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# REVIEWS

## The Power of Persistence: Mighty Real/Queer Detroit

by K.A. Letts

One hundred and twenty-six artists and more than 700 pieces of art were displayed across metro Detroit during Pride Month in June 2022 as part of what's being billed as the largest exhibition of LGBTQ+ art ever. "Mighty Real/Queer Detroit" demonstrates both proof of concept and a declaration of intent—to represent, to party, to persist. Organized to celebrate the ins and outs and ups and downs of Detroit's LGBTQ+ artists over the last 77 years, from 1945 to 2022, plans are in the works to make this sprawling celebration of gender fluidity a recurring event.

The idea for the festival was initially sparked in the mind of visual and performance artist Patrick Burton by a conversation with longtime gay activist/writer Charles Alexander at the Scarab Club in 2020. "I just had this kind of surreal idea," Burton said. "I wanted to put a show together to celebrate the experience of others—to reveal the [LGBTQ+] community emerging from a desire for visibility. And to show how real and good that desire is." Bur-

ton organized and curated the multi-venue, multi-media exhibition over the course of the next two years, a process complicated and extended by the pandemic. Oh, and by the way, the number of participating galleries expanded from 5 to 17 and picked up a sponsor: the Ford Foundation.

A curatorial project of this size and scope needs careful structuring—not an easy task for a stylistically diverse group unified by its identity but not by aesthetic outlook. And Burton not only elected to show work by young contemporary artists, he also included work that honors the memory of the many gay artists who were casualties of the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s and early 1990s AND chose to posthumously honor gay artists of historic regional importance. All of this amounts to a pretty tall order.

In each venue, some aspect of gay life was showcased, from LGBTQ+ participation in the Detroit community at large to exhibitions more attuned specifically to the gay lifestyle. Rather than show the work of a given artist in a single gallery, examples of each artist's work were scat-

Matthew Papa (left), *Cluster* (Big Indian, NY), 2020. Pigment print. (Right) *Transmission No. 1* (Bearsville, NY), 2020. Pigment print. Photos by K.A. Letts.





(Left) Cyrah Dardas, *Levon*, 2021. Archival paper, earth pigment.



(Right) James Stephens, *The Utomah Portraits*, 2019. Oil on wood. Photos by K.A. Letts.

tered throughout multiple sites according to theme. So, for example, New York photographer Matthew Papa's artworks were shown at Cass Café, the Center for Creative Studies, Galerie Camille, Hatch Art, and Playground Detroit. Julie Sabit (coincidentally the longest living, working artist in the show at 91) had paintings at Anton Art Center, Collected Detroit, Galerie Camille, and Hatch Art. Leroy Foster (1925–1993), a historically significant Detroit artist, had paintings and photographs at four different galleries. Any effort to form an overview of the work of a particular artist rapidly devolved into a frustrating treasure hunt.

Maura Latty, *Thank you for Being a Friend: The Toll of Isolation on my Social Life*, 2020. Gouache on paper. Photo by K.A. Letts..



Still, the abundance and excellence of the work no doubt ended up being a heart-warming and life-affirming experience for the LGBTQ+ arts community.

Art critics' quibbles aside, the positive energy of Mighty Real/Queer Detroit was pervasive. Future iterations of the event will, as a matter of course, build upon the success of this year's inaugural effort. As Patrick Burton states in his exhibition essay:

*Queer art as a studied aspect of American art (and life) has been a comparatively recent phenomenon—and only recently celebrated. Over the past 77 years, the*

Tom Livo, *The Curlers*, 2021. Oil on matt board. Photo by Tom Livo.





Tom Livo, *Natalie on the Green Couch*, 2021. Oil on matte board. Photo by Tom Livo.

*richness of Detroit Queer life, as expressed in art, has developed in unseen and diverse ways. This exhibition is one of the first to capture the range and breadth of that development—and to give it the public space and curated attention it deserves.*

In 2022, the LGBTQ+ community finds itself at a peculiar societal crossroads. Many Americans—and members of the arts community in particular—have willingly accepted gender non-conformity. But a sizeable minority of the general public seems eager—still—to stuff gay and trans people back in the closet. It is certainly not a time for triumphalism.

But it might be appropriate to be optimistic. Photographer Matthew Papa captures the glass-half-full character of the moment well. “Achieving marriage equality in 2015 was a level of progress I never expected to see in my lifetime, but since then we’ve seen a frightening backlash against the transgender community with the aim of eras-

ing diverse voices and lives,” he says. He continues, “It’s a reminder that we need to stay vigilant and continue to fight until everyone in our community can live with freedom and dignity.”

Public events like “Mighty Real/Queer Detroit” play an important part in supporting the LGBTQ+ community through raising visibility and acceptance. Art and artists keep up the resistance and create progressive and inclusive environments that will open space for future generations.

The artworks pictured in this review are only a fraction of those shown in the exhibit. For a complete list of artists, go to <https://mrqd.org/artists/>.

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(Left) Leroy Foster, *Martini Marti (Self Portrait)*, 1945. Reproduction, inkjet print on archival matte paper, 2022. (Right) Julie Sabit, *Choice*, 2005. Oil on canvas. Photo by K.A. Letts. Photos by K.A. Letts..

