

Detroit's famed Cass Corridor art movement spotlighted at Simone DeSousa

April 21, 2017 by Sarah Rose Sharp



Within the recent history of Detroit's relationship to the wider world of contemporary art, there is only one major movement that gained widespread attention: the Cass Corridor Movement. Bridging the mid-'60s to the late-'70s, and accelerating under Sam Wagstaff's abbreviated but deeply influential stint as contemporary curator of the DIA, Cass Corridor artists became some of the most prominent visual artists to emerge from Detroit and join the international conversation. The aesthetic capitalized on the urban realities of late 1960s Detroit, with a scrappy cohort of poets, writers, painters and sculptors salvaging beauty from the fractured material remains of a city in post-industrial decline and racial turmoil.

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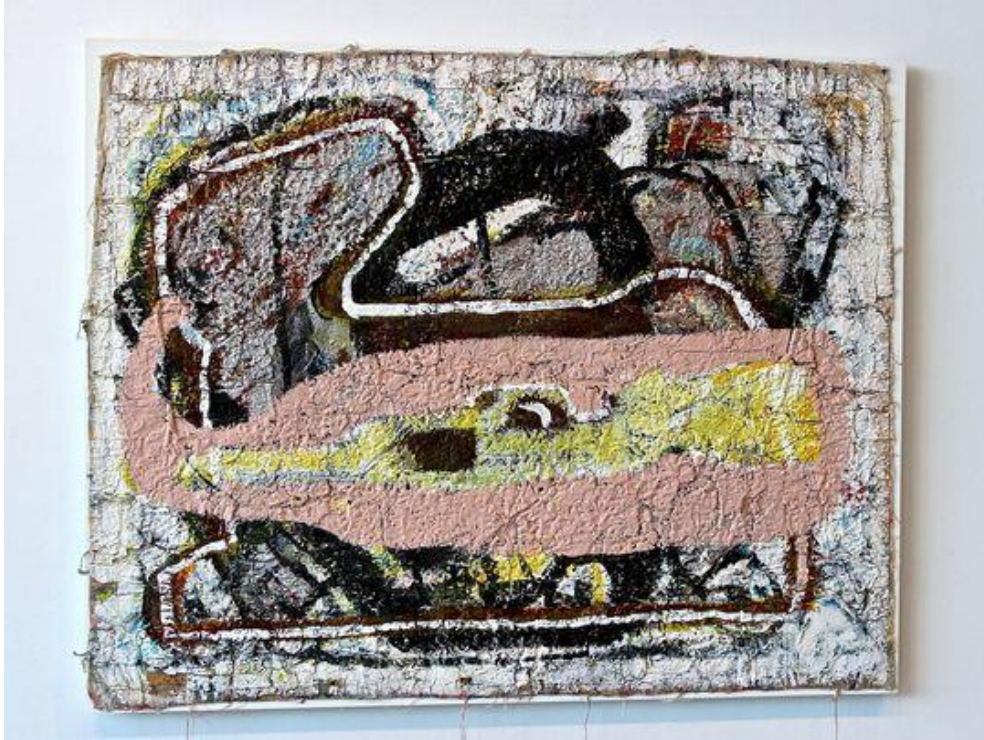
Many of the artists, however, have languished in relative obscurity. With commercial redevelopment in the Cass Corridor area gaining momentum every day, there is perhaps a sense among those who remember the era fondly that now is the time to reflect on some of the movement's unsung heroes. On Friday, Simone DeSousa Gallery — which has witnessed its neighborhood moniker change from Cass Corridor to Midtown — kicks off "Cass Corridor: Connecting Times," a series of exhibitions of past Cass Corridor artists curated by painter and queen of the old school, Nancy Mitchnick.

“Our gallery is close to its 10th anniversary,” said gallerist Simone DeSousa, “and my intention was always to do a major project in the gallery that connected to the history of our neighborhood. My challenge was figuring out how this exhibition could be literally alive.” DeSousa says that the idea was never to create an academic retrospective of the Cass Corridor's heyday, but to imbue the project with a sense of living history.

