

On the 80th anniversary of the DIA's Rivera Court

# Museum show misrepresents Detroit's crisis and history

By Tim Rivers  
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An exhibition of 14 mural panels entitled *The Past is Present*, commemorating the completion eighty years ago, in March 1933, of Diego Rivera's *Detroit Industry* frescoes, opened September 4 at the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit (MOCAD). MOCAD is housed in a 22,000-square-foot former auto dealership, located just two blocks from the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA) where Rivera's work occupies the central courtyard.

For the current exhibition, funded by grants from the Andy Warhol and Taubman Foundations, curator Jens Hoffman selected 17 artists from different parts of the world to prepare designs based on images drawn from city archives of the last eight decades. There are some original images, but the majority were prepared by simply enlarging a photograph, postcard, newspaper or typed report.

The museum hired local artists to transfer, with acrylic paint or collage, the commissioned designs to 14 wood panels, sized 9' x 14', which were erected in the exhibition space. "The paintings appear on temporary walls," said Mr. Hoffmann, who is also deputy director of the Jewish Museum in New York where he oversees exhibitions, collections and public programs. "We came with some preconceptions as outsiders about the UAW, strikes, rebellions. We saw the city as a symbol of how the American dream turned into the American nightmare."

He picked artists with different styles for the exercise, "some playful, some photorealistic, some documentary." In the catalogue that accompanies the show, Mr. Hoffman writes, "These new murals, designed by artists who, like Rivera, bring an outsider's perspective to the history of Detroit, depict key events that have taken place here since 1933."

Rivera was a revolutionary socialist. He came to Detroit in the depth of the Great Depression to represent the world's industrial powerhouse artistically and test his understanding before a mass audience. Before beginning to paint, the great Mexican muralist devoted himself to a study of the city, its inhabitants and the productive, or in some cases, destructive, processes in which they were engaged. As a graphic depiction of the essential character of modern life, his may be unmatched, before or since. See: "Eighty years of the Diego Rivera murals at the Detroit Institute of Arts ." There are serious problems revealed in the exhibition, that speak to the difficulties that contemporary artists have in coming to terms with social life and history.

A number of exhibits that refer to workers' struggles omit central issues. Artist William E. Jones, for example, enlarged a famous photograph of Ford company thugs attacking union organizers in *Battle of the Overpass, 1937*, which was painted by Lisa Poszywak . Citing the wide distribution of the original photo, the catalogue states, "Partially as a result of this publicity, the union increased its membership and eventually grew into a cornerstone organization fighting for workers rights."

This leaves out the evolution and ultimate fate of the UAW, not a small point. Auto workers who have witnessed the union over the last thirty years collaborating ever more closely with the companies to close factories, destroy jobs, cut wages and destroy retirement benefits will wonder what organization is under discussion.

No panel in the show addresses the catastrophic effects of the integration of the trade unions into the corporations—a process accelerated by the UAW's witch-hunt of communists and socialists in the late 1940s and early 1950s. The union defends the profit system and the Democratic Party, a party of big business. During the current bankruptcy crisis, Detroit union officials have publicly endorsed the plan of Kevyn Orr, the city's unelected emergency manager, to sell the precious holdings of the DIA.

Other panels at MOCAD recall the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM), a radical organization of mostly black workers, in the 1960s and 1970s; the bitter strike of local newspapers in 1995-96; and the recent D15 protests at local fast food outlets. For the most part, however, the show does not probe beneath the surface of events.

A postcard image of polar bears at the zoo was enlarged to draw an analogy between bears and workers as endangered species, and another piece, entitled "SCRAPCITY," places the city skyline against a background of auto parts and other debris. A billboard advertises bankruptcy filings for \$500, above neat rows of vegetables in an urban garden. A crossword puzzle made up of words, such as, for example, "setback," "revenue" and "decline," forms a ghost-like image against a black background.

Racial antagonisms have been encouraged and exploited historically to divide and dominate the oppressed. Because several of the show's pieces that deal with these questions appear apart from any historical or social context, the viewer is encouraged to believe that race and not class is the main division in society and

Detroit's history.

