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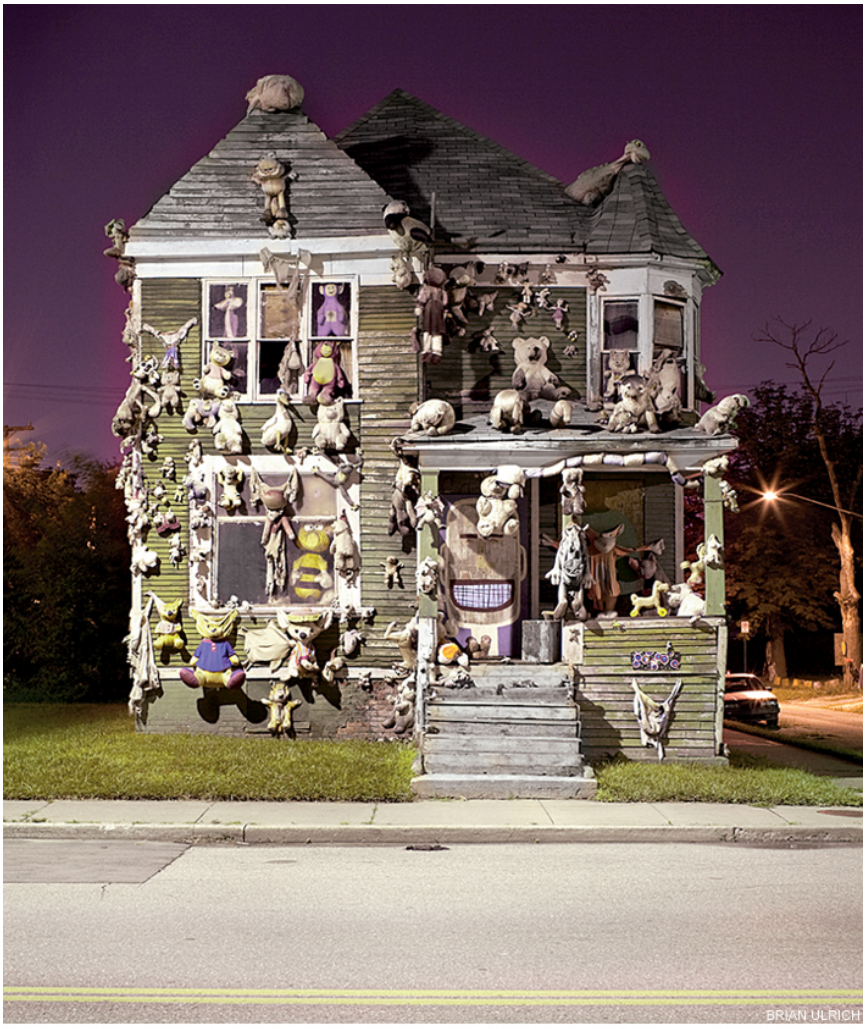


