

HYPERALLERGIC

The Cass Corridor Movement's Salvation Through Salvage

Working with what they had, Cass Corridor artists scrapped and repurposed anything they could get their hands on, attempting to find some salvation for their city through a literal process of salvage and reuse.



by Sarah Rose Sharp
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Nancy Mitchnick, "Why Bother?" (2017), on view at Public Pool Galley in Hamtramck, Michigan (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

SIMONE DESOUSA GALLERY

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“It never occurred to me that we would ever have an audience,” said painter [Nancy Mitchnick](#), in a curator’s statement that accompanied a series of three exhibitions presented at Simone DeSousa Gallery in 2017. Mitchnick is referring to the Cass Corridor art movement, which took place roughly between 1960 and 1980 in the heart of Detroit, and is touted as the only major contemporary art movement to originate in the city. The movement draws its name from Cass Avenue, an arterial street in the rapidly developing commercial strip between Wayne State University and the Masonic Temple — the “Cass Corridor,” or “Midtown,” as it has been painstakingly rebranded over the last decade.

Mitchnick was one of a number of Cass Corridor artists who moved to New York temporarily or permanently to pursue their careers on a more public stage — a cohort that included [Al Loving](#), [Robert Sestok](#), and [Brenda Goodman](#). “We were just a bunch of young, intense, talented almost-artists trying to figure it out,” she remembers, painting a picture of mid-1960s abandon. “I have always been an outsider, on the inside, sort of,” she added in her 2017 curator’s statement.

The notion of an art scene that is “underrepresented,” like the Cass Corridor, obscures the fact that within it are participants who are further under-recognized, especially from the outside. Mitchnick recalls figures like Gregg (Greg) Murphy, an influential and difficult artist and scene figure “whom no one remembers,” but without whom the important [Willis Gallery](#) would never have formed, and who also made numerous introductions between artists and [Sam Wagstaff](#) during his brief but highly influential tenure as curator of contemporary art at the Detroit Institute of Arts (1968-71). She also praises the late artist [Michael Luchs](#), who was a recluse for 30 years. [Cass Corridor: Connecting Times](#), the exhibition series Mitchnick curated, was a deeply informed dive into the Cass Corridor scene, but it was never intended to be canonical; on the contrary, it took as its conceit that it was presenting an individual perspective based on Mitchnick’s lived experience.



Robert Sestok, "Mix I" (2021), acrylic on canvas (image courtesy Simone DeSousa Gallery)

Perhaps the more official take on who's-who in the Cass Corridor movement can be found in the keystone exhibition at the Detroit Institute of Arts in 1980, *Kick Out the Jams: Detroit's Cass Corridor, 1963-1977*, co-organized by curators Mary Jane Jacob and Jay Belloli and featuring 22 artists. In the catalogue, Jacob traced the evolution of the movement through the DIA's "Wagstaff Years" and the formative era of the Willis Gallery, from 1971 to 1977. Notable names that were consecrated in this exhibition and catalogue are Gordon Newton, Nancy Pletos, Douglas James, and poet Ken Mikolowski.

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Little can be said that applies to every artist related to the Cass Corridor scene. Like all of Detroit, the community was rocked by the polarizing 1967 Rebellion (or “riots” as many Metro Detroiters still call the period of unrest), and though much of the art can be characterized as apolitical, the associated literary scene was extremely radical. It produced both the *Alternative Press*, founded by Ken Mikolowski and his wife, artist Ann Mikolowski, and the Fifth Estate, the region’s first alt weekly style newspaper, founded in 1965 and considered one of the longest running English-language anarchist publications in North America. Though writers, poets, and musicians are not often included in the Cass Corridor canon (the Mikolowskis are an exception), their influence on the scene was integral, and they carried much of the weight of communicating the political and social fissures that emerged in the 1960s and ’70s in Detroit and its surrounding areas.

