

Artist engages passers-by and customers outside Detroit liquor stores

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Liquor Store Theatre, vol. 4, no. 7
COURTESY OF MAYA STOVALL

Stateside's conversation with artist Maya Stovall and Laura Mott, the curator of Contemporary Art and Design at the Cranbrook Art Museum.

An exhibition currently at the Cranbrook Art Museum challenges our idea of what a theater is. Rather than an ornate performance space like, say, the Detroit Opera House or Orchestra Hall, this exhibition shows that a not-so-typical space can be a theater: a liquor store. The exhibition is titled [Maya Stovall: Liquor Store Theatre Performance Films](#). Maya Stovall is a Detroit artist and who has her Ph.D. in Cultural Anthropology and Performance Studies from Wayne State University.

Starting in 2014, she held a series of dance performances outside liquor stores in her McDougall-Hunt neighborhood on Detroit's east side. She would also engage and talk with passers-by and store customer, filming all of it. *Liquor Store Theatre Performance Films* runs till March 11 at the Cranbrook Art Museum in Bloomfield Hills.

Artist [Maya Stovall](#) and **Laura Mott**, the curator of Contemporary Art and Design at the Cranbrook Art Museum, joined *Stateside* to talk about Stovall's exhibition.

Listen to the interview above, or read highlights below.

What was it about the Liquor Store Theatre Performance Films that felt like a good fit for Cranbrook?

Mott: "There's a current suite of exhibitions of four solo shows; two very venerable, famous artists Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring, and contemporary artist Ryan McGinness. Maya was the fourth artist that joined this group of artists because these were all artists who are working in the street and this relationship between art and life.

It's also part of the mission of Cranbrook Art Museum and of contemporary art to really be supporting and looking at artists who are really challenging the forms in which people are creating, and Maya is an incredible example of all of that."

What does it mean for Liquor Store Theatre to be described as a "choreo-ethnographic project"?

Stovall: "The work is equally contemporary art and equally ethnography. What ethnography means is anthropology speak for a gross study of some group of people. So, in my case, I was meditating on this neighborhood called McDougall-Hunt, this tiny slice of Americana on Detroit's east side. So, my ethnographic subject is the neighborhood and of course the people who are in the neighborhood and who are passing through. At the same time, it is equally bizarre, surreal, weird project unfolding on the street."

When speaking with people from the community as they watch you dance, what are you talking to them about? What do they say to you?

Stovall: "I don't invite anyone to sort of speak with us until they have absorbed and been on the scene and seen the performances.

So then I'm asking people like "Tell me about Detroit? Tell me about the neighborhood. What's going on in the city?" And then towards the end of the project, I started asking people "What's going on in the United States right now? What's going on in the world that you're interested in?" So the questions I keep really focused and then I let the person who I'm speaking with guide me. We discuss everything from graffiti to economics to politics to places and spaces that are important to them. Everything important sort of comes up."

What most surprised you?

Mott: There was always the surprise. There's a person who's just walking by, an unassuming person, and then you ask them a question about city life and they start waxing philosophical and they start winding you through worlds around history and memory, around places and spaces around the neighborhood, you know from the last 20 years. The surprise is constant.

Why did Cranbrook commission a film?

Mott: "This was a way for Maya to create a work that is now traveling the world. It's at Cranbrook Art Museum but the same piece is being shown internationally now. It's a way for Detroit to speak for itself and it's a really incredible intersection of creating new contemporary artwork, but also really engaging in the international conversation that happens around our city."

What kind of response have you seen among people who watch the films?

Mott: "The response has been incredible because what this exhibition does is that it's a trigger for conversation. So people come and they watch and then you see them speaking to each other. They talk about their own experiences in the city, they talk about how they understand the place of McDougall-Hunt, they feel like they've met the people that Maya has met. It's really a wonderful way of engaging the city through artwork."

Watch artist Maya Stovall's *Liquor Store Theatre*, vol. 4 no. 6 below:

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