

Cultural Daily

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Detroit: From Economic Turmoil Comes a New Cultural Trajectory

W. Kim Heron · Wednesday, August 14th, 2013

BASK Ornate D & Girl, Photo: Sal Rodriguez (more info below)

One by one, they listened as their names and bios were read. There was Terry Blackhawk, the Neruda Poetry Prize winner whose InsideOut Literary Arts Project has enriched more than 5,000 young lives since 1995. There was Michael Zadoorian, whose debut novel, *Second Hand*, brought him to national prominence with a rave in *The New York Times Book Review*. There was the activist speculative fiction writer, Adrienne Marie Brown; the surrealist-influenced retired autoworker-turned-printmaker, Carl Wilson; the creator of a community space with a living, edible roof, Kate Daughdrill; the visual artist working with sound and structured improv, Jon Brumit.

Eighteen in all, a cross-section of arts in metro Detroit today, they walked to the front of the auditorium to a burst of applause and the snapping of a ceremonial photo as they were handed a \$25,000 check from the Kresge Foundation's Kresge Arts in Detroit program. After the ceremony the Kresge fellows attended a reception of 150 attendees which included staff and leaders of the foundation (which funds this KAID program) along with the College for Creative Studies, which administers the program and hosted the reception on its campus in Detroit's bustling Midtown area. Prominent in the crowd were past fellows in the five-year-old program to recognize local artists for their vision and commitment to excellence. This year's class brings the recipients list to 90.

A parallel KAID effort celebrates the life achievements of an eminent Detroit artist each year, with such past honorees as trumpeter Marcus Belgrave, opera impresario and composer David DiChiera, and poet Naomi Long Madgett. The fellows and eminent artist programs – which both entail considerably more than their cash awards – are key components of the program designed to invigorate the city's "arts ecology." The foundation's efforts to foster a vibrant city of broad opportunity include support for a soon-to-break-ground light-rail line to the creation of a long-term development framework known as Detroit Future City.



Daytime Skyline by Vito Palmisano

The spirit of the gathering at College for Creative Studies was not the same attitude Detroit presented to the world two days later when the city's state-appointed emergency manager filed for Chapter 9 municipal bankruptcy in federal court — the largest municipal bankruptcy filing in history. That one word and its synonyms – bankrupt, broke, busted, etc. – seemed to define the city, which for too many citizens has long been the ultimate symbol of urban decline and nothing

more.

As any number of commentators have observed, Detroit has been long-battered and undermined by job flight, white flight, black middle-class flight, racism, segregation, sprawl, divisive politics, deindustrialization, a plague of empty storefronts and abandoned homes. While none of these symptoms are unique to Detroit, all are extreme in this situation and collectively devastating.

Yet, the city has always been more complex and dynamic than the facts of decline would suggest. That's true for anyone paying casual attention to the city's creative community. With the current municipal calamity and its uncertain outcome looming, the disconnect has never been greater between the "ruin porn" (as Detroiters have taken to calling abandoned-building photography) and the momentum of revival now seen clearly along the city's riverfront, in its downtown and Midtown areas — and in significant spots beyond. From billionaire downtown developer Dan Gilbert to Kresge and fellow philanthropists to elbow-grease entrepreneurs to urban farmers and other grass-roots activists, it's difficult to convey the engagement happening in the city today.



Photo by Sal Rodriguez

"Detroit has been in economic crisis for decades," the urban studies theorist Richard Florida wrote shortly after the bankruptcy filing. He continued to note however that "a fiscal crisis is a crisis of municipal budgets; it reflects a history of decline and overspending. But it is not the same thing as a economic crisis. In fact, it is occurring at a point when the city and region's economy actually looks to be turning upward. And it will likely help the city's turnaround by cleaning out the fiscal mess." But the process, which promises to be protracted, is unsettling even in its early gambits.

"Many have even wondered if, after its historically unprecedented bankruptcy filing, Detroit might somehow actually disappear, its very municipality evaporated like manhole steam, its residents roiling flotsam in the financial cataclysm," was the way writer and 2012 Kresge Fellow Marsha Music summed up the mood of the city when asked a few days ago. As the daughter of the famed R&B producer Joe Von Battle (John Lee Hooker among others recorded in the back of his record shop on famed Hastings Street) Music qualifies as a second-generation Detroit artist, about as deeply-rooted as they come. Music continued: "In reality however, nothing much has changed; not, at any rate, in the Detroit that exists outside of the courthouses, boardrooms and silk stocking firms where they wrestle with the angel of debt."



Photo by Sal Rodriguez

Considering the possibility that even parts of the Detroit Institute of Arts collection could be auctioned to help settle the city's \$19 billion debt, Music wrote:

With a bankruptcy, culture is whipsawed against pensions and city parks. Nonetheless, residents live on and artists still create, our extreme maker impulse unfettered, no longer consumed by the industries of the past that propelled yet devoured so much of Detroit's creative energy. Bankruptcy notwithstanding, a new industry of creativity grows in the midst of financial disintegration and reorganization. Today's Detroit artists are the creative seraphim of redevelopment, the coalmine canaries of our scorched and burned land. The community of artists has been waiting — and creating — for such a time as this. Life in Detroit goes on.

Music, like her father before her, is emblematic of the creative spirit in Detroit, the city of McKinney's Cotton Pickers and the White Stripes, Motown and techno, Aretha and Eminem, Jackie Wilson and James Carter. If those who hold the city's fate in their hands can take even a few

cues from the imagination and humanity of its artists, then the city really does have a chance.

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NOTE ON TOP IMAGE: BASK Ornate D & Girl – This stunning HDR image is courtesy of Sal Rodriguez. Its centerpiece is a beautiful sculpture created in Detroit by the internationally acclaimed artist known as BASK. He used reclaimed material in creating the “D.” For Rodriguez it was all about finding beauty in a perceived wasteland. It communicates hope and fortitude, with our youth offering the creative vision that the city needs.

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