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Detroit's Artistic Renaissance: Meet the Creatives Leading the Way

Written by Siddhartha Mitter

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The artist Matthew Angelo Harrison works in downtown Hamtramck, the enclave city within Detroit known for its diverse immigrant population, old-school and hipster dive bars, and the GM assembly plant that is slated to close in 2020. His storefront studio stretches deep into the building, but Harrison needs more space. His practice is going well—he was in the 2019 Whitney Biennial, and is preparing for a marquee show next year at the Kunsthalle Basel. Plus his work requires industrial equipment, such as a CNC machine and his self-built 3-D printer, as well as rooms for various chemical processes.

"I use the machines as collaborators," Harrison says. In one series, he encases African statues in blocks of translucent resin, producing prismatic effects in which the objects seem to split or double when seen from different angles. Another method involves molding Makonde tribal helmets and 3-D printing them with code glitches that alter them in intriguing ways. He also works with zebra and antelope bones, sourced from game parks.

Harrison's background is pure Detroit: His grandparents came from the South in the Great Migration; his mother worked at American Axle, a GM spin-off that closed its Detroit plant in 2012. Before moving to art full-time, Harrison was at a Ford design lab, building prototypes. The collapse and tentative renewal of the automotive industry are omnipresent in Detroit's energy—in family histories, in the shuttered buildings and empty parcels left behind by massive depopulation, in the driverless test cars you see roaming the streets.



The artist Matthew Angelo Harrison, in a contaminant-free room in his Hamtramck studio.

Photograph by Alec Soth/Magnum Photos.

Jessica Silverman Gallery
488 Ellis Street, San Francisco, CA 94102
415.255.9508 • jessicasilvermangallery.com

"It's a very Detroit thing to be DIY," Harrison says. Indeed, this is a maker town. The auto industry sustained a constellation of skilled trades. The design tradition, anchored by Cranbrook Academy of Art in suburban Bloomfield Hills, reaches back to Eliel Saarinen and Charles Eames. More recently, newcomers have streamed to Detroit to set up artists' studios and craft ateliers—some locals coming home, others drawn by the city's historical mystique and what was still, a decade ago, ultracheap space.

But Detroit is changing—coming back, as the boosters say. The central business district, once a ghost town, hums with activity. Cranes rise above construction sites. Parking is scarce. A measure of forced enthusiasm - prevails, with murals and banners everywhere celebrating the Detroitness of Detroit. The new QLine, a tram in colorful livery, runs up and down Woodward Avenue, each stop announcement crediting a corporate sponsor.

Past the freeways that edge the core downtown, things are radically different—but redevelopment is moving outward, raising fundamental questions about who will benefit, and what will be the place for low-income residents and the city's 80 percent black population. And whether they are new transplants or forever Detroiters, artists are on the front line. "Everything that has been touched by artists has gone up," Harrison says.

Creatives who invest in a place tell its story in fresh ways, and open possibilities through their art and their actions. And Detroit inspires fierce commitment. "There is something weirdly compelling about Detroit, especially if you grew up here, but even if you didn't," says Bridget Finn, co-owner of Reyes Finn gallery. "There are so many ways to engage with the city and all of its beautiful, eccentric things." She and her business partner, Terese Reyes, moved back to Detroit in 2017. Their gallery occupies a former bank building in the Corktown neighborhood, where they show work by emerging local artists alongside more established names.

Tiff Massey, an internationally shown artist and jewelry designer who's an outspoken critic of gentrification, bought a huge derelict bowling alley in the Bagley area, where she grew up. She plans to develop it into an art and community education hub where young people have access to space, equipment, and global networks. "I'm a product of my environment," she says. "I'm always thinking about what we need." Seattle-raised Roslyn Karamoko founded *Détroit Is the New Black*—a fashion label and sleek downtown concept store with furnishings by Donut Shop, a two-man local design team. Karamoko showcases Detroit designers like Tracy Reese, who manufactures her pieces in Flint, and Nelson T. Sanders Jr., whose bespoke menswear label is called Dandy; every quarter, three new local designers rotate through her store, supported by a Michigan small-business incubation program. "There's a lack of pretense here that gives you the freedom to just throw things out there," Karamoko says.

The veteran painter Allie McGhee, one of the "Seven Black Artists" of a 1969 exhibition that staked a cultural claim two years after the devastation of the 1967 riots, puts it this way: "Detroit is an example of the in-your-face attitude that you're not going anywhere, you're going to be here, and you're going to accomplish what you're here to do."

On a bright summer afternoon, the painter Ellen Rutt and her friend Patrick Ethen, who makes light-based art, are at work in adjacent studios in a warehouse at the edge of the North End district, where some blocks are immaculate and others have gone fallow. Rutt points out one of two urban farms nearby. Across from the warehouse is a small tree-shaded plot that feels like a cozy glade. "This is a fun place to come and build forts," Rutt says. "And the fact that I can think that way, just have the space, feels really good. Artists maybe think differently because we come into contact with these spaces."

Beyond downtown, which is its own animal, Detroit has a spatial energy, a rhythm you key into after a few days. The place is big—the main arteries go on for miles before you cross into Dearborn, the hub of the Arab-American community, or wealthy Royal Oak or Grosse Pointe. Detroit had 1.8 million residents in 1950; now it's under 700,000. It's wrong to say the city is empty, but there is an abundance of gaps: vacant parcels, barren parking lots, large tracts gone wild, architectural gems in search of fresh connective tissue. The time of ruin-porn portrayals that irritated many Detroiters seems over, in part because many neglected buildings have been torn down. What's striking now is how green the city is, though in an unplanned way, bereft of the public investment that could make it an urban model.

