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Leonard Cohen: A Crack in Everything - Montreal's tribute to its favourite son

The new exhibition was conceived as part of the city's 375th anniversary celebrations - but has morphed into a thorough investigation of all things Cohen

Melissa Locker

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Almost exactly a year after his death, Leonard Cohen will have a homecoming - of sorts - in Montreal. On 9 November, the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal (AKA the Mac) will open the doors to [Leonard Cohen : une brèche en toute chose/A Crack in Everything](#), a tribute to the artist, poet and musician, filled with multi-disciplinary works inspired by Cohen's songs of life.



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The show is the first major exhibition devoted to Cohen's legacy, and while it seems like the type of show thrown together in the wake of an icon's death, this exhibition was planned far in advance, securing Cohen's blessing before he died on 7 November last year.

According to the Mac's curator, John Zeppetelli, the idea came about during a brainstorming session with the show's co-curator Victor Schiffman. The pair were trying to figure out how

to celebrate Montreal's 375th anniversary, and draw in visitors who might not normally sign up for an afternoon of contemporary art.

"We wanted to do something that the museum wouldn't normally do. Leonard Cohen came up and we just looked at each other knew that this was it," explains Zeppetelli. "Every time we mentioned the name Leonard Cohen, everyone lit up. We knew it was a winning proposal."

The curators felt even more strongly about their choice when Cohen released his 2016 album *You Want It Darker* - his 18th studio album - at the age of 82. "We were excited to be celebrating a living legend, an active musician, poet and cultural figure who had been active for five decades," says Zeppetelli. "We were so looking forward to taking him around the exhibition hall and showing him how relevant and powerful he has been to so many people."

Zeppetelli never thought he would be able to get Cohen to agree to the show, though. "Leonard is notoriously private," explains Zeppetelli, who was surprised when Cohen responded, through his lawyer, by saying he was touched by the exhibition and gave his approval. "I think it's because this wasn't a hagiography, it wasn't a collection of his fedoras. This show was contemporary art commissions where we invited artists to think about Leonard Cohen's cultural output, to be displayed in Montreal, the city he came back to - to be buried."

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While Zeppetelli admits that the show has become a little more “commemorative” in the wake of Cohen’s death, most of the artists were invited to participate before Cohen died, and the work reflects that. Artists from around the globe - France, Germany, Israel, Hong Kong, the US and [Canada](#) - contributed pieces that contemplate Cohen’s work and reinterpret it, sometimes through the lens.

The artists’ meditations on Cohen’s work have resulted in pieces like South African artist Candice Breitz’s recreation of Cohen’s album I’m Your Man, all sung by Montreal men over the age of 65, or Canadian artist Janet Cardiff’s piece that invites visitors to touch the art and summon up one of Cohen’s poems from The Book of Longing recited by him.



 Kara Blake, The Offerings, 2017. Photograph: Archival material courtesy of the National Film Board/MAC



The show takes its title from Cohen’s song Anthem, which contains the famous line “There is a crack in everything, that’s how the light gets in.” The song also inspired artist Kara Blake’s piece for the show, an immersive installation called The Offerings. “The song apparently took Cohen 10 years to craft and is just one example of his many artistic offerings that get inside the beautifully flawed nature of being human,” says Blake. “I wanted my piece to present visitors with a sampling of the creativity, wit and insight Cohen has gifted us with.”

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What was special about Leonard Cohen's work was its calm mystery. The world needs this subtle beauty right now

Julia Holter

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genuine curiosity about the world and his place in it that allowed him to consider and talk about the human experience in a very inclusive and heartening way.”

The show extends outside of the Mac, too. There's a tribute concert planned, and a run of talks with Cohen biographer Sylvie Simmons and roundtable conversations about the continuing resonance of Cohen's work. In a piece called For Leonard Cohen (Pour Leonard Cohen), artist Jenny Holter will take Cohen's words, and project them on to Silo No 5, an abandoned grain silo that looms over Montreal's old port. The work will last for five nights, beginning on 7 November, the first anniversary of his death, transforming the cold concrete into an ephemeral tribute to Cohen.

While Cohen's lyrics and poems inspired artists, so, of course did his music, which is why the curators have incorporated music into the museum piece. The Listening Room features musicians' interpretations of Cohen's work, including cover versions by Feist, Moby, Chilly Gonzales with Jarvis Cocker, and The National featuring Sufjan Stevens.


Julia Holter contributed a cover of Cohen's Take This Waltz, which will play on rotation in the Listening Room. “I enjoyed getting into the feeling of this passionate, seductive, demented waltz,” says Holter, who incorporated field recordings she made during a visit to the Greek island of Hydra, where Cohen had a home. “Being there was incredible,” she says.

To bring those elements to life, Blake pored through decades of archival material, including film and television appearances, photographs and written documents, to craft a portrait of the artist displayed on video screens with Cohen's velvet-clad voice enveloping the viewer in the darkened room. The piece is a portrait of Cohen wrought out of his own words, letting visitors spend time in what Blake calls “his contemplative universe”.

“Cohen was always an extremely humble man,” says Blake. “He had a

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For Holter, being invited to contribute to the show is the perfect way for her to give back to an artist she was introduced to as a child and who inspired her love of poetry. “What was special about Leonard Cohen’s work was its calm mystery. I think that can be an inspiration to the world right now,” she says. “The world needs this subtle beauty right now.”

Leonard Cohen : Une brèche en toute chose/A Crack in Everything opens 9 November until 9 April 2018 at Montreal’s Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal