

Cultural Daily

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Remembering Leonard Cohen Through Art

Stephen West · Monday, October 4th, 2021

How does an art museum pay tribute to a musician? In the case of *Experience Leonard Cohen*, a new exhibition at the [Contemporary Jewish Museum](#) in San Francisco, the answer is it's trickier than you might think.

Cohen (1934-2016) wasn't your typical folk-rock star of the 1960s and beyond. Born to a prosperous Orthodox Jewish family in suburban Montreal, he studied literature at McGill University and initially tried to be a poet and fiction writer, publishing his first book of poetry in 1956 and his first novel in 1963.

While Cohen had been interested in music since childhood, dabbling in folk guitar and songwriting, he didn't release his first album until he was 33. His often mournful songs, such as "Suzanne," "So Long Marianne," and "Hallelujah," explored "religion, politics, isolation, depression, sexuality, loss, death, and romantic relationships," as [Wikipedia](#) puts it.

The exhibition at the CJM doesn't attempt to present a biography of Cohen. Instead, it offers works by four separate artists who were inspired by Cohen and his music. The star of the show is a one-hour video tribute by George Fok, *Passing Through* (top image), featuring short clips of Cohen's performances and interviews throughout his career.



George Fok, *Passing Through*, 2017, multi-channel video, black and white and color, sound, 56 minutes; installation view at Contemporary Jewish Museum; photo by Impart Photography.

The video, projected on three walls of a darkened gallery space, is cleverly edited. It intercuts

multiple performances of a single song across decades, showing how the young Leonard and the old Leonard interpreted a given phrase (sometimes identically, sometimes quite differently). There's a revealing interview clip in which Cohen explains how he was tricked into signing away the ownership of his early hit "Suzanne." The video isn't a biography, but it gives you a sense of the man and his music, and it's not to be missed.