

# Detroit Art Review

## Cass Corridor @ Simone DeSousa Gallery

September 28, 2018 by Glen Mannisto

**Cass Corridor, Connecting Times: Brenda Goodman, Kathryn Bracket Luchs, Ann Mikolowski, Nancy Mitchnick, Ellen Phelan, and Nancy Pletos**



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Until very recently driving into Detroit from the nearby suburbs on Friday night was hassle-free and at most a 15-minute drive. For the opening of Simone DeSousa Gallery's current exhibition, "Cass Corridor: Connecting times," the last in the series to explore art of the 60s and 70s in Detroit's infamous bohemian community, the drive was a delightful pain in the ass. The freeway was clogged with impatient drivers going to the Red Wing Hockey game, or the Tiger game or the half dozen art openings in the cultural center or music concerts or to hang at all manner of clubs and bars or to dine at the literally dozens of new restaurants in the new Foodie capital of

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the United States. We always knew the city would come back and we knew that we would regret it and also rejoice.

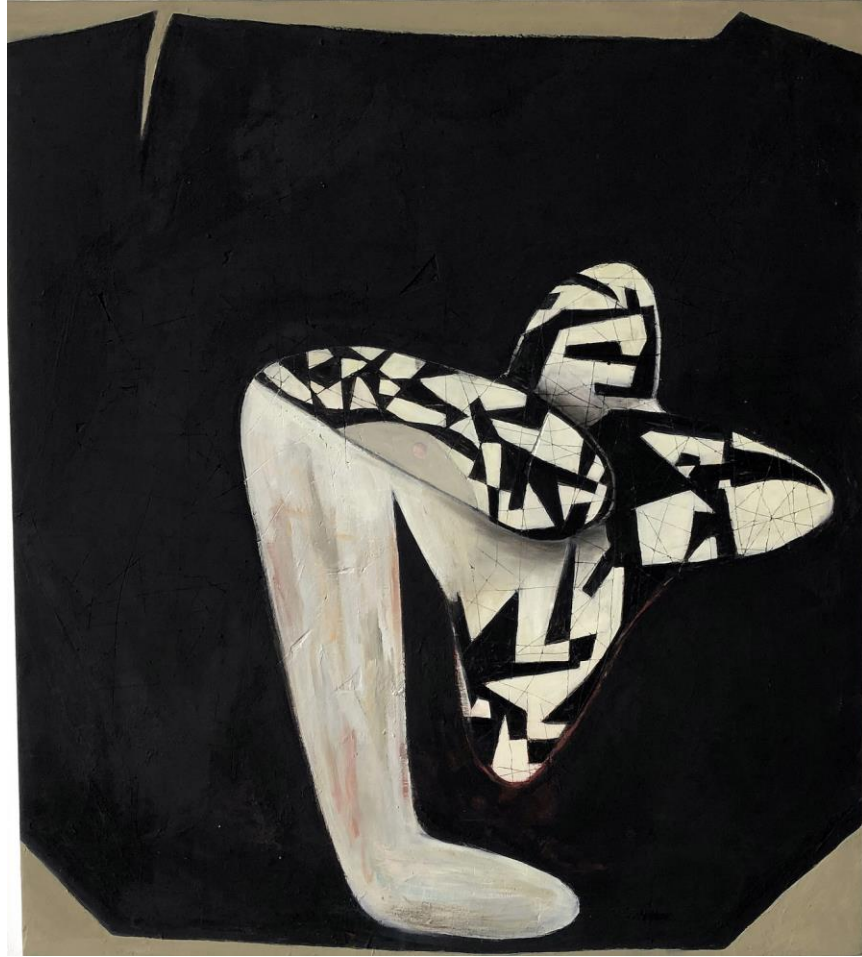


Nancy Mitchnick, "Dog Party," 2017, oil on canvas. All images Courtesy of Simone DeSousa Gallery.

Forty or so years ago when the six women artists in this exhibition came down to Wayne State University or the Detroit Society of Arts and Craft to begin their art education, from each of their nearby homes in the broad reaches of Detroit's working class neighborhoods, they were adventurers in a pretty much strange land. The exodus from racially torn Detroit had begun and the seamy, derelict parts were rising; the city seemed abandoned. Rents were cheap and studio space abundant.

