

THE BRIEF



Andrea Bowers:
One Big Union,
2012, marker on
found cardboard,
157 by 105 inches.
Collection Museum
of Contemporary
Art San Diego.
Courtesy Susanne
Vielmetter, Los
Angeles Projects.
Photo Pablo Mason.

Detroit Up Against the Wall

A stagnant economy, seemingly insurmountable debt and declining public services: this was the Detroit that Diego Rivera encountered when he came to the city at the height of the Great Depression to paint a series of frescoes. A permanent fixture in the Detroit Institute of Arts, Rivera's mural cycle *Detroit Industry* (1932-33) is an iconic portrayal of mass production and a monument to the city that pioneered the assembly line.

As Detroit becomes the largest U.S. municipality ever to declare bankruptcy, artists including Andrea Bowers, Tania Bruguera, William E. Jones and Martha Rosler are revisiting Rivera's murals by creating some of their own for a timely exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit (MOCAD). Organized by Jens Hoffmann, deputy director of New York's Jewish Museum and now senior adjunct curator at MOCAD, "The Past Is Present" (Sept. 6, 2013-Jan. 5, 2014) features 15 new murals commemorating episodes in Detroit's history over the 80 years since Rivera completed his masterpiece. "I asked the artists to imagine what Rivera might have painted if he were to remake *Detroit Industry* today," Hoffmann told *A.i.A.* by phone.

Presented inside MOCAD's galleries, the murals will illustrate the city's changing fortunes from the postwar automo-

bile industry boom to its current economic crisis. Subjects include the Battle of the Overpass, a violent 1937 confrontation between union representatives and Ford security officers; Motown's dominance of the pop charts in the 1960s; and the opening of a Whole Foods grocery store this year, a major event in a part of the city that had become a food desert.

Few of the artists participating in the exhibition have experience creating murals, but according to Hoffmann, all have an interest in history and politics. "Murals have long been used to depict political subjects of all kinds," he said. Mirroring Rivera's own reliance on workers and assistants, each artist submitted designs that professional painters will execute on large panels. Part of the exhibition will present archival documentation of Rivera's murals, and plaques resembling those that the Michigan Historical Commission uses to mark sites of interest around the state will describe each new image.

While Rivera's work inspired the project, Hoffmann emphasized a key difference: these commissioned murals will be impermanent, reflecting shifting attitudes about how to represent history. "History is not something that has to be fixed," Hoffmann said, "it can be changeable, and our images of it can be temporary."