

ARTFORUM

Maya Stovall

CRANBROOK ART MUSEUM

In Detroit, there are no bodegas, just liquor stores. This is part of why Maya Stovall's 2014–video series “Liquor Store Theatre”—eighteen installments of which are currently on view at the Cranbrook Art Museum—could not have been made anywhere else. For Stovall, who is a Motor City native, these windowless mom-and-pops are neighborhood sanctuaries. With foreclosures of other types of businesses, liquor stores have expanded to become mini superstores additionally selling clothes, food, toys, cleaning supplies, and smoking paraphernalia.

Each of the short videos showcased at the museum embodies different aspects of the city.

Interspersed among choreographed scenes of meditative ballet and experimental dance performed by several artists (including Stovall herself) are interviews with people Stovall met at the shooting locations. The series combines documentary journalism, ethnography, and video art. Yet these videos are not about voyeurism; rather, they attempt to channel the many spirits of a city unseen, one uncontaminated by the national narrative of Detroit as a wasteland. At the same time, these dancers and their movements transcend the impossible definition of *place*.

We sometimes see Stovall and her team of dancers through the windows of passing cars, juxtaposed with people going about their usual business. The dancers demi-plié in second position or pace across parking lots and sidewalks, giving the impression of a mirage. Former editor of *Ballet Review* and dance critic for the *New York Times* Don McDonagh once described the experience of viewing Trisha Brown's *Roof Piece*, 1973—performed by dancers on various neighboring Manhattan rooftops—like receiving a message from outer space. Stovall's work evokes a similar feeling in reverse, as if it were beaming a message of truth into outer space, saving the performances on video as prospective human relics.

Large signs rendered in paint or neon bearing phrases such as PALMS LIQUOR STORE or THANK YOU FOR YOUR BUSINESS PLEASE COME BACK!, are often seen in the frame. Occasionally Stovall dances alone, as in *Liquor Store Theatre*, vol. 3, no. 3, 2016, in which we see LOTTO BEER & WINE writ large in thick blue paint behind her. As she moves along the outer wall, her choreography transforms the storefront into a sort of altar. The dancers become part of each store's welcome sign, passionately moving around these modern-day shrines. Across the eighteen videos on display, they wear mostly coordinated, everyday outfits—usually all black. They are distinguished from one another only by their different accessories, such as shoes or sunglasses. The dancers neither fade into the background nor stand out as imposing on the stores and their patrons.

Stovall's do-it-yourself approach to filming and editing might have come off as naive, but instead lends the works a natural appearance, like that of home videos. Unaffected and intimate in its personal documentation of locals—who speak on topics ranging from fashion, to the unemployment epidemic, to President Donald Trump—the shorts are more consciously concerned with the task of capturing a subject than with evoking a style. The soundtracks to the videos are largely house music made by the artist's husband, Todd Stovall (with the exception of the score for *Liquor Store Theatre*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2015, which was composed by Cliff Martinez).

This choice of music thus places the project in context with Detroit's vibrant dance legacy. (A particularly fascinating episode of this history was *The New Dance Show*, which aired on the country's first entirely African-American-owned-and-operated television station from 1988 to 1995.)

At Cranbrook, the exhibition design employs dynamic installation techniques to enhance the viewer's auditory journey: *Liquor Store Theatre*, vol. 4, no. 7, 2017, for example, is projected on a giant wall and is accompanied by cordless headphones. *Liquor Store Theatre*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2015, on the other hand, is projected into a tiny rectangular room, with the music being played loudly on an overhead speaker. Three televisions hang on another wall, playing anywhere from four to six different videos from the series on loops. The scope of this show is a lot like that of a city: From a certain vantage, one can hear one neighborhood, while other lives play out silently in the distance, all within the same limits or, in the case of this installation, within the same room.

—Lisa John Rogers