

**THE NIGHT SKY BILLBOARD PROJECT**

by

**CHARLIE MICHAELS**

B.F.A. Bradley University

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts

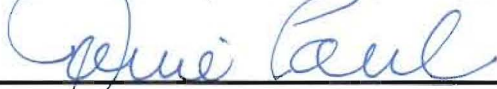
University of Michigan  
School of Art and Design  
*April 2011*

Approved by,



---

NICK TOBIER, Thesis Committee Chair



---

JANIE PAUL, Thesis Committee Member



---

KARL LONGSTRETH, Thesis Committee Member




---

MARIA ARQUERO DE ALARCON, Thesis Committee Member



---

BRAD SMITH, Associate Dean of Graduate Education



---

BRYAN ROGERS, Dean, School of Art and Design

# **THE NIGHT SKY BILLBOARD PROJECT**

**CHARLIE MICHAELS**



**SPECIAL THANKS TO**

**Bird, Nick Tobier, Janie Paul, María Arquero de Alarcón, and Karl Longstreth**

**Dwayne Kassab, Zack Jacobson-Weaver, Adrienne Finelli, Michael Borowski, Erica Buss, Doug Galante, Edward Grubb, Max Collins, Emilia Javanica, my Dad – Chuck Michaels, Stephen Schudlich, Mary Beth Carolan, Patrick Crouch, Stacey Malasky, and Jeff Sturges**

**My graduate school cohort for their unwavering support and friendship**

**© 2011 Charlie Michaels**

# TABLE OF CONTENTS



<b>1.</b>	<b>Building Bridges And Balancing Acts.....</b>	<b>06</b>
<b>2.</b>	<b>Finding The Stars.....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>3.</b>	<b>Into The Street.....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>4.</b>	<b>Creativity and Detroit.....</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>5.</b>	<b>Bird's Eye.....</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>6.</b>	<b>Series of Events.....</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>7.</b>	<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>8.</b>	<b>References.....</b>	<b>38</b>



The Night Sky Billboard Project

## ABSTRACT

Above the intersection of Mack Ave. and Mt. Elliott St. on the east side of Detroit, a billboard that's been sitting empty for decades displays an image of the night sky. Allowing those who pass underneath to see the stars more clearly than they are visible in the city, it offers a quiet reminder to notice what is always present but cannot always be seen.

The hand-painted billboard emerges through collaboration with Bird, an artist who has been leaving his mark along streets in Detroit for decades.

**Keywords:** Public Art, Community-Based Art, Collaborative Art, Street Art, Detroit, Social Practice, Billboard, Stars, Night, Sky, Painting

## BUILDING BRIDGES AND BALANCING ACTS



*A sketchbook drawing made at Earthwork Urban Farm, Detroit, MI, Fall 2010*

This simple image presented on a billboard surfaced from a multifaceted journey that was literal as well as metaphorical, consisting of years of both urban exploration and self-exploration. With a desire to open up my solitary artistic practice to broader and wider audiences, I approached the city of Detroit with open eyes in hopes that I might find something to spark my interest and imagination. Remaining open to what places and people along the way could teach me, I found not just an audience for my work, but a city I never expected would provide such rich and unique experiences.

When I was first getting to know the city of Detroit, I was fascinated with the racial and economic divisions between the city and its surrounding suburbs. My attention focused on the boundary line between the east side of Detroit and the suburb of Grosse Pointe Park, where stepping over the city line is like entering another world. Cracked sidewalks, broken streetlights and boarded up buildings are instantly replaced with tree-lined streets, brick sidewalks, restaurants and yoga studios. Documenting this dramatic shift in the urban landscape as well as physical barriers that prevent traffic from flowing easily between the two sides got me walking around, investigating the streets, and thinking about how the biggest divisions in our culture play out in the organization of cities. Having grown up near a similar border in south Chicago, it reminded me of my own neighborhood in certain ways, but much more dramatic in its separation.