“That's when I came up with the idea to invite Nancy (Mitchnick) to curate,” says DeSousa. “Because Nancy was here then, and she's back here now.” Mitchnick returned to reside in Hamtramck in 2011, after a decades-long exodus from Detroit, pursuing a successful painting career in New York, and a teaching career at California Institute of the Arts and Harvard University. Mitchnick is a figurative painter, known for her large-scale, gestural portraits, urban landscapes and kinetic renderings of trees.

“She's also a woman, and we all know the artists recognized from Cass Corridor time are majority male, so I thought that would be an interesting perspective,” says DeSousa. “But the main thing is that Nancy is a significant artist, and it's from a practicing artist's point of view, rather than an academic one. The interesting thing about this exhibition is that it's a slice of Cass Corridor, from one person's perspective.”

Mitchnick's choice for the inaugural exhibition is a solo show focusing on the work of inter-media artist Michael Luchs. Luchs' work was featured in the 1980 DIA survey, "Kick Out the Jams: Detroit's Cass Corridor, 1963-1977," and was written up in *Art in America* as part of a major spread on the Detroit's art scene. DeSousa and Mitchnick worked closely with Luchs, as well as his wife, Kathryn Brackett Luchs, who often acts as an interface for the notably reclusive artist. Luchs has long-since retreated from urban life, working from a studio in Lewiston for the past several decades.



Michael Luchs' "Untitled (Rabbit) #3" appears in the first of a series of shows at the Simone DeSousa Gallery devoted to Cass Corridor artists. This 2014. piece is mixed media on canvas, mounted on wood, 42.5" x 53.5." (Photo: Sarah Rose Sharp)

“When Simone asked me if I’d like to curate a show about the Cass Corridor from my own perspective, I didn’t think I could do it — I’ve never curated anything,” says Mitchnick, taking time out of supervising the final installation details for a brief interview. “And then I thought of Michael Luchs, he was the first person I thought of, because he’s such a great painter, and so serious, and influenced and helped so many of us.” Mitchnick described the influence that Luchs had on her own trajectory, offering a crucial intervention in Mitchnick’s own development as an artist.

“He was my next-door neighbor, in married student housing for Wayne State, because I was going to go to school,” said Mitchnick. “Michael saw my first drawings, and I hated them, I thought they were the most horrible things — they were not like Michelangelo — he said, “These are painters drawings, you should learn how to paint.” And he bought me paint and brushes.”

Luchs work is astonishingly consistent — likely a result of a daily practice he has maintained over decades, even as he approaches the age of 80. The works on display span decades of experimentation, but abstracted animal totems — dogs, squirrels, fish, and the rabbits for which he is best known—appear throughout. These creatures are sometimes heavily armed, suggesting a conflict between man and nature that appears to be a perennial concern for Luchs. Some of his

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most abstract work, which deals with paint built up in dense and cracking layers, retains not only aesthetic appeal, but contemporary relevance.

“You cannot appreciate the materiality and the physicality of this work until you see it in person,” says DeSousa. “You can see the range of work, how his process is responsive and immediate.” Luchs will be on hand for Friday's opening —a rare public appearance for the intensely private artist. The exhibition, which runs through May 28, offers a sterling opportunity for art lovers and those curious about Detroit's history to tap the wealth of living knowledge still held by the old guard of the Detroit art scene.

This is the first offering in a full summer at Simone DeSousa; future programming in the series includes a three-person show featuring Jim Chatelain, John Egne, and Gordon Newton, and another featuring Steve Foust, Greg Murphy and Nancy Pletos. Special events include a May 13 panel discussion featuring Mitchnick in conversation with Cass Corridor-era art writers and critics, and the launch of an original publication covering the summer series on July 29. Future plans include a "Women of Cass Corridor" group exhibition slated for fall 2018.

Times, they are a-changing. Thanks to the efforts of Simone DeSousa Gallery, and the boundless energy of Mitchnick, you don't have to wait until it's gone to know what you've got. For the summer of '17, at least, the Cass Corridor will be as close as a ride on the Midtown QLINE.



Michael Luchs' "Untitled (Squirrels and Guns) #3," 1989. Mixed media on canvas, 33" x 49" (Photo: Sarah Rose Sharp)

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