio on a regular basis, finding an artistic outlet. “And out of this misery came a flame of joy in my life. I always wanted to be a sculptor; I’d always wanted to try it.” Pitt then introduced Houseago to Cave, taking him to see Andrew Dominik’s 2016 documentary *One More Time With Feeling* – about the making of *Skeleton Tree*, the album created in the aftermath of the death of Arthur, Cave’s teenage son.



After this, says Cave, “we started to meet up as a group – a weird, diverse collection of people who would sit around a table on weekends”. The dinners were joined by the likes of Dominik (who recently directed the film *Blonde*, produced by Pitt’s production company Plan B, and with a soundtrack by Cave and his longtime collaborator Warren Ellis), director Spike Jonze and Flea from the Red Hot Chili Peppers. “To go out and talk to people freely about things, that was something new to me,” continues Cave. “Normally, I just work away and do my thing, and I have my friends and all of that sort of stuff. But we were allowed to talk about anything. And, for me, that was a very freeing situation to be in.”



*Thomas Houseago, Brad Pitt and Nick Cave on Houseago’s Cast Studio (stage, chairs, bed, mound, cave, bath, grave), 2018 © Maureen M Evans. Courtesy Houseago Studio*

The trio’s easy camaraderie plays out throughout the photo shoot, which is set against the backdrop of Houseago’s room-size plaster, hemp and rebar work *Cast Studio (stage, chairs, bed, mound, cave, bath, grave)* (2018). The three men chat. They lark around. Houseago takes his shoes off and poses in the cast bed. He breaks into song. It’s more than a little surreal. By the time the shoot moves outside, Houseago is singing “The Sound of Music” and Pitt is dancing, pirouetting towards the camera.

The trio's concept of "we" delivers a "simple but strong message of love, hope, friendship and forgiveness, celebrating creativity over destructive forces," says Sara Hildén's chief curator, Sarianne Soikkonen. The new opening is, she says, "a momentous exhibition, where Thomas Houseago is reinventing himself as a sculptor who is now also showing exceptionally strong paintings as well".



*From left: Lechuza, 2020, Squatting Man, 2005, Episode (June), 2022, and Gold Walking Man, 2021, all by Thomas Houseago © Jussi Koivunen/Sara Hildén Art Museum*

In many ways, despite the press furore largely centred on Pitt's first foray into art, this is Houseago's moment, with Pitt and Cave playing supporting roles. His gallery walk-through moves from towering sculptures cast in bronze to plaster maquettes for monumental spaces, alongside amalgamations of beach-found objects assembled with his children, Bea, 16, and Abe, 13. "Out of the haunting elegance of his carved redwood figures comes a fresh look at nature and its healing power in his recent paintings," says Otilie Windsor, Houseago's artist liaison at Gagosian.

It was a phone conversation with Cave that proved the catalyst for Houseago's new body of paintings – which fluctuate dramatically between terrifying nightmarish visions to more "cosmic" scenes. "When Thomas said, 'I can't even pick up a fucking paintbrush', or whatever, we made a little deal," says the UK-based Australian singer. "I said, 'All right, I'm having difficulty writing songs. I'll write you a song if you paint me a picture.' And that did sort of ignite something for me." When Cave duly emailed across the poem that would become the song "White Elephant", Houseago was spurred into action. "At that time I wasn't making any art. I was done. I was going for runs and trails in Malibu, trying to connect to nature," he recalls. "There was one flower that I would see, and I thought, 'I'm going to paint that for Nick.'"



*The trio with Gate I (2018-22) by Thomas Houseago © Maureen M Evans. Courtesy Houseago Studio*

The creative exchange was one of a number of factors leading Cave to ceramics, and in Tampere he shows a series of 17 figurines, produced in a studio in south London with the assistance of British sculptor Corin Johnson, and inspired by the Victorian Staffordshire flatback ornaments that he collects. “I have hundreds of the things,” says Cave of the somewhat kitschy forms he has subverted into *The Devil – A Life*. What started as a desire to create a single small devil figure as a vehicle for an intense red glaze “became a journey towards some kind of absolution from a series of shattering events. This [the ceramic works] – and in fact, all the songs that I write – are about the idea of forgiveness, the idea that there is a moral virtue in beauty. It’s a kind of balancing of our sins.” Like his music, the result is both beautiful and heart-stoppingly poignant.