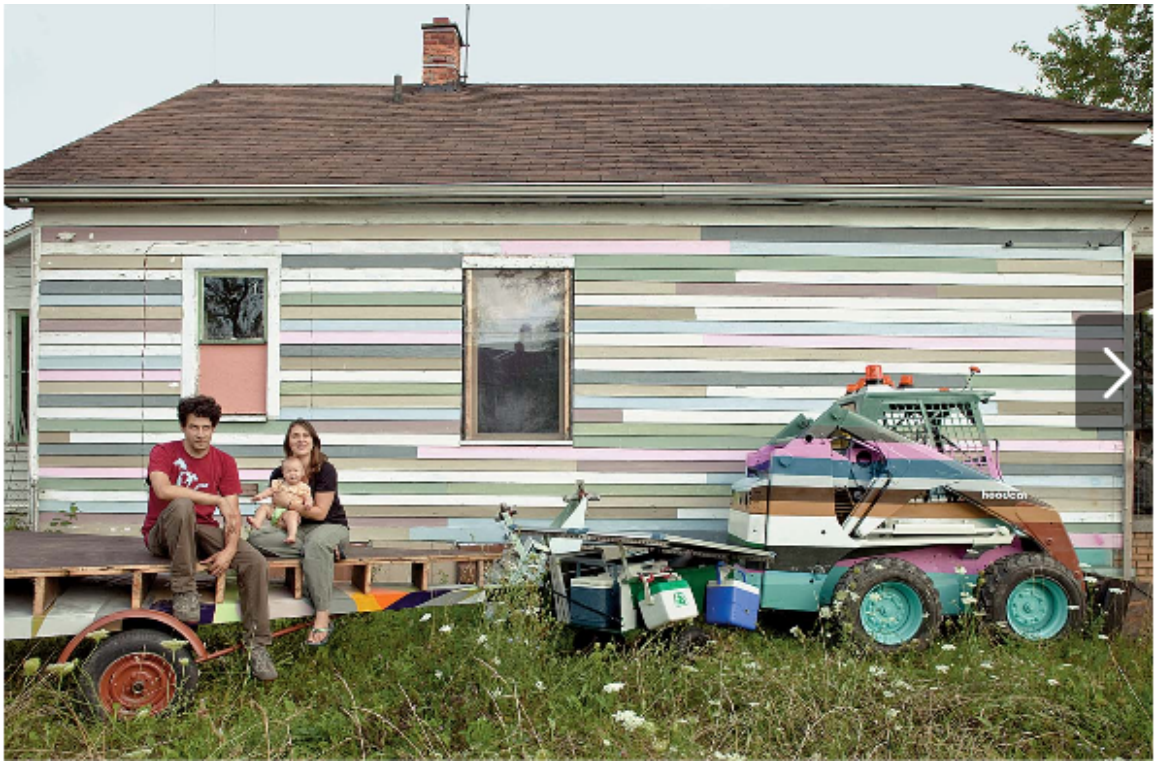
Artists in Residence

In the long shadows of Detroit's ruins, a creative community is transforming the city. Linda Yablonsky drops in.

The New York Times

Artists in Residence

REMIX | By LINDA YABLONSKY | SEPTEMBER 22, 2010



HOME MAKERS MITCH COPE AND GINA REICHERT WITH THEIR DAUGHTER, EVA, AT THEIR WHIMSICALLY PAINTED HOUSE IN SOUTHWEST DETROIT. PHOTOGRAPHS BY BRIAN ULRICH

Rome has nothing on Detroit. The industrial ruins in this American city are at least as spectacular, and largely unmatched in scale anywhere in the United States. They are also fertile ground for a growing number of artists like Scott Hocking, who find inspiration in the tatters. To make his large-format photographs, Hocking has built anomalous sculptures in two ghostly auto plants, Fisher Body and Packard, both designed by Detroit's leading industrial architect, Albert Kahn.

Last winter Hocking stole onto the Packard's grounds, now so devastated they suggest the aftermath of an earthquake, and installed junked TVs atop fluted columns that had supported the roof of one building. Standing on hilly terrain that was once the level top floor, we could see the unblemished 1963 Mies van der Rohe apartment towers in Lafayette Park across town. The juxtaposition of a living civilization against its vast remains was so disquieting I couldn't speak.

Today Detroit, home of the American automobile industry and a once-mighty symbol of enterprise and ingenuity, is a city of haunting contradictions. Spread over roughly 140 square miles, it has a business district that resembles a ghost town: it is not unusual to spot wild dogs on downtown streets, pheasants in backyards or tumbleweeds rolling down sidewalks. There are an estimated 33,000 empty houses and 91,000 vacant lots, many of which sit cheek by jowl with pristine Art Deco skyscrapers, glorious estates and freshly painted single-family homes.

All of it packs a visual wallop, which is one reason this failed metropolis has become such a magnet for contemporary artists, who include important figures like Matthew Barney and the Detroit-born Mike Kelley as well as rising stars like Cyprien Gaillard and Jordan Wolfson.

For his show at the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit (Mocad), Kelley will drive a mobile re-creation of his childhood home from the museum through downtown slums to his family's western suburb, stopping at the Henry Ford museum; it will then be parked permanently as a community center at Mocad, an avant-garde showcase at a former car dealership. "My hope is that along this route some kind of 'social services' are performed using the structure," he said. "Something along the lines of a bloodmobile or Meals on Wheels." Kelley, now based in L.A., is joining a community that is reshaping the city as no outsider could. Where visitors see a corpse, these activists see a phoenix; the derelict homes that are shorthand for the faltering economy present opportunities. "There's something about the desolation that makes it easier to do something different," said Levon Millross, a performance artist and member of the cultural underground who wears a shoulder-pad assemblage he made from Styrofoam, electronic hardware, keys and gooseneck tubing. "And it's empowering."

