

STYLE

20 Detroit Artists You Should Know

BY JENNIFER WOOD SEP 30, 2014

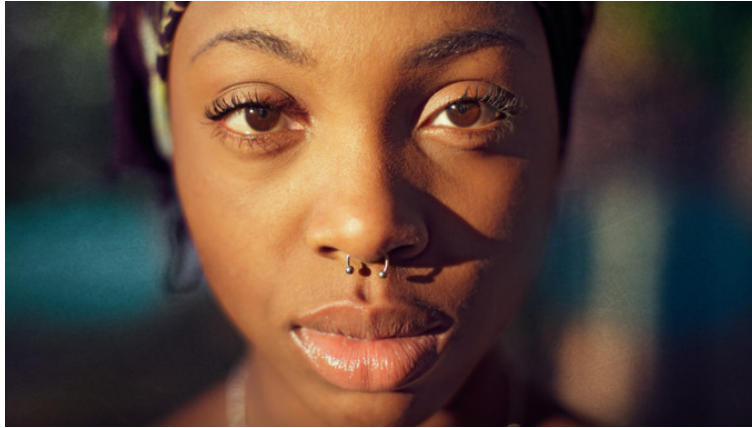
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Although the bulk of today's headlines about Detroit tend to focus on the city's financial dramas, there's another story coming out of the Motor City, and it's not an unrelated one: the rising art scene. While [the city's 2013 bankruptcy filing](#) has put the future of venerable organizations like the Detroit Institute of Arts into an uncertain place, neighborhoods like the Sugar Hill Historic District—home to the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit, the N'Namdi Center for Contemporary Art, and the artist residences at 71 Garfield—are keeping Detroit's creative spirit alive.

Like New York City's SoHo or Miami's Wynwood, it's Detroit's ever-growing brigade of artists who are helping to maintain the city's reputation as a hotbed of cultural activity. Here's a look at **20 Detroit Artists You Should Know**.

Noah Stephens



"Iyende" by Noah Stephens / Image via [The People of Detroit](#)

Seven months before Brandon Stanton started Humans of New York, Detroit native Noah Stephens began documenting the people of Detroit, equipped with just his trusty DSLR camera and a desire to see the real face—and *faces*—of his city in a project entitled *The People of Detroit*. “My goal was to show the world a vibrant, attractive side of life in the city seldom examined in national or international media,” says Stephens of the impetus for the project. “On some level, it worked. In 2011, a creative director in China saw the project on Flickr and hired me to shoot an ad campaign for McDonald’s in Shanghai. I’ve been working full-time as a photographer ever since.”

Joe Mazzola



Image via [Joe Mazzola](#)

Eco-conscious art connoisseurs, rejoice: At Eastworks Detroit, Joe Mazzola is reimagining everyday household items such as fans, lamps, water spouts, and speakers as bona fide works of art. Inspired by mid-century American design and manufacturing styles with a dash of industrial steampunk edge, Mazzola says that, “Guided by my intuition and my own personal aesthetic, the work reflects my quest to meld wonder, beauty, and function into three-dimensional art.” Best of all, the bulk of Mazzola’s pieces are one-of-a-kind items.

Carl Wilson



"Church Of The Living Streets" by Carl Wilson / Image via [Carl Wilson](#)

Though Detroit native Carl Wilson spent the earlier part of his professional life working in an auto plant, his passion for printmaking was evident. So Wilson decided to trade in the 9-to-5 life for the role of indie artist. Crediting surrealist painters and German Expressionist printmakers as his main influence, Wilson employs traditional carving techniques in his work and allows his subtle plays on color—namely black versus white or light versus dark—to communicate the full story. “Detroit has the best arts community I have ever seen,” says Wilson. “My creativity actually feeds off of the streets and the artists populating the city. There is a whole new energy here that demands to be noticed. We are survivors.”

Hubert Massey



Image via [Hubert Massey/Facebook](#)

When it comes to artwork, bigger is better for Hubert Massey. And if you've spent any time in Detroit, chances are good that you've seen his work, as his focus is on large-scale public art installations like the mural pictured here. And as much as Massey's work is completely personal, he also regularly collaborates with the people within the communities in which he is working in order to create pieces that speak to their individual stories and struggles.

