MARTOS GALLERY

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By M.H. Miller

McDougall-Hunt, a small neighborhood of single-family homes on the East Side of Detroit, once represented the best America had to offer working people. In the years leading up to and directly following World War II, it became a predominantly black neighborhood of mostly automobile and manufacturing workers, many of them employed at the nearby Packard automotive plant, which was once among the largest luxury-car manufacturers in the world. Today, the neighborhood, full of vacant lots and crumbling houses, looks like a sentence that has been sloppily erased. If you didn't live in McDougall-Hunt, there wouldn't be much reason to be here — if not for a four-block-long street called Heidelberg.

At first glance, Heidelberg appears much like the streets that surround it, pockmarked and mostly empty, but it transforms about halfway down its length, becoming what looks from a distance like a junkyard but on closer inspection is a bizarre open-air museum that occupies two whole blocks. One vacant lot has sculptures strewn about like children's toys on the lawn of a happy home. Nearby sits an old car chassis, painted pink, the grass from what used to be someone's yard growing around and through it; attached to a tree hangs a piece of wood painted like a clock, while a coil of dirty stuffed animals snakes up the trunk of another; the sidewalks and the street are painted with fading, multicolored polka dots, leading the eye to another lot across the way, with more clocks attached to trees and telephone poles and, near the back, the wooden frame of a house that has been built out into a makeshift chapel, affixed with a pink cross and covered in street signs, vinyl records and a placard that announces: I AM THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD.

The installation "Holy Place" at the Heidelberg Project. Damon Casarez for The New York Times

On a bright morning last fall, the creator, custodian and de facto mayor of Heidelberg, Tyree Guyton, stood in the middle of the street, talking to a neighbor. Inconspicuous in a dark blue hoodie and paint-smeared jeans, he was stationed in front of an old white house, covered in polka dots, one of the few still standing on the block. This was the Guyton family home, originally purchased by the artist's great-grandparents in 1947. Guyton no longer lives in the house, but he returns to it more or less every day, as he has for most of his life. He is the lone constant on a stretch of urban landscape that has changed endlessly for most of its existence.

Bald and bearded, he dresses so unassumingly that he seems to be hiding in plain sight. When I first met him the day before, at the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit, where he had a solo show, he was clearly suspicious — he started out asking me the questions and not the other way around. But he warmed up when I described to him how, earlier that day, after having flown in from New York, I drove past my own childhood home in the Detroit suburbs. A dreamy smile stretched across his face. "So you're telling me that when you come back, you let yourself go back into the past, and you remember?" he asked. "And you can see yourself, in your mind, playing in that house?" This was how he felt about Heidelberg. "It's a special street," he said. "It's a special place that — that I can't leave. I can hear it talking to me."

[Should art be a battleground for social justice?]

Even as Detroit emptied out over the decades, Guyton stayed put, returning to the scene of his childhood with a compulsory repetition. He was unwilling to watch the street he loved so much crumble into nothing. As more and more families left, he took what remained, the odd leftovers, the detritus of neglect, and reconfigured all of it into his sculptures and paintings and

installations, holding up a kind of cracked mirror to the street and everything that had been lost there. Taken as a whole, the project is a reverse memento mori — an assertion of life, a work that announces "I'm still here," even as everyone else seemed to look away.

The artist Tyree Guyton amid his installation "Open House." Damon Casarez for The New York Times

At various points in the last three decades, the Heidelberg Project, as it has come to be known, has been dismissed by neighbors as the junk of a crazy hoarder and hailed by critics as one of the great American artworks of the last 50 years. Despite some local ambivalence about Guyton's artistic merit, his bona fides have been more readily accepted elsewhere in the country and, especially, in Europe. As a Times review put it in 1999, "The farther people lived from the Heidelberg Project, the more they seemed to like it." The Heidelberg Project has become, in recent years, one of the most visited sites in Detroit, attracting 200,000 visitors annually.

There is a long tradition of so-called outsider art that has skirted the periphery of mainstream acceptance, and that Guyton, despite having attended art school at Detroit's Center for Creative Studies, has often been slotted into by critics. The word, which art-historically implies a nonacademic, untrained approach to art-making, is an increasingly odd one to apply to Guyton, who as of last year has representation in New York through Martos Gallery, which is planning a solo exhibition in November. But by the '90s, and especially in the last decade, the art world would start to catch up with Guyton by celebrating works like Rick Lowe's Project Row Houses in Houston, in which artists rehabbed derelict properties in the city's Third Ward, or Theaster Gates's more recent restoration of abandoned buildings on Chicago's South Side. Still, Guyton was one of the first artists anywhere to try to use art to materially improve a community, long before this became a contemporary cliché.