These young women had the freedom to grow and become what they would without the usual college routines. Each did grow and develop as artists in their own unique way, for a while each living in the intellectually and artistically energetic Cass Corridor, staying the course to become fully, accomplished artists.

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Brenda Goodman, "Balance," 2017, Oil on Canvas

For years, the Brenda Goodman that Detroit knew had been the stalwart painter of a personal, iconography that was always executed with a masterful surface and line but left us waiting for a little more expansive, less inward preoccupation. Her drawing always had an underlying tenderness that contrasted with its moody, psychological content.

It appears that Brenda has broken out of her reflexive imagery, to do what John Yau has said about another fine artist, making "improvisation and surprise central" to her practice. In the two paintings at DeSousa, fresh new shapes and forms are the message and they are both wrought with Goodman's characteristically sure hand and architecturally acute eye. "Tomorrow's Promise" is a wonderful folding of trapezoids, ribbons and biomorphic shapes into an enigmatic etched space of brilliant thin orange and lime green wash activated by black and gray outlining. An inscrutable, colorful triangle sits in the center challenging the whole.

"Balance," a black and white phallic yoga posture abstraction, has a sculptural presence and carries a memory of Goodman's earlier cartoony symbolism.

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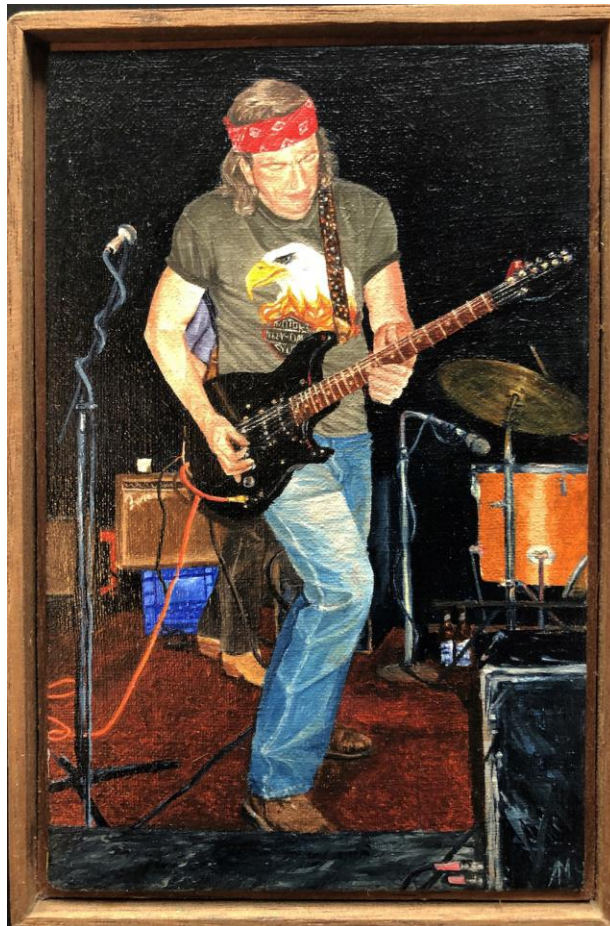
Nancy Pletos, "Topsy Turvy," 2001, Cardboard, paint, glue, found objects

Nancy Pletos, the spiritual linchpin of the Corridor art scene, and always one of its most formally inventive artists, transformed bits and pieces of wood molding and found objects into imaginary gardenscapes and architectural dreamscape. At once zany as well as magical, she also recomposed sheets of Masonite back into 2-dimensional log forms. There are a number of her

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childlike gardenscapes (“Standing Gardens”) and wood sculptures in the exhibition, but the centerpiece of her work there is “Topsy Turvy,” 2001, the last wall reliefs she did before turning to smaller works. A multimedia piece of cardboard, paint, glue and found objects, “Topsy Turvy” is a hybrid wall relief, at once flora and fauna, creature and plant, serpent and garden, lacking a fixed identity and a wonderful synthesis of Pletos’ realizations of the natural world.