Aaron Blendowski



Image via [Real Ok Design](#)

Artist. Designer. Educator. Aaron Blendowski does it all, and he isn't afraid to share what he knows about finding success as an artist with Detroit's up-and-coming creative types. In his full-time life, he is the Fabrications Coordinator at Cranbrook Academy of Art, which also happens to be his alma mater. When he's not in the classroom, he's better known as Real OK, the artist and proprietor behind a small-scale furniture design studio on Detroit's East Side, which creates one-of-a-kind pieces that are both functional *and* beautiful. "This place means many things to me," Blendowski says of his city. "Designing here is like working in a creative monastery; there is a freedom I feel here that words don't really do justice to."

Jason E. Carter



"Medusa's Gaze #6" by Jason E. Carter / Image via [JECart](#)

Jason E. Carter may not be painting pictures of the Penobscot or Guardian buildings, but the spirit of Detroit is imbued within his work. “My paintings are not specifically about Detroit, but Detroit is certainly within the work,” says the artist and Detroit area native. “The city is a wonderful and complicated place, and traits like the dichotomy that can be Detroit make for interesting art, which I try to use within the framework of my paintings.” Also of great interest to the artist is the role that light and illumination play in today’s digital world. “My current paintings are meditations on a new perception of light,” says the artist. “The light we live by today is not what others experienced in the past. The digital age has brought a new age of illumination through glowing rectangles that demand our attention and are used with an almost religious fervor as they are essential to our day-to-day and culture.”

Vanessa Miller



"Lafayette Coney Island, Detroit MI." by Vanessa Miller / Image via [Vanessa Miller](#)

Like any great collaboration, Vanessa Miller’s relationship with the city of Detroit has evolved over the years. “I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t originally

attracted by Detroit's decay and tough streets; the fall of the city was just so different from what I or really anyone had seen before,” admits the photographer, who writes—and shoots—about the city’s cultural scene for the Knight Foundation’s Art blog and the College of Creative Studies. “I studied it almost scientifically, dissected and photographed it piece by piece, building by building, for over a decade. And as I did that I found myself falling in love with the life and the lives that people make here. That life is what makes me stay, and has transformed my creative practice.”

Tyree Guyton



Image via Heidelberg Project-Archives

Tyree Guyton is an artist with a purpose. Though he’s best known as a painter and sculptor, he’s also a creative revolutionary—one who has

made it his mission to fight the blight of Detroit's East Side with the most powerful weapon that he has: his art. And he has captured the attention of the public in doing so (not to mention Oprah Winfrey, who welcomed Guyton as a guest on her talk show in 1990). Through The Heidelberg Project, a constantly evolving, open-air art exhibition, Guyton is proving the healing power that art can have on both individuals and on a community. But he's not even close to done. "The city of Detroit is a great city full of creative people, doing great things in a post-industrial era," says Guyton. "It is a microcosm for the rest of the world. It may seem chaotic at this stage, but it is in the middle of a new birth. Keep your eyes open."

Sarah Wagner



"Yard/Zone" by Sarah Wagner / Image via [Sarah Wagner](#)

Through her work, sculptor and installation artist Sarah Wagner observes, interprets, and re-creates the environment that surrounds her, turning the outside world into a one-of-a-kind, personal experience which she refers to as "a parallel reality called the 'Invisible Healing World.'" For

example, one of her most recent pieces, *Yard/Zone* (pictured), “is about my neighborhood,” Wagner explains of her silk organza piece. “Detroit’s complexities are fascinating, and in this piece I built a copy of the neighborhood and inhabited it with a pheasant and a fox—two animals frequently seen in the city proper.”

