

The Lively Soul of a Decaying City

Detroit Artists at Marianne Boesky and Marlborough Chelsea Galleries

By RANDY KENNEDY JUNE 25, 2014



A scene of 1960s Detroit by the street photographer Bill Rauhauser, part of a new exhibition of Detroit-focused art at the Marianne Boesky and Marlborough galleries in Chelsea. Credit Bill Rauhauser/Hill Gallery

DETROIT — “There are cities that get by on their good looks, offer climate and scenery, views of mountains or oceans, rockbound or with palm trees,” Elmore Leonard wrote. “And there are cities like Detroit that have to work for a living.”

One place where the city punched in for generations was a collection of warehouses along the Detroit River known as the Dry Docks Engine Works, where a pre-automobile Henry Ford worked as an apprentice machinist. Almost a century later, in a Detroit well into economic free fall, a teenager named Todd Levin worked summers in one of the same buildings, washing down grease-caked machinery. But on breaks, he would use the frayed city as an open art book, wandering to places like Mies van der Rohe’s Lafayette Park housing development and to Heidelberg Street, where the artist Tyree Guyton was beginning to reimagine urban blight as Surrealist assemblage.

“This place and a few others were like a dream machine for me,” he said recently, inching a rental car through Lafayette Park. And now Mr. Levin, a prominent New York art adviser and curator, has revisited those dreams to organize a sprawling portrait, filling two Chelsea galleries, of his hometown’s life in art, a history that has been too often unsung.



“Mall Culture,” part of a larger installation by a group of artists that included Mike Kelley, far left.
Credit Mike Kelley Foundation for The Arts



Part of the Heidelberg Project, a free-form street art project by Tyree Guyton.
Credit Fabrizio Costantini for The New York Times

“Another Look at Detroit: Parts 1 and 2,” which opens Thursday and runs through Aug. 8 at the Marianne Boesky and Marlborough galleries, takes place at a crucial turning point for a city that has had so many illusory turning points over the years. The city’s federal bankruptcy case heads to trial in mid-August, a reckoning that will give Detroit a fresh start but will also determine the fate of the Detroit Institute of Arts, whose collection, under siege by the city’s creditors, has become the symbolic heart of the battle between Detroit’s financial future and its cultural past.

The exhibition also points up the jarring disconnect of a city fighting for its art at the same time that it has become a mecca for young artists, drawn by cheap space and a kind of untamed urban flux that makes the art worlds of 1970s SoHo or Venice Beach seem like manicured estates by comparison. (When Patti Smith urged young artists to move to Detroit instead of New York in a 2010 commencement speech, many had beaten her to the punch, and more artists raised there are staying, instead of leaving for the East or West Coasts.)

“The last thing I want is for the show to be seen as ‘Up with Detroit,’” said Mr. Levin, 53, who was born in Sinai Hospital north of downtown and whose mother still lives in a Detroit suburb. “But it is a very personal reaction to what’s happening in a city where I grew up and that I still care a lot about.”



A 1988 work by Ray Johnson.
Credit: The Ray Johnson Estate/Richard L. Feigen & Co.



A damaged book will be displayed as a found object by the photographer and sculptor Scott Hocking.
Credit Scott Hocking/Susanne Hilberry Gallery

Ms. Boesky — whose father, the disgraced financier Ivan Boesky, also grew up there and whose grandparents owned a beloved Detroit deli, Boesky's (pronounced Bo-ESK-ees, by those who still remember it) — added: "We wanted a show that reflected a living city, not a dead city, and that if it had a message it might be 'Don't take what's left.'"

During the city's long, slow slide but even in the years leading up to its economic heyday — Detroit's population peaked in 1950 at 1.8 million and it now has fewer than 700,000 residents — the city's art world existed mostly in the shadow of Chicago's and New York's. It spawned no great movements or long-lived scenes except for the Cass Corridor artists, postmodern sculptors and painters who thrived in the 1960s and '70s in a derelict neighborhood near downtown, where the rock magazine *Creem* was also founded.

But Detroit has produced and flung elsewhere some of the most wildly idiosyncratic artists of the postwar years — Ray Johnson, who was making Pop art before his friend Andy Warhol did; James Lee Byars, a shamanistic sculptor whose work is now the subject of a retrospective at MoMA/PS1; Mike Kelley, one of the most influential artists of the last three decades, whose suicide in 2012 still resonates in Detroit, though he left the city for Los Angeles in the late 1970s.



The painter Scott Reeder works in a studio in an old automotive warehouse.



Marie T. Hermann, a Danish ceramicist, moved to Detroit
Credit Joshua Lott for The New York Times

While their work will loom large in Chelsea, the show dives much deeper, to artists who are not well known but whose work is knit intimately with the soul of the city, like Bill Rauhauser, a street photographer, now 96, whose black-and-white images, influenced by Cartier-Bresson and André Kertész, subtly chronicle Detroit's rise and fall.

"I took photographs in New York and Chicago, but I could never see a picture there as well as I could in Detroit," Mr. Rauhauser said in a recent interview. "I think you have to know a place. And I've been here all my life."

In a line that could have been spoken by many Detroit artists generations younger, working now in the city, mostly in obscurity, he added: "I think if I'd been better known, it might have been bad for my work. I took pictures because I liked to see them when I developed them. I thought they looked pretty great."

