

HYPERALLERGIC

A Very Personal Art History of the Motor City

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Installation view, 'Another Look at Detroit' at Marianna Boesky Gallery, with Charles and Ray Eames's 670/671 Lounge chair and ottoman (c. 1970s) in foreground and Diego Rivera's portrait of Edsel B. Ford (1932) on back right wall (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

With [ruin porn](#) photographs and discussions of [whether creativity can save Detroit](#) persisting at every turn, it's no surprise that art galleries have taken an interest in the city. The latest exhibition is a group show titled *Another Look at Detroit: Parts 1 and 2* and split, accordingly, between two spaces in Chelsea, [Marianne Boesky Gallery](#) and [Marlborough Chelsea](#) (it's unclear which part is 1 and which is 2, or if it matters). The organizer of this extravaganza is art advisor Todd Levin, who in a [written statement](#) calls it "a sprawling tone poem evoking the city where I was born and raised, a place I still feel deeply in my identity. A soliloquy by someone returning home, but not to the place they once knew."

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Scott Hocking, "New Book of Knowledge" (2010), fire and water damaged book of knowledge, 10 x 8 x 2 ½ inches

If it strikes you as ... incongruous to have an exhibition about the city that this year filed the [largest municipal bankruptcy in US history](#) (one that has [engulfed its art museum](#)) on view in two high-end, white-walled galleries, you are forgiven; it is. Yet Levin's, Marlborough's, and Marianne Boesky's institutional cred have no doubt allowed them to pull together a show with an exceptional range of work, from 19th-century landscape paintings (Robert Duncanson, William James Bennett) where the prospect of urban metropolis is barely a whisper to mid-20th-century photographs (Bill Rauhauser) that reveal the extent of Detroit's transformation to 21st-century work (Kate Levant, Scott Hocking) that hints at the despair Detroit can evoke today. Key lenders include the Detroit Institute of Arts, the Cranbrook Academy of Art, Wayne State University, and the Henry Ford Collection. This is not your average summer group show of art pulled from the gallery stables, and the incredibly high quality of what's on view makes it worth the trip.

As corny as it may sound, the exhibition also offers a welcome opportunity to learn by featuring a good number of artists who are or were deeply connected to the city but whose names aren't widely familiar. The [Cass Corridor artists](#) — a group named after the area of the city they lived in during the 1960s–80s, near Wayne State University — get a strong showing; highlights include Ann Mikolowski's chilling, almost Pointillist drawing of a handgun, with the word "Braindeath" inscribed on it like a brand (c.1981), and Gordon Newton's "Untitled Pair" (1972), two thin, cut-up pieces of wood that seem to hover between sculpture and driftwood. Both works capture the duality of purpose and chance, intention and fate, that's marked Detroit's larger narrative as well as the realities of living there.

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Installation view, 'Another Look at Detroit' at Marianne Boesky Gallery, with Gordon Newton's "Untitled Pair" (1972) in corner and Metroplex records in foreground

Levin has brought in a lovely array of design too, much of it by students of the [Cranbrook Academy of Art](#) (not technically in Detroit, but close enough). Charles and Ray Eames's plush 670/671 Lounge chair and ottoman (c.1970s) and Eero Saarinen's sleek Kingswood School Cranbrook, Auditorium Armchair (1930) both invite sitting (just don't actually sit). Saarinen's parents are also represented, Eliel by a light-handed 1940 drawing of the Cranbrook campus (academy, museum, and library) that he designed and Loja by the gorgeously geometric "Wall Hanging with Peacock" (1932). A shiny bike manufactured by [Shinola](#) and swirling pieces of [Fordite](#) bring the design offerings into the present day, although the makers of these products go unnamed.

On the level of its individual artworks, *Another Look at Detroit* is an amazingly consistent show, with only a handful of missteps that suffer mostly from being boring, among them Michael Glancy's glass abstraction, "Tempest" (2011), and Marie T. Hermann's overly understated "The river of time (but you are still here)" (2014). Where the exhibition falls apart is in the attempt at a larger narrative — if one grants that it's even trying to offer a narrative at all. The thinness of the premise — 'here is a bunch of art from the Detroit area' — comes through in Levin's curation, which overrelies on obvious formal or subject similarities (a corner of work featuring messy clusters and thickets of lines here, a wall devoted to Ford there) rather than trying to tell a story or build unexpected conceptual connections.

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Installation view, 'Another Look at Detroit' at Marlborough Chelsea, with MC5 video hovering over a corner of artworks with messy clusters of lines

Threads and themes do emerge: Detroit as a place of musical alternatives, exemplified in the infectious [video of an MC5 recording session](#) hovering over a corner at Marlborough and the row of records from independent techno label [Metroplex](#) at Marianne Boesky. But these seem to only amplify the absence of that other musical phenomenon born from the energy of the Motor City: Motown. Which in turn points to another issue with *Another Look at Detroit*: its whiteness. White men literally preside over large portions of both galleries — a 1907 Percy Ives painting of the “First Board of Trustees of Detroit Museum of Art” at Marlborough and portraits of various Detroit businessmen (William Boesky, father of the [now infamous Ivan](#), [Hervey C. Parke](#), and [Edsel B. Ford](#)) at Marianne Boesky; these people are relevant, of course, but what’s missing are others to balance out their presence. Yes, there are African-American artists in the show, and fantastic ones, including Charles McGee, McArthur Binion, and Nick Cave. But, as *New York Times* art critic Holland Cotter [pointed out in his review](#), Levin, in his choices of them and their work, “steers toward abstraction and away from overt politics.”

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Installation view, 'Another Look at Detroit' at Marlborough Chelsea, with Percy Ives's "First Board of Trustees of Detroit Museum of Art" (1907) hanging behind Wallace MacMahon Mitchell's "Painting with Ovals" (1950) and 50 of Fordite cabochons in display case

This, in a way, is fine: Detroit can be approached from many angles, and Levin freely admits that his is just one (and highly personal). But his view is also deeply, perhaps even dangerously nostalgic: fewer than a third of the exhibition's artworks (27 of 96) are from the 21st century. Combine a romantic focus on what Detroit once was with a lack of politics and you get something that glosses over the city's true existence just as effortlessly as beautiful photographs of abandoned spaces, which Levin calls, in his statement, "the misguided aesthetics of destruction porn." Ironically, he himself is making the claim that "hope resides in Art," while the curious appeal of ruin porn is that it shows precisely the opposite: that art was not enough to save anyone or anything. In both cases, what's being avoided is a direct and honest engagement with Detroit: its people, its places, its politics. If you believe in the power of art to inspire hope — and by all means, you should — wouldn't you want to find where that inspiration is being generated today?

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One of the best hangings in the show: Robert Duncanson's "Landscape" (1870) and Bill Rauhauser's "Woman on Bus" (c. 1955-60)



Ford Motor Company ads (1950s)

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Installation view, 'Another Look at Detroit' at Marlborough Chelsea, with Destroy All Monsters' "Mall Culture (from Strange Frut: Rock Apocrypha)" (2001) on central wall



Installation view, 'Another Look at Detroit' at Marlborough Chelsea, with Charles McGee's "Noah's Ark #8" (1984) on left and Loja Saarinen's "Wall Hanging with Peacock" (1932) on right

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