

Michael Luchs

May 20, 1938-June 9, 2021

by K.A. Letts, Summer Quarter (July/August/September) 2021



When I can no longer paint it will be time to go.

Michael Luchs, 2021

Michael Luchs, one of Detroit's best known artists and a pivotal figure in the Cass Corridor Movement of the 1960's and 70's, passed into art history on June 9, 2021. As part of a community of unruly young artists that gathered in the wake of the 1967 Rebellion, Luchs responded to the accelerating decline of the city by salvaging materials and inspiration from the wreckage of the struggling but still lively urban environment.



Michael Luchs, *Fictitious Character*, Installation view at MOCAD, 2018. Photo courtesy of MOCAD.

Nancy Mitchnick, a fellow Cass Corridor artist, recalls of the period, “Detroit was alive. The neighborhoods were dangerous. We did not notice...Michael Luchs was inventing a kind of matrix that influenced many of the wilder artists deeply.” She continues:

They took risks. They drank and smoked a lot of pot. They played drums in the middle of the night and carried on with the kind of intensity that was real and rare. And they talked, and argued, and disagreed, and pissed each other off. It was great. The late sixties was a time of innocence really. We still believed the world was going to get better and more interesting. Detroit was producing steel and cars. And young people were inventing themselves. We were not imitating anyone. After all, Rock and Roll was new.

The Cass Corridor Movement ended in the early 70’s with the departure of many of its artists, though others stayed and remain integral to Detroit’s art scene. After a short period living in New York, Luchs, plagued by substance abuse, retreated to rural Michigan where he continued his art practice, supported financially and creatively by his life partner and fellow artist Kathryn Brackett Luchs. After a period of relative obscurity, Luchs enjoyed a late career re-evaluation which included shows at Marlborough (New York, 2014), American Academy of Arts and Letters (New York, 2017), Simone DeSousa Gallery (Detroit, 2017, 2020), Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit (2018), and Cranbrook Art Museum (Bloomfield Hills, MI, 2019). His work is represented in several museum collections: the Detroit Institute of Arts, Wayne State University James Duffy Collection, the University of Michigan Museum of Art and the Cranbrook Academy of Art Museum, as well as in private collections throughout the U.S.



Michael Luchs, Fictitious Character, Installation view at MOCAD, 2018. Photo courtesy of MOCAD.

Michael Luchs's artworks have been described as a form of performance, or even ritual. A virtuoso who rejected virtuosity, Luchs built his paintings by accumulation, using materials from the hardware store and the street to achieve effects that range emotionally from the poetic to the fierce. The rich, damaged surfaces are built up by accretions of disparate and unlikely materials such as spray paint, house paint, duct tape and wire. Images were smeared, scraped, smudged; the ground was often pierced or folded or torn.

Throughout his creative life, Luchs returned obsessively to a deeply idiosyncratic lexicon of creative strategies and subjects. Foremost in his iconography was the totemic rabbit. *Untitled (Silver Rabbit) 1994*, currently on view as a special project at Simone DeSousa Gallery, illustrates this consistency. On an unlikely irregular vinyl ground, the ghostly outline of a hare, rendered in metallic paint, is shot through with holes and folds that are both decorative and expressive. The bumpy and damaged surface hints at vulnerability and peril, yet the painting manages somehow to convey a combination of austerity and opulence.

