

Renaissance before Revival

Detroit's black artists, young and old, face gentrification, white gaze, a lack of municipal support and dwindling opportunities for the next generation. This is their time to fight back.

Taylor Renee Aldridge



Early this summer, I sat down with the 90-something-year-old artist Charles McGee to talk about his upcoming work *United We Stand*, a 20-by-20 foot installation located outside the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History. The structure was created in recognition of the 50th anniversary of the 1967 rebellion in Detroit, which falls next year.

During our two-hour chat, McGee often attributed his career as an artist to the formidable education he received in Detroit Public Schools. McGee was just 10 years old when he moved to the city from the South. Despite having never stepped foot inside a school, he quickly advanced with the help of his teachers and “self-determination.” In eighth grade he took three art classes and developed an affinity for art-making altogether.

“I got to understand that I could do whatever everyone else could do,” he says. “I became really inspired (by art).” From that point, McGee pursued a degree at the College for Creative Studies and in turn became an educator himself, offering art courses to children at his art space, Gallery Seven in Detroit’s University District

neighborhood, and teaching at Eastern Michigan University throughout the 1960s and '70s.

Likewise, seasoned gallerist Dell Pryor shared in a recent Model D article that if it were not for the required electives she had to take – art history and art appreciation – she wouldn't have the breadth of art acumen that eventually ignited her interest in gallery work.

Textile artist Carole Harris and I often talk about the arts and vocational offerings she had during her upbringing that influenced her to pursue a career in the arts. When I spoke to Harris recently, she recalled an experience she had as a young arts student at the Highland Park Community College.

“My professor Cyril Miles asked students to bring in an image of an artwork to discuss. I think I brought in Picasso,” says the artist. She and Miles talked about the piece in depth, after which Harris wanted to use the image as inspiration for her work. Miles took the image from Harris and told her, “Go create your own.”

Harris says that challenge from her art professor taught her to value her own creative voice and begin an art and design career.

Arts education early on can be a catalyst for art making. Furthermore, it promotes critical thinking and self-determination. The generations that followed these artists, however, experienced an even more potent education centered on pan-Africanism and awareness of social justice – particularly students that came through DPS after 1995, when the public district incorporated African Centered Education (ACE) in many of its schools due to its large demographic of black students.

It's no surprise that children who came out of this period – now adults – often incorporate both aesthetic appeal and conceptual threads that speak to current social conditions. Some have even chosen to operate without the assistance of larger institutions.

In 2012, artist and curator Ingrid LaFleur created the Afrotopia multimedia curatorial project, which uses the theories and aesthetic of the arts movement Afrofuturism as a vehicle for psychosocial healing in Detroit and beyond. Similarly, artists Bryce Detroit, Halima Cassells and the architecture collective Akoaki have founded the multidisciplinary O.N.E. Mile project, which prioritizes social and economic sustainability through cultural awareness and aesthetic. Sound artist Sterling Toles often combines historical sound bites and broadcast reports on the city and juxtaposes them with techno-like instrumentals. If Detroit were a film, Toles would be the score composer.

Metalsmith Tiff Massey produces monochromatic objects that invoke African diaspora ephemera. Her latest work includes imagery of markers in Detroit's history paired with handmade mirrors with the popular Detroit greeting etched in the sculpture that read, “What up doe.”

Sydney James, a notable muralist and illustrator, re-created the landmark VIBE magazine Death Row Records cover, replacing Dre, Snoop, 'Pac and Suge with four black artists in the city's contemporary black community: Tylonn Sawyer, Rashaun

Rucker, Massey and James herself, all of whom create work that explicitly address racism, identity and social class.

James' public art effort, like many in Detroit, was direct and intentional. She saw the art community in Detroit advancing without the presence and consideration of black artists who have *been* here. In turn, she created a space for these artists to be seen in one of the most highly trafficked areas of the city.

It seems black artists in Detroit are not just creating art for art's sake. Whether it's to heal, provide a service or just say, "I'm here," they're creating because they *need* to. Art has also been a form of language, but specifically in Detroit, it has been a tool that's used to express and uncover societal conditions that aren't as palpable in mainstream media.

I believe the courage among this new school of black artists directly reflects certain stimuli present during their upbringing. While not all youth in the 1970s, '80s and '90s had schooling centered on the African diaspora and social justice, there were cultural markers in Detroit during this period that served as a foundation for instilling pride in the black community.

Consider the rise of confident pioneer Coleman Young, a mayor who was often explicit about prioritizing the needs of black people. Simultaneously, the black middle class in Detroit began to rise – and the population as a whole. Upward mobility was accessible and promising, the complete inverse of what it is today.

As a result, at schools like Aisha Shule, Nataki Talibah Schoolhouse of Detroit, Malcolm X Academy and Marcus Garvey Academy, ACE became a priority. Simultaneously, organizations like Detroit Summer, (although not limited to black youth) fostered social justice awareness, collectivity and empowerment. This mashup of social awareness and black pride represented at a municipal level was unprecedented and went on to influence a generation of "woke" – consciously aware – black Detroiters.

However, contrasted with the inequities provided by Detroit's "renewal" and subsequent gentrification at the expense of quality of life for black people, there is a loud tension that echoes throughout the city. Who are these new developments *really* for?

