4 ARTISTS

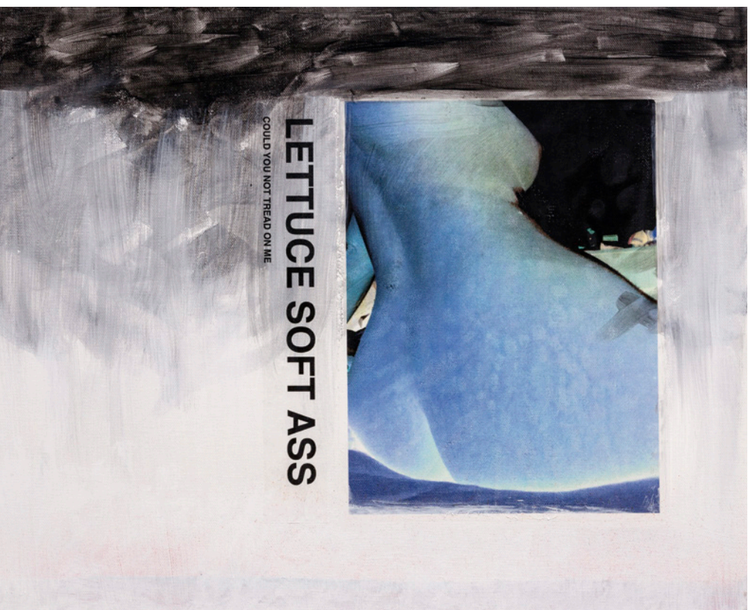
Four Detroit-based artists selected by Elysia Borowy-Reeder and Zeb Smith (executive director and exhibitions manager respectively) at MOCAD, the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit

ALIVIA ZIVICH

By Lola Young

Alivia Zivich intends to capture, through both her personal work and her gallery space, the perpetual 'grey area' of human experience. Ever diverse and experimental, her art is unnervingly entertaining and resists clear definition. It's with a similar tone that she sheds light on Detroit's artistic community, one that exists in a city that's simultaneously fading and escalating, fighting and embracing both its past and future. Zivich asks us to look beyond the hype and romanticism and see the place as it is. Not an isolated no-man's-land, but part of the world. Not a recent hub of creativity, but somewhere that has bred artists for decades.

Lola Young: Your work is so varied, what ties it all together?
Alivia Zivich: I want to take images out of the simple visual realm into a broader context. For me being a studio artist was too interior, insular, so I started to draw more from DIY culture and did things like start up a record label and get involved with the mechanical processes and analogue equipment involved in video production.
LY: Do the same ideas run through everything you do?
AZ: Recently I've moved from appropriating images from popular culture, to appropriating myself. For example looking through my own archive of thousands of photos on my phone, like a Google Image result, questioning if any of them mean anything more than that.
LY: I heard you collect the text in your work in the same way?
AZ: Yeah I get my text from things I've heard, and give it a sound-byte slogan quality using commercial aesthetics.
LY: Some of the messages could be seen as ambiguous, is that your intention?
AZ: Definitely. I try to stay in a grey area, I'm not interested in answering questions. My gallery is called WhatPipeline, named for the idea of things passing through.
LY: So what are you focused on now?
AZ: Most of my attention lies with my gallery at the moment.
LY: Has that taken over from your own work?
AZ: Yes, but the harsh reality of business also informs my personal work. My recent show at Cave opened with a photograph of a sign saying, "The Customer is always right." That's ominous, but also amusing. I took the photo in an abandoned printing press shop where the customer had been so right the business had to shut down – a warning of the way we heedlessly follow market demands.
LY: There's a lot of hype right now surrounding Detroit's young artist community, how do you feel about it?
AZ: It's two-sided. Detroit's got a lot going on and it brings more people to the gallery. But it is tough to see what's been here for years not get its due recognition. We want to show artwork done here decades ago that hasn't
been seen.
LY: I was speaking to someone from Detroit earlier about the issue of outsider artists being commissioned for murals in Detroit – should that be an opportunity for Detroit artists instead?
AZ: It's a balance. Someone wanted to do a Detroit Biennial and just feature Detroit artists, but what good is that for them? Unless your work is placed in an international context you're operating on a very local level. We want to place everyone on the bigger playing field.
LY: I read WhatPipeline is considered an experimental, avant garde gallery. Was that your intention?
AZ: Maybe in the way most of our shows are collaborative. Other commercial galleries that focus on sales can't do that. There's a big non profit/community arts trend in Detroit, and the funding was shaping the dialogue of the art that got produced. We wanted to intervene in that process. We'd rather have a non-compromising space.
LY: Is there an energy about Detroit that invites collaboration?
AZ: Yeah without a doubt. People were here for freedom, being able to create work without judgments or criteria – the terms 'Wild West' and 'Lawless' were thrown about. Obviously a lot of people are frustrated with the change that's happening, but it's still not like other places.



