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**Stéphane Mandelbaum,
Drawing Center review –
disturbingly seductive survey
of works meant to shock**

His use of Jewish and Nazi imagery was bound to outrage but his body of work has much more to it



“On my pages the 20th century vomits out its murders,” Belgian artist Stéphane Mandelbaum wrote in a notebook. “I have a disgust for what I have done, but also a respect.” Viewers might feel the same way. But the Drawing Center’s disturbingly seductive survey of Mandelbaum’s works on paper in New York demonstrates that his ability to ensnare viewers overwhelms his habit of repelling them.

Mandelbaum’s career was drastically truncated in 1986, when the 25-year-old’s body was found bludgeoned, shot, spattered with acid and thrown into a landfill. He had built no artistic name to speak of. Only in the past few years has his reputation started sputtering to life, bringing attention to his dark visions of evil, violence and death.

With meticulous technique and a smattering of the grotesque, he drew Nazis, *poètes maudits* and artists who died young. At 15, he produced the sort of self-portrait that must have alarmed his parents and teachers. We see him dressed in black, dangling from a meat hook, hands baring his bloodied crotch. In retrospect, his death by murder seems almost foreordained.

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Ariella Budick

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Mandelbaum was born in 1961 to the Jewish painter Arié Mandelbaum and a mother of Armenian descent who worked as an illustrator, both fixtures of the Brussels establishment. Stéphane wasn't raised as Jewish but began to identify as one in his teens, taking on what his mother described as a "Jewish air". He taught himself Yiddish and relished the companionship of his paternal grandfather, Szulim (Salomon) Mandelbaum, a Polish émigré who had lost virtually his entire family in the Holocaust. Later, he moved to a Jewish neighbourhood.

That embrace of Jewishness overlapped with a bitter fixation on Nazis. At 19, he reproduced a 1933 photo of Joseph Goebbels as a large-scale drawing of the man with mouth agape, his fulminating shout distended into a howl. A pair of 1981 portraits of Ernst Röhm, whom fellow Nazis assassinated on the Night of Long Knives, depict him as a brutish, fleshy-faced thug with a vague resemblance to Mandelbaum himself. In one of the pictures, a large, erect penis enters the frame from its right wing with the annotation "pas kosher".

A year later, he drew a lovingly detailed pencil portrait of his father Arié, rendering the fine angular face without his habitual distortions. Then he added a filigree of marginalia that mix gentle teasing with downright hostility. Hebrew characters spell out the work's Yiddish title, "Kismatores!", which in English might be transliterated "Kiss my tuchus!" Mandelbaum peppers the page with fragmentary curses and antisemitic slurs in German, Hebrew, Yiddish and French. A small collage over to one side of the page (again labelled "not kosher") sets a grinning head in a Nazi cap on a scrap torn from a porn magazine.



The show's indispensable catalogue explains the mash-up of Jewish and Nazi elements as two parts of the same attack on convention. Curator Laura Hoptman suggests that he used Yiddish "with a deliberate aggression and a desire to destabilise and discomfit". Mandelbaum's friend Gérard Preszow, who later made a film about him, saw the artist's fascination with Judaism as a transgressive "fetish", on a par with his penchant for alcohol, drugs, porn and petty crime. It's hard to say which is more offensive, Preszow's terminology or the attitude it describes.

The young artist liked to shock. His superheroes, whom he drew with idolatrous repetitiveness, were other fast-living risk-takers who died young: Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Pier Paolo Pasolini and Yukio Mishima. Francis Bacon crops up repeatedly as both muse and subject: the master's bulbous nose, bruised lips and unkempt hair embody the two artists' shared obsessions with sex, death and carnage.

Mandelbaum also portrayed Bacon's partner George Dyer, who, according to (since disproved) legend, was breaking into Bacon's house one night when homeowner and burglar locked eyes and fell in love. We see Dyer in imperial profile, like a figure on a coin, five o'clock shadow creeping across his cudgel of a chin and one strand of pomaded hair lifting out of place. His lips are slightly parted as if in protest or greeting. The drawing is a memorial of sorts: Dyer had killed himself in his Paris hotel room in 1971 while Bacon was preparing a retrospective at the Grand Palais — a grisly tale that seems to have lodged in Mandelbaum's imagination as a romantic apotheosis.



Portrait of Bacon (1980) © Stéphane Mandelbaum Estate

As the Drawing Center show makes poignantly clear, only Mandelbaum's early work exists, made at a time when his adolescent preoccupations had not yet burnt off. In art school, he discovered Egon Schiele's theatrical angst, messianic narcissism and Byronic affectations. Schiele too, cultivated an erotically stunted and provocative persona that he never had the chance to outgrow, since he died in his twenties too.