Pitt’s work feels harder to place. His lockdown love of ceramics has been widely reported – and a cluster of his handcrafted porcelain candleholders are shown amid Houseago’s sculptures. His larger-scale sculptural works are more disturbing: a relief plaster panel imprinted with his own body to depict a filmic gunfight (but also, he suggests, “an inner conflict”) and a number of

simplified house-shaped silicone structures that have each been shot at – titled *Self-inflicted Gunshot Wound to the House* – draw parallels about the destruction of his home life that are all too plain to see. “It’s all about self-reflection,” he explains. “I was looking at my own life and really concentrating on owning my own shit: where was I complicit in failures in my relationships, where have I mis-stepped. For me, it was born out of ownership of what I call a radical inventory of self, getting really brutally honest with me, and taking account of those I may have hurt.”



*Slave To Our Vices, 2022, by Brad Pitt © Courtesy Studio BeeP, Los Angeles*





*Detail of Aiming At You I Saw Me But It Was Too Late This Time, 2022, by Brad Pitt © Maureen M Evans. Courtesy Studio BeeP, Los Angeles*

Eating a sandwich later in the café, Pitt seems relieved to have put this out there. He's surprisingly open for a man whose every move – from his signet ring to his sobriety and new skincare line – is subject to scrutiny. “It’s just exhausting to be anything but who you are,” he says. “You have to understand, at least where I grew up, we’re more the Clint Eastwood character; you hold everything within, you’re capable, you can deal with anything, you don’t show weakness. I see that in my dad and the older generations of actors, and, man, it’s exhausting. As I get older, I find such a comfort in friendships where you can be [completely yourself], and I want that to extend in the outer world. What people make of it: I’m fine. I feel safe here because there’s a focus on our struggles as human beings, because it’s fraught with peril. And joy as well.”

How to talk openly about grief and trauma, yet not be defined by it, is a subject of much discussion. “I find I have to walk with the pain I experience, and I have to walk with the joy, the beauty,” says Pitt.

Cave adds: “Talking about things like trauma, I’m much more circumspect [than Houseago]. It’s much more controlled.” He recalls a time when he and Houseago were modelling some clothes for Susie Cave’s fashion label, The Vampire’s Wife. “We were all sitting there having our hair shampooed, and within 30 seconds of talking to [the hairdresser], Thomas had revealed the most mind-boggling, traumatic events,” says Cave. Even so, neither Cave’s new book, *Faith, Hope and Carnage*, nor his question-and-answer blog, *The Red Hand Files*, shy away from difficult subjects. Both offer an astonishing exploration of his griefs. “That stuff’s been pulled out of me by people who relate to my situation; you have to respond to that with a full heart. There’s a certain period of loss where you’re just terrified and everything’s collapsed; your life is

destroyed. And I know that there is a way through that. I know because I've gone through it and it just seems duty-bound to talk to people on some level from the other side of the chasm."



*"Our mutual misery became comic," says Pitt of his meeting with Houseago six years ago © Maureen M Evans*

How much to reveal is something Houseago is currently working out. "Professionally, I don't have to talk about my recovery over and over again; it's clear in the work," he says. "But personally, I want to make sure that everybody who looks at my work and sees this show knows that I am open to talking about trauma, about solutions, in a very grassroots way. If there is a need for me to come and talk somewhere about how you survive pre-verbal trauma, I'm there."

Both Pitt and Cave voice their intention to continue their journeys as visual artists. Cave is already making a new series of ceramics. For Pitt, the practice feels centred on art as therapy: "I feel that there's a higher calling, a connection again. Being tactile, there's some release in that..." Houseago, meanwhile, is excitedly finishing off a large-scale outdoor commission in LA, and has also created a series of new sculptures for the Centre Pompidou-Metz, which will go on show alongside paintings from 22 October. All embody his new spirit of hopefulness. "It's completely clear to me that my mission is to sing the beauty of the world," he concludes.

*Thomas Houseago – WE With Brad Pitt & Nick Cave, is showing at [Sara Hildén Art Museum](#), Tampere, until 15 January 2023. Victoria Woodcock and Maureen M Evans travelled as guests of The City of Tampere ([tampere.fi](#))*