*A physical barrier constructed between Detroit (left) and Grosse Pointe Park (right) at Goethe St.*



*An extended panoramic photograph of Kercheval St at the border of Detroit (left) and Grosse Pointe Park (right)*





*The border of Detroit (left) and Grosse Pointe Park (right) on Kertcheval St. (Detail)*

Looking back on these early urban explorations, I realize I was creating documentations of a complicated situation I was trying to understand but couldn't fully grasp. I was surveying a place, a situation, giving equal importance to two sides that I saw as separate and divided. What I was mostly interested in, however, was not the divide, but the point of connection and the potential that exists for crossover between the places and the people that live there. The real question, I believe, had to do with my own sense of belonging. I never saw myself as a part of either side, but somewhere in the middle, wanting to straddle the two. I began looking for places in the city where this crossover was already happening in hopes that I could learn how to better position myself and begin to bridge this divide while learning about the city from people that were living and working in it.



*Learning how to harvest potatoes at Earthworks Urban Farm, Detroit, MI*

In May of 2009 I woke up in my bedroom in Ann Arbor, poured some coffee into a travel mug, threw my bike and a bag full of clothes in the back of my car, and got on the highway for the 45 minute drive to Detroit. Instead of coming back that afternoon, like every other time I made a trip into the city, I would be staying for about a month, working four days a week at Earthworks Urban Farm in the Islandview neighborhood on the east, side and staying in a house with Capuchin Friars and other volunteers.

Earthworks Urban Farm is a program of the Capuchin Soup Kitchen. A small farm in the heart of

the city, they work in response to the lack of accessibility to fresh, healthy food in the surrounding neighborhood; growing organic vegetables for the soup kitchen and holding a weekly community market. That summer, Earthworks became the bridge I was looking for and my

real entrance into Detroit and its layered history and culture. It afforded me the opportunity to work with people and to talk while we worked outside, having conversations about everything from urban farming and food justice, to the city, our own histories and potential futures. It was working in the garden at Earthworks where I learned the most about the city, more than I could have ever learned from studying and documenting it from the outside. I grew really fond of this neighborhood and the urban farm because of these experiences and, over the course of two growing seasons worth of continued volunteer work, really began to adopt this place as my own in certain ways. No longer understanding myself as just an outsider, but as someone who has some sense, if even a minimal one, of belonging here.

I began to recognize another separation at this time, between the fulfillment I got out of working and talking with people at Earthworks and the work I was making in my studio. At the time I was working on a series of large charcoal drawings, aerial views of similar politically divided landscapes, which weren't providing me the same kind of excitement and interactions I had found in Detroit. At Earthworks, I had found a way to satisfy my desire to feel like my actions had a tangible effect on people while working collaboratively with others toward a common goal. In a sense, I found what I had perceived as missing from my own work. I wanted, somehow, to harness this energy and let it enter my work.