The "Party Animal House," which was destroyed by fire in 2014. Julie Dermansky/Corbis, via Getty Images

And yet, in 2016, after surviving six occasionally hostile mayoral administrations and a series of arson fires, Guyton announced, suddenly and to the confusion of his admirers, that he'd be dismantling the project piece by piece — an undertaking that is still in progress. He presented this decision as a means of allowing his work to travel and be shown in institutions, of finally having a more conventional artistic career, but it was tempting to see larger forces at work. In 2013, Detroit became the largest municipality to ever file for Chapter 9 bankruptcy, setting the stage for a mass reorganization of the city's assets and an ongoing, lumbering economic revival. Slowly, developers and the city itself are buying up the empty lots and condemned houses: The Detroit Land Bank Authority, a quasi-governmental agency that was designed to address the high volume of abandoned homes, has worked closely with the city's various departments to become Detroit's largest landowner. It now has in its portfolio just over 50 percent of the city's vacant houses.

McDougall-Hunt is hardly on the brink of gentrification, but it has shifted from an impoverished pocket into a potential opportunity. This has endangered the Heidelberg Project, but it is also a testament to the strange paradox at the heart of Guyton's career: If an artwork's aim is to improve a neighborhood, then the happiest conclusion would be for that artwork to be made obsolete. And yet McDougall-Hunt has now been defined by the Heidelberg Project for longer than it was defined by anything else. Guyton's art arose out of decline, and it has, for most of its history, required decrepitude in order to exist. After years of fighting off destruction from vandals, from elected officials, from arsonists and police, Guyton must now effectively destroy his work in order to save it.

The “You House” at the Heidelberg Project. Damon Casarez for The New York Times

The Detroit riot of 1967 was a formative moment of Guyton’s childhood. The scale and scope of the violence that broke out over five days in July of that year were unprecedented for a thriving American city. Mt. Elliott, the main thoroughfare of McDougall-Hunt, became a command headquarters for the Army, which had been sent to Michigan by President Lyndon B. Johnson to contain the situation. Tanks and troops amassed in the neighborhood. “I thought the world was coming to an end,” Guyton recalls. It was at least the beginning of the end of McDougall-Hunt.

Guyton enlisted in the Army in the late ’70s, when Detroit’s unemployment rate was soaring. When he returned to Heidelberg at the end of that decade, he found a street that was largely unrecognizable. Speaking about this time in Detroit, of the allure of the drug trade and the violence that came with it, Guyton referenced Frederick Douglass and his belief in the importance of agitation — that improvement is impossible without struggle.

Detroit had changed because the world had changed, and if Heidelberg Street was going to continue to exist, someone had to fight for it.

A Heidelberg sign expressing Guyton's artistic philosophy: that something can be wrought from nothing. Damon Casarez for The New York Times

The way he tells it, the idea of creating a huge installation with the remnants of the old neighborhood struck him like an epiphany one Saturday afternoon in April 1986. He looked out at the street from his grandfather's house and could see the project taking form in his head. Over time, as his work expanded on Heidelberg Street, he developed his own philosophy about it, which he calls "2 + 2 = 8," or just Heidelbergology: "What does that mean?" Guyton asked me. "You make it up": Something can be wrought from nothing.

Guyton's solo exhibition at Mocad provided a rare glimpse of his art taken out of its usual context. On one side of the gallery sat a yellow cab bearing a creepy advertisement for something called

"Tippytoes the Clown"; Guyton had painted multihued faces on the car's windows. A tree had been set up in the center of the main exhibition space, and colorful shoes hung from its branches. Old vacuum cleaners were lined up in a neat row. Divorced from its context on Heidelberg, Guyton's work became more lighthearted, a kind of lampooning of grotesque materialism — of all the things we thoughtlessly discard — it was apparent how meticulously Guyton plans out the seemingly random gesture. Jova Lynne, the show's curator, explained how the exhibition addresses a major misconception about Guyton, that his assemblages are thrown together carelessly. She described going through his archives and discovering thousands of drawings and plans that prefigured his installations. "Tyree does sketches for every single piece he makes," she said.

"Noah's Ark." Damon Casarez for The New York Times

When Guyton was 9, his grandfather Sam Mackey, a house painter, gave him one of his brushes and encouraged him to start painting.

The rest of his family was not as receptive to his creative impulses. "They felt that art was for white people," he told me. "And crazy people. Homosexuals and folks who smoke dope. And I said, 'I want to hang out with *those* people.' " Once Guyton began work on Heidelberg, Grandpa Mackey became his artistic partner, working quietly away with him every day. As the project grew in size, it transformed into an act of Proustian reclamation, as if Guyton were creating a new neighborhood out of the one he'd lost, embellishing his and Grandpa Mackey's memories out of the wreckage that surrounded them. His grandfather would tell stories about having witnessed the aftermath of lynchings growing up in the South, and how he, as a small child, believed he could see the victims' souls. Guyton would gather up shoes and place them in the branches of a neighborhood tree, calling the piece "Soles of the Most High."

[Can an art collective become the Disney of the experience economy?]