Attracted by cheap space and driven by a sense of civic responsibility, young artists are turning crumbling homes into art centers, converting factories into studio and exhibition spaces, and planting community gardens as artworks. As the 25-year-old Kate Daughdrill put it, for her generation Detroit is no city on the skids but "a theater of engagement."

Of course, artists in other depressed cities have rejuvenated decrepit neighborhoods before, only to be exiled by gentrification to even more unsavory locations, where the cycle repeats. But with crime rates soaring and some officials estimating unemployment to be as high as 50 percent, that's not likely to happen here anytime soon. Meanwhile, Detroiters might welcome more amenities like the Cass Café, a wallet-friendly hangout near the Wayne State University campus.

"I hope we're battling gentrification," said Daughdrill, co-founder of a monthly benefit dinner called Soup that supplies micro-grants for creative projects. When we spoke, Daughdrill was working on a project at the Russell Industrial Center, a complex of former auto-body factories that offers cut-rate space to a gallery called Cave, a glass-blowing factory, a pole-dancing exercise studio and a coppersmith, among others.

Kathy Leisen, 32, took over two empty plots in her North Corktown neighborhood, northwest of the city center, and created the Lot, an outdoor art space with site-specific projects. In Highland Park, an impoverished, predominantly black neighborhood, an art collective painted 16 derelict homes orange to make them visible from expressways to northern suburbs, where much of the city's white population first fled after the 1967 riots.

The impresario of such guerrilla art in Detroit is Tyree Guyton, who started painting polka dots and mystical circles on the vacant houses in the McDougall-Hunt area 25 years ago. He also filled the empty lots between the houses with stuffed animals, salvaged furniture and upright car hoods bearing the imprint of primitive masks. A trained artist with a metaphysical bent, the 54-year-old Guyton says he put "the face of God in the 'hood." Now an unofficial landmark maintained by his nonprofit Heidelberg Project, the original site draws 275,000 visitors a year. Next he plans to suspend vintage cars from the facade of Brewster-Douglas Projects, the abandoned housing complex where Diana Ross grew up. "What's made me successful is my faith," Guyton said. "I created an audience and tapped into something bigger than all of us."

On the border of Hamtramck, a largely Polish-Bangladeshi municipality, the artist Mitch Cope and the architect Gina Reichert have made real estate development a primary medium for their own socially conscious art. Working from a modest home in a former grocery store, they have bought or facilitated the sale of 10 neighborhood houses to other artists and curators from Detroit, Chicago and Europe. One was a $100 tear-down partly destroyed by two arson attempts.

The couple's most ambitious project is the Power House, which they conceived as a design lab for artists and architects. This summer, they organized groups from San Francisco and the Netherlands to prepare the house for solar power and rebuilt the interior, using Detroit's abundant scrap materials. "The house is meant to be a public space and an experiment in what can be done off the grid," Cope said. "There is too much opportunity here. You can be consumed by it. But it's a malleable city, and you can change and improve it."

Though the city is broke and many of its art collectors stay cloistered in wealthy suburbs, there is some institutional support. Last year the Michigan-based Kresge Foundation created a program that awards $25,000 grants to artists who work in the Detroit area. And this year, the local McGregor Fund began supporting the four-year-old Mocad. Luis Croquer, its director, has attracted financing from private individuals and foundations, mounted an ambitious program of American and European art, and scheduled musical performances, readings and symposia that have made Mocad the community's social hub.

"We're an audience builder, a think tank, a point of access to the world," said Croquer, who admits it's not easy to get people from the suburbs to go downtown. "I think people are unprepared for the changes that are coming."

