

# Alumni Profile

## Nick Cave, '82 fiber

Chair, fashion department,  
School of the Art Institute of Chicago

### Background information

United States Artists awarded one of its inaugural \$50,000 unrestricted grants to Nick Cave ('82 fiber) in 2006. Cave, who now chairs the fashion department at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, is best known for his career as a performer and fashion designer. In announcing the grant, USA noted that Cave creates "fantastic, almost ritualistic costumes for dance and performances. More recently, he has been presenting these costumes as sculptural objects. These works, which he calls Soundsuits, are textured, sensual, elaborately designed assemblages of sometimes unexpected materials that act almost like musical instruments, emitting sound as they move."

### Q: How do you plan to use your \$50,000 grant from United States Artists?

A: It will allow me to maintain my studio assistants — a staff of really great individuals who are helping me produce work — and I will be able to finish the "Soundsuit Boxfolio" with a catalog, poster and 20 hands-on objects in an edition of 1,000. This piece will travel with the next five exhibitions and will allow audiences to have a hands-on type of experience with the work.

### Q: What is the inspiration for your Soundsuits?

A: The Soundsuit is a combination of a number of things. I'm looking at historical dress, costume, ceremonial, performance, carnival and celebration pieces from around the world. I want to bring that range of diversity into the work and allow the community to make reference to pattern or form or transformation of material. Also, during the time of the Rodney King incident in Los Angeles, I was reading an article in the newspaper that generated this image in my mind of a black male, larger than life, fearless, mammoth — a persona that is threatening on one hand but full of strength and power.

### Q: What was going through your mind when you made your first Soundsuit?

A: I made the first Soundsuit out of twigs, and I still find myself connecting back to the whole idea of recycling. I was raised by a single parent, and I had seven brothers, so we had to think about hand-me-downs. The idea of reclaiming or reinventing is still with me. I looked at the first Soundsuit as a sculptural object. Then I put it on and I realized the extraordinary potential of sound orchestrated by the wearability of it. Then I thought about movement.



### Q: Do people actually wear your Soundsuits?

A: Yes they can be worn and moved in. In fact, the suits don't become part of the collection until they've been worn.

### Q: When did you know you wanted to be an artist?

A: When I was in high school in Columbia, Mo., my brother Jack was a student at KCAI. I went through the same process my brother did of developing a portfolio and applying. While I was still in high school I took a number of classes at the University of Missouri-Columbia, including a weaving class. I was always interested in textiles and clothing. Once I got to KCAI, I had the opportunity to scout out other areas I found interesting. I was committed to the process of making, and I also explored the dance program at the University of Missouri-Kansas City.

### Q: What were the most valuable lessons you learned at KCAI?

A: I think what I learned was the importance of being able to allow yourself to explore the possibilities and to know that if I were to fall I would still have the support of my professors. My professors challenged me, which allowed me to build trust in myself and to have a point of view — to have the confidence and the belief that I could turn this into a serious career. The school was a pivotal moment in my career.

### Q: Did you go to graduate school immediately after graduating from KCAI?

A: No, I had a studio practice in Kansas City, and I and six friends set up a calendar where every six months we would go to someone's studio or home and continue to have critiques. I also worked as a visual director at Macy's. After two years, I enrolled at Cranbrook Academy, where I completed my M.F.A. degree in 1989. I went into it with the expectation of becoming an art professor. Then I was offered a job in fiber materials studies with Joan Livingstone and Ian Wilson, and for five years I was a full-time visiting artist at the School of the Art Institute in Chicago. At about that point, I had an opportunity to open a clothing store with Jeffery Roberts. We created the Robave collection, and we went to markets in New York and Paris and sold to 250 stores across the country. I joined the faculty at SAIC full time in 2001.

### Q: What's next for you?

A: I'm preparing for a Soundsuit performance that will open in Chicago in 2009 or 2010. I'm collaborating with three dance companies in the city, and we're doing outreach with kids, and there will be a performance piece in Millennium Park. I'm working with Mayor Daley and his office on logistics for the piece. There will be 90 Soundsuits in the performance.