

ENTERTAINMENT

Liquor stores create frame for Detroit artist

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It wasn't your everyday proposal for a Ph.D., that's for sure.

Detroit artist Maya Stovall, who calls herself “a post-minimalist ballerina,” spent years performing modern dance outside liquor stores in her beleaguered neighborhood, and interviewing passers-by on their thoughts of the city.

The result is an astonishing video series, “Liquor Store Theatre,” a humanizing peek into the complexities of urban life that won the fourth-generation Detroiter a coveted invitation to last year's Whitney Biennial exhibition in New York City.

Closer to home, “Maya Stovall: Liquor Store Theatre Performance Films” is at the Cranbrook Art Museum through March 11. (You can also catch some of the videos on the artist's website at mayastovall.com.)

The dancing, Stovall said, creates a “surreal frame” that helps “crash through” the rigidities of class, race and gender, in the process eliciting deeper, more thoughtful interviews from her subjects.

“People always thought I wasn't from Detroit,” Stovall said of the liquor-store patrons. “They were surprised I lived in the neighborhood.”

The neighborhood in question is McDougall-Hunt on the city's east side, a triangular plot south of Gratiot that includes the Heidelberg Project, one of the poorest census tracts in Michigan.

“The neighborhood's less than half a square mile,” Stovall said. “And it's got eight liquor stores.”

She's not attacking the stores themselves, which she concedes provide a service and act as centers of social interaction in a neighborhood with almost no retail outlets.

All the same, Stovall wondered, “How is it acceptable that the most common businesses in the city are liquor stores?”

Such paradoxes fascinate the academic in her, but she denies that her videos are polemical. “My work is non-didactic,” Stovall said. “My only agenda is to ask questions.”

Of her work, Artforum magazine said, “Maya Stovall’s videos are not about voyeurism; rather, they attempt to channel the many spirits of a city unseen.”

“Liquor Store Theatre” is only one part of Stovall’s wide-ranging artistic output. She also created “Harbor Square Ballet” during a residency in Denmark, in which she interviews people while dancing in a fountain.

She’s also currently in a group show at Birmingham’s Reyes Projects, “At Large,” through Mar. 17, while her work in glass was at the Studio Museum in Harlem until January.

For Stovall, dance and object creation aren’t as different as they might seem.

“I view performance as a medium,” she said, “just like glass or metal or paint. That’s how I think about it.”

Stovall, a graduate of Cass Tech and Howard University who got her doctorate in anthropology at Wayne State, grew up in an artistic, intellectual household in Woodbridge.

“I started art school in the womb,” she said with a laugh.

It didn’t stop there. As a youngster, Stovall spent endless hours at the Detroit Institute of Arts.

“I’d bike there, and spend all day sketching and roaming,” she said Tuesday in the museum’s Kresge Court. Afterward, if the weather was fine, she’d plop herself down right outside the museum walls. “I’d just lay on the lawns and stare up at the sky.”

Perhaps she was dreaming of the unexpected visibility her liquor-store series would win for this self-described “very private” artist.

“Liquor Store Theatre” will be in a group show at the Museum of Contemporary Art Toronto Canada opening in May, and — continuing the over-the-border theme — Stovall’s got an upcoming residency this summer in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan.

But nobody should be surprised that such “amazing” work is getting noticed, says Whitney Biennial 2017 co-curator Mia Locks, who visited Stovall in 2016 late one night at her Gratiot studio. Locks confesses she was dazzled. She admires Stovall’s take on the liquor store as unlikely social space, and applauds her “ability to engage (patrons) in a meaningful and generous way. It’s such a unique approach.”

Cranbrook Art Museum curator of contemporary art and design Laura Mott likes the way Stovall’s work casts a spotlight on the mostly overlooked.

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“Maya’s work ... lets Detroit speak for itself, combatting the narratives that are imposed upon it,” Mott said.

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‘Maya Stovall: Liquor Store Theatre Performance Films’

Through Mar. 11

Cranbrook Art Museum

39221 Woodward, Bloomfield Hills

11 a.m.-5 p.m., Tue.-Sun.

\$10 adults, \$8 seniors over 65, \$6 students with ID. Kids 12 and under free.

(248) 645-3323

cranbrookartmuseum.org