Another powerful inspiration was Arthur Rimbaud, who appears repeatedly as part angel, part Dionysian rebel. "I'm now making myself as scummy as I can. Why? I want to be a poet," Rimbaud wrote as a teenager. "The idea is to reach the unknown by the derangement of all the senses. It involves enormous suffering."

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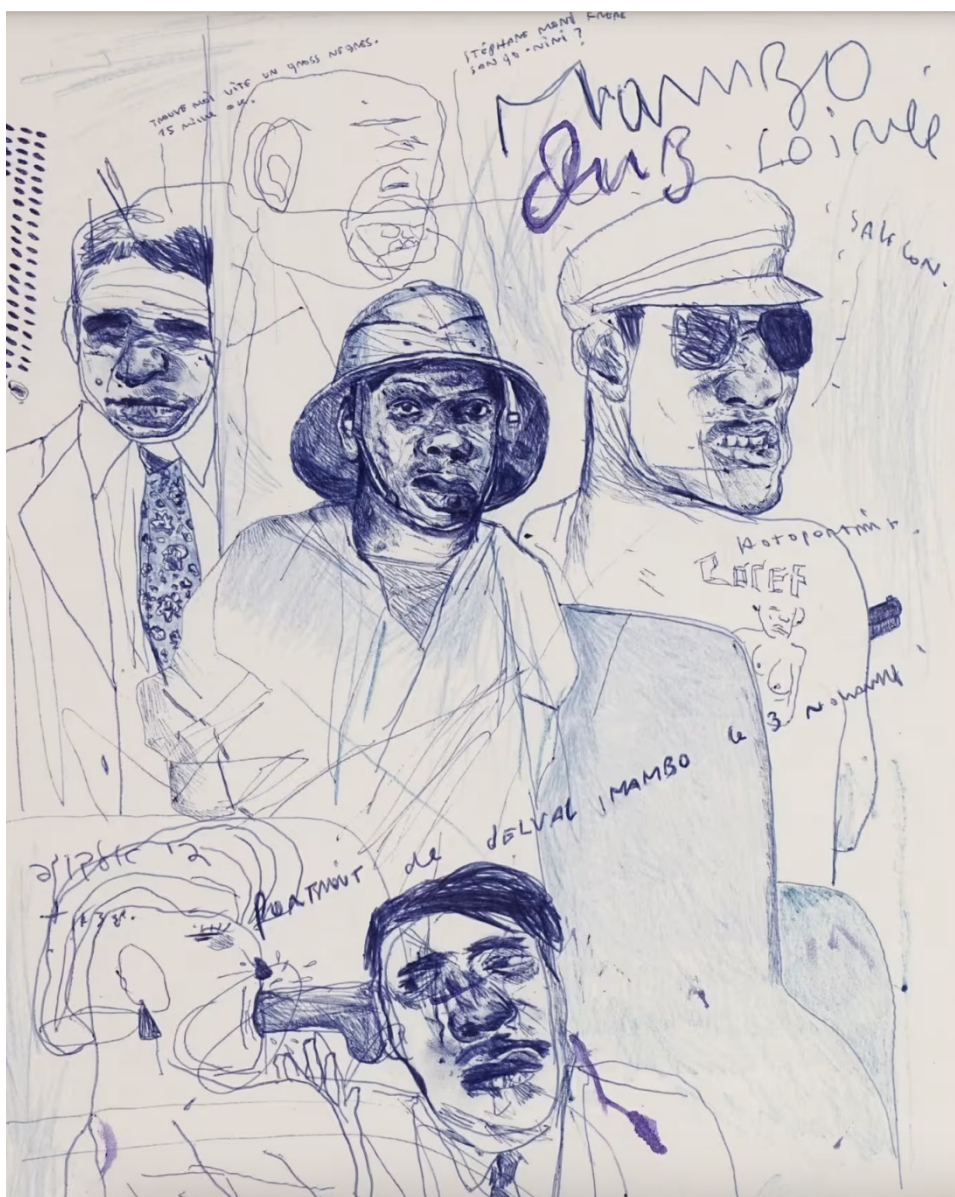
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In 1986, he stole a supposed Modigliani, “The Woman with the Cameo”, from an elderly woman’s suburban home. The painting turned out to be a fake. Perhaps he demanded money for it anyway, or maybe the underworld figures who had commissioned the job punished him for the mistake. In any case, Mandelbaum’s fickle friends helped him realise a long-held plan to die young. He left behind the beginnings of an oeuvre full of distress and possibility, a body of work powerful enough to incite the wish that he hadn’t confused talent with self-destruction.