LY: There are multiple parts to it.
AZ: Certain areas are being developed so rent is higher and there's not the same freedom. But Detroit went through serious political disenfranchisement where voters had no power, on top of this overall environment of burnt out buildings, that kind of thing affects people. So seeing redevelopment and places getting attention is great.

There was an old brutalist building that was torn down to build a new school and people were up in arms about it. But the school now has really modern facilities, like a science lab. We can't hold things in this state of amber preservation for the sake of having aesthetic ruins. There are people that have to live their life here. People call it change but it's more like a series of losses and gains, and we're yet to see where that balances out. We're living through what *might* be a re-birth, but I doubt they'll be a million people moving to Detroit anytime soon.
LY: Are you commenting on this with your work and the gallery?
AZ: Yes, Detroit is this focused and easy-to-read version of what's happening in the US in a larger way – it's the result of the past 50 years of US policy. The experience of America is one big grey area. There are fantastic things and a terrible persisting system, I've had to learn to respond, sometimes by laughing at it, and at other times really dealing with the serious aspects.
LY: What's next for WhatPipeline?
AZ: We're showing at NADA Miami for the first time this December. It's out of our comfort zone but we'll meet people we would never meet in Detroit, it's become important for us to do that. Also next year we are going to focus on representing women artists, which is great.
LY: What about young artists?
AZ: Yes, I would never want to cut myself off from young artists. But I actually find it interesting to work with middle aged artists with steady careers who haven't hit it big, coming in mid-career and seeing where these people are at. New galleries often focus too much on new artists. I'm working with my peer group, I think that's important.

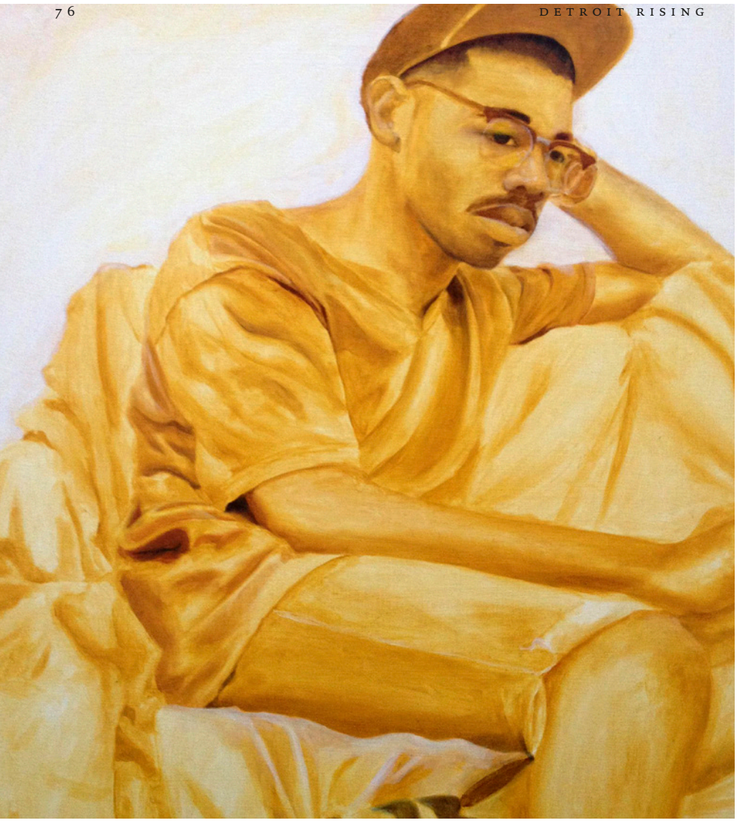
opposite
LETTUCE SOFT ASS, ALIVIA ZIVICH, 2014
above
RAINCOAT, NICK JASKEY, 2015

NICK JASKEY

By Luisa Le Voguer Couyet

As a young skater Nick Jaskey digested the Detroit cityscape at a different pace. He noticed there was a distinct lack of communication unique to Detroit, a divide that separated people from one another while travelling; essential modes of transport became vehicles for keeping people from interacting like they do in other cities.

