

Sharp Contrasts Abound in “Bruce Weber’s Detroit” *[originally published Knight Arts blog: June 30, 2014]*

I had the privilege of viewing the DIA’s newest special photography exhibit, featuring the Detroit-based work of fashion photographer and filmmaker Bruce Weber, in the company of a team of Detroit high school students, taking a rain break from their summer job watering trees. The kids live and attend school all over the city, and provided both color commentary and an excellent jumping off point for this blogger to consider the controversial questions of what makes a Detroiter and who is “entitled” to tell Detroit’s story.

The exhibit cites Richard Avedon as one of Weber’s great influences, and that is evident in both his candid and fashion work. Weber’s body of Detroit work is at its strongest where he follows the lead set by Avedon in his landmark portrait series, “In the American West,” which captured interesting subjects on their own terms. A novice photographer myself, I find myself desiring always for a wider angle lens—the real beauty in Detroit being the poignant juxtaposition of extremes; not just the thing, but also the thing next to it.

The weakest work, to my mind, involved Weber’s attempts to force Detroit into line with fashion photography, which largely amounts to pictures of Kate Moss leaning on Detroit and literally on Detroiters, like so much scenery. I don’t presume to say who is entitled to tell Detroit’s story, but I feel entirely confident that it is not Kate Moss. Yet the alienating contrast between real, proud Detroiters and detached fashionista served, in a way, to underscore how Detroit is the ultimate anti-fashion subject. With its potent combination of Midwestern sincerity and harsh urban reality, Detroit has little room for fashion’s whimsical, glossy narratives. Regulation footwear for the tree-watering crew is steel-toed boots, and any kid on that crew can tell you, if you wear high-fashion labels in the wrong neighborhood, you might get jumped for your shoes.

So again, the power of Detroit lies in the contrast, how one of these things is not like the other ones. Food for thought, certainly, and certainly worth a look.