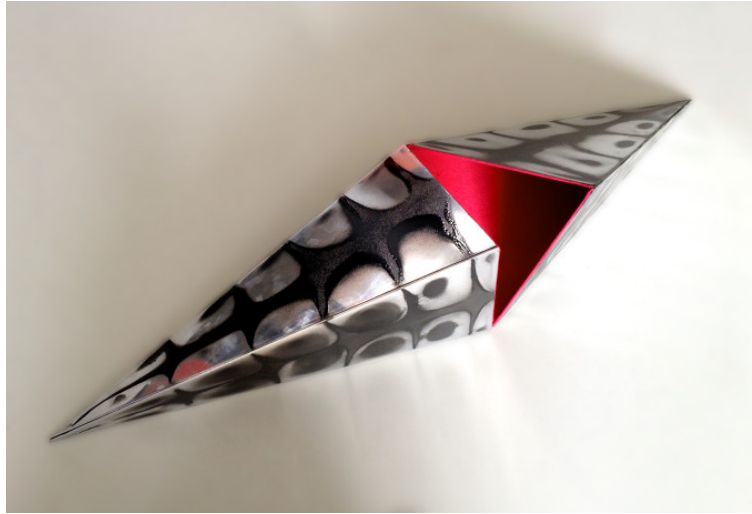
Bruce Giffin



"Bill and His Chihuahuas" by Bruce Giffin / Image via [Bruce Giffin](#)

You’d be hard-pressed to ever find Bruce Giffin without a camera in his hand. By day, he shoots for the *Metro Times*. When he’s not working, he shoots for himself. Whether he’s shooting a person, place, or thing, he’s got the passion and patience to wait for those magical moments to strike. “No matter how something looks on the outside, if I can stay long enough and look a little closer, I can find the beauty in it,” says Giffin.

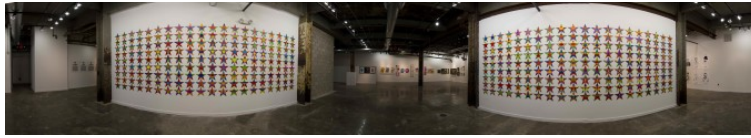
Bethany Shorb



"Alien Fortune Cookie" by Bethany Shorb / Image via [Bethany Shorb](#)

You can practically hear the musical history of Detroit in the work of artist/designer Bethany Shorb. “My work is inspired by Detroit’s rich music history,” says the Boston transplant. “From Motown to Detroit Techno, we have some of the best sonic influences in the entire world. Over the last year, and during my residency at Red Bull House of Art, I’ve been exclusively working with visualizing sound vibrations as first realized by 18th-century acoustic pioneer Ernst Chladni. He depicted waveforms with sand, a metal plate, and violin bow. Expanding on his work, I invented a process for making the experiment permanent and developing it into three-dimensional form.” But Shorb’s artistic interests extend into wearable art, too. She’s coming up on the 10-year anniversary of the founding of [Cyberoptix Tie Lab](#), her can’t-miss men’s accessories company.

Franklin Jonas



"360 12" Star Installation" at The Red Bull House Of Art Detroit by Franklin Jones / Image via Salvador Rodriguez

“Detroit is in the most important reinvention of its time. As an artist, I strive to reinvent myself by creating new projects and exploring the opportunities the city has to offer during this new renaissance,” insists artist Franklin Jones, who is merging math and art with The Star Project, in which he utilizes five-pointed stars and straight line segments “to push the envelope of what has, 'til this day, remained a predominant symbol of perfect celestial objects.”

Matt Gordon



"Science Lamonica" by Matt Gordon / Image via [Matt Gordon](#)

Named as part of Detroit’s “New Generation” of artists by Oakland University, it’s easy to get lost in one of Matt Gordon’s labyrinthine paintings (and occasional three-dimensional carved wood sculptures).

There's so much detail that you could look at one image hundreds of times and discover something new with each viewing. And it's the always-changing landscape around him that makes this possible. "I've traveled all over the world but the Detroit metropolitan area (all of Michigan, really) is the only place that lets me to think and observe life the way my painted world needs me too," says Gordon.

Chido Johnson



"My Pink Cadillac" by Chido Johnson (2009) / Image via [Chido Johnson](#)

Originally from Zimbabwe, artist Chido Johnson credits his having lived between two cultures as part of what distinguishes his work. "I have lived in Detroit for almost a decade now," says Johnson, who has studied sculpture, painting, and drawing and currently serves as the section chair in sculpture at Detroit's College for Creative Art. "What connected me to the city is how familiar its 'otherness' felt. During and after Zimbabwe's struggle for independence and the economic struggles in Zambia, my formative years there evolved in a landscape of recovering and healing from the wounds inflicted by previous oppressive regimes. Detroit's landscape is similar. It, too, cannot be divorced from the embedded

narratives marked on its face.” It’s this sense of otherness that has spawned Johnson’s interest in a variety of mediums, from sculpture to video installations like 2009’s *My Pink Cadillac* (pictured), which tracked the movement of a wire fabricated pink Cadillac’s movement through the whole length of the city of Detroit.

