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VICE



By **Nafisa Kaptownwala**

Artist Maya Stovall Talks Exploring Detroit and Other Cities Through Her Work

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Admittedly, I was nervous about interviewing artist Maya Stovall because, like I'm sure so many, I don't know a whole lot about conceptual art. Not sure how to talk about it, what I'm suppose to be looking at and what to take away from it. But I was interested in learning! I hopped on the phone with Stovall and chatted with her about her work *Liquor Store Theatre* (2014-2017) included in the new MOCA's inaugural exhibition *BELIEVE*.

LST (Liquor Store Theatre) is a four year-running, four volume, 20 episode video series of dance performances and conversations filmed on the streets, parking lots, surrounding areas of eight liquor stores in the neighbourhood she lived in at the time, McDougall-Hunt in Detroit. Stovall is equal parts a contemporary artist and ethnographer and she describes the series as, "meditation on city life in a Detroit neighborhood". The artist's book, *Liquor Store Theatre*, is to be released by Duke Press in Fall 2019. Maya's works are included the permanent collections of Cranbrook Art Museum and the Whitney Museum of American Art.

Having grown up in East Vancouver, myself, I see the similarities between many parts of Canada and the ethnographic landscape represented in *LST*, and come up with my own conclusions about the work. I chatted on the phone with Maya to find out if I was doing it right, if I was understanding the work as she intended. She spoke with me about her exploration in Detroit through LST, her current work in downtown Saskatoon, and her fascination with urban landscapes.

Nafisa: What kind of story are you looking to share with movement?

Maya: It's the exact opposite of that actually. I'm not trying to tell a story - I'm posing questions.

Nafisa: How do you feel like movement speaks to ethnography?

Maya: In *Liquor Store Theatre*, I was posing a question that is, 'what is the struggle for the city in contemporary Detroit?'. There isn't a literal connection, it's a conceptual work. There isn't a literal connection that performance driven work

has a particular output. More so I'm interested in broad sweeping questions in my work concerning human existence. In the case of this project in Detroit, I staged and video recorded conversations in the street and sidewalks surrounding liquor stores in Detroit, in the neighbourhood where I also lived which is called McDougall-Hut on the east side. So eight liquor stores day in and day out for four years. The central question of the work is meditation. Meditation on a city, an inquiry into city life, what makes people tick and what gets people up everyday. So broad sweeping questions. Performance is prompt, it's not literal, its not entertainment - it's surreal, bizarre, post minimalist, intervention.

Nafisa: Why the street? Why did you want to use the street as a place to perform?

Maya: For me the street and the sidewalk is where the city comes alive. The streets and sidewalk are a common thread in my work as an artist. I have a fascination with cities, and the particular layers of questions that can be raised is explored through the city's on the street and sidewalks.

Nafisa: Now that the work has transitioned from being on the street to in a gallery, do you think that changes the way that people interact with it?

Maya: I think all work is dynamic and constantly shifting as work moves in the world. The work is also the subject of a completed dissertation and it's also a book that is coming out with Duke Press next fall. The work lives in a number of ways, to me that is interesting and another layer of intertextuality and modality, discussion, motion, and momentum that fascinates me.



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Nafisa: But do you think the audience that's interacting with the work is going to be completely different? Do you think they're going to react in a different way?

Maya: I don't know. That's for the viewer to decide.

Nafisa: Is this something you're not concerned about when you're putting the work together?

Maya: I wouldn't say that I'm not concerned but I would rather have people come to their own conclusions. I'm not trying to tell people what to think about my work, or to guess what people are thinking. It's much more interesting to me to see how people respond. My current project is called *The Public Library*; Crystal Meth and Conceptual Art in Downtown Saskatoon. So I have a solo exhibition opening up at AKA Artist Run in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan opening November 2nd and it's another Canadian exhibition. What's interesting about this project is that I'm staging and documenting conceptual practices and conversations around a public library in downtown Saskatoon, so it's an entirely different framework of questions than *LST*. The work is very much a distinctive approach and style - a point of departure that is in dialogue with *Liquor Store Theatre*. So one thing that is interesting as I'm working on the street and talking

to people in Saskatoon and look at the work that I've done in Detroit, or in Denmark, where I spent time last year making a body of work. It's interesting to me to see how people on the street that I talk to and encounter in this weird bizarre exploration and investigation that I do, how they are interested in other cities, and interested in viewing moving and still image.

Nafisa: Saskatoon being a newer place to you, do you find the questions and conversations you're investigating are going to be quite different than say, Detroit?

Maya: Yeah, definitely. There's this sense of generational depth with my work in Detroit. Although when I'm working I get into this mode where I'm just so deeply in the moment anywhere I am in the world. But with Detroit there's this whole set of context and all of this generational connective tissue that runs so deep, literally and figuratively. But that also changes my questions.

Nafisa: Is there a connectivity between you and Detroit, or do you mean amongst people in Detroit in general?

Maya: No, I'm talking about having grown up there and my family has been there since the late 1800s. I was just referring to my connection with Detroit. But that doesn't change my interest with Saskatoon. I'm interested in what's happening at a place in a moment in time, and in Saskatoon there happens to be tremendous amount of dynamic, fascinating, and developmental shift of political economy and sociocultural context. So it's a fascinating place.

Nafisa: It's funny that you are working in Saskatoon because I was actually thinking about your work coming to Canada and how Canadians would read something like *Liquor Store Theatre*. There are communities in Canada similar to the one you show in your project, where there's a high density of liquor stores in a small area. I'm wondering what does that say about how people treat those communities?

Maya: Yeah, so with my work I'm interested in the conceptual and what I call 'the paradox of place'. I think about a place in many ways at once and I invite people to do so when they see my work. I'm also thinking about the way that I approach as an artist and I'm thinking about post minimalism and conceptualism in a bizarre, completely open possibility in the moment. I'm thinking about all of that and most certainly thinking beyond the descriptive, beyond the "oh well this is a poor neighbourhood, look at that", I'm meditating on deep questions as to how wealth and resources are consolidated, how to connect with flows and markets and conceptual practice as an artist.

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This fascinates me and as an ethnographer. I'm equally an artist and an ethnographer and it's really exciting thinking through questions for me. There is an interesting dialogue between Saskatoon and Detroit. When I work I find places that I have some connection to, or have some connection to me, because they're fascinating. It's so important to me to uncover complexity. I'm not interested in crystalizing or reducing people or places with this work. I'm interested in doing the exact opposite of that.



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