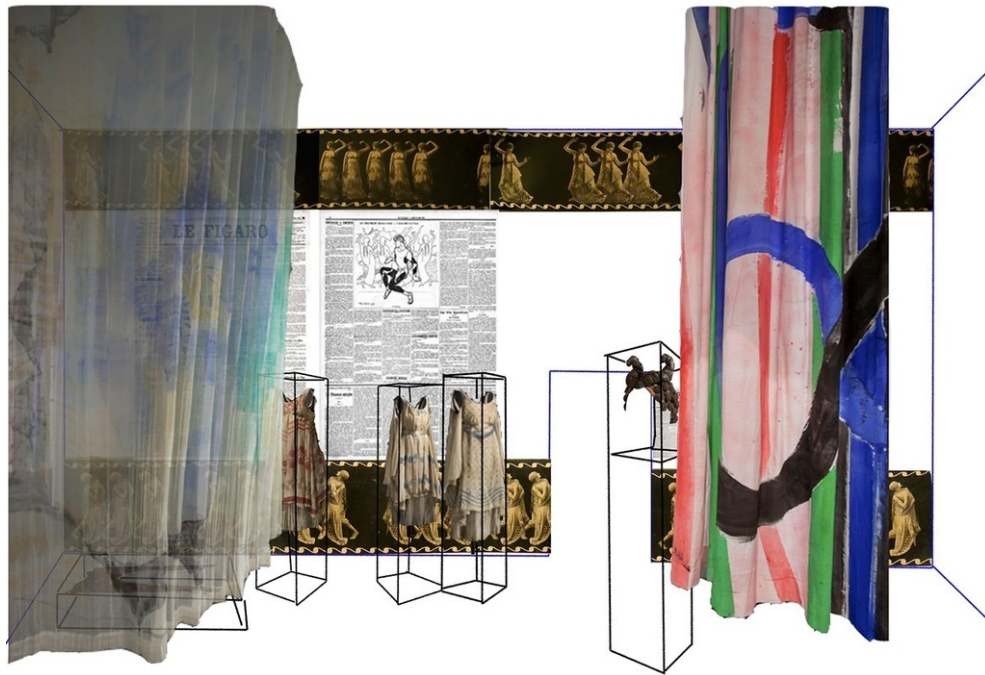


# ARTFORUM

500 WORDS - Nick Mauss

12.27.16



Nick Mauss, *visualization for Spectre/Faune*, 2016.

*Nick Mauss frequently stages and animates historical material in his works, which revel in unexpected juxtapositions and recontextualizations. It is fitting that he has envisioned the exhibition layout for "Design Dreams, A Celebration of Léon Bakst" at the Nouveau Musée National de Monaco—one of several shows worldwide this year celebrating the 150th birthday of Bakst, the consummate set and costume designer of the Ballets Russes, among other creative roles. Here, Mauss describes the itinerary through the exhibition as well as Bakst's enduring impact. The show is on view through January 15, 2017.*

**I OFTEN INCLUDE PIECES BY OTHER ARTISTS IN MY WORK**, and for me the interest is always in the resonance of that work, whether it has a sense of urgency. It may be historical work by someone no longer living or no longer known, which allows for a shift in emphasis or a redistribution of attention. I am less interested in standard historicization than in how the work vibrates through layers of histories and senses of the present moment.

Celia Bernasconi, curator at the Nouveau Musée National de Monaco, contacted me to see if I would consider working with her and dance historian John E. Bowlt on a historical exhibition about Léon Bakst. She asked me to be the exhibition designer, which is something I've always dreamed of doing and in many ways I've already done in my work, but not explicitly. Much of the way I work is about the negotiation of distances and intimacies, and about reorienting the roles of artist and viewer and artwork. I think about the spray of implications of "the decorative." I was drawn to modernist ballet because it's a multiauthored, but not necessarily collaborative, form. And these twentieth-century ballets are inextricably linked to and propelled by innovations in the visual arts, especially in painting—ballet is where painting is

“put in its place” as decoration.

Given the indelible impression Bakst left on twentieth-century visual culture and early modernist spectacle culture, it's surprising how few people seem to know his work. In developing the exhibition, I learned that aside from his innovations for the stage, Bakst was an undeniable influence on Paul Poiret and other fashion designers, changing the world of fashion forever. And while he didn't live long enough to work in Hollywood, you can find his atmospheres of excess, especially his synthetic Orientalism, drifting from Hollywood to B movies to Jack Smith. His imagery has had a strong afterlife. In the show we are even exhibiting some second- and third-generation costumes that live off fumes of what he designed. Bakst was really pathbreaking in the way he did so many different things. He was a set and costume designer; he made jewelry and paintings; he wrote treatises on fashion; and he gave lectures. He was a polymath and entrepreneur. He cast a wide net and operated in a variety of media and roles, and also upended them. He seems especially interesting to revisit now.

In terms of approaching the work of another artist—there are so many questions that can run alongside conventions of curating. What is a way to actually fully incorporate the work, literally take it in—but also step away and actually disappear again? Because Diaghilev forbade the filming of his productions, his dances live in a space of total projection. I tend to work well with absence. But at the same time I wanted to see how close I could get to the material. I made many visits to the museum's storage, and I saw that the costumes were often collages of culturally incompatible fabrics and techniques, or that the amalgamation of ornamental motifs had been hand-painted or airbrushed directly onto the costumes, and they looked incredibly fresh. It became clear that textile ornament was an integral part of Bakst's logic that I could use as a guiding principle—you can see it in his famous billowing costume drawings, in his set designs, and in his late designs for the New York fabric company Selig, of which we were able to include many original gouaches. So these motifs that could be found throughout Bakst's work, on a cellular level and in a grand scheme of his stage designs, became a literal substrate to the exhibition, an inherently disparate grammar that unites everything.

The big challenge with an exhibition like this is that you're trying to show, in the static museum setting, objects which were never intended to be seen as museological artifacts. They are remnants of an elaborate time-based spectacle that lasted for a few evenings, or maybe a few seasons. How to show these fragments is something I'm still thinking about, and it is such a challenge: How can you make a displayed costume become vivid enough that you want to read it like a text? How can the impact these productions had at the time they were performed—and they were very radical—be transmitted?

It was important for me to work with what was already there, and to take cues from the things I was discovering. In programs and publications from the time, I found evidence of the way these ballets were advertised, received, and consumed. One publication in particular, *Comoedia Illustré*, combined fantastically written descriptions of the productions with photographs, drawings, and ornamental borders in very dynamic page spreads. I transferred the space of these pages onto the exhibition walls as a way to frame, double, and narrate the costumes, headdresses, and miniature set maquettes.

Framing and making conflicted spaces is central to what I'm doing. In this case, I was able to bring the work of Bakst to the public in a way that is hopefully a rich experience. From the point of view of artistic practice, I was able to synthesize something about historical material and its formal problems, such as the basic (but often sidestepped) tension of translating two dimensions into three dimensions, from Bakst's highly idealized drawings to the reality of the costumes and the sets, of getting how exactly to display their formal properties as constructions, their reception by an outraged or enthralled public—the list of problems could go on for days. I hope I have created a succession of experiences for the viewer that keeps these tensions and questions in motion.

— As told to Alex Fialho