It wasn't long before Guyton started to receive attention, first from the local press and eventually from Oprah Winfrey, who invited Guyton and the woman who was then his wife on her show in 1991. Guyton was under the impression he'd be part of a segment on neighborhood attractions. The segment was actually about neighborhood nuisances, and when Guyton walked out onstage, he found, to his surprise, one of the disgruntled residents sitting there, who accused Guyton of vandalizing a neighborhood he no longer lived in. (He and his wife had moved out, though much of his family still lived on Heidelberg Street.) Guyton tried to defend himself as his neighbor and, later, Winfrey's mostly white audience berated him, dismissing his work as "garbage."

The Heidelberg Project. Damon Casarez for The New York Times

Visitors to the project skyrocketed, of course, and several weeks after the show aired, Detroit's mayor at the time, Coleman Young, came by to meet Guyton. They exchanged what seemed to Guyton like friendly words, but shortly after, the city arrived with bulldozers, police and a helicopter, in a scene that called to mind the riot of 1967. They destroyed years' worth of Guyton's work in under an hour — all of the houses that weren't paid up on their taxes, which unintentionally left various nearby crack houses intact. Young explained his actions to Guyton by saying he was "trying to make the people happy," the artist told me. "But in making the people happy, he was giving the people exactly what they were already living with: nothing." Not long after, Grandpa Mackey died, and Guyton's first wife left him.

Almost immediately, Guyton started to rebuild, and as the narrative of Detroit's downfall took off in the national imagination, Heidelberg was both a rebuttal and, in its front-loading of all the

things that people no longer value, a kaleidoscopic vision of decline itself. Guyton had not solved all of the neighborhood's problems, but by the '90s he had accomplished something few others in Detroit had. He had gotten people to come back to a semiabandoned neighborhood — thousands of them, sometimes in a single day. Guyton was usually there, sitting on the curb.

"Pink Hummer." Damon Casarez for The New York Times

Jenenne Whitfield, a former banker, took a wrong turn on her way to work one morning in 1993 and ended up on Heidelberg, where she found Guyton on the curb and had a reaction similar to the one that many people have upon first encountering his work: "What in the hell is all this?" She quit her job soon after and started working with Guyton, becoming his mouthpiece and main supporter and helping to navigate a rocky relationship with the local government. They married in 2001.

The morning I visited Heidelberg last fall, Whitfield came and

picked me up in her car. Looking out the window as we drove through McDougall-Hunt, most of the neighborhood had fallen into such disrepair that parts had simply converted back into wilderness — overgrown fields and patches of dead grass. Circling back to Heidelberg, however, we saw people everywhere. We drove past Guyton's resident handyman, who was sweeping the streets. A docent was leading a tour group around the grounds. Construction workers were rehabbing the Numbers House, one of the Heidelberg Project's few remaining original structures, a sagging white frame house that Guyton had covered in a strange numerical code. There were people out in the streets, smiling and conversing, not unlike how Guyton described Heidelberg in its heyday. Maybe two plus two really did equal eight.

'It's a special street,' he said. 'It's a special place that — that I can't leave. I can hear it talking to me.'

By taking apart his life's work, by effectively bringing Heidelberg up to code, Guyton and Whitfield hope to partner with the Detroit Land Bank, which would allow them to buy up empty lots in McDougall-Hunt by the bundle. While preserving some of Guyton's major works in place, their dream is to gradually transform the buildings that still stand into a series of cultural and educational centers dedicated to the arts, and then build housing and work spaces marketed for artists out of this central core. They hope that McDougall-Hunt will be supported by the arts in the same way it was once supported by the auto industry.

The land bank has twice rejected Heidelberg's application to become a "community partner," but Guyton and Whitfield are now working with Maurice Cox, the city's director of planning and

development, on addressing the questions that Heidelberg has historically avoided. “It’s about: Where do we shop? Where do our kids play? Where do they go to school?” Cox told me. He is an open supporter of Guyton and the project, and is working with him to prove to the city that an artist can answer these questions.

Before leaving Detroit, I went back down Heidelberg Street to say goodbye to Guyton. He stood in roughly the same spot as when I first met him there, though he now faced a half-circle of students from Grand Valley State University, about two and a half hours west of Detroit. He grilled them about their studies, then insisted they ask him questions. What did they want to know?

One of the students made a sweeping gesture and asked, “What does all this mean to you?”

Tyree Guyton in front of the “New White House,” his childhood home on Heidelberg street. Damon Casarez for The New York Times

It wasn’t a bad question, but I wondered whether it missed the

point. The very fact that someone was standing on Heidelberg Street in the middle of the afternoon at all, having a conversation with someone who grew up here, got directly to the heart of the project. Soon, the crowds of people would depart Heidelberg for wherever it was that they came from, but Guyton would still be here. Maybe he really would dismantle his work and build a new neighborhood in its place. Or maybe the city or someone else would once again raze it to the ground. But it was difficult to imagine a scenario in which Guyton would not still be here, listening while the street talked to him.

What did all this mean to him? Guyton didn't hesitate.

"Everything," he said.

Heidelberg Street. Damon Casarez for The New York Times