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Up Close: The Once and Future Detroit

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View of the exhibition, "Vision in a Cornfield," 2012 at the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit

Detroit's troubles (poverty, crime, and failing public schools) have been well publicized, but over the past decade, the media has turned its attention to new developments in the city. You often hear Detroit referred to as a blank slate, as a city undergoing a renaissance. In her essay "The Kidnapped Children of Detroit," activist, writer, and performer Marsha Music, who has deep roots in the city's arts community (her father was the pre-Motown record producer Joe Von Battle) writes of the recent influx of people: "It is hard for many

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black Detroiters to comprehend the sense of belonging, or even entitlement, that many whites feel."¹ She is disturbed by the newcomers' lack of curiosity about what happened before they arrived, about the history and the people. It is difficult to keep the details of the past alive, but each of us can tell the stories we remember.

I moved to Detroit in 1993, a period in the city that Elmore Leonard described as being "on the edge of a changing civilization with an undefined future."² Yet accounts of Detroit today tend not to unearth the fertile vibrancy Leonard describes. A few stories have become increasingly well known. There's Motown and Diego Rivera's murals at the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA). There's Mexican-American artist Robert Graham's *Monument to Joe Louis*, aka "The Fist," in Hart Plaza. However, there are many lesser-known stories.

Before moving permanently, I spent a few years here in the early 1980s. I waitressed at Alvin's, a music venue, bar, and restaurant located in Cass Corridor, which is near Wayne State University and a few blocks away from the Detroit Public Library and the DIA. The area was a hub of leftist activity in the 1960s and '70s. A bunch of artists known as the Cass Corridor group worked out of Convention Hall, a former car showroom on Cass Avenue, and made paintings and sculpture, often using scavenged street and industrial materials (wood, wire, pipes).

One day, Laura, a fellow Alvin's staffer, mentioned that her husband, saxophonist, poet, and composer Faruq Z. Bey (1942-2012), of the avant-garde jazz band Griot Galaxy, was going to be playing and speaking at the DIA. He was participating in "Lines," a program of afternoon classes and evening readings organized by poet and educator George Tysh. Bey read poems and played his saxophone during my first visit to a session, after which there was a conversation about John Coltrane, Julia Kristeva, and rhythm. It was magical.

There was an undercover, underground feeling to the meetings. In other classes we looked at work by Christian Boltanski and Howardena Pindell. We read Gayl Jones, Marguerite Duras, Ishmael Reed, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Karl Marx, and Jacques Lacan.

The series, which hosted writers including Kathy Acker, Pedro Pietri, Richard Hell, Margaret Atwood, and Ntozake Shange, introduced me not only to new ideas about seeing, reading, and writing but also to the global sensibility deep within Detroit's culture.

I experienced Detroit in the '80s and '90s as a place with flourishing pockets of artistic activity that usually didn't overlap. Things happened on neighborhood streets and in private spaces. Basements, living rooms, warehouses, and rooftops were creative laboratories for art, music, dance, and political activism. Some of the work being made in those independent pockets has been reappearing in today's more interconnected Detroit.

The Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit (MOCAD) re-created the radical vision of artist, poet, and activist Aaron Ibn Pori Pitts (b. 1941) in the 2012 Afrofuturist-inflected exhibition "Vision in a Cornfield." Pitts joined the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, started Black Graphics International (a local press) in 1969, and believed in art as ritualistic transformation. He founded the Ogun collective in the early '90s. Ogun (named after the Yoruba orisha, or spiritual emissary, of iron, hunting, politics, and war) was known for adorning abandoned cars with flowers, spray paint, and found-object sculptures, treating the festooned autos as "urban monumentz." The show itself was a collaboration between M. Saffell Gardner of Ogun, Cary Loren of the noise band Destroy All Monsters, and MOCAD deputy director Rebecca Mazzei, and was dedicated to Bey and artist Mike Kelley. It featured an installation of decorated cars as well as Pitts's collage paintings.

The three musicians credited with creating Detroit techno-Derrick May, Juan Atkins, and Kevin Saunderson-were on a panel at MOCAD last May, a few days before Detroit's tenth Movement Electronic Music Festival. Developed in the late '80s, techno taps into the space-time elements of Afrofuturism-sometimes sets last for hours-and relies heavily on the potential of machine technology to create the dance music itself. An audience member noted during the panel that techno is more celebrated in Europe than in its hometown. Hip-hop easily eclipsed techno in the States, since techno musicians tended to prefer anonymity and an underground status; some of their releases did not even have their name on the label.

Techno was hugely influenced during the late '70s and '80s by the radio DJ who called himself the Electrifying Mojo. EM supported local musicians and played a wide mix of recording artists, from Pink Floyd to Kraftwerk to Parliament-Funkadelic to Prince. A few hours into his show, he'd call to order the Midnight Funk Association and play an hour of funk, telling listeners to turn on their porch lights if they were at home, flash their headlights if driving, or dance on their backs if in bed.

Looking back, Detroit took a turn toward interconnectedness around the new millennium. It was in 2000 that Dabls MBAD African Bead Museum opened to the public. Founder Olayami Dabls (MBAD are the initials of his children) is an artist and visual storyteller who weaves together ancient and modern culture with materials that he believes speak universally. Even though freeways bound one side of Dabls's museum and a busy city street the other, it is a calm, sweet spot to be. It is not unusual to find the founder, with his characteristic big smile, walking the grounds or galleries of the museum.

