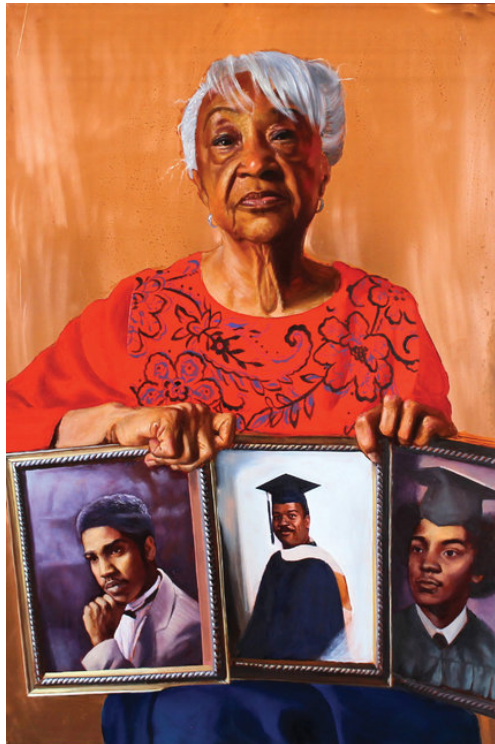


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Detroit Museums Examine the Riots That Changed the City

By MICHAEL T. LUONGO AUG. 13, 2017



“Queen Mother Helen Moore” (2015), by Mario Moore, at the Detroit Institute of Arts. Credit Detroit Institute of Arts

DETROIT — The story of Detroit’s July 1967 riots is, in some ways, a tale of two cities, one black and one white. Now, 50 years later, three neighboring museums here are revisiting that fateful summer with exhibitions that portray and explore the riots in sharply different ways.

The exhibitions also amount to a forceful attempt by two of the museums, the Detroit Historical Museum and the Detroit Institute of Arts, to connect with African-Americans. These museums draw predominantly white patronage in a city in which more than 80 percent of residents are black. A mere 10 percent of the institute’s patrons are black.

“Within the African-American community, we were seen as the white museum,” said Joel Stone, senior curator for the Detroit Historical Society, which runs the Detroit Historical Museum.

The most provocative of the exhibitions is at the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History, an institution that is more popular with black residents. Its examination of violence against African-Americans mirrors the intensity of Kathryn Bigelow’s new movie, “Detroit,” and like the film, it uses the riots to comment on race in the United States today.

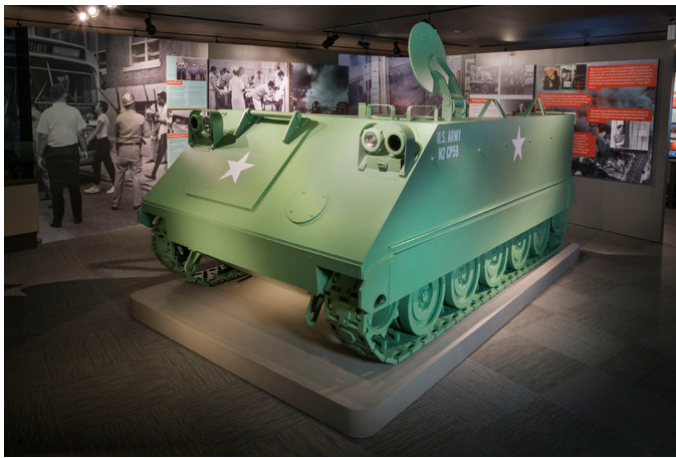
Detroit’s riots, known locally as a rebellion, began early on the morning of Sunday, July 23, 1967, set off by a police raid on a “blind pig,” local terminology for an illegal club. A combination of tensions, from employment, discrimination, police brutality and increasingly crowded living conditions finally boiled over. Parts of Detroit burned for nearly a week, leaving 43 dead.

“It’s like 9/11,” said Mr. Stone, a Detroit native. “Everyone remembers where they were and what they were doing in 1967 in Detroit.”

The historical museum’s exhibition, “Detroit 67: Perspectives,” has three sections: before, during and after the riots. In the first, timelines, photographs, movies, newspaper clippings and other ephemera plot the growth of Detroit’s black community during the Great Migration, with earlier examples of racial tension highlighted.

In addition to timelines and placards, visitors are exposed to the riots through more immersive displays, including a midcentury living room with TV sets blaring ABC News, and a mock-up of looted 12th Street businesses, including Joe’s Record Shop.

Around the corner is a mock armored personnel carrier, its side split open, displaying graphic-novel-style montages of residents recounting the riots. Tanks and other military vehicles are a common theme. Sounds from the looted shop fronts and TVs compete for attention, a cacophony of smashing glass, crackling fires and panicked news coverage that brings a heart-pounding sense of confusion.



