

Art in America

Beyond "Ruin Porn": Another Look at Detroit



Destroy All Monsters Collective (Mike Kelley, Carey Loren, Jim Shaw), *Mall Culture*, from the installation *Strange Früt: Rock Apocrypha*, 2001, acrylic on canvas, 96 by 138 inches

A group show opening tonight in New York aims to offer a nuanced portrait of the Motor City. The exhibition is organized by Todd Levin, Detroit native and director of New York's Levin Art Group, who hopes to cast aside sensational images of his hometown in the dual-venue exhibition "Another Look at Detroit (Parts 1 and 2)" at New York's Marianne Boesky Gallery and Marlborough Chelsea (June 26-Aug. 8). Forget the seduction of "ruin porn," the romanticizing shots of "industrial buildings, ruins, and old

trains stations that have fallen into shambles," he said. To Levin, "showing only images of the city in decay tells a shallow, one-dimensional side of the story."

With some 100 works by over 60 artists working in varied mediums, "Another Look at Detroit" spans a period of 150 years, emphasizing complexity and contradiction in the fine, decorative and illustrative arts, fashion and ephemera. Archival materials like a 1907 portrait of the Detroit Museum of Art's first board of trustees, a collection of vinyl records from Detroit techno label Metroplex and vintage Ford Motor Company advertisements will be shown alongside a suit from designer Anna Sui's 1991 debut collection, Diego Rivera's portrait of Edsel B. Ford and other works by artists with connections to the city, such as Mike Kelley, Nick Cave, James Lee Byars and Julie Mehretu.

The show includes numerous museum loans from institutions including the Cranbrook Academy of Art, Bloomfield Hills, Mich.; the Detroit Institute of Arts; the city's Henry Ford Museum; and the New-York Historical Society. Of all the museum officials he approached, Levin said, "Nobody said no, which is rather astonishing." Typically, he said, institutions shy away from lending to for-profit entities. "There's a wall that's supposed to be there. But being generous and sharing are crucial aspects of what art is."

Levin sought neither to create a comprehensive survey nor to accentuate solely the positive. "I didn't want to turn this exhibition into a Disney Hall of Presidents," he said. "There are clear omissions and clear questions. It's a personal show. I don't want anyone to feel that this is definitive." He instead seeks to craft an intimate tone poem of the city that is "part of my DNA, something that I can't evade."

Following the collapse of the auto industry in 2009 and the city's 2013 bankruptcy filing—the largest municipal bankruptcy in U.S. history—this fallen hub of American industry and ingenuity has come to be known for unemployment and foreclosure. Half of the population does not work a consistent job and by some estimates, the city is 40 percent vacant. In a press release, Levin says that people often ask him, "Where is the hope in Detroit?"

As one possible answer, "Another Look at Detroit" presents the city as a creative center. Lured by the dirt-cheap real estate, many young artists are relocating to the Motor City. Still, Levin says, "I don't know what the future of Detroit is. The city has a very long and complex and difficult road ahead of it. It is mired in corruption, sociopolitical and geopolitical issues. There is the DIA, the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit and a

couple of good younger galleries like Re:View Contemporary Gallery and The Butcher's Daughter, and artists are moving there, but it's still a very delicate situation. It's really day by day."

If the Latin motto emblazoned on the city's flag, *Speramus Meliora; Resurget Cineribus*—we hope for better things; it shall rise from the ashes—is any indication of Detroit's spirit, life will go on there, and so will its rich history of artistic production. "The city casts a very long shadow over the American people's psyches," Levin said. "I wanted to do something broad-based even if conflicted. I am not trying to provide answers. I am trying to provide alternative ways of viewing the situation."