Today, Jaskey captures photos of his daily surroundings and uses them as a starting point for his abstract paintings. An ability to slow down and focus on the nuances of his hometown gives his work a rich depth that tells his story, and that of his beloved birthplace.
Luisa Le Vogeur Couyet: When would you say you first became an artist?
Nick Jaskey: It started with me taking notice of my surroundings through skateboarding and graffiti, all the subtleties that were happening, examining things that people typically don't see on a day to day basis.
LLVC: Can you tell me about your process?
NJ: I carry a camera with me day-to-day, the stuff that jumps out at me and the stuff that I want to capture are what I've been calling 'signs of life'. Detroit is different than London and New York, we're in a major city but people don't necessarily communicate with each other. Everyone is in a car or perhaps on a bus, therefore there's not much verbal dialogue happening between people. I've always been interested in that. It caused me to dig into my surroundings and find little clues about what was happening around me, about the rest of the people in the city. I document these things then through painting I rework them into an abstract form.
LLVC: How would you describe the art community in Detroit today?
NJ: I think it's really strong right now, there're people from all over the place working on a lot of different projects and I feel really lucky to know a lot of them personally. It's all in my backyard right now, when before it felt like I was kind of living on the moon.
LLVC: Did you grow up in Detroit?
NJ: I've been in the city properly for about fourteen or fifteen years now, I grew up in the northern suburbs. I've spent my whole life here and have been in the city for as long as I can remember.
LLVC: How has it changed since you were younger?
NJ: It was like time stood still for almost 30 years, and it hasn't been until the last few years that things are visually starting to change. Before that you would hear of projects happening that wouldn't get finished, a lot of ideas and hopes and dreams that didn't come to be. But for whatever reason in the last few years people have been taking interest in



the city and find it more manageable to work with than others in the US. A lot is changing really fast right now.
LLVC: Do you think the change is a good thing?
NJ: It's good and bad. With new people coming and businesses opening we're getting some new conveniences that we didn't have before, things like grocery stores. I just hope that whoever comes here who wants to make this their home takes the time to understand that there have been people here for a really long time, a lot of people call it their home no matter how it may look or seem and it's not a total free-for-all.
LLVC: How strongly do you feel like Detroit is reflected in your work?
NJ: When I was a teenager I moved to New York City, I was making paintings and shooting photographs more casually. A couple of weeks after September 11 happened I moved back to Detroit to reconnect and restart and just gather my thoughts. It was immediate, my connection to Detroit and my love for the city, it was very clear how inspired I was by this place, it's a huge part of my work. It can be a quite difficult environment to survive in, but when you're so passionate about something you're invested in it, you want to take care of it.
LLVC: Is most of your work left untitled?
NJ: Yeah. When people see my paintings some of them reference specific things and places that are in the city and others give me totally different interpretations, which I think is great. I like abstract work because it's not limiting and it doesn't put the viewer in a box. For me personally I know what the work is and I know where it comes from and I know why I'm making it or why I feel the need to create it. For everybody else it's their thing and I don't want to limit what that might be.

ELIJAH FORD
By Alex James Taylor

California-born artist Elijah Ford paints from his imagination to canvas. Plundering tropes from classical art, Ford juxtaposes this imagery within a contemporary context while taking influence from his environment – having recently moved to Detroit his work has adapted to reflect a new landscape.

Conceptualising subconscious instincts: love, time, courage, and freedom, his fantasy aesthetic captures a transient world, one neighbouring the surrealist and expressionist greats whilst telling their own idiosyncratic story.
Alex James Taylor: How would you describe your aesthetic?
Elijah Ford: I like to call myself a surrealist, I like to draw a lot and I try to actualise these visions in my head, giving them a more serious take and then turning them into paintings. I like to deal with themes that exist on ground level, but I'm also the kind of person whose head is always in the clouds.
AJT: From a young age were you always painting and drawing or did it suddenly click one day?
EF: It was more inherited from my father, he paints. I grew up around his work and he dealt with Kenyan themes. That was cool, he's a very realistic painter. I wanted to sort of explore the other side of the spectrum and be very dreamlike, to push the boundaries of reality.
AJT: You recently moved to Detroit after growing up in California, how much does your environment influence your art?
EF: Greatly, I didn't really start loosening up with art until I moved here about a year and a half ago. Growing up on the East Coast and visiting Detroit for the first time, you learn that the world might not be quite so clean and perfect as California is. I think I just got a little bit looser and became less hard on myself, soon I was exploring abstract work, destroying the canvas – things like that. There's less pressure here in being away from school and there's also just a calm atmosphere. It's more about production, really.
AJT: Why did you decide to move there?
EF: I met this guy in grad school called Mike Demps and became like a mentor for me, as well as a friend. I was looking to get outside of California and for a good place to start my art career, and Mike linked me with his friend West Taylor in Detroit, he told me about all the resources that Detroit has right now as far as art goes, as well as material and space. Being out here – having a studio space and an apartment – it's a real blessing. It's a fun city too, Detroit has an amazing spirit and everyone's so welcoming. Today I'm helping refurbish a house that got bombed out by a firebomb a few years ago, there're restoring it and asked for some help.