Military vehicles are a common theme in the exhibition “Detroit 67: Perspectives” at the Detroit Historical Museum. Credit Morley Companies/Detroit Historical Society

The historical society has also created programming outside the museum, including at the site where the riots began. It has dedicated a historical marker in Gordon Park, which is built over the site of the long-gone club. Curators from all three museums put together the program of events with input from focus groups of locals,

academics and activists. The society also coordinated with Brothers Always Together, known as the BATs, a group of African-American men who were children at the time of the riots and have long held a commemorative neighborhood festival on their anniversary.

Aspects of the exhibitions at the Detroit Institute of Arts and the Wright Museum align. Their exhibitions share artists, including Jason H. Phillips, Jeff Donaldson and Wadsworth Jarrell, reflecting the museums’ collaboration. For the institute, that cooperation was an important component in seeking closer ties with African-Americans in the city, a goal of the museum director, Salvador Salort-Pons.

Looking beyond Detroit, the institute’s exhibition, “Art of Rebellion: Black Art of the Civil Rights Movement,” examines the civil rights movement’s artistic impact. Some pieces are influenced by African traditions, and are grouped by various African-American art movements, including Spiral, the Kamoinge Workshop and the Black Arts

Movement. The exhibition curator, Valerie Mercer, said she hoped that museum-goers learn how, from the 1960s on, “artists participated in their own way in the civil rights and black power movement.”



Rita Dickerson’s “1967: Death in the Algiers Motel and Beyond” makes links between the incident and people recently killed by police. Credit Detroit Institute of Arts

Recent works by Detroit artists exemplify this, including Mario Moore’s 2015 “Queen Mother Helen Moore,” painted on shimmering copper and portraying his grandmother, protectively holding photos of her sons. “1967: Death in the Algiers Motel and Beyond,” by the Detroit artist Rita Dickerson, who was 21 during the riots, features the cherubic faces of the three young black men killed in the incident, which is dramatized in Ms. Bigelow’s movie. In Ms. Dickerson’s work, the names of young black men recently killed by the police are juxtaposed with the names of the victims from 1967.

“Patriot” (1975), by Jeff Donaldson. Credit Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History

Taking its name from a James Brown song, and with indoor and outdoor components, the Wright’s exhibition, “Say It Loud: Art, History, Rebellion,” is the most conceptually difficult of the three shows in Detroit. Groupings of artworks also highlight contradictions for African-Americans who might fight alongside whites to protect American freedoms, yet still have trouble reaching full equality, according to Erin Falker, an assistant curator at the museum.



Jason H. Phillips’s “Weight” (2001). Credit Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History



Ms. Falker said that they chose to place “Flag for the Moon: Die Nigger” by Faith Ringgold, a distortion of the United States flag from 1969 that spells out the racial epithet in its stripes, across from the khaki-colored “Patriot” by Jeff Donaldson, from 1975, and “Weight” by Mr. Phillips, from 2001. Ms. Falker said the

grouping highlighted the remembrance that, on the night of the raid that sparked the riots, the club was having a party for African-American soldiers returning from Vietnam.



Sanford Biggers's "Laocoön" is one of the more uncomfortable images in the exhibition "Say It Loud: Art, History, Rebellion," at the Wright Museum of African American History. Credit Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History

One of the most uncomfortable works at the Wright is Sanford Biggers's 2015 "Laocoön." The cartoonish, bulbous black male is made from inflatable vinyl and is clothed in a bright orange shirt and blue jeans. He resembles a sleeping Fat Albert, but the museum placard suggests that the work depicts Eric Garner, the black man who died in 2014 after being restrained with a chokehold by the New York City police.

Today's Black Lives Matter movement is reflected in all three shows. The institute's final piece is a room almost entirely filled with Adam Pendleton's 2015 work "Black Lives Matter #3." The historical museum examines Black Lives Matter and that movement's use of new media. At the Wright, in Mr. Phillips's 2015 work "Uneven Fight," "Black Lives Matter" is tattooed across the chest of a black boxer surrounded by menacing white police figures.

In a Detroit area with changing demographics, the Wright's collaboration with the institute allows "people to see a much broader perspective of '67 than they would have if they had just seen one or the other," the Wright's president and chief executive, Juanita Moore, said. She said she hoped it might also encourage more white visitors to her museum.

Another goal at all the museums is teaching millennials and other young people to make connections between the past and present. The Wright's curator of exhibitions, Patrina Chatman, a Detroit native who was a teenager during the riots, said art with Black Lives Matter elements mixed with earlier civil rights references reminds young people that "history is repeating itself."

Ms. Chatman added, “This occurred and pay attention, because it can happen again.” The question she wants all museum visitors to ask themselves is “how can we move forward” in racial understanding, in Detroit and throughout the United States?

Correction: August 18, 2017

An article on Monday about museum exhibitions in Detroit focused on the city’s 1967 riots misidentified a mock military vehicle that is displayed at the Detroit Historical Museum. It is an armored personnel carrier, not a tank. The error was repeated in an accompanying picture caption.