Although in a minority, there are some thoughtful, and troubling, images in *The Past is Present*. One panel bears the title *The Other America*, in honor of a speech with that title delivered by Martin Luther King Jr. at Grosse Pointe [Michigan] High School, on March 14, 1968, only a few weeks before his assassination.

In his address, King noted that there were “literally two Americas,” divided along class lines. “Every city in our country,” he suggested, “has this kind of dualism, this schizophrenia, split at so many parts, and so every city ends up being two cities rather than one.” In one America, “millions of people have the milk of prosperity and the honey of equality flowing before them. ... But there is another America. This other America has a daily ugliness about it that transforms the buoyancy of hope into the fatigue of despair.”

Designed by Harrell Fletcher of Portland State University and Katherine Ball, the image inspired by King's speech is an enlarged facsimile of a confidential report by two FBI informants who had been following the civil rights leader.

The threat of another imperialist war for oil is the subject of a design by Colombian-born artist Nicolas Consuegra. The image of the rising sun from Japan's World War II flag forms the backdrop for a 1959 Cadillac Eldorado, as warplanes jet off in all directions, Richard Nixon confers with Leonid Brezhnev and cartoon characters appear to blow their brains out with gas pump nozzles. With the title, *Of such machines, dreams are made...*, the artist seems to be warning the viewer to reject the war drive, not to be taken in.

On the other hand, the most disturbing aspect of the show comes in a catalogue paragraph, apparently meant to summarize the last eighty years of Detroit's history. Although in a somewhat cautious manner, the statement accepts and endorses the program of the city's dictatorial emergency manager Orr, which threatens to destroy the social rights of the working class and includes the possible sale of artwork from the DIA and the closure of the museum itself.

“Crippled by more than \$18 billion in debt,” the catalogue asserts, “mostly attributable to a diminished tax base, high healthcare and pension costs, poor management, and continually high costs of city services, Detroit became the largest American city ever to declare bankruptcy.” The financial oligarchs who have been at war with the working class here and everywhere for decades—closing factories, gutting schools and city services, undermining culture and the museum itself—could hardly have found a more accommodating advocate.

The catalogue continues, “The prospect puts many of the city's resources and obligations in crisis: from the art collection of the Detroit Institute of Arts, which could be auctioned off for revenue, to employee pensions, which may be drastically slashed.”

But Mr. Hoffman's pamphlet suggests that there may be a bright side to the destruction of Detroit. “While the decision is definitely a blow to the city,” it says, “some see it as a chance for a new start, and, indeed, the only solution that might ensure the city's long-term survival.”

This reporter spoke to a number of visitors, as well as the curator, at the exhibition's opening.

Ralph Rinaldi, a local artist who attended Wayne State University in Detroit and knew members of DRUM, was indignant at the threat to the DIA. “Why don't they sell one of the casinos?” he asked. “Or take [pizza billionaire] Mike Ilitch and start with him.”

Some \$250 million in public funds has been earmarked for an arena to house the Detroit Red Wings hockey team, owned by Ilitch. “They are not going to tax Ilitch,” Rinaldi continued. “There are a lot of sacred cows in the city of Detroit who are not supposed to be touched at all: Peter Karmanos, Mike Ilitch, Roger Penske [all billionaires]. What about the ethical, moral bankruptcy of the system? Of the whole thing? How far-reaching is this? The corporations want to make an example of this whole area.”

Rinaldi felt that an exhibition commemorating 80 years of the murals should have been held at the DIA. “There are still people who do not want to have the Rivera murals at the DIA,” he said. “Rivera identified with the working man. He had a hell of a time when he was here.”

Rejecting the identity politics expressed in much of the show, the artist continued, “It always has been a class question.” Regarding the implications of the recent history of the city, especially the assault on education and cultural life, he said, “They totally destroyed the school system. That didn't happen overnight. It has taken more than a decade.”

Heidi graduated with a fine arts degree from the College for Creative Studies, across the street from the DIA. She is devoted to the great museum and works as an assistant for special events at MOCAD. “It is ridiculous that they even think of the possibility of doing something like selling art from the DIA,” she said. “I cannot imagine doing anything other than art. Children go to the DIA all the time. They are already taking art away from the schools and classrooms. To take away the museum would be really devastating.”

The exhibition will be on view until the beginning of January.

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