

Cranbrook's Sprawling, Ambitious 'Landlord Colors' Exhibit Connects Detroit to the World

Ryan Patrick Hooper, Special to the Detroit Free Press

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Scott Hocking is photographed with "Bone Black," an installation that uses boats abandoned throughout the city as a suspended fleet in Detroit, Mich., Monday, June 18, 2019. (Photo: Kathleen Galligan, Detroit Free Press)

The Cranbrook Art Museum has put together one of the most ambitious projects in the history of the institution.

"Landlord Colors: On Art, Economy, and Materiality" is a sprawling exhibition that stretches across multiple eras, mediums and contemporary art movements — a logistically massive undertaking that highlights 60 artists from Detroit and around the globe, all connected by economic, social and cultural upheaval.

The effort also stretches far beyond the museum's walls in Bloomfield Hills, bringing a series of public performances and installations known as "Material Detroit" to a handful of destinations in Detroit starting this weekend and running through October.

In some ways, "Landlord Colors" couldn't be more global. In other ways, it's totally local.

In the museum exhibit, which opens with a preview event on Friday, the curated works from Detroit artists stretch back five decades, starting with the 1967 rebellion — a seismic event that left a mark across generations of homegrown artists.

The rest of the exhibit focuses on the cultural climate of four additional cities in specific eras — the Italian avant-garde in Turin during the 1960s-1980s; authoritarian-ruled Seoul, South Korea of the 1970s; Havana, Cuba since the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s to the present; and contemporary Athens, Greece since the financial crisis of 2008.

Compiling a bevy of newly commissioned works and archival pieces with works on loan from galleries and other museums, "Landlord Colors" was curated by Cranbrook senior curator Laura Mott alongside Taylor Renee Aldridge, who co-founded the arts criticism journal [Arts.Black](#), and Ryan Myers-Johnson, who is the executive director and curator behind the [Sidewalk Detroit festival](#).

Aldridge says Mott's curation of the exhibition helped bring a greater sense of humanity to the artists from each city as well as recast the global artistic narrative around Detroit.

"Too often, in recent years, material decay and ruin have become metaphors for this city's post-bankruptcy character," says Aldridge. "In that, we have lost a sense of the very factor that enables activation of such materials in the first place — the Detroiters themselves. While this exhibition prioritizes material ... I think it also reminds us of the artist's hand, and the lived experiences that belong to that hand."

Globetrotting across artists and issues, the scope and scale of the exhibit feels massive and overwhelming on paper. Inside the museum, the commonalities between the five cities and their social and economic histories become clear.

Cultural production rarely stops in the face of economic collapses, industrial struggles or new regimes tightening down on freedom of expression.

Focusing on the artist experience, "Landlord Colors" explores how materials — an excess or lack thereof — influenced the work of creative classes from each era.

"I wanted to situate Detroit in a larger trans-historical, global art history to really understand what this place is in relationship to other places in the world," says Mott. "In part, doing that was looking through material."

In 2014, Mott witnessed how Detroit artists were sourcing their materials when she oversaw another sweeping exhibition that helped break down the walls between Cranbrook Art Museum and the city of Detroit.

"Nick Cave: Here Hear" brought Cave's gorgeous sound suits to a series of lively performances scattered throughout the city thanks to a \$150,000 grant from the Knight Foundation's Knight Arts Challenge.

"Landlord Colors" is financed in part through a \$75,000 Knight Arts Challenge grant and is equally focused on engaging Detroit residents. Mott also received a grant from the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, which helped finance travel to each country featured in the exhibit.

For Mott, the journey to open "Landlord Colors" has taken four years of preparation and research that feels like a history book brought to life through contemporary art.

"There's a kindred-ness in the materiality and how they were using materials as a form of communication," says Mott, "and also how materials meant very specific things in different locations."



Yoan Capote's "Island (see-escape)" is shown at Cranbrook Art Museum in Bloomfield Hills, Mich., Monday, June 17, 2019. (Photo: Kathleen Galligan, Detroit Free Press)

Where Detroit artists from different generations like Charles McGee, Gilda Snowden, Olayami Dabls and Scott Hocking explore an excess of found material from years of industrial growth, Cuban artists Reynier Leyva Novo and Yoan Capote recycle the limited resources around them to explore themes of cultural identity and immigration.

