

10-4-2012

Intimate Distance: Negotiating the Urban/ Suburban Divide

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Recommended Citation

Sage, Whitney L., "Intimate Distance: Negotiating the Urban/Suburban Divide" (2012). *Mid-America College Art Association Conference 2012 Digital Publications*. Paper 4.
<http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/macaa2012scholarship/4>

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Intimate Distance: Negotiating the Urban/Suburban Divide

Presented by Whitney Sage

How Detroit Built My Aesthetic
MACAA Conference 2012
Detroit, Michigan

As a young metro-Detroit artist presenting today on artistic and conceptual process, I can say that it was nearly impossible for me to separate the nostalgic topics of childhood and upbringing from the more academic focus of this conversation. In the process of composing this presentation I kept butting heads with these warm fuzzy notions of me, my life, my perspective, my story, things that I have always aimed at eliminating within the major plot lines of my artwork. But after writing and subsequently deleting about three presentations worth of text, it dawned on me that perhaps this presentation doesn't exist without the personal. In fact, the artwork I have come to produce arose out of my long-term relationship with a place that has not only defined my artistic sensibilities, but also has raised me on the values of hard work, humility, and hope. My upbringing in suburban Detroit taught me the value of responsibility, for myself and for history. My journey and struggles as an artist have often come down to this relationship: getting to know Detroit, knowing Detroit, and then realizing I know nothing about Detroit. The biggest challenge is the latter, trying to communicate something relevant in a relative state of unknowing. In the process of negotiating this obstacle, my artworks, ranging in media and, have several reoccurring threads indicative of how I have chosen to carefully tread the subject matter. These works often employ a sense of intimacy, either in process or the implication of domestic spaces, distance in both the passivity of the work's message as well as physical distance from the subject matter and devices of nostalgic longing through the use of postcards, framed photos and souvenirs, objects of memory and devotion. Through reflecting on these approaches and the evolution of the work itself, it becomes clear that my challenging relationship with Detroit has in fact expanded my material and conceptual range. In the act of bridging the suburban divide between artist and subject, I've found a way to create work that is, like Detroit, complex, nuanced, and thought provoking.

As a native of suburban Detroit, my relationship with Detroit began at a very young age, far before any refined use of artistic sensibility took hold. A product of Farmington Hills, I always had a peculiar relationship with my city's urban counterpart, spending the majority of my

childhood isolated from the harsher realities of crime and depopulation in Detroit. My family made frequent visits downtown, my father being an avid Tigers fan and my mother enjoying spoiling us kids with trips to Boblo Island and the DIA. Call it childhood innocence or suburban naiveté, but I always remembered loving Detroit and thinking I was so incredibly lucky to live near such a place. This detached cognizance as a suburbanite has been profoundly influential to both my personal relationship with the city as well as my approach as an artist representing the city. When tackling Detroit and identity, major threads within my art, my inside-outsider relationship with the city serves as an ever-present obstacle within my artistic practice and as a result, is as integral to the content of the work as the buildings I depict. In fact when it comes down to it, the real obstacle within each work is distance: distance from holistic understanding of Detroit as well as physical distance from the subject matter itself.

As a product of a community that is seemingly worlds away geographically and culturally from Detroit it is no surprise that distance is a constant consideration within my work. When discussing a geographical distance, I am referring specifically to the 23.8 miles and 35-minute drive that separate me from Detroit. In the process of getting downtown its necessary to take 2 or 3 highways, the majority of the trip spent traveling between concrete walls with barely a glimpse of the neighborhoods passed along the way. When you finally emerge from the concrete bunker of the freeway, it's as if you've teleported into another world together. Urban grit and sparsely populated city blocks replace dense pockets of unremarkable subdivisions, industrial parks and strip malls.

Though the geographic distance between the two cities is small in the big picture, only physically separated by two or three cities, the cultural separation could not be starker than when comparing Farmington Hills and Detroit. In the last twenty-plus years, where one community was growing in population, employment, and affluence, the other was still reeling from rapid deindustrialization, which not only left countless sprawling factories vacant, but also created a job void that crippled its residents. Probably the most indicative difference between the two regions however is demographics. In 1990, Detroit was comprised of a population that was nearly 80% black, while only 1.7% of Farmington Hills residents were black, totaling a mere 1,300 of the city's 74,000 residents. In 2000, the year I began high school, the median household income in Farmington Hills was more than double that of Detroit households. However for me, more telling than any population statistic was the voyeuristic ritual of the evening news, often a

violent highlight reel, almost exclusively stories from Detroit. Every evening suburbanites gazed upon crime, arson, and struggle before crawling into bed, possessing the luxury of ambivalence towards a local reality.

Early Work

My distance and separation from Detroit culturally manifested themselves early into my artistic exploration of Detroit. My first body of work depicting Detroit consisted of traditional, representational cityscapes featuring some of Detroit's infamous structures including the Packard Plant and the United Artists Theater. While the architecture in these works was meticulously and lovingly rendered, the structures were physically and emotionally distant in their depiction. The buildings were always rendered as exteriors and the compositional framing always placed the artist and viewer in distant locations across the street or in a nearby field. Gritty, confrontational, interior viewpoints were unconsciously avoided. While these tendencies weren't clear to me until years later, the cause of them was simple: a lack of ownership of these sites due to a distant familiarity with the city and its condition. A building in the distance was how I myself knew Detroit and therefore the only manner in which I framed it. Undoubtedly there were more dramatic, emotive compositions I could have chosen, like the images debris-filled ravaged interiors, powerful in their ability to collapse the distance between viewer and these apocalyptic appearing landscapes. There was unlimited access to such imagery through an explosion of trendy urban explorer photography, not to mention the unbelievable ease of accessing many of these abandoned sites. I shied away from them however, because expressing my art through those spaces felt inauthentic and as an outsider, frankly exploitative. For me, standing in Detroit in front of sagging Brush Park giants felt intimate, but for a relative outsider, the wire-stripped decomposing interiors of those structures represented a distance I felt I could never traverse.

