

# ARTnews

## Bells and Bears and Beings, Oh My!: Charlemagne Palestine Takes New York

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By Andy Battaglia



Charlemagne Palestine at the Jewish Museum in New York.

On an otherwise humdrum Tuesday evening this spring, bells ringing out over the heart of Manhattan sounded more than a little unusual. They were louder than is routine, for one thing—and then there was the playing: mantric articulations of two-note pairs rising and falling, rising and falling. At one point, after a drone-intensive interlude, overtones figured in, strange resonances higher than any one particular note being played but related to all of them resounding together, en masse.

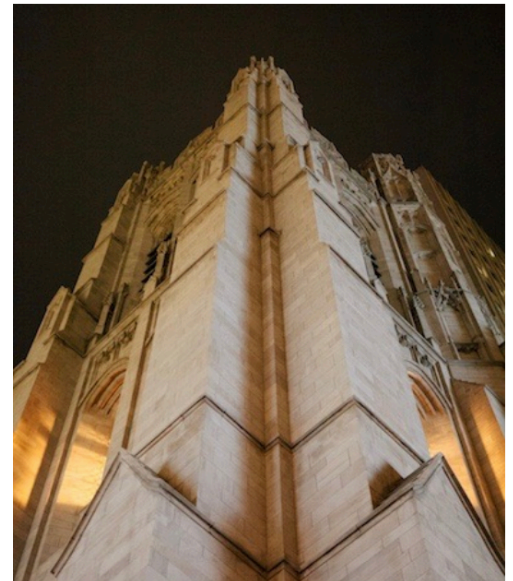
The threat of rain did not keep a curious crowd of around 300 listeners away. They had gathered around the corner of Fifth Avenue and 53rd Street in Midtown, down the block from the

Museum of Modern Art and in front of St. Thomas Episcopal Church. Across the street, mannequins in sensible solids watched the scene from windows on the second floor of Uniqlo. On the street, people in cars were rubbernecking to try to get a peek at the source of so much attention.

Up in the church's tower, hidden from view, was Charlemagne Palestine. The bells he rang—or the carillon, as the set of them would more rightly be known—were the same exact bells he played when first getting his bearings as a musician while a student in high school. He grew up in Brooklyn but made his way to Manhattan for a job with the reigning bell master. When he played in a manner that diverged from churchly custom back then, people would sometimes gather in MoMA's sculpture garden to listen. As he told me a few years ago, "Nobody approached bells like a monster, except for me." At dinner at the pastrami haven Sarge's after the carillon incantation this spring, he said, "I play it as a soul instrument. The bells have their different voices, and each one has its nuances."

Palestine was back in New York from his present home in Belgium for a number of occasions. The carillon performance, presented by the roaming curatorial enterprise Blank Forms, doubled as a tribute to the departed artist Tony Conrad, with a title stylized in Palestine's less-than-conventional language: STTT THOMASSS

“””””DINGGGDONGGGDINGGGZZZZZZ ferrrrr TONYYY”””””. Soon after was a concert in a different church on the Upper East Side, this one an organ performance with the title Aaa HHeavenlyyyy RResttt SSchlingennn BBlängennnn. And then there was the opening of an exhibition at the Jewish Museum, “Charlemagne Palestine's Bear Mitzvah in Meshugahland.”



The bell tower at St. Thomas Episcopal Church.



Exhibition view of "Charlemagne Palestine's Bear Mitzvah in Meshugahland" at the Jewish Museum.

The museum show, on view through August 6, features recordings of music by Palestine as well as ambassadors from his collection of more than 10,000 stuffed animals—or, as he calls them, “plush divinities.” A small riot of them is on display, hanging from the ceiling, draped over furniture, and seated on the floor in the stately environs of the former family mansion across the street from Central Park.

“They’re souls, presences, beings,” Palestine said shortly after his friends had been installed. Like his work in general—mainly music and sculpture but also early video art and performance-oriented episodes that date back to the 1960s and ’70s in downtown New York—the divinities “travel in different dimensions.” They carry some of the same connotations coursing through work by other artists like Mike Kelley and Jeff Koons, but his interest preceded theirs, Palestine said, and, in any case, they mean more to him than they do to most. “I started before, but the reason I’ve come out so late in the art world is that they were always beings with me, which ambiguitized what they are in art.”

Among his stuffed creatures are frogs, elephants, caterpillars, sheep, ducks, lobsters, and especially—given their historical significance and cultural lore—teddy bears. All together, they make up what the artist called a “historical, hysterical bear mitzvah”—with a mesmerizing soundtrack to match. The music playing on a loop in the exhibition is compiled from recordings from different points in Palestine’s career, with cantorial singing and suites for harpsichord alongside offerings of the drone-minded organ and piano music for which he is best known. (A recording of his recent New York carillon performance will be released on cassette by Blank Forms in September too.)

Another flourish for which Palestine is known: scarves, lots of vividly patterned and colorful scarves. Or, as he was quick to specify: schmattes. “We’re in the Jewish Museum, and I’m a Jew from New York, which is a special kind of Jew,” Palestine said. “When you ask people like Donna Karan, Bill Blass, and other designers from New York, they all say they started in the schmattie business, which means ‘rags.’ It’s a good New York Jewish word.”

What it means to Palestine, however, seems to differ a bit from the rest. After talking through the past, present, and future of schmattes in his life, the artist panned back for perspective and said, “I sacredize the textile.”

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