But improvisation has strengths. Amid crisis, all kinds of subcultures came to roost in Detroit's warehouses. Already home to Motown, countless jazz greats, Iggy Pop, and the MC5, Detroit in the 1980s birthed techno, the hard dance sound that found favor in Berlin, another wild at heart city. Techno greats like Derrick May, Juan Atkins, and "Mad" Mike Banks still live in Detroit, elders in a music scene that—across genres—insists on quality. "There's a standard that you have to work toward," says Nicola Kuperus, one half of Adult., the veteran punk-electronica band. "I'm always most nervous to play Detroit," says her partner, Adam Lee Miller. "It's a really critical audience here, and I like that." Rebellious art has also sprouted in the hardscrabble landscape, notably in the rich African-American tradition of found-object installations imbued with humor and poetry. Begun in 1986, the Heidelberg Project, Tyree Guyton's ensemble of painted houses and outdoor assemblage in McDougall-Hunt, on the East Side, became a tourist draw. On the West Side, Olayami Dabls, another veteran artist, continues to populate, in the same vein, a fieldlike lot edging Interstate 96.

This year, an ambitious exhibition at the Cranbrook Art Museum combined a range of Detroit-made art from 1967 to the present with work produced in four other places during periods of great flux: the Italian arte povera movement, begun in the late 1960s; the Dansaekhwa minimalist artists of 1970s South Korea; Cuba during the 1990s' Special Period, when the end of Soviet support threw the island into scarcity; and present-day Athens, amid austerity and the debt crisis.



Harrison, wearing a Tyvek suit, with works in progress.
Photograph by Alec Soth/Magnum Photos.

Titled "Landlord Colors" (a reference to John Baldessari's term for the utilitarian hardware-store paints found more in cheap apartments than in fine art), the show looked at the ways in which artists incorporate the material landscape—machinery, rocks, textiles, wire, wood, consumer goods, found objects—into work expressing, in local yet strikingly universal terms, the energy of social turbulence and far-reaching economic change. Harrison installed and operated one of his intentionally glitchy 3-D printers. Massey showed stark, elegant textile pieces that she made by unweaving gingham patterns, responding to research on the clothes that enslaved people wore on Southern plantations. Dabls presented rusting iron chairs mounted by rocks, drawn from one of his outdoor panoramas. In total, 21 Detroit artists mingled with the arte povera greats Michelangelo Pistoletto and Marisa Merz, and a host of Cuban, Korean, and Greek artists, placing Detroit's creative life in a cosmopolitan frame. "Of great concern to residents of Detroit is, Who is narrating the city?" says Laura Mott, the show's curator. "And that's the call to action that I am leaning into."

In parallel, a program called "Material Detroit," led by the Detroit-born writer and independent curator Taylor Renee Aldridge, organized performances and installations in the city. For 40 days, the artist Billy Mark raised at dawn and lowered at dusk the arms of a gargantuan hoodie mounted on flagpoles. Jennifer Harge held a month of events and performances exploring black women's agency in domestic spaces. In an abandoned Eastern Market apartment, Anders Ruhwald designed a quasi-ritual sensory experience in which visitors moved between darkened rooms inhabited by large black ceramic ovoid sculptures. And close to the riverfront, the artist Scott Hocking took over an immense warehouse, graffiti-stricken and partially roofless, and installed a flotilla of small boats—some hung from the ceiling, others set on the ground, all reclaimed from the endemic practice of illegal dumping, in which suburbanites leave their detritus inside the city line.

"When you think about Detroit, you're thinking about the world," says the artist Maya Stovall. A fourth--generation Detroiter who currently teaches in California, she broke out in the 2017 Whitney Biennial with "Liquor Store Theatre vol. 2, no. 2," part of a series of videos in which she performs ballet and holds conversations with people outside the liquor stores, which also serve as convenience stores, in McDougall-Hunt. From her childhood she remembers a continuous presence of art in the city, even when "capitalism had defected to the suburbs." Now, she says, Detroiters are well aware of the downtown boom and its contradictions. "Detroit is at the cutting edge of what's happening around the U.S. in terms of political and economic chickens coming home to roost," Stovall says.

At the foot of a parking structure, a plaque near the Library Street Collective gallery marks its partnership with Bedrock—the megadeveloper company that owns much of downtown, and is controlled by the Quicken Loans magnate Dan Gilbert—to seed the area with public art, by which "messages of wonder and hope can be sent out to present and future citizens of our city." Inside the gallery, by contrast, was a radical exhibition with edgy, Afrofuturist art assembled by the curator Ingrid LaFleur. Across the street a huge billboard announced, there are black people in the future.

Vividly, sometimes to extremes, Detroit poses the questions of ownership that the whole country—or really, the whole world—is now facing. Not just material ownership but also moral, cultural, and aesthetic ownership. "I like that the city is changing," says the respected elder artist Carole Harris, in her apartment-workshop steps from the Detroit Institute of Arts. She remembers when downtown was thriving yet also riven by racial discrimination, as well as the 1967 riots and all that came after. "Hopefully it will be more inclusive in its reinvention."

Finn, the gallerist, sums up a collective mood in which trepidation and bold creativity are impossible to separate—indeed, one helps drive the other. "It's superominous, the idea of what's on the other side, but it's also superopen," she says. "People are excited not for a specific change but for the idea of change. Nobody knows what's around the corner."

Correction, November 5, 2019: The original article did not credit Taylor Renee Aldridge. Her name has now been added.