Bruce Weber's Detroit: "Projection" as truth?

"I was really thinking just of my picture, instead of what life is really like"

Seraphine Collins
8 August 2014

Bruce Weber's *Detroit,* an exhibition of photographs, opened June 20 at the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA) and will run through September 7. The images on display were captured during two visits the photographer made to Detroit, one in 2006, and the other this past year. According to the exhibit's accompanying placard, the collection focuses on an exploration of the city, its vitality and the vitality of its residents.

The exhibit opened against the backdrop of a city consumed with ongoing bankruptcy proceedings that began in July 2013, when Detroit filed the largest municipal bankruptcy in history. The Detroit Institute of Arts has been a focal point for the city's unelected emergency manager, Kevyn Orr, and the bankruptcy court, as they developed and are now moving to implement the Grand Bargain to restructure the city's debt. This plan means the privatization and transference of a cultural institution owned by the public since 1919 into the hands of corporate-funded foundations.

Weber is a renowned American fashion photographer and occasional filmmaker who rose to prominence in the early 1980s after shooting ad campaigns for clothing companies such as Calvin Klein. In 2006, Weber's curiosity about Detroit propelled him to do an on-location shoot with supermodel Kate Moss.

Upon entering the gallery, the viewer first encounters a series of portraits featuring Jeremy Marek. Marek, a native Southwest Detroit resident, age 17 at the time the first series of photographs were taken, was hired to model by Weber when spotted by a staff member in an anti-gun music video produced by Marek and peers involved at the Detroit Hispanic Development Corporation. The subject's tailored black Gucci suit, accessorized with fedora and expensive bling, coupled with his posture, unsmiling face, and furrowed brow, act together to suggest the swagger of a young mobster with a vintage vibe. Weber is known for favoring black and white photography, which is used here, and he commands it well.

Continuing on, Miss Moss enters Weber's universe. She is posed seductively with Marek as he possessively drapes his arms around her neck; she reclines on a beanbag in a skirt, legs lazily spread; she struts at a barbershop in short shorts with tall heels. She is Kate Moss selling sex and fashion well, the way you would expect a seasoned professional of her stature to do, and Detroit is an afterthought to the characters she plays in various settings. Her persona is strong, and though Detroit natives are cast alongside her, they play the role of extras, her star power the focal point every time.

The exhibition also features several portraits of prominent Michiganders: predictably, Madonna, Iggy Pop and Francis Ford Coppola, along with veteran "left" activist Grace Lee Boggs, about whom the WSWS has had a few things to say, including this.

Before exiting the gallery, visitors encounter a darkened room set up for viewing a series of short films, wherein an odd juxtaposition arises. The first film is of rescued dogs—not rescued from or living in Detroit—owned by affluent Los Angeles-based, "dog trainer to the stars," Omar Von Muller, who have been taught to skateboard. The dogs are funny and endearing, but what is their function in an exhibit

framed as a celebration or treatment of life in Detroit?

The answer to this is suggested when the animals fade and Jeremy Marek appears on the screen in the short *You Get me?*, wherein he tells an interviewer about a dog he once owned. When it had become too difficult for Jeremy to afford dog food, he had given it away to a friend. A month later he inquired about the dog, only to discover the animal had starved to death in his friend's possession. This moment is the most poignant and truthful one that viewers will experience, and instead of being showcased as the piece of the puzzle that makes Jeremy three-dimensional and interesting, its placement seems like a public service announcement for surrendering animals to shelters.

When asked by *i-D* magazine, in a June interview, how he had decided what work to include when curating the exhibition, Weber remarked, "I like exhibitions that express something about the artist, so I hope that mine does." His viewpoint—that of an outsider—is indeed what the local viewer will perceive. Prior to his first visit to Detroit, Weber "imagined it would be like a musical, with everybody singing and dancing down the street." There is the risk that those merely visiting the DIA, who have little or no personal relationship to the city with which to contradict such fanciful thinking, will encounter the photographer's narrative and will exit having internalized what is largely a falsehood.

Weber's tendency toward leaving a heavy fingerprint in his work can be traced back to the 1960s when he studied under preeminent photographer Lisette Model at the New School for Social Research in New York. Model's guiding motto was that "photography starts with the projection of the photographer, his understanding of life and himself, into the picture." While it is inevitable that an artist will be present in his or her work to a differing degree, this philosophy takes that truth and makes it an active, purposely focal element of the image-making process, altering the world viewers are left to experience and subordinating it to the artist's impressions.

That the exhibit is sponsored by Condé Nast is hard to miss, as the sponsorship is prominently featured on exhibition signage and the museum's website, and in advertisements for the show, including a series of billboards throughout the metro Detroit area. Condé Nast is a media conglomerate that specializes in publications such as *Vogue* and *GQ*, catering for the most part to the tastes and interests of the wealthier layers of society, on the pages of which Weber made a name for himself.

The photographer may have had decent impulses in coming to Detroit and training his camera on the city. But what history and knowledge does he bring to such a project? The visual evidence suggests that what he brings is very limited.

Is it negligent of Weber, for example, to have been in the city in 2013, building a body of work to be entitled "Detroit," and not document—or even refer to—the assault on the population (and the DIA itself) that continues to rage? The work here is aesthetically consistent with his other collections, but an opportunity has definitely been missed.

According to the exhibition materials, Weber wanted to focus on the city's strengths and "dynamic evolution," instead of the "ruin porn" narrative all too commonly promoted. Clearly, however, any existing or potential fighting spirit in the working class (reflected, of course, in the DIA's own Diego Rivera murals) was not meant to be showcased by the photographer.

Instead, he chose to set up mostly posed images of residents removed from their lives. He photographs people in their Sunday best, both literally and figuratively. A study of church fashion is a valid element of the cultural story of any city, but when this dressing up becomes the focus of a project such as Weber's, a skewed chapter is entered into history. This one contributes to the commercialization and branding of Detroit, the adorable underdog that hustles harder.