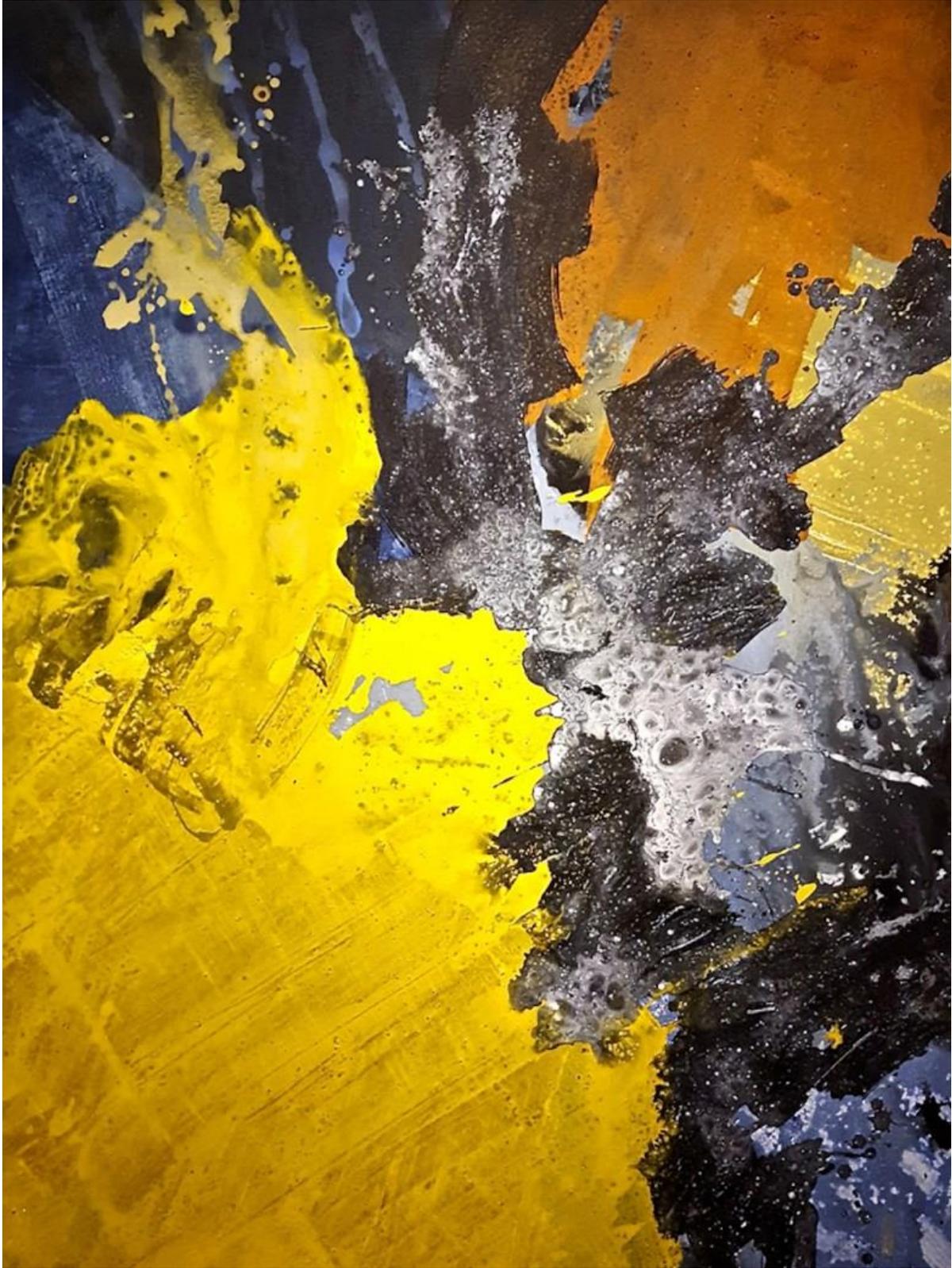


Charles McGee, “United We Stand” (2016) at the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History in Detroit (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

The visual artists were better known for their pushback against the prevailing convention of abstraction. Working with what they had, which was a city full of abandoned industrial parks, Cass Corridor artists scrapped and repurposed metal, wire, fencing, broken ceramic, industrial paint and foam, and anything else they could get their hands on — attempting, perhaps, to find some salvation for their city through a literal process of salvage and reuse. The results were gritty and hard edged but often still figurative, as with Jim Chatelain’s “[Black Coat](#)” (1989), an eponymous construction from fabric and encaustic. Michael Luchs’s “[Rabbit](#)” (1974), composed of wire, carpet, cable, and wood is just one of many iterations of his Leporidaen muse, which he would continue to obsessively sculpt and paint through his [final working year](#) of 2020.

