

**SPECIAL ISSUE: DETROIT**

BOOK REVIEW

*Canvas Detroit*

*By Julie Pincus and Nichole Christian*

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*[Art] wasn't about establishing a career. It was about making art as life support. And no matter who they were or what they did or where in the city they lived, or even if they were there for a single project, they all had the same subject: Detroit.*

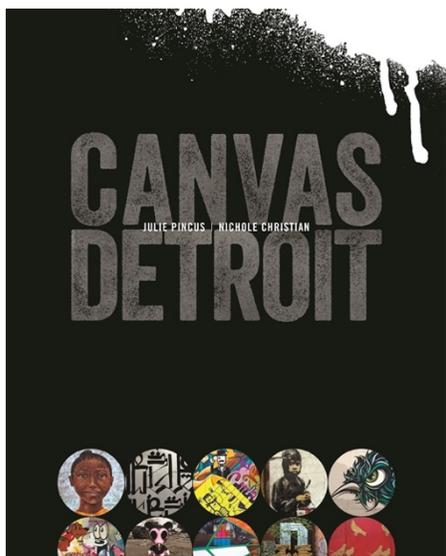
—Linda Yablonsky (p. 51)

*My art is medicine for the community. You can't heal the land until you heal the minds of the people.*

—Tyree Guyton (p. 159)

The title *Canvas Detroit* fulfills a promise long understood in the Southeastern Michigan community: the Motor City, despite its rough and tumble journey into the 21st century, is home to a vibrant and flourishing arts scene. Though far from a standard coffee table book, this rich—yet surprisingly accessible—volume functions as a visual ethnography of the artists who define that scene. Hundreds of beautiful images complement dozens of profiles of natives, adopted locals, and famous visitors, who collectively shape Detroit's culture while representing the resilience of a population indelibly linked to the city's Rust Belt origins.

Rather than leveraging topical or theme-based chapters, co-authors Julie Pincus and Nichole Christian have chosen to explore Detroit through fifty vignette-like profiles, each dedicated to an artist or arts collective. Every profile opens with a brief summary of the given subject, and, in the case of non-natives, their journey to the city. These entries are essentially



built around interviews, framing each subject's philosophical goals to reveal the intent behind a myriad of artistic styles. Such influences span everything from deconstructivism (p. 249), to political visioning (p. 209), and art as a catalyst for urban transformation (p. 61). The stories are interwoven with descriptions of a particular project, or set of projects, which exemplify the subject's artistic voice. Each entry concludes with a statement of potential—calls-to-action that draw the reader's attention to the struggles of everyday artists, and the optimism that drives their practice regardless of circumstance.

The book itself is captivatingly designed, thanks to Pincus and Christian's shared visual sensibilities. Blending their individual acumen as a graphic designer and writer, respectively, the

writing is curatorial and collaborative. Much like an effective museum experience, every paragraph of text invites readers of all experience levels to look more closely at the quality of artmaking and variety of aesthetics on display. Seasoned connoisseurs will gain insights on lesser known aspects of the practices strewn about by locals and visitors. Who knew Detroit was home to not one, but potentially five, Banksy murals? Novices can revel in the visual walking tour that gradually reveals obvious themes of resilience and reclamation. The short-form vignette format favors the casual reader, though subtext is relatively easy to unpack based on a sampling of stories. To that end, the reviewer appreciated the efficient framing essays by John Gallagher, Michael H. Hodges, Marion Jackson, and Linda Yablonsky. Jackson's introduction (p. 1), in particular, articulates how artmaking in the Motor City reflects much more than individual expression. For many artists, sustaining their peers seems to be a collective, existential priority. It is clear to those who have chosen to make Detroit their canvas that the city deserves better. More respect for what it has; greater opportunity to rebuild its vibrancy. As Wayne State University-trained street artist Eno Laget puts it (p. 203), "If there's gonna be life here [in Detroit], it has everything to do with, as clichéd as it sounds, building sustainable communities. We have a chance to be about more than making a buck."

One of the best examples of this philosophy in action can be found in the profile of Marc Schwartz's DLECTRICITY (p. 113), a nighttime "exhibition" that blends technology and architecture to create a celebration of outdoor space. Festivals have generally proven to be effective amplifiers of a scene's brand, yet they often export much of the value created, imparting only transient interest and short-term impact to the local economy. DLECTRICITY is driven by a different agenda; it aims to build a year-round community that is energized by "concentrated areas" of activity throughout the city. The festival has grown since its launch in

2012, with follow ups in 2014, 2017, and Summer 2020. Pincus and Christian can boast that this book chronicles the beginnings of a potentially significant and pioneering example of a density-driven, urban-revival festival concept, but it also exemplifies the potency of *Canvas Detroit's* own design. The imagery here is equally, if not more, essential to the prose in capturing the potential for aesthetic practice to activate communities and physical spaces towards a brighter future.

It is hard to overstate how aggregating resources and individuals is key to achieving sustainability in Detroit's modern arts economy. Many of the entrepreneurial arts organizations that have risen in the past decade are central to the work of defining what such an infrastructure might look like. 555 Gallery (p. 19), for example, pops up in numerous artist profiles as a guiding force that either brought them to the city, or, through incubation, provided the platform that nurtured their vision and kept their work local. The self-organized collective known as the Five Fellows (p. 147), "dispatched" from the University of Michigan—Ann Arbor on research fellowships, transformed a decrepit house, a visual epitome of the city's decline, into an architectural playground as a "means to finding opportunity rather than solving problems—a technique that resonates with the contemporary conditions of a city like Detroit." Unpacking these connections are left in large part to the reader, though the framing essays provide thematic entry points that, when cross-referenced with the table of contents, make the search for individual stories accessible for all.

More than a snapshot of Detroit's cultural renaissance, the stories captured in this book showcase art as a way of life for local artisans, much in the way industrial labor dominated the cityscape through much of the past century. One comes away from the book with a sense that art is *alive* in the city, bound by a common understanding that individual works have larger implications when coordinated around social action. The obvious takeaway here is that art is responding to the urban infrastructure of the city, blemishes and all. The more subtle message is how the collective practice of public artmaking has created a living tapestry of Detroit's rich history, present struggles, and aspirational potential. By cataloguing the highs, lows, and social ramifications of a transformative arts revival, *Canvas Detroit* makes a compelling case for the power of visual artists to engage in placemaking everywhere.