In one of the largest and most visually arresting pieces of the exhibition, Capote uses roughly 500,000 fishhooks to create a seascape that's deceptively peaceful and calm until closer inspection. Entitled "Island (see-escape)," the piece examines the idea of the ocean as both an economic resource and foreboding border wall for Cubans looking to immigrate.

"Every single artwork has a story behind it, and it tells you more about what it was like to live in these places and these conditions," says Mott. "There's a strange optimism to this exhibition when you see the incredible ingenuity that artists use through these time periods."

For the "Material Detroit" portion of "Landlord Colors," the trio of curators corralled a wide-ranging series of installations and performances throughout the city. They run through October in a variety of locations — everywhere from the 250-acre [Eliza Howell Park](#) to the nonprofit [Detroit Artists Market](#) gallery.

The kickoff of the "Material Detroit" elements this weekend will include a Saturday performance from the Havana-based Afro-Cuban artist Susana Pilar.

Alongside 12 Detroit-based musicians, Pilar will honor and reinterpret the music of the Dramatics at the former site of the Algiers Motel, [where three unarmed black men were killed by Detroit police officers in 1967](#). The performance will start at 3 p.m. at 8301 Woodward Avenue in Detroit. It's free and open to the public.



"Bone Black" is an installation in progress by Scott Hocking in a 25,000 square-foot former industrial building. It uses boats abandoned throughout the city as a suspended fleet in Detroit, Mich., Monday, June 18, 2019. (Photo: Kathleen Galligan, Detroit Free Press)

For his part, artist Scott Hocking has created a massive found object installation called "Bone Black" inside a 25,000 square-foot former industrial building currently owned by the Stroh family. It'll be on display through October (guests will have to view the exhibit from the entrance of the factory for safety reasons).

Hocking has filled the old factory with 30 boats — many hanging from the ceiling; others situated on the ground with trees growing out of them — that he's found and photographed for years throughout the city in empty lots, low-trafficked side streets and even inside the dilapidated Packard Plant. The effect is a surreal scene of a floating ghost fleet of boats, many of them abandoned or dumped in the city.

"The procedure of dumping boats around Detroit is the same as dumping lots of other stuff like tires or mattresses," says Hocking. "It's just big (expletive) that people don't want to deal with, so here I am — the guy that comes around and deals with garbage."

A native of Redford Township who graduated from the College for Creative Studies in the mid-'90s, Hocking has made a name for himself turning found objects into otherworldly installations. His work follows in the footsteps of Cass Corridor artists like Gordon Newton and Brenda Goodman, who is also featured in "Landlord Colors."

The title of the "Bone Black" installation comes from the name of the pigment Hocking used to paint some of the boats — a natural black made from crushed animal bone that has been produced in the Detroit-area since 1878.

Like the overarching themes of "Landlord Colors" itself, Hocking is using an abundance of material that helped defined Detroit's past to put a new light on what some might see as waste and ruin.



Detroit-based multimedia artist Olayami Dabls' MBAD African Bead Museum is part of "Landlord Colors: Material Detroit." (Photo: John Froelich, Special to the Free Press)

'Landlord Colors: On Art, Economy, and Materiality'

Opening Saturday, June 22, runs through October 6, 2019, Hours: 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesday – Sunday
Cranbrook Art Museum, Bloomfield Hills: cranbrookartmuseum.org

'Landlord Colors: Material Detroit'

This is a performance and public art series that complements the Cranbrook Art Museum exhibition. Events and exhibits are located throughout the city of Detroit, beginning Friday and running through Fall

A few highlights from 'Material Detroit':

Following a recent \$100,000 fundraising initiative and restoration, artist Olayami Dabls and his one-of-a-kind **MBAD African Bead Museum** will open a new gallery space as part of "Material Detroit." It will host work from Detroit artist Elizabeth Youngblood called "mat/ter" in addition to the outdoor installation "Iron Teaching Rocks How To Rust" by Dabls. *6559 Grand River Ave.*

The site-specific "**Wind Participatory**" installation by Billy Mark in Detroit's North End neighborhood turns a handmade hoodie with 25-foot arms into a ritualistic flagpole raising. *858 Blaine Street*

In "**Unit 1: 3583 Dubois**" artist Anders Ruhwald turns a former apartment in Eastern Market into a gallery exploring themes of transformation and memory via black ceramic, charred wood and molten glass. Sat. through Oct. 5. *3583 Dubois Street*