Ann Mikolowski, always a magical presence herself in the Cass Corridor, is represented by six of her famed miniature portraits of the movers and shakers of the art world. She of course did large paintings that always surprised with their unique subject matter and perspective. She did wonderful paintings of Lake Huron in various states of being and an enormous black and white cow, but her miniatures are her iconic works. Among the six portraits exhibited her portrait of “Mike Knight,” 1991, 3”x 5,” playing guitar, with the Ghost Band at the Third Street Bar, is a small miracle in capturing Knight’s singular presence, with red bandana and Harley-Davison T-shirt, on the stage. The detail of the stage setting is comical with a blue plastic milk crate supporting guitar player Ron Kopac’s Fender amp behind his cowboy boots, and two beer bottles hiding under the drum kit.



Ann Mikolowski, “Mike Knight,” 1991, Oil on canvas

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Both Nancy Mitchnick and Ellen Phelan were powerful artistic, intellectual, and social forces in the Cass Corridor, before moving to New York City in 1973, to establish extraordinary careers. Composed of narrative comedy, painterly gymnastics and intuitive invention Mitchnick's "Dog Party," 2017, is just that, a delightful playdate for six dogs of diverse shape, color, and breed. Situated in a Southwestern-like landscape, with pink sky caressing distant mountains and arid green foreground with three horizontal canals articulating the space, the dogs, are dispersed like notes on a music scale. It's a marvelous painting and arch illustration of Mitchnick's enchanting inventions.

Ellen Phelan's most notable works are her atmospheric and luminescent landscapes and her soft-focus doll paintings, but there is clearly a relationship between the early wood and paint sculpture in the exhibition and those later works. "Untitled," 1976-77, is composed of three vertical wood boards painted gray, green and one unpainted, creating a column which is mounted to the wall. It has a black horizontal panel bifurcating it. Like her landscapes and soft focus dolls, "Untitled," has an atmospheric presence. Its ambiguity is its definition. The black horizontal panel makes it a cruciform but only adds to its minimalist autonomy. Like Mitchnick, Phelan, in exploring multiple artistic tropes throughout her career, imposed an artistic and intellectual rigor to the Cass Corridor art scene.

Last, but spectacularly not least, is the Kathryn Brackett Luchs' "Open," 2018, a carved, 4'X8,' birch plywood wood block and print diptych. Intensely gouged and carved with naturalistic patterns, and skimmed with green patina, resembling a landscape topography, it is imposing as a gorgeous monumental wall relief. Paper thin glassine was pressed into the block to create a gossamer, textured, echo-like print that was treated with sumi, a kind of printer's ink, to insinuate a haunting aura. Luchs' wood block and print is reminiscent of the early Cass Corridor artist's experiments with gouging and violently attacking plywood panels with a circular saw. Overall there is a beautiful coppery patina that fills the room with a beautiful glow.

With its focus on women, this last installment of "Cass Corridor: Connecting Times" couldn't be more timely. The Cass Corridor moment is past, and this exhibition is palpable proof of the power of social and political forces in compelling and honing an engaged, creative community and, in this revolutionary moment, it is fitting that its revisiting ends with powerful women artists. Simone DeSousa Gallery's ambitious undertaking to revisit this artistic reaction to a dystopic Detroit is a resounding success. More important than anything else is that the Cass Corridor cultural scene was a collective community response, not to just a local crisis, but a worldwide psychic calamity. The art was one was one element of an incredibly complex time. Celebrated here are six women artists whose work emerged from that moment and of course many equally fine artists, political activists, and intellectuals, who ultimately created and defined it, have not. It was the actual experience of that community, that was life/mind changing. It will be interesting to see what forms of a community and art loom out of the new Detroit.





Kathryn Bracket Luchs, "Open," 2018, Wood block—carved birch plywood with ink. Print—layered glassine with sumi on canvas, varnished.

*Cass Corridor, Connecting Times: Brenda Goodman, Kathryn Bracket Luchs, Ann Mikolowski, Nancy Mitchnick, Ellen Phelan, and Nancy Pletos at Simone DeSousa Gallery through Oct 14, 2018*

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