

Find your Sparkly Heels and Walk!

[I WALK ONTO THE STAGE WEARING SPARKLY SILVER HEELS AND THE GRADUATION

GOWN] I know that in 2025 it's not that big a deal for a guy to wear heels, but for *me* it's

HUGE!

I wear these heels to face my fears – I really had to psyche myself up to do this today. I grew up in South Africa during apartheid, when it was illegal to be gay and doing something like this would've been scorned and ridiculed. I would've been branded 'Degenerate'. A maker of 'Degenerate Art'. Right now, I can still hear an irritating little voice inside my head saying to me: "Who'd give an honorary doctorate to something like you?" And so, "thank you" to the Montserrat Faculty and Trustees for giving this award to someone like me, and for *not going along* with the politics of our time! [PAUSE].

Montserrat College of Art, is a place where I can feel at home, a place that allows me to be my 'sparkly self' and I salute you, graduates of '25, while wearing my sparkly shoes!

[LIFT ONE FOOT FROM BEHIND THE PODIUM TO SHOW OFF A SHOE]

I want to impart some 'provocative' energy on to you, the new generation of makers. I believe that whatever pushes you to face your fears can ultimately empower you to stand up, be seen, heard, and valued – on your own terms. I want to inspire you to be *brave*, to be audacious, to be *strong* and to be *true to yourselves*. I encourage you to find your own 'sparkly heels', whatever you perceive them to be, take the risk and put them on. Just as the Lady Gaga memes urge us to "climb our cringe mountains", I want to motivate you to embrace your perceived challenges, even if they seem ridiculous or uncomfortable!

I also wear these heels as an *homage to anyone* who wears them. [LOOK UP] And to my mom who passed away in 2017, who also wore heels. I wear them for you too mom! FYI, I had to *practice* walking around in these things so as to not fall and break my neck in a spectacular, "Doctor Honoris Causa Disasta"!

I wear these shoes to lift our spirits and as a reminder for me to not take myself *too* seriously. This makes me recall one of my most epic failures to try and impress someone, in 2011. I was given a show at my first commercial gallery in The United States, a prestigious well respected space in Baltimore. On arrival at the gallery, I was bursting with pride – and anxiety ... I wanted to make a good first impression

to the gallery CEO who'd gone out of her way to make me feel like a *superstar*. The show looked *pristine*. The buffet spread, *delectable*. Everything was ready for a high-toned opening reception fit for a Head of State! Into the gallery I waltzed with a sweater, casually draped over my arm, blissfully *oblivious* to the *impending doom* ...

Temporarily left by the door from the previous exhibition stood an expensive sculpture made up of a tree branch carefully balanced with lots of multicolored billiard balls. [PAUSE]. With my arms flapping around in my usual flappy way, my draped sweater caught the branch by mistake, wrecked the sculpture and sent – what seemed like *hundreds* of billiard balls – *flying* through the air and onto the floor! It was like one of those B-grade movie slow-motion scenes, with the gallery CEO and I just standing there with a rictus of horror on our faces ...

Bang-crash goes the branch ... balls *EVERYWHERE* ... *boing-boing-boing* ... then silence ...

And all I could do was wince, turn to the gallery CEO and say: “OH DEAR. IS IT ALRIGHT IF THE BALLS DO THAT???” Not my most shining moment!

The actor Will Rogers once said: “Good judgement comes from experience ... experience comes from ?

Bad judgement!”

That was a really humbling experience and I learnt a lot about the art world and its “façades”. And so, I would say, when walking in your sparkly heels, risk taking some *missteps*. Missteps are our greatest teachers! Missteps reveal our prejudices, our preconceptions, our biases and our assumptions. And, as we all know, *assumption* is the *mother* of all ...?

Slip-ups!

I've had some of my own prejudices vanquished indeed! In my research in the US, I interview a lot of military veterans who've served in the Middle East – because my dad was Lebanese. I'm exploring the United States' involvement in conflicts in the region for video-installation works that engage ideas about masculinity. I must confess that I came to this country with *all sorts* of preconceptions about soldiers. To be honest, I thought they would be thoughtless, conservative, homophobic, macho patriots who had no *conscience* about what they do, *especially* in other countries. I also thought that someone like me would be rejected by them most of the time and that if I did manage to meet at least a couple of military veterans, talking to them would – at the very least – confirm to me how *narrow* their world

views must be ...

I was so *wrong*.

Talking to veterans and soldiers has changed me in ways I cannot fully express. Their stories of survival, of hardship, resilience, humor and acceptance, fill me with such *awe*, and *horror*, and *humility*.

