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ART

When Art Becomes a Lens Through Which Detroit Can Shine

A career-bridging selection of art by Michael Luchs and a jaw-dropping installation of new works by Tal R feel authentically Detroit.

Sarah Rose Sharp July 5, 2018



Michael Luchs: *Fictitious Character* at the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit, installation view (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

DETROIT — If, on occasion, I have taken issue with the [Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit](#) for weak curation or content that fails to connect with its immediate surrounding audience, it is only because I've seen what it is capable of when it gets everything right. The current summer exhibition [Fictitious Character](#), a career-bridging selection of works by Michael Luchs side-by-side with a jaw-dropping installation of new works by [Tal R](#), is a resounding success, conceptually and aesthetically. It is a

shining example of how great MOCAD can be when it becomes a lens through which Detroit can shine.



Michael Luchs: *Fictitious Character*, installation view, "Untitled Rabbits" (circa 1980) (foreground); "Untitled Frogs" (circa 1994) (background)

Michael Luchs is more or less the platonic ideal image of the Detroit creative spirit in the wild and untamed Cass Corridor — once the rough-and-tumble area situated just south of [Wayne State University](#), and home to a coterie of interdisciplinary creatives who gave birth to Detroit's highest-profile homegrown contemporary art, the Cass Corridor Movement, most active from the 1960s to the '80s.

MOCAD is situated in the footprint of the Cass Corridor, but current development has rebranded the area

"Midtown," and as it is among the fastest-rising neighborhoods, one must squint to find any trace of the original grit that for decades made the Cass Corridor a notoriously sketchy place to hang. That grit is evident and dynamically alive in Luchs's work, mostly large-scale paintings and drawings, and small to medium sculptural creations, assembled from and in conversation with the scrap and salvage that was the bedrock of Detroit's waning infrastructure for many years.



"Rabbits models" (2017-18) by Michael Luchs, installation view.

The works on display span more than half a long career, but Luchs is remarkably consistent in its subject matter. His figures are mostly rabbits and frogs, sometimes wielding subliminal guns, often caught up in an abstracting whirl of esoteric lines or assemblage materials. Luchs scrap-wood sculptures look like the [nkisi spirit-objects](#) that appear in villages throughout the Congo Basin in Central Africa, pitted with nails and ringed with wire, featuring ghostly puffs of spray paint in shapes that are both extremely amorphous and somehow inarguably rabbits. Not since *Watership Down* have rabbits carried the weight of such violent and vulnerable premonitions, but Luchs's figures are nonetheless sprightly.



Still capture of "Images"(2002) by Kathryn Brackett Luchs

Luchs is a famously reclusive artist, having retreated from Detroit several decades ago in favor of his remote home-studio life in Lewiston, Michigan, with his wife, artist Kathryn Brackett Luchs. When one reaches out to the artist, it is always Brackett Luchs who takes the call, so it is therefore fitting that these works are presented in the form of a 73-minute artistic documentary, *Images*, made by Brackett Luchs, that collages together her Super 8 footage of old Detroit, Michael Luchs at work in his studio, and more recent footage and narration by the artist on a range of topics relevant to the Cass Corridor aesthetic.

"Detroit is a physical place," he philosophizes, over silent footage of himself as a young man at work in an industrial studio space. "It's a violent place. It's not a place that people who are fragile ought to be."



Four out of five in an early 2000s portfolio, "Untitled Rabbit," installation view

Luchs is enjoying a resurgence of interest of late, spurred by last year's terrific [Cass Corridor: Connecting Times](#) summer series presented by [Simone De Sousa Gallery](#), and curated by painter [Nancy Mitchnick](#) — another Cass Corridor holdover. Mitchnick had a [solo exhibition of her large-scale paintings at MOCAD](#) in 2016 and, together with the program at Simone De Sousa, it formed a powerful moment of rediscovery for one of Detroit's major contemporary art movements.

If Luchs sets the bar high, Copenhagen-based artist Tal R (Tal Shlomo Rosenzweig) answers with a series of massive paintings and a newsprint publication, collectively titled : [this is not Detroit](#), in the MOCAD's main gallery. The strict yellows and reds punctuating Luchs's palette are countered by oceans of blues in Tal R's. Despite the exhibition's declaration, each of the seven huge, multi-canvas, mural-like works on display takes inspiration from a different Detroit neighborhood, and the motifs and ambiance of the exhibition feel very much like Detroit, indeed.



: *this is not Detroit* by Tal R, installation view



The newspaper publication produced by MOCAD of works by Tal R

According to the exhibition guide, which publishes an entire set of smaller works in newsprint weekly format, the title alludes to Tal R's process, based entirely on "the artist's fantasy of Detroit," rather than actual visits to

the neighborhoods. As a premise, it feels insidious — to bring in an Israeli artist, by way of Copenhagen, to impose a vision of Detroit on itself as "a meditation on dream places" — but the results are difficult to dispute. Whether or not the giant painting of a horse-cheetah-zebra being ridden by a puppet-like figure has anything to do with the Delray neighborhood whose name it bears, it feels very much at home in Detroit. The ad hoc patchwork Tal R used to create these large canvases on site —including one made of discarded sails from a cargo ship upon which he traveled to the North Pole — the symbols that punctuate them, and the primitive rendering of the subjects all jive with Detroit, a city that has, for decades, visually rejuvenated itself through adaptation and repurpose.



: *this is not Detroit* by Tal R, installation view

These two shows work remarkably well together; at first, catching a cross section of a Tal R mural through a doorway, I wasn't sure it was separate from the Michael Luchs exhibition. It is a neat syncopation of visual rhythm, offhand figuration, and multi-media blending that delivers a vision that feels unique, challenging, and deeply, authentically Detroit.

Michael Luchs: Fictitious Character and : this is not Detroit by Tal R continue at the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit (MOCAD) (4454 Woodward Ave, Detroit) through July 29.