Recent Work

As I entered into graduate studies the work, still Detroit themed, began to reflect a more intimate approach to Detroit. Residing in St. Louis and encountering an even larger literal distance than that I had felt from Detroit, I began making work influenced by feelings of displacement, loss, and homesickness. Absence makes the heart grow fonder and abounding distance from a troubled and complex city allowed me the luxury of nostalgic longings. The work shifted materially, from oil on panel to needle and thread, from canvases left behind at the

studio to small portable works I took home with me, held in my lap and labored into while watching television, making phone calls, and even worked on in bed as I wound down for the day. The works almost became an extension of my body itself, crossing traditional artist divisions between home life and studio life. While the framing of the Detroit imagery featured remains distant, the implication of home craft production make the buildings feel intimate, implicating images of the city with domesticity. My finished works and display preferences evolved from wall-mounted works to installations of home craft and pseudo-souvenir objects transforming my own nostalgic longings into pieces that investigated the human tendencies of collective memory, nostalgia and our social predilection towards utopian projections. The use of the souvenir form also proved to be a viable entry point for me as these objects and their consumption are uniquely suburban. For me, the idea of these mementos of an urban space being collected and displayed proudly within suburban homes revealed intriguing intersections between Detroit's devolution, consumerism and the psychology behind "owning" the idea of a place. By allowing myself to respond to a tendency that was innately personal, I was able to pinpoint a unique and relevant entry point for myself, enabling me to open up my work and Detroit to bigger issues of identity and collective experience.

After a year of living in St. Louis and making artwork about Detroit, I had become increasingly aware of powerful variables influencing my long-distance artist relationship with the city. National news reportage was my main source of updates from home, but not before filtering and mediating the realities of the city first, telling only the most extreme and marketable of stories and in the end, stipulating the type of relationship I should have with the city. Though I was horrified by the poor quality and the singularity of the narratives being told, even worse for me were the photos that always accompanied these stories, apocalyptic compositions featuring only the most ruined of Detroit's buildings and neighborhoods. In making art about the city, the newest obstacle for me became overcoming this problematic mediated distance. Frustration became a driving force for *Ruin Porn Series*, works that directly engage the city of Detroit through its prolific media images in a discussion about context or lack thereof, emotive manipulation and exploitation. Lush materials like fabric and beadwork used in past works lent themselves to creating pieces that appropriated found media images into sensual, tactilely inviting eye candy. Folds and creases in pink, peach and nude chiffons and satins evoke appealing forms of flesh and body, while the torn, haphazard treatment of the fabric subtly hints at violent trauma. The small-scale works attract viewers into intimate contemplation with the image, the

excessiveness of the materials stimulating viewers into a lustful, voyeuristic relationship with the depicted space.

Ruin Porn Series marked a significant turning point in my work and my relationship to the city. For the first time, I found myself through the shift in subject matter playing the new role of protective insider. I had found through continued focus and artistic exploration into the city that I began to bridge the suburban/urban divide that had served as an obstacle for personal expression in the past. Finally getting to a place where intimacy had overtaken distance in my relationship with Detroit, my current work has significantly shifted in materials and in approach. *My City, My Home, My Body*, work presented at my MFA Thesis Exhibition, exemplifies this evolution, monumental sculpture replacing small glittering fiber works. The sculptures, which evoke domestic architecture through wall fragments, represent a departure for me in many ways, including the use of an interior space instead of an image to represent Detroit. The surfaces of the walls swell, sag and droop and I see the rather simply decorated surfaces functioning almost as paintings, the ebb and flow of the surface an expression of an internalized psychological state. In relating with an insider viewpoint, the artwork emphasizes the need for a shift in how we interact with history and struggle. The sculptures aimed to engage viewers in an empathetic, bodily reaction to decline, a concept too often understood as an impersonal social inevitability, instead of a human condition and a loss of homeland for many Detroiters.

While I am still young in my artistic career, *My City, My Home, My Body* represents an important pinnacle of sorts for me. The work not only stands as a signifier of personal and intellectual growth, but a breakthrough in a subject matter that has been rocky and unfamiliar to traverse. During the last five years I have devoted my artistic practice to imaging and discussing Detroit and the evolution of my approach to the city engaged me into materials, processes and viewpoints I otherwise may never have been exposed to. My detached suburban upbringing wrought many challenges for me over this span, but it encouraged me to seek out unconventional approaches to discussing Detroit that not only makes the work feel new, but almost self-perpetuating. Most important for me is that I feel that the work I make today, while perhaps not able to scratch the surface of telling the whole story of Detroit, makes an earnest attempt in saying something important when many have written the city off. I hope that if possible, the journey I took in bridging the gap of understanding Detroit if nothing else encourages many others to do the same.