Some of us have even become friends. One of them is a triple amputee from being blown up by a landmine in Iraq in 2003. He was also a speaking guest at the president's inauguration this year and he invited *me* for a drink at the Hyatt in DC that day. While I wheeled him around the lobby in his wheelchair, a civilian came up to him, glanced nervously at his legless body and said: "Thank you for your service". And you know what his response was? With a big grin and a twinkle in his eye, he said: "Thanks, I had a blast!"

Afterwards, he pulls me aside and tells me quietly, "You know, as a veteran I feel awkward in so many ways when people thank me for my service. I'm not *accustomed* to *praise*. As soldiers we're sustained on *caffeine* and *negative reinforcement*. We don't know what to do with praise. If, instead, a stranger came up to me in my wheelchair and barked: "I still expect to see you at Physical Training you SLACKER!", I'd probably take that as a compliment ...

I'm so lucky I stumbled into him during my research, literally, in a grad-school elevator in '22. Listening to veterans recount their complex, layered stories of military service and their conflicted feelings about duty, patriotism and survival, has taught me so much about what we take for granted as privileged civilians in hallowed spaces like this. [GESTURE TO THE ROOM AND PAUSE].

We're in such a precious place – and time – you know ...? Okay, more about Missteps!

Sometimes I think a *misstep* is just a *first-step* in disguise. In 2013, I remember how devastated I was when I was refused permission to put up an outdoor installation of banners in France next to a *huge* World War 1 monument in the countryside. I'd spent *three years* researching the right site for my installation. Applied for a grant to get there from South Africa ... failed to get the grant ... re-applied for the same grant the following year ... got the grant ... learned how to drive on the other side of the road ... learned how to speak a rudimentary French ... made a fool of myself speaking rudimentary French ... and finally found the perfect site ... only to be turned down at the 11th hour! Why? Because the British authorities felt that my work was "*inappropriate*" next to a memorial to The Missing of the Somme on the French battlefield. After all those *years* of work! IT. WAS. A. DISASTER!

Only after lots of crying with friends – and several glasses of wine – could I bring myself to see that this wasn't a misstep at all, but just "Step 1". Yes, I was refused permission to put it up on the grounds of the monument, which is managed by the *British* government, but I was later granted permission to put it up on a privately owned farm *next* to the memorial grounds – managed by the *French*! As a result, the installation was read in a more powerful way by critics because of its perceived *sensitivity* to the site and all the pilgrims who visited it.

Since then, I've learned a few things about memorials and monuments and that memorialization is something we *all* think about at some level. We *care* about how we're perceived by others, and *how* we'll be remembered. After all, that's why we take photographs. With each social media upload, we build little *monuments* to ourselves to remember beautiful moments just like this one and unconsciously, all of us want to connect to something bigger than ourselves. To the eternal. To the Divine.

We *are* the stories we tell ourselves.

When I first read about how the Q and T in LGBTQ+ were *erased* from the US National Park Service's Stonewall memorial website, I was deeply, deeply troubled. Stonewall is a national monument in New York City, dedicated to LGBTQ+ rights and history. It marks the site of the Stonewall riots of 1969, which ensued after police raided a gay bar there, under the pretense that it didn't have a liquor license. Removing the letters Q and T from the website erases the fact that queer and trans people were at the *forefront* of those riots which ultimately paved the way for LGBTQ+ rights. It sends shivers down my spine because it reminds me of how the apartheid government in South Africa also sought to silence the voices of those with whom it did not agree. If 'WE' erase the legacy of certain people, 'WE' erase 'THEM' from public memory. And if I control the story of what YOU remember, I *control* YOU ...

I am the "Q" in LGBTQ+.

... And now, I'm DOCTOR Q !!!!

Making art is a *political* act. Making art is a *rebellious* act. Marjory Stoneman Douglas, an American journalist, women's rights activist and environmentalist, said, "Be a nuisance where it counts." In this era of erasure and invalidation, making art is a way to take back your power. As the author James Baldwin insisted, "You have to decide who you are and force the world to deal with you, not with *its idea* of you." That's why institutions like Montserrat College of Art are *so important*, and why *you young makers* are *so important*. It may not seem to be so, but actually, if you're *making anything* right now, you're doing

pretty okay!

I love what theorist and poet Fred Moten said when he urges us makers: "... to forget about trying to *find* ourselves when creating things. Instead, let's rather think about ways in which we might try to *lose* ourselves." I think this is his way of encouraging us to not be afraid to give up our self-consciousness, our egos.

It's *hard*, you know ..?!

We risk being laughed at. We risk being criticized. We risk being vulnerable. Maybe, we risk being labelled "Degenerate".

In other words, the very thing that we *perceive* to be *disempowering* is often the very thing that can make us *shine*. So, graduates of '25! This is my way of saying, find your own sparkly heels, whatever you perceive them to be. *Take* that risk. *Put* them on. *Find* your balance and WALK TALL!

Thank you!