

Letters

MOCAD'S "MURALS"

To the Editors:

I am writing in response to the news story "Detroit Up Against the Wall" [*A.i.A.*, Sept. 2013]. Drawing a parallel between the economic situation during Diego Rivera's 1932-33 tenure here, while he executed the *Detroit Industry* murals at the Institute of Arts, and the current predicament in which the city finds itself may appear to be topical and clear-sighted. However, "The Past Is Present" [through Jan. 5, 2014], curated by Jens Hoffmann at the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit (MOCAD), is just another effort to exploit our urban crisis.

1. The "murals" in "The Past Is Present" are just big paintings on board, 9 feet by 12 feet. Murals imply walls (MOCAD has plenty of large walls), not panels set around a cavernous room like cows being judged at a state fair.

2. The work was supposed to be inspired by Rivera's *Detroit Industry* murals on their 80th anniversary. There is little evidence of such inspiration.

a. Rivera lived in Detroit while he executed his murals and mixed with all classes of people. Only one of the invited "The Past Is Present" artists came to Detroit to look around.

b. Rivera took working-class people and the factories in which they worked and made them mythic in stature by drawing on Mexican legend and American culture. He saw the conditions in Detroit, but he chose to create work that ennobled and empowered the workers and fed their self-esteem, even while they were standing in unemployment lines. Only one of MOCAD's paintings resembles Rivera's in style, and that work was done, in response to a curatorial request, by the one invited artist (Hank Willis Thomas) who actually collaborated closely with a local artist (Tylonn J. Sawyer). None of the MOCAD pieces has the complexity and vision apparent in Rivera's work.

c. Rivera painted the murals himself. His assistants traced his actual-size drawings, pounced them on the plastered walls, ground the pigments, and applied further coats of plaster as Rivera adjusted the compositions while he worked. The invited MOCAD artists submitted designs that were executed by local artists.

3. The invited artists, Hoffmann said, were to "imagine what Rivera might have painted if he were

to remake *Detroit Industry* today." Rivera created original, complex compositions using reference photographs to confirm accuracy of details. For the most part, MOCAD's invited artists each chose to focus on one event in the last 80 years and render it with one simple image that lost impact, meaning and intimacy upon enlargement. These paintings lack the conviction so apparent in the invited artists' usual mediums of choice.

I fault Hoffmann on several counts: for constraining artists to an assigned format and theme, when they might have been more comfortable working in their customary way; for inviting more than a dozen artists, when fewer might have been better; for failing to encourage true collaborations with socially engaged artists in Detroit, when doing so might have resulted in positive community projects in the city. No wonder the show looks like a high-school art project.

Thank goodness the work is impermanent. We can soon forget this lackluster moment in MOCAD and Detroit's history and get on with making the future present.

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Elysia Borowy-Reeder, executive director of MOCAD, replies:

On Nov. 6, MOCAD will hold a curator's conversation, where the public can talk openly about "The Past Is Present." The museum strives to have an international impact, while providing our community with a forum for the immediate exchange of ideas. Mounting exhibitions potentially reaches far beyond the sphere of making and consuming art, creating a critical dialogue that is at the core of MOCAD's mission.

CORRECTION

Aug. '13, p. 164: Due to a typo, our Annual Guide misspells the last name of the director of New York's Jewish Museum, Claudia Gould.

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