

Envisioning Detroit as a Postindustrial Boomtown

by Sarah Rose Sharp on June 4, 2015



Still from one of Melanie Manos's headlight feeds in 'Detroit Boom City' (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

DETROIT — [Detroit Boom City](#) (DBC) is an ambitious installation orchestrated by Atlanta's [Dashboard Co-Op](#) by invitation of the [Ford Motor Company Fund](#), featuring some of Detroit's most innovative artists: Mitch Cope, Graem Whyte, Osman Kahn, Chido Johnson, Sabrina Nelson, Ingrid LaFleur, Scott Hocking, Antonio Cosme, and Melanie Manos, joined by visiting artists Michi Meko, Jason Peters, and The Young Never Sleep. The theme of the installation is “social entrepreneurship” — a challenging subject in a city that has come to symbolize the ravages of postindustrial capitalism.

“We spent eight months doing research in Detroit — meeting with artists, arts administrators, business owners, leaders and residents of various neighborhoods — to put it all together,” said Dashboard co-founder Beth Malone of the process. “It was important to us to hire local companies and talent to help with the exhibition: printers, food trucks, builders, technicians, DJs; we bought all our wine at Cost Plus in Eastern Market and hired five smarties to run gallery hours when we eventually came back to Atlanta. Out-of-town artists stayed at [the Corktown small business incubator] PonyRide and [Hamtramck’s art gallery and residency empire] Popp’s Packing.”



Graem Whyte’s “Popp’s Mobile Sauna,” with a view of the Alps

The result, ironically, feels less like a commentary on business and entrepreneurship and more like a demonstration of the concepts of leisure and identity in the context of austerity, salvage, and waning surplus. A great deal of the work on display at DBC is comprised of repurposed materials — once the entrepreneurial components of the auto industry, now the waste of its exigencies — much of which was found

on-site in the Pickle Factory building; owner and Detroit native Brad Ellis generously turned over the contents as creative fodder for the show. As though having learned a lesson from the errors of industry, the DBC artists have bent these materials to focus on the social far more than the entrepreneurial. All over *Detroit Boom City* are opportunities to congregate, mingle, or relax — as with [Ingrid LaFleur](#)'s “In Paradisium,” a guided meditation that draws on her Afrofuturistic leanings and welcomes visitors to walk on a patchy strip of grass in front of a grid of sorted car parts in wire containers. Or [Graem Whyte](#)'s “Popp's Mobile Sauna,” a literal sauna built into a converted van overlooking a photographic view of the Swiss Alps, and attended to at the opening by the [Tzarinas of the Plane](#), a performance art duo comprised of Whyte's wife and Popp's cohort, artist Faina Lerman, and the hilarious Bridget Michael.



Michi Meko's "Damn, I'm Here Now" (click to enlarge)

Visiting artists get in on the recreational vibe, with [Michi Meko](#)'s "Damn, I'm here now." converting found objects from the urban and rural landscapes of Detroit into a soul food cart — a reflection of his Southern sensibilities, but right at home in a city that historically drew massive population segments from the rural South. Likewise, [Jason Peters](#) created "Once Was, Always Will Be," a sculptural fortress of recycled and disassembled auto parts and other salvage. This installation is remarkably well balanced, converting "junk" into tight, almost precious arrangements and resulting in something you might find on a postindustrial mini-golf course ... if a society after economic collapse still had time for mini-golf (which, given the 2013 [Urban Putt-Putt project](#) at the Imagination Station, it does).

Even [Scott Hocking](#)'s installation, "Narcissus Inc.," which assembles artifacts found on-site at the Pickle Factory and adjoining properties into a kind of lair — half hideout, half anthropology museum, all Hocking — juxtaposes the concepts of leisure and industry. Hocking likens this environment to "this office scene that felt part like an Elk's Club, and also mysterious, like a Masonic lodge, and playing off the idea of a man's club. You're the CEO of some company, you're working in this office, but you've got this interest in nature, you go out into nature and you shoot things."

When we consider the high cost we pay in American society for "making a living" — whether as entrepreneurs or otherwise — our leisure time becomes the ostensible reward for the time and energy we devote to our labor. Profound, then, to see *Detroit Boom City* making downtime, playtime, and innovative art possible in an economic nadir. It suggests that industry may not be as necessary, in the end, as creativity.



Scott Hocking's "Narcissus, Inc."



Mitch Cope's "After Aris"

Detroit Boom City continues at the Pickle Factory (2120 Bellevue Street, Detroit) through June 12.