Occupying a section of a town house, the museum displays Dabls's own bead art, jewelry, and bins of ancient African beads, which are referred to in museum literature as "textbooks packed with information." These handmade, variously sized and marked beads identified characteristics of individuals, such as their village, family, and medical history, but the specifics are now lost. Dabls's sprawling outdoor installations on the museum's grounds include the *African Language Wall* (2009), featuring examples of dialects that are no longer used. He tells me that the writing "keeps our ancestors with us." Other installations are covered with bright paint, bead murals, or splintered mirrors. The mirror shards give a disconcerting reflection; you see yourself and what is behind you in fragments.

Also outside, the installation *Iron Teaching Rocks How to Rust* (2006) tells of the loss imposed on people wrenched from their homes, traditions, and cultures. Among the work's elements is a deserted dinner table covered with old plates, bowls, and cutlery. Children in many African cultures learn to eat with their hands. The sequence of fingers to food to mouth, Dabls says, prepares saliva and digestion for a happy eating experience, a process hampered when families were forced to eat a new way.

Also in 2000, art critic Marsha Miro asked a group of people, including me, to discuss starting a contemporary art museum in Detroit. Our meetings were casual at first, but MOCAD opened its doors in 2006, with Miro as founding director. We wanted to bring national and international art to the city but also wanted to establish a hub for all the artists already here. It is located in Cass Corridor, now also called Midtown. The area today, with all its restaurants, shops, and foot traffic, offers no sign of the empty streets that predominated just a decade before. Ingo Vetter, an artist who visited from Germany in 2004 and helped start the Detroit Tree of Heaven Woodshop (a network of artists and craftspeople using the invasive ailanthus tree as a material), commented that he felt then like "a visitor to a city that knows no tourism."³ He wouldn't be able to say that now.

Dealer George N'Namdi, who specializes in African and African-American art, contributed to changing Cass Corridor, having moved his gallery from Birmingham, a northern suburb, to an old service station in the city in 2001. It was a farsighted move. Since then, N'Namdi has established the site as a multiuse space with galleries, a yoga studio, a café, and pop-up stores. An alley that runs alongside the building leads to MOCAD one block south.

Many new galleries and alternative spaces have opened in Detroit in the last ten years, but one of them, Young World, best captures the tenor of the past while looking to the future. Since 2014, Young world has shown cutting-edge art in a down-and-out area several miles northeast of Midtown and just south of the famous Eight Mile Road (named for its distance from the city center). The exhibitions have been held in six thousand square feet of an empty building with no electricity or plumbing that is situated on an overgrown lot behind a chain-link fence. My first visit to Young world was in 2015 for a show by new media artist Jeremy Couillard, born in the Detroit suburbs and living in New York. Walking down a dark corridor, I encountered radiant, shrill, sexy videos of morphed, moving beings bursting with color. Couillard's acid-bright animations portray *a future* future—a state we might call *post* post-collapse. The contrast between the blight of the venue's location and the sophistication of the artwork inside was powerful.

Young world is run by three artists who were born and raised in the Detroit-Metro region: Ben Hall, Andrew Mehall, and Jason Murphy. They have been using the space cost-free in exchange for keeping out squatters and protecting against break-ins. In addition, they own the Russell Street Deli, a popular eatery in Eastern Market (a recently gentrified neighborhood), from which they gain income to support their individual practices and the art space. In June, they arrived at Young world to find the door padlocked by the owner, who had found new tenants, something they always knew might happen. (As we go to press, they have found another space in the area.)

The many stories about Detroit's creative community of the recent past will continue to be told. It is heartening to see young Detroiters using this history as source material. Haleem "Stringz" Rasul, dancer, fashion designer, and filmmaker, resurrected a buried piece of Detroit with the 2014 documentary *The Jitterbugs: Pioneers of the Jit*. The film chronicles Johnny, James, and Tracy McGhee, three brothers who started the 1970s Detroit dance group the Jitterbugs (which was slang for hoodlums at the time). They would dance to funk music in the streets, in fields, from rooftop to rooftop. The Jitterbugs tap into the ethos of Detroit, utilizing the urban setting as a kind of dance floor. Rasul has kept the Jit alive, doing the intense footwork and other moves to techno.

Artist Megan Heeres, one of a number of recent graduates from the nearby Cranbrook Art Academy who have chosen to live in the city, takes a self-aware approach to Detroit's changing landscape. For her 2015 exhibition, "The More We Get Together," at the [Simone DeSousa Gallery](#), she made paper with fibers from invasive plant species, integrating the material into large sculptural installations that evolved over time through viewer participation. "I am an invasive species," she said in her gallery talk. Her attitude, with its awareness of the danger of overtaking an existing ecosystem, offers a considered response to Marsha Music's observations about displaced populations and historical amnesia. People, human connections make a city, and history lives in stories passed along in circles of intersecting communities.

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1. Marsha Music, "The Kidnapped Children of Detroit," in *A Detroit Anthology*, ed. Anna Clark, Pittsburgh, Belt Publishing, 2014.
2. Elmore Leonard, foreword to Julia Reyes Taubman, *Detroit 138 Square Miles*, Detroit, Museum of Contemporary Art, 2011, p. 8.
3. Ingo Vetter, *Detroit i.e. Infrastructure*, Detroit, Museum of Contemporary Art, 2006, p. 20