Two Robert Sestok murals commissioned in 1973 by James Duffy for his pipe storage warehouse mimic the pipe forms and repetitive circles of the materials in the space, just as his 2017 mural, commissioned by Jack White for the Detroit location of the recording artist’s Third Man Records franchise, echoes the materials and functioning of the record-pressing plant it adorns. Nancy Mitchnick’s paintings are [gestural and evocative](#), but they are also generally figurative, and in recent years have moved toward streetscapes that treat dilapidated houses as still life subjects. The trend toward more literal, rather than abstract, expressions embodies a divide between Midwestern and coastal cultures that remains to this day. The governing aesthetics of the Cass Corridor movement, writ large, are gritty, opportunistic with respect to found materials, and bootlegged, resulting in artwork that sincerely captures and reflects the Detroit of its time.

The Cass Corridor movement is marked by intertwining and diverging histories. Different threads may follow hometown hero and legendary sculptor [Charles McGee](#), who recently passed away, or painter [Allie McGhee](#), who has been a pillar of the Detroit art scene for over five decades, or multimedia artist [Lester Johnson](#). Though much of this work retains figurative elements, there is also a richer emphasis on color, pattern, and motifs that explore the roots of Detroit’s Black citizens, in the Southern United States, and further back to Africa.



Allie McGhee, "Hi Fi" (2018), on view at the Detroit Institute of Arts (photo by the artist for Hyperallergic)

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Zubel Kachadoorian, a painter and Wayne State University professor born in 1924, who slightly preceded the movement, also had connections to it. During my woefully truncated research, I went down a [Bradley Jones](#) rabbit hole that led to Catherine DeMay, artist and general manager of the Detroit Focus Gallery; Carl Kamulski, co-director of the Michigan Gallery; and Mary Preston, owner of the Feigenson/Preston Gallery in Birmingham, a suburb of Detroit. [Susanne Hilberry](#) was an especially influential gallerist, who served as an assistant to Sam Wagstaff in 1972, and went on to champion a second and third wave of Detroit artists at her gallery, which she relocated from the suburbs to the edge of 8 Mile Rd., the dividing line between the city and the suburbs. Yet one suspects that any of these other gallerists would have their own story to tell of the Cass Corridor. For instance, gallerist [Paul Kotula](#) is an ardent supporter of [Jim Chatelain](#). Many in Detroit's art community speak [Ellen Phelan](#)'s name with reverence and respect.



Michael Luchs, "Untitled (Rabbit)" (2019), acrylic, mixed paints, on paper (image courtesy Simone DeSousa Gallery)

The best formal repository of this period is the Wayne State University Collection. The DIA has holdings in its collection, but the museum has rarely exhibited them or considered the legacy of this movement, despite Sam Wagstaff's influence on the art scene. But whether or not the Cass Corridor scene ever gains greater outside recognition, it is deeply known to itself — and whether outsiders choose to notice or validate Detroit's cultural production has never seemed to be a primary concern of its artists, past or present. Any witness to the scene can offer their own winding history, their own litany of names and places.

Even those like me, who are simply following breadcrumbs through archives or having conversations with Nancy Mitchnick or Bob Sestok, will be left with their own unique impression of the Cass Corridor, and its multiplicity of meanings. The scene is a microcosmic example of the ways in which everything that happens in Detroit is part of a tapestry of nuanced and often conflicting histories, sensibilities, and perspectives. I don't know whether it is better to be, as Mitchnick termed herself, an "outsider on the inside" or — as most of us who live in this city seem to prefer — an insider here on the outside.



Nancy Pletos, Triptych: "Arch/ Cry Bunny," "Arch Triumph," "Some Claimed She was an Angel (I knew better)/ My [Arch] Sin" (1981), mailing cardboard, paper, plastic, wood, paint, glue (image courtesy Simone DeSousa Gallery)



Brenda Goodman, "Tomorrow Promise" (2017) on view at Simone DeSousa Gallery in Detroit (image courtesy Simone DeSousa Gallery)



Installation view of Kathryn Brackett Luchs, Michael Luchs, and Robert Sestok: OFF THE PRESS at Simone DeSousa Gallery in Detroit. From left to right: Robert Sestok, "Remnants 1-5" (2018), engraving, chine colle mono print; Michael Luchs print installation (2000); Kathryn Brackett Luchs installation (2018) (image courtesy Simone DeSousa Gallery)

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