The show, which includes loans of three works from the Detroit Institute of Arts, encompasses fashion (Anna Sui was raised in Detroit), music (among the artifact-like pieces are original 12-inch singles by Metroplex, one of the earliest techno labels) and design, much of it flowing from the Cranbrook Academy of Art, a crucible of American modernism. Work by a broad swath of African-American artists — Al Loving, McArthur Binion, Nick Cave, Gilda Snowden — is included. And in oblique ways, the exhibition touches on the city's long and tortured history of racial politics, featuring lush 19th-century landscapes by Robert Seldon Duncanson, a black Hudson-River-School-style artist who is believed to have presented himself as white during much of his career.

It also, while working hard to steer clear of the fetishizing of decay that has become ridiculed as "ruin porn," makes plain the brutal toll that poverty and drugs have taken on the city, with a now-infamous 2009 Detroit News photograph by Max Ortiz, showing the body of a sometimes homeless man, Johnnie Redding, almost completely encased in winter ice inside an abandoned Detroit warehouse where he died.

The incongruity of a large, ambitious show of Detroit art being held in Manhattan, especially now, is not lost on many of the participants, including Mr. Levin. But younger Detroit artists often admit to warring sentiments about the arrival of greater recognition for the city's contemporary scene.

That scene has not exactly thrived in the “sunshine of absolute neglect,” a phrase the critic Dave Hickey has used in another context. But it still feels very much like its own ecosystem, flourishing almost in opposition to the moneyed realms of New York and Los Angeles. And artists — while gossiping sometimes about the possibility of a big New York gallery opening a Detroit outpost — worry about that ecosystem being upset by a vogue for the city’s cool.

“I had a show in Berlin, and I was in a cafe, and I saw something on the menu called ‘Detroit banana-almond bread,’ ” said Scott Reeder, a painter who moved to Detroit more than a year ago and works in a vast old Albert-Kahn-designed automotive warehouse that has been converted to hundreds of thousands of square feet of artists’ studios. “I didn’t know this city was known for its banana-almond bread,” said Mr. Reeder, whose work will be included in the show. “They just stuck it on because Detroit’s a thing now.”

Marie T. Hermann, a Danish ceramicist whose pale, rigorously austere forms will also be included in the show, said the conception of “some kind of fairy tale art community here is very wrong because there’s so much hardship surrounding it.” But she added: “For me it’s a good place to be an artist because you’re not put in boxes, categorized, the way you are in other cities.

“It’s very fluid,” said Ms. Hermann, who moved to Detroit from London and works in a studio in Pontiac, Mich. “Even the way the city looks — so much space between things, no apparent logic to the way things are set up — has had an effect on my work.”

The extreme physical decay — a federally supported task force recently recommended that 40,000 dilapidated buildings be torn down, in a city with more than 100,000 vacant lots — has clearly been alluring to many young artists, who have inherited postmodernism’s fascination with entropy. (Robert Smithson, in his 1967 essay “A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, N.J.,” described how the decrepit industrial landscape he traversed, like an 18th-century explorer, seemed “full of ‘holes’ ” that defined “the memory traces of an abandoned set of futures.”)

Scott Hocking, a photographer and sculptor who grew up in the Detroit suburbs and has worked in the inner city since the mid-1990s, said he and many other longtime city artists don’t fetishize destruction but simply accept it for what it is, a supplier of cheap and often otherworldly art materials and an environment that feels by now almost domestically familiar.

“Everybody I knew growing up was nostalgic for Detroit’s heyday, but I’m 39 and I never knew it, so one day I’m sure I’m going to be nostalgic for what I know, which is the city in a lot of desolation,” said Mr. Hocking, who harvests stalagmites from long-abandoned buildings and will display found objects in the show — a book, a collection of dolls, polystyrene eggs — that seem to have been fossilized over years by the elements inside their industrial settings.

Mr. Hocking added: “I’m worried that to rebuild itself the city will have to end up looking like a suburb and that the things drawing artists here are all going to be eaten up. But it’s probably going to take a very long time. It’s a very big city.”

The last remaining structure in the riverfront Dry Docks complex, the Globe Trading Company building, where Mr. Levin worked, already looks like a suburban import. Empty for years, it was recently refashioned with state money into a sports and recreation center, with a sleek new facade and only a hint of its original brick still visible. On June 20, Michigan’s governor, Rick Snyder, used the building as a symbol of rebirth, signing legislation there to approve almost \$200 million in state funds for what has become known as the “Grand Bargain,” a package of private and public money intended to save the Detroit Institute of Arts’ collection by helping the city pay its pensioners.

Driving by the building one recent morning, Mr. Levin bemoaned its new anti-industrial look. But then he drove to the Heidelberg Project, the raucous, free form street art project that Mr. Guyton has been shaping, with frequent opposition from the city, for almost three decades. A recent spate of fires had destroyed more than half the project’s houses, but Mr. Guyton, who was there that morning and clapped Mr. Levin in a hug, seemed more excited than despondent by the turn of events. He conducted an impromptu tour to show how he had turned one of the burned houses into an ethereal new work, piling the destroyed foundation with dolls and other found objects, like a shrine, and building in its basement — visible from the street through gaps in the charred floorboards — a miniature city, fashioned from scavenged children’s play houses.

“This isn’t the end of us, not by a long shot,” Mr. Guyton said emphatically. “This is a new beginning. This is two plus two equals eight. We’re making magic here!”

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