One person who is banking on it is the dealer George N'Namdi. Last fall he opened an 8,000-square-foot space in the midtown Cultural District, where he shows international artists of color. "The energy is in the city," said N'Namdi, whose gallery is one of the oldest in the country owned by an African-American. Many of his artists live and work nearby, in mixed-race neighborhoods like the Eastern Market area northeast of the city center, and in Corktown, home of the former Michigan Central Station, a 18-story Beaux-Arts relic that is Detroit's reigning symbol of decay.

Nearly all the other galleries are in the suburbs, anchored by the ultracool Susanne Hilberry Gallery. And more are starting to come. Monica Bowman, 33, opened the Butcher's Daughter in an office space in Ferndale a year ago. "I saw people on the ground desperate to change things, and I saw I could make an impact," said Bowman, who hopes to connect the city's emerging art scene with deep-pocketed collectors nearby. "It sounds evangelical, but, well, you have to believe before you can do anything. The issue is how to get people with disposable income to spend it on art instead of cars."

Cars are partly what drew Matthew Barney to the city: one is the star of "KHU," the second installment of his projected seven-part epic, to be presented next month as a five-hour journey on the Detroit River. The Motor City also resonates with Barney because of his obsession with Harry Houdini, who died here after a performance.

Though many in the baby-boomer generation are skeptical that the young idealists can sustain even the most promising projects without developing a new class of collectors to support them, they have made a commitment to Detroit that seems unshakable. "It's a hard city to understand," said Julie Taubman, a founding member of Mocad who has taken thousands of photographs of the city. "I think it's the most visually compelling place on the planet. If you have a sense of adventure and curiosity, there's no place like this."

Essentials: Detroit

Hotels
There is an Omni downtown (omnihotels.com), but Detroit lacks high-end hotels. The best option is the Inn on Ferry Street, spread out in four mansions. 84 East Ferry; (313) 871-6000; doubles from $129.

Restaurants
Atlas Global Bistro - Eclectic American bistro. 3111 Woodward Avenue; (313) 831-2241; entrees $20 to $30.
The Cass Cafe - A cafe and bar serving casual international fare and sponsoring activities like a midnight spelling bee. 4620 Cass Avenue; (313) 831-1400; entrees $8 to $15.
El Barzón - Half-Mexican, half-Italian. 3710 Junction Street; (313) 894-2070; entrees $7 to $25.

Russell Street Deli - Great sandwiches. 2465 Russell Street; (313) 567-290; all under $9.
Slow's Bar B Q - Ribs, fried chicken and pulled pork. 2138 Michigan Avenue, Corktown; (313) 962 9828; entrees $9 to $25.
Soup - The monthly 150-person dinner is above the Mexicantown Bakery, 4300 West Vernor Highway; (313) 554-0001; $5.

Bars/Clubs
Bronx Bar - An amazing jukebox. 4476 Second Avenue; (313) 832-8464.
P.J.'s Lager House - For up-and-coming bands. 1254 Michigan Avenue; (313) 961-4668.
The Majestic - Two music venues, bowling, a pizza parlor and seven bars. 4120-4140 Woodward Avenue; (313) 833-9700.
The Old Miami - A former Vietnam vet hangout that now attracts bands and a diverse clientele. 3930 Cass Avenue; (313) 831-3830.

Museums/Galleries
The Butcher's Daughter - A new space for emerging talent. 22747 Woodward Avenue; (248) 808-6536;
Detroit Institute of Arts - Founded in 1885, and famous for its Diego Rivera fresco. 5200 Woodward Avenue; (313) 833-7900.
G. R. N'Namdi Gallery - Specializes in African-American artists. 52 East Forest; (313) 831-8700.
Heidelberg Project - Located between Mt. Elliott and Ellery Streets. heidelberg.org.
Lemberg Gallery - Features big names like Jasper Johns and Sam Francis. 23241 Woodward Avenue; (248) 591-6623.
Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit - Cutting-edge art in an old car showroom. 4454 Woodward Avenue; (313) 832-6622.
Paul Kotula Projects - International and local artists. 23255 Woodward Avenue; (248) 544-3010. Susanne Hilberry Gallery - One of the oldest contemporary galleries. 700 Livernois; (248) 541-4700.

CORNERSTONE: THE AMBITIOUS PROGRAMMING AT MOCAD IS HELPING SPUR DETROIT'S REVIVAL.

TYREE GUYTON'S HEIDELBERG PROJECT.