CATIE NEWELL
By Tempe Nakiska

Step into the world of Catie Newell and you're likely to end up in total darkness. Working at the intersection of architecture and art, she tests the effects of light – or lack thereof – in the reconfiguration of familiar, domestic spaces. Her process is hands on, large scale and charged with feeling, an ongoing riff on cultural context and environmental meaning.
Tempe Nakiska: Your work exists on a pretty epic level, why is this?
Catie Newell: I was drawn to installations as soon as I understood that this was a medium that even architecture could communicate through. For me it felt like a fitting way to work with materials, to make temporal spaces that acknowledge and work with the area they occupy. In grad school I was exposed to that mixture of art and architecture, so I'm balancing myself between both realms.
TN: You're a trained architect and aside from your work as an artist you are Assistant Professor of Architecture at the University of Michigan. How much does your architecture background feed into your works today?
CN: There's always a really strong focus on how somebody occupies a space, or maybe how that space is charged with the materials working in different ways. A lot of my work has commentary on existing spaces within the city of Detroit, a narrative surrounding violent or unsettling things happening to our architecture, like arson, theft or abandonment. I try to take on the things that I feel architecture doesn't directly talk about. For me it's about promoting conversations that I think architecture should ignite. The training has made me very sensitive to materials, spaces and the implications something has in an urban setting.
TN: Can you take me through your process?
CN: There's usually a type of space that my brain is really thinking about for whatever reason, like with *Salvaged Landscape* there are ideas relating to arson. *Weatherizing* was done at a time when I was really interested in the fact that everything in Detroit was boarded up, creating these huge dark volumes inside the houses. Then I mess around with the materials to create something unique, there tends to be a lot of temperature change in a lot of my work, like melting acrylic, or using heat to manipulate materials, changing its attributes. The process features a space and an issue, both rolling around in my brain and then eventually they start feeding into each other and a concept builds.
TN: There's a real connection between emotion and physicality in your work, do you feel a strong emotional connection to Detroit as a city?
CN: I'm originally from the Detroit suburbs, near Pontiac, which is just twenty minutes outside of the city, I live in Downtown now. With my work I often feel like I'm tending to a space, mourning for it. I definitely think that my strong connection with the city helps my work, I feel a part of it, I've watched it evolve and struggle through so many problems: racially, socially, financially.
TN: Where is your studio base?
CN: At my house at the moment, but my studio is the site that I'm working on at any given time. I used to say that my studio was my pick-up truck [laughs], I'd be on the site with my tool kit and hard hat, I'd literally work there, draw there, create there, and then go home. My apartment just always ends up being full of whatever I'm working on.
TN: There seem to be quite a number of artists sticking around and contributing to Detroit now, what's your take? Does it feel stable?
CN: There's been a big shift, there's so much going on – so many events, and an energy is really growing. We all get on really well and people collaborate a lot, so I'd say that right now there's a strong group. I do get nervous when there's a lot of new people coming in, that it thins this community out. I'm also very introverted creatively, I like to go somewhere and work in silence, so when there's a sudden inundation of people I'm a bit like, "No, no." Now there are a lot of entrepreneurs coming here, in setting up a coffee house, or a weird diner, or record shop, it sometimes feels like people are coming here to do things driven by business as opposed to art, I feel like the pulse is changing.
TN: Do you plan on staying in Detroit?
CN: I have these dreams that the work I do will take me all over the world, and through my work I can explore. But I want to have a base and a strong foundation where I can always work on my projects, so I'll always have a place here.

opposite
SELF PORTRAIT, ELIJAH FORD, 2013
below
SALVAGED LANDSCAPE, CATIE NEWELL, 2011