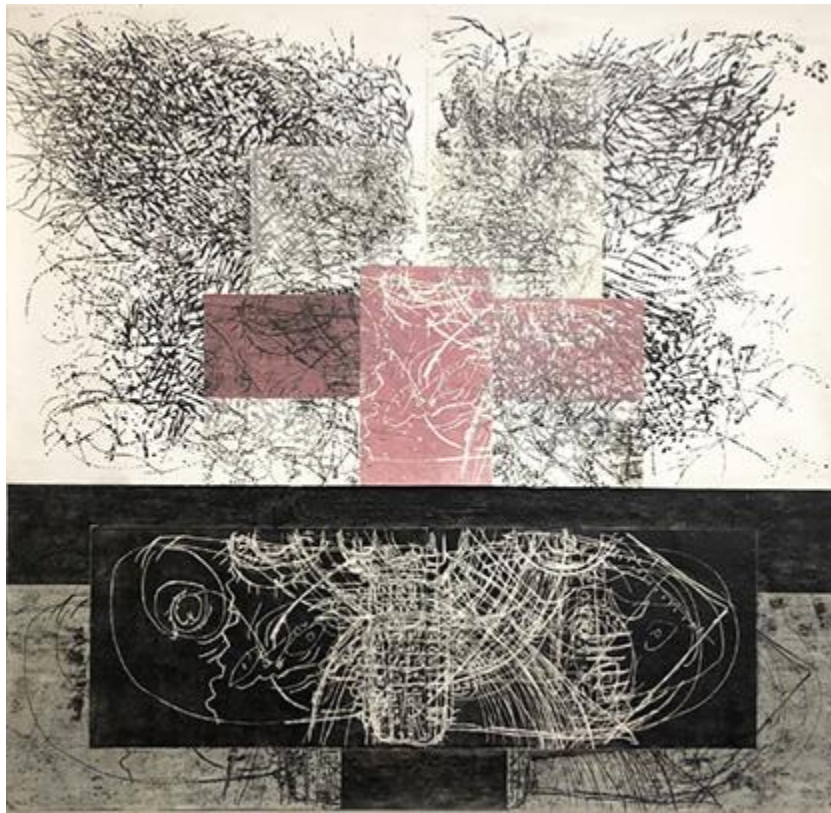


Michael Luchs, Untitled (Silver Rabbit), 1994. Mixed media on vinyl. Photo courtesy of Simone DeSousa Gallery.

Luchs returned often, also, to other vulnerable inhabitants of the natural world as subjects—frogs, squirrels, moths. Stylized outlines of these creatures, both sheltered and confined within a dense and highly physical matrix of marks, piercings and folds, provide the underlying compositional structures that hold the compositions in precarious suspension. He obsessively layered one pictorial element on top of another, each addition subtly interacting with the still-visible lines and patterns below. The iconic animals exist within the often irregular boundaries of his artworks as pictograms and constitute a kind of hermetic personal language. Elements of the built environment—electrical plugs, wires, guns—interact on a symbolic and formal level with signifiers of nature in an ambiguous dialectic of obsession and release.

Although Luchs came to prominence as part of an urban art scene, it would be facile to attribute the rough textures and his use of found objects and humble materials solely to the influence of late 20th century Detroit's environment of decay and transience. As Timothy Van Laar wrote in his 2017 monograph, reviews of Luchs's work in 1985, 2004 and 2017 reveal great consistency in their descriptions of the artworks. Based on his obsessive return to these images and materials throughout his career, it appears that Luchs's creative energy was largely generated internally from deep within his subconscious. The materials and processes he developed in Detroit merely served as catalysts and tools for the efficient expression of his deeply personal, compulsive vision.

In spite of his fragile health, including a late diagnosis of Parkinson's Disease, Luchs remained remarkably productive in his last years. Visitors to his rural Michigan studio would find the walls and floors covered with works in progress, his obsession with what he called "searching" undiminished. He always worked in multiples, investigating, painting and repainting, building his surfaces, revising, re-working and discarding.



Michael Luchs and Kathryn Brackett Luchs, Moth (Pink), 2020-2021. Woodcut collagraph sumi on glassine canvas.

As recently as spring of 2021, Michael Luchs and Kathryn Brackett Luchs collaborated during the MOCAD show Dual Vision with two ambitiously scaled kimono-like wall hangings. The Sumi ink drawings on tissue-like glassine paper, combined with collagraph and woodcut, suggest metamorphosis. The matching pair, fragile but lively, contain—in retrospect—intimations of mortality, visual metaphors for a creative partnership that enabled a damaged but talented artist to thrive and create.

K.A. Letts is the Detroit editor of the *New Art Examiner*, a working artist (kalettsart.com) and art blogger (rustbeltarts.com). She has shown her paintings and drawing in galleries and museums in Toledo, Detroit, Chicago and New York. She writes frequently about art in the Detroit area.