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Essay'd

Detroit Art + Detroit Artists

73 Maya Stovall

[July 11, 2017 Artists Performance, Socially Engaged Art, Video Matthew Piper](#)



Born Detroit, 1982 / BA, Howard University; MA, University of Chicago; Phd, Wayne State University / Lives in Detroit

Art, ever sociable, is always in conversation with something else. One of artist Maya Stovall's primary interlocutors is the City—that ever-shifting concatenation of street, sidewalk, and neighborhood; of people, power, and capital. (This conversation started early; Stovall recalls riding her bike to the Detroit Institute of Arts as a child and developing an “obsession” with the street life she encountered along the way.) For the last four years, she has pursued a related obsession, enacting and documenting an ongoing series of sidewalk performances and ethnographic interviews made near the liquor stores that dot her eastside neighborhood, McDougall-Hunt. Stovall, who trained in classical ballet, holds a Master's degree in Economics and a PhD in Performance Studies and Cultural Anthropology. She approaches the sprawling yet tightly focused **Liquor Store Theatre** project as a means to ask what she calls “monumental questions” about human existence via “close, rigorous, devoted, durational looking.”

The basics of *Liquor Store Theatre* (2013-present) are as follows: Stovall, as a soloist or with one or two other dancers in tow, shows up, unannounced, outside a local liquor store and begins dancing on the public street or sidewalk. The performances are recorded, usually by Stovall herself or her collaborator, the composer and sculptor Todd “Quaint” Stovall. Inevitably, the dancing and filming draw interest, and as people wander over to watch, Stovall engages them, asking about their experience of Detroit, their neighborhood, and art. If they are willing, their conversations are recorded, and end up in the short videos that Stovall edits and exhibits on her website and in galleries/museums. These are part social documentary and part video dance, their unpolished streetview visuals set to Quaint’s pulsing electronic scores.

Watching the videos, one is struck by the banality of the Detroit they represent; this is neither ruin porn nor the glittering city of the revitalization; it is part of the wide middle ground, the common but under-visualized spaces in which Detroiters go about their everyday business. To be sure, in McDougall-Hunt, the everyday is intricately intertwined with significant socioeconomic distress; Stovall reports the dismal demographics, including a median annual income of \$13,000 and an unemployment rate of 40%. Under such conditions, as elsewhere in the city, liquor stores flourish. There are, in fact, eight in McDougall-Hunt’s .39 square miles, providing, as Stovall notes, not only their namesake product, but also household goods, electronics, and, significantly, a space where residents can see and connect with friends and neighbors.

Stovall thinks of *Liquor Store Theatre* as a “backstage view” of one Detroit neighborhood. By using her work to amplify the voices of her neighbors, whom she has summoned with her surprising, surreal street dance, she privileges the underprivileged, moves the marginal to the center, and presents a close-up look at Detroiters who, in turn, present some of the complexities of real life in Detroit. (They muse variously about the past, present and future, about transformation, development, and gentrification, and about their individual places in this mix.)

It is not possible to plan to attend a *Liquor Store Theatre* performance; like Stovall’s earlier Detroit dances, performed in urban gardens, they are intended for the people who happen upon them. But Stovall does perform under more traditional circumstances, as well, and two recent pieces help crystallize some of the formal and conceptual underpinnings of her work. Her penchant for serialism and minimalism, for instance, is laid bare in ***Maya Praising Quaint*** (2017), a simple, obsessive dance staged at the Pulitzer Arts Foundation in St. Louis that found her standing, holding one of Quaint’s interactive sculptures, and, for 360 minutes over the course of a weekend, using her hand to repeatedly rotate a piece of it. ***Manifesto*** (also 2017), performed at the Whitney Museum in New York, was a series of ten tableaux that included chance-based readings of various theoretical texts that have informed *Liquor Store Theatre*, daylighting the feminist, queer, and Marxist currents that swell beneath it.

Stovall's work in *Liquor Store Theatre* has been widely seen (not least through its inclusion in the 2017 Whitney Biennial) and Stovall, starting from her center, is taking the opportunity to “envelop Detroit in a global conversation,” and to do what she does locally elsewhere. Currently, she is in Aarhus, Denmark, where she is daily enacting her ***Havnepladsen Ballet*** (2017). She's dancing in a fountain in a public square, recording the performances, and interviewing people who stop by, getting the street-level skinny about life in Aarhus, Denmark, and the EU. The context is different, but the impulse is the same: to dance, to inhabit a place, to start a conversation—to “think,” as the artist puts it, “in multiple ways at once.”



Liquor Store Theatre, vol. 3, no. 3, Untitled 1, 2016. Performance, Detroit, USA. 4 years. Image courtesy Todd Stovall and the artist.



Liquor Store Theatre, vol. 1, no. 3, Untitled 1, 2014. Performance, Detroit, USA. 4 years. Image courtesy Todd Stovall and the artist.

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In performance of Maya Praising Quint, 2017. April 6-8, 2017, at the Tadao Ando Water Court, Pulitzer Arts Foundation. Photography by Michael Thomas.



Literature, as part of performance of Maya Stovall: MANIFESTO, 2017. May 17, 2017, at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Photography by Paula Court.

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