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ART

Calling Detroit's 1967 Civil Unrest a "Rebellion," a Museum Takes a Strong Stand

In an exhibition commemorating the uprising, the Charles H. Wright Museum takes a political stance in how it describes that history.

Sarah Rose Sharp | October 23, 2017



Say It Loud at the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History, installation view (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

DETROIT — It's been 50 years since a weeklong mass civil uprising took place in Detroit, an event that is sometimes seen as an isolated riot, but in fact was an expression of decades of racial inequity. The events of the summer of 1967 have been one of the defining incidents connected with the city. Buildings burned, businesses were looted, and eventually the National Guard was called in to control the populace. What failed to happen then, and largely in the following decades, was any sort of detailed or uncomfortable conversations about the long-term social and economic factors that set the scene for the summer of 1967 — issues that were in the making for 50 years or more prior to the uprising, as an African-American labor force was lured to a white population center that was unprepared to offer the kind of equity and social progress promised by the Great Migration.

As cultural institutions all across the city have launched and hosted commemorative events, each has developed their own take on Detroit's history, and made decisions about which voices to amplify. The Detroit Institute of Arts put together *Art of Rebellion: Black Art of the Civil Rights Movement*, a concentrated survey of some of the most influential African-American artist collectives of the 1960s, linking art of the Civil Rights Movement in Detroit to that across the country. The Detroit Historical Society launched *Detroit 67: Looking Back to Move Forward*, an ambitious, multi-year documentation effort, collecting 500 stories from those who were in Detroit when it was under siege (July 23–August 1, 1967). This ongoing work has created the most comprehensive archive on the subject, and directly informed the Detroit Historical Museum's interactive exhibition, *Detroit 67: Perspectives*, that brackets the tempestuous week with an entire century of historical context in the form of documents, artifacts, and oral histories.



Tony oko, "Martin Luther King" (year unlisted), mixed media on canvas

Also among these institutions is the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History. In mounting its exhibition, the first step it took was to make a conscious decision about terminology.

"We started this project over a year ago," said Assistant Curator Erin Falker, in an interview with Hyperallergic, "and it started with the idea of taking back the term 'riot' and talking about it in a new way. We felt like the narrative that what happened in '67 as a riot has been the thing that people

know, and it has been the thing that spread across the country, and we wanted to problematize that to an extent, and offer another perspective. So we started calling it a rebellion."

Colloquial references to the events of '67 as either a "rebellion" or an "uprising" are common in Detroit — in fact, the term you choose to apply to these circumstances often lets people know your perspective on it — but the Charles H. Wright appears to be the first institution to officially adopt that nomenclature as a matter of policy, and this seems right

in step with their commemorative exhibition, organized by Falker, *Say It Loud: Art, History, Rebellion.*



Jamea Richmond-Edwards, "Levitate" (2016), mixed media on canvas

The exhibition spans decades, and puts some of Detroit's hometown heroes, like artists Senghor Reid, Saffell Gardner, Tylon Sawyer, and Yvonne Park Catchings, in conversation with artists that have national and international profiles, like Carrie Mae Weems, Sanford Biggers, Hank Willis Thomas, and Melvin Edwards. Most of the 40-plus artists with works on display are African-American, and the show centralizes the daily experiences of black artists in Detroit and beyond.

The Charles H. Wright, a historical museum, does not

always show art, but Falker wanted to make the exhibition an accessible experience for its audience.

"I think that's one thing that artists do very well, is they deal with their own realities in their own ways," said Falker. "And I think that when visitors come, they can find a piece that deals with reality in a way that's similar to how they would deal with reality. There's enough breadth of artworks that we can speak to multiple generations, different kinds of people, different races, different backgrounds, at the same time."



Still capture from a performance/video work by Sherina Rodriguez Sharpe

This manifests in moments that range from exquisite to challenging, sometimes simultaneously. Much of the work is figurative, and visitors are greeted by largely recognizable imagery, such as two mixed-media portraits of young black women by Jamea Richmond-Edwards, or photographs from Civil Rights protests in 1960s New York by Gordon Parks. A second theme touches on symbols, including renderings of iconic Civil Rights Movement leaders, as well as many takes on flags, from “Trump Edition” (2017) by Detroit native John Sims (known for his extensive work with flags), and Faith Ringgold’s “Flag for the Moon (Die Nigger)” (1969).



Faith Ringgold, “Flag for the Moon (Die Nigger)” (1969), oil on canvas

“I have been looking at that piece [Ringgold’s] since 10th grade, maybe, and I said to myself: this has to be in this show,” said Falker. “I think it really speaks to a feeling of not belonging, but wanting to belong that a lot of people identify with, and that spans generations. That piece was done in 1969, but the idea that

you want to be American, you want to be a part of this country, but a lot of people of color don't identify strongly with a nationality. I was just having this conversation with a friend of mine, about the difference between being black in America and being black in, say, Nigeria. You're from Nigeria, you are Nigerian, you identify with that country. Being in America and being black is a very different kind of feeling. It's a very, 'Do I belong here? Do people want me here?'"



Richard Wilt, "Words and Voices" (1968), mixed media.

Included in the exhibition is "Laocoön" (2015) by Sanford Biggers, which was the subject of some controversy, in terms of its subjugation of a black body. Here, there is a sense of it being held safely in the space — surrounded by similar faces, watched over in empathy, and on display not for a detached viewing experience, but perhaps as a focus for personal pain. As Detroit critic and Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA) curator Taylor Aldridge said in an email to Hyperallergic: "I've been wondering, if we're going to keep creating artwork that depicts and portrays violence, specifically tied to race and oppression, how can we create gallery spaces that encourage visitors to mourn and lament these human proxies that are represented through visual ephemera, rather than perpetuating environments of just viewing and consumption?"

The efforts on the part of the Charles H. Wright to present work in precisely this manner have very much paid off. *Say It Loud* has proven that a riot by another name may lead to a more liberated viewpoint, and one which prioritizes the lived experiences of African-Americans.