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VISUAL ARTS

Right place, weird time

Showing us our city, through their eyes

BY REBECCA MAZZEI

A place can have definite or indefinite boundaries. Places, in my mind, have always been marked by very definite barriers. It's a product of growing up with a younger brother who is handicapped. Some time, very early on, I unconsciously made the decision to join him on his journey, and began processing my experiences in terms of the physicality of my surroundings. It's like second nature now: Is this terrain flat or bumpy? Is it wet? How many people are sharing it? How soon will I be moving from this location to a new one? As an adult, I am more often than not somewhere he can't easily be — say, hiking in a forest or walking up three flights of stairs in an old apartment building — and my barrier has become emotional. It's guilt.

A heightened sense of awareness characterizes a really wonderful, intimate exhibit entitled *Walking Distance*, on display at Hamtramck's 2739 Edwin gallery through the end of the month. In photos, drawings, paintings, video and installation, 10 artists do more than document urban landscapes; they explore what defines our relationship with the world around us. The topic seems to be on the minds of many artists, as humanity continues to lose touch with the real world.

Walking Distance guides us around an array of local spots that are at once common and barely recognizable. Emily Linn, whose family has lived in Detroit for seven generations, researched 13 routine routes in Detroit that members of her family once traveled. She walked these paths with a camera at her side, shooting the street beneath her feet. The concrete flows fast down the screen like a stream, and bounces to the rhythm of her gait. The footage affords frustratingly little opportunity for the viewer to develop any real connection to a place that means so much to her. In a subtle language, she manages to honor her ancestry while expressing the loss she's struggling with; the futility of seeking to reclaim everyday moments that have long passed.

Guests entering the gallery at 2739 are greeted by a zoetrope made from wooden figures on a turntable. Artist and animator Gary Schwartz was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in the mid-'70s. Since then, he has occasionally lost the ability to walk, and writes in his artist statement that he has been fixated on the "walking cycle" as it manifests itself in motion picture, kinetic sculpture, stop-motion animation and more. His piece seems as heartbreakingly cruel as it does playful, because the freedom of mobility is a delusion set in motion by a strobe light. The power of the zoetrope is a result of our eyes deceiving us, just as illness betrays the body.

The strength of this show is, in part, credited to its curator, Steve Panton, who displayed the work so that visual cues guide eyes from one piece to the next. Gateways into new worlds form fences, doors and windows in Toby Millman's photographs, a Brooklyn transplant just getting to know her new neighborhood, while Laura Macintyre's paintings celebrate the vibrancy of an area she's lived in her whole life. The setting, for both of them, is Hamtramck.

Imposing concrete barricades in Scott Hocking's photos — inched apart just enough for someone on foot to pass through — represent a gateway that takes us from one era to the next. For 10 years, Hocking has tracked the evolution of what is known as the "I-94 Industrial Park Renaissance Zone," an area of about 289 acres located close to Hamtramck on the city's east side, between St. Cyril and Mount Elliot. The neighborhood was once residential, but gradual depopulation led to the demolition of homes. Hocking explains that the area was used as a dumping ground and eventually the barricades were put in place. The expansive territory in his photos now occupies an incredible interplace between civilization and total collapse. It's a section of Detroit that has returned to the condition of fertile landscape Count Pontchartrain described in 1709 as "the earthly paradise of North America," replete with wildlife and natural landscape. The Detroit Economic Growth Corporation, reads the State of Michigan's website, seeks businesses for "industrial redevelopment." Invested with such social power, Hocking's lush landscapes are also an indictment of a city and state government floundering with little vision.

The subject matter in *Walking Distance* may be local, but it's far from provincial. As a side note, while art of the local landscape hangs on the wall, the creators have been in and out of the country, working and vacationing in China, Panama, Germany, Italy, Los Angeles and Philadelphia.

Corine Vermeulen-Smith is relatively new to the local art community; she's from the Netherlands, and her photos of local residents look like stunningly contemporary interpretations of 17th century Dutch paintings. The placement of a hand on the knee, the cropping of a woman in an oversized jacket and the slight tilt of head gives off the air of classic nobility and beauty. For four days, Vermeulen-Smith, with Femke Lutgerink (who provided text), turned a formerly foreclosed home on Klinger Street in Hamtramck into a "Walk-In Portrait Studio," where she shot pictures of strangers for free. Vermeulen-Smith opened up shop as a way of introducing herself to the community where she and her husband recently bought a home. "It was like baking an apple pie and saying, 'Hi, I'm your new neighbor,'" she writes in an e-mail. She adds that she'd like to continue this project as a traveling photo studio, documenting different communities around Detroit.

Painter Kathy Rashid turns her attention to cracks in the sidewalk, focusing on a spot about as big as where nearly one foot can rest. In her interpretation, a place is an intimate story told millions of times.

The show's most abstract piece is Chris Samuel's installation, a waist-high construction of a gate, some paint cans and mirrors reflecting the steps of those who pass in front of it. This is a poignant representation of an environment built up from imbalance, yet surprisingly functional as it now stands.

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