The Raiz Up collective, comprised of Detroit-based graffiti artists and activists William Lucka and Antonio Cosme, is facing up to four years in prison for allegedly tagging one of the largest water towers in the city with the slogan "Free the Water" and a bold black fist – a common signifier in the black community representing solidarity and support.

The disparities are obvious. The targeting of Lucka and Cosme by the Detroit municipality is petty. Yet this situation is indicative of a larger issue: There's hardly any advocacy for the artists and arts making from a municipal level, *period*. The city's government finds very little value in public art and its artists – the very asset that serves as the main attraction for transplants moving to the city.

Most major cities throughout the nation have a cultural affairs department that operates on a city or state level. These entities are created to provide resources and

art-making incentives to artists and, most of all, ensure proper arts education in public schools. These departments also inform artists how to go about making art in a way that is legal and most pragmatic.

Instead of providing opportunities where public artists can exhaust their talents, Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan and his administration have done the complete opposite by shaming public art and graffiti, devaluing the very act of expression.

Ryan Myers-Johnson, founder of the annual Sidewalk Festival Detroit, often talks about how difficult it is for artists to get permits for public art. She shared in a presentation earlier this year at the IdeasCity conference here in Detroit that “many say that it’s easier to ask for forgiveness than it is to ask for permission” – To echo this sentiment, sometimes it is easier to start by showing the value of public art rather than waiting for it to be approved by a government that finds little value in it anyway.

While there are disconnects between policy makers and artists, there is also a disappearing infrastructure for arts education – or education in general – in Detroit. There are fewer arts and music enrichment courses in DPS than ever. I imagine this void, or educational disparity, is also influencing the way art is being made by black artists in Detroit.

Shortly after moving back to Detroit in 2014, I reconnected with artist and educator Senghor Reid, my middle and high school art teacher who I now consider a friend and mentor. We met shortly after a Vulture.com article titled “9 Artists on Why They Live in Detroit” was published. It featured nothing but white artists, most of who were not from Detroit. In a black city, one could imagine how this was problematic. Reid and I talked about the many other artists who could have, or *should* have, been featured, and talked for hours about the burgeoning “new school” of black artists in Detroit.

It was clear Reid was concerned about the lack of education in the city for artists, particularly those of color. The short of it was, there are little to no opportunities and resources for artists – young and old – and, in turn, no critical discourse.

With the divestment in public schools, shortage of arts offerings and hikes in MFA programs, arts education is becoming more and more privatized and intangible. Especially if you’re poor and black.

A few months ago, I talked with artist and professor Tylonn Sawyer. Although Sawyer would technically be considered as an emerging artist, he has had a presence within the Detroit art community for some time.

He has exhibited in a range of galleries throughout the city, worked at the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit for several years, and teaches at the College for Creative Studies, where he once was a student. We found ourselves in a conversation about how much smaller the black arts community in Detroit has become. Then he reminisced on the previous generation of Black artists in the city, such as Gilda Snowden, Shirley Woodson, Allie McGee, Charles McGee and their presence in and outside of galleries like The N’Namdi Center for Contemporary Art and Dell Pryor.

The consensus was that there was a greater presence of black artists then, more so, than now, and that there was a lacking pedagogy in the current ecosystem.

“In the black arts community, (education) is neglected,” he says. “I don’t know how everyone can get the same education, or be on the same level.”

He’d like to see education include arts making – including on professional side of the industry. “Even though it is art, there are still industry standards for what’s professional,” Sawyer says.

In the fall of 2015, I found myself chatting with Jova Vargas Johnson, a second-year photography student pursuing her MFA at Cranbrook Art Academy in Birmingham. She felt disconnected from her white peers and white advisors, and found herself constantly having to explain black cultural themes in her work.

Vargas was looking for a safe space to hold art critique sessions without having to appease the white male gaze – a standard in art history that plagues many MFA discourses. Artist Ash Arder had been in talks with Vargas about this as well. The three of us began to wonder what it would look like if we normalized the black gaze in a space exclusive to black artists in Detroit – a supportive space for black artists and by black artists. In a city that is about 80 percent black, this seemed imperative.

So we created the Black Artist Meetup – a convening for fellowship and feedback between emerging and established black Detroit artists. The group meets monthly, where two artists present a work for dialogue.

In a way, the meetup is an indirect solution to all of the resources that are inaccessible to black artists in the city. The collective is very grassroots; writer and Allied Media Conference program manager Morgan Willis offered up their Detroit offices for the first several gatherings. Often joined by the aforementioned Toles and Reid, photographer Bree Gant, illustrator Blair Watts, photographer and illustrator Rashaun Rucker, multidisciplinary artist Onyx Ashanti, writer Billy Mark, fiber and video artist Marcellus Armstrong, multimedia artist Reuben Telushkin and a host of others, the meetup has affirmed the value and importance of prioritizing black-centric pedagogy in an exclusive space for black artists.

The state of the contemporary black arts community in Detroit deserves to be preserved and prioritized. With a lacking infrastructure for arts support, education and even criminalization of arts making, artists respond by “creating our own.”

In the docu-series *Black Market*, *The Wire* actor Michael K. Williams opens each show with “If the system fails you, you create your own system.” This declaration is an ethos that is akin to the black arts ecosystem in Detroit. With a lacking infrastructure for arts support, education and even the criminalization of arts making, Black artists will unapologetically respond by “creating our own.”

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