Marie T. Hermann



"Untitled #6" by Marie T. Hermann / Image via Tim Thayer

Born in Copenhagen, Denmark, ceramic and sculptural artist Marie T. Hermann now splits her time between Detroit and her hometown. Yet her work can be found in collections around the world, from the Sèvres Museum in France to the Jingdezhen Ceramics Museum in China. Playing with texture and lines, Hermann groups everyday items in a way that gives them greater purpose and aesthetic significance.

Alphonso Cox



"Cosmos" by Alphonso Cox / Image via [Alphonso Cox](#)

"I'm always inspired by my city," says Detroit native Alphonso Cox, who has been creating art since he was old enough to pick up a pencil. "Detroit has a style that can't be copied or repeated; that's the type of style my art represents." Pulling from what's happening in the world around him, Cox is not afraid to mix up styles or mediums, creating works out of everything from ink to oil to acrylic to charcoal.

Corrie Baldauf



"Optimism Filter for Truck Driving School" by Corrie Baldauf / Image via Stephen McGee

With a goal of constructing spaces that transform the viewer, Corrie Baldauf's work is a participatory experience. "My artwork frames and spotlights human interaction," says the artist, who points to her Optimism Filters as an example. "In 2008, I started carrying large colorful sheets of acrylic through Michigan cities to offer a new view of our surroundings. I call them Optimism Filters." Since then, Baldauf has utilized these filters—which shine a positive light on the city and its people—into numerous projects, including *Frames for the People: A City of Halos* and *Filters for Michigan*.

John Dunivant



"Expatriate" by John Dunivant / Image via [John Dunivant](#)

“For years now I've been inspired by the beauty in decay and the resilience and drive of the people of Detroit,” says John Dunivant, who draws inspiration from what he describes as a “variety of obsessions and fascinations,” from Dr. Seuss and Hieronymus Bosch to natural history museums and roadside attractions. “There is no place I'd rather work and there is no place in the world that would have allowed the type of work that I was doing to gestate and grow the way it has,” says the painter of his works that merge the concepts of beauty and the grotesque in intricate and perfectly executed detail. In 2010, Dunivant brought these interests to life with one of his best-known projects, *Theatre Bizarre*, which was an illegal Halloween masquerade that was shut down by the city in 2010 (and about which a documentary is currently in the works).

Scott Hocking



"The Egg and Michigan Central Station" by Scott Hocking (2007-2013) / Image via [Scott Hocking](#)

Forgotten places and objects are a long-running theme in the work of Scott Hocking, as evidenced in *The Egg and Michigan Central Station, 2007-2013* (pictured), the recent photo series and site-specific installation that the Detroit native created in what he describes as one of the city's "long abandoned, often photographed, symbol of 'Detroitus' decay, vacant train depot." Continues Hocking: "Like most of my Detroit based projects, I try to use wasted materials and neglected spaces—which Detroit has had a ton of over the years—attempting to transform them into something new, with the hope that perceptions of these places/materials can be transformed, too. I've been here my whole life, so I like to think that I see the beauty below the surface. It's a city in flux —always transitioning—and I think this kind of threshold energy inspires creative people."

Sebastian Sullen



"American Sista" by Sebastian Sullen / Image via [Sebastian Sullen](#)

Though he has been shooting for nearly 20 years, it's that one moment in time—the one second where the everyday becomes extraordinary—that fuels Detroit native Sebastian Sullen's work. And the ability to showcase the dichotomy between what the world sees when it looks at his city and what it actually feels to be a part of the community. He captured one such moment in *American Sista* (pictured), one of his favorite images. "I asked this cool woman if I could take a picture of her and her cool dress," explains Sullen. "She turned around proud and confident. She said she made it from scratch. Her beauty, confidence, and size made me realize and capture how great Detroit is. Everyone was staring and she did not care." Which is representative of the city itself. "Everyone is staring at Detroit's bankruptcy and we will still stand proud and confident," says Sullen.