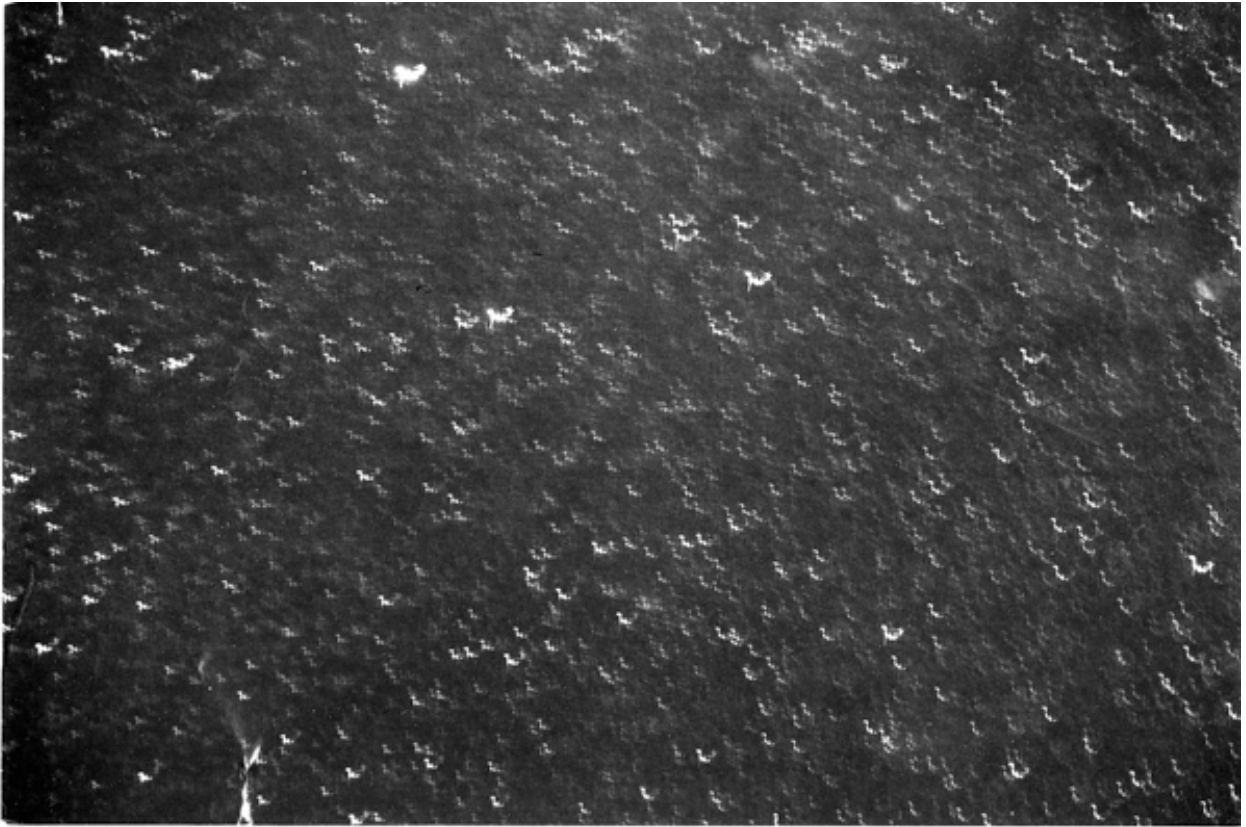
The struggle that emerged out of these perceived divisions in my work also parallels the way I tend to approach people and situations. I transition pretty fluidly between being an introvert and an extrovert, a quality I used to see as problematic because I would often question what my true nature was. I see, now, that this is a unique asset that I can use to relate to various kinds of people, being quiet and contemplative when I need to be and outgoing and direct when I need to be. I realize the potential of this quality in my work where I want quiet subtlety and introspection, while at the same time having a positive effect on communities outside the art world. Like the garden at Earthworks, which provides a practical solution to a very real problem while simultaneously existing as a calming place for building a spiritual connection with nature in the city.

I've thought before that maybe the key is to view my practice as divided into private and public aspects, someone who makes art alone in a studio and simultaneously participates in community work in order to feel a stronger connection to the rest of the world. This way of understanding my practice, however, ignores the need for the bridge, denying either side the ability to grow and prosper in conjunction with one another. After all, I am one person and my sides play off each other in very fluid ways. As a Gemini, I've come to understand that this feeling of being a divided whole may never go away. It's a gift, not an obstacle, to be able to move smoothly between spaces, cultures, and ways of

working. Recognizing these inherent privileges and the inherent privileges that come with the place I inhabit as a young, white, educated, artist working in a world with so much inequality, it became my mission to use my work to extend those privileges to others. Is it possible to merge metaphor and action? To create a reciprocity of some kind by letting others into my work and still maintaining it as my own? What role can art play in a community like this one in Detroit, and what role is it already playing?

I approached this project with these questions in mind, looking for a way to bridge gaps both real and perceived.

## FINDING THE STARS



In September 2010, during the first weeks of settling into a new apartment, the first time I have ever lived alone, I laid in bed and drew a small picture of the stars in my sketchbook. For years I've had a framed photograph, a snapshot taken with a disposable camera of the night sky over cornfields in central Illinois, hanging every apartment and house I've lived in. The photo is blurry, but you can tell it's the stars. It's one of those things that makes wherever I'm living feel like home. My friend Margot, who meant a lot to me before she passed away about six years ago, took it with a disposable camera when we were teenagers. I made a small black square on my sketchbook page that night, with white dots across the surface.

*Where we grew up, south of the brightest city lights in Chicago, the pleiades is one of the only constellations you can see clearly. As teenagers we would sit in a park in our neighborhood at night, right off a busy street that became silent when it got late. Turning your back from the street, the expansive grassiness of the park made it just dark enough to see the pleiades, the constellation Margot had adopted as her own. Searching for places to see the stars became a common activity for my group of friends, because it was something free to do on summer nights, but also because they fascinated us. Living so close to the city, the stars seemed slightly foreign and finding new ones or new places where we could see them was fun. Like a quest for something ever present but only visible under certain conditions. Those nights provided the context for that high school kind of philosophical conversation, where you feel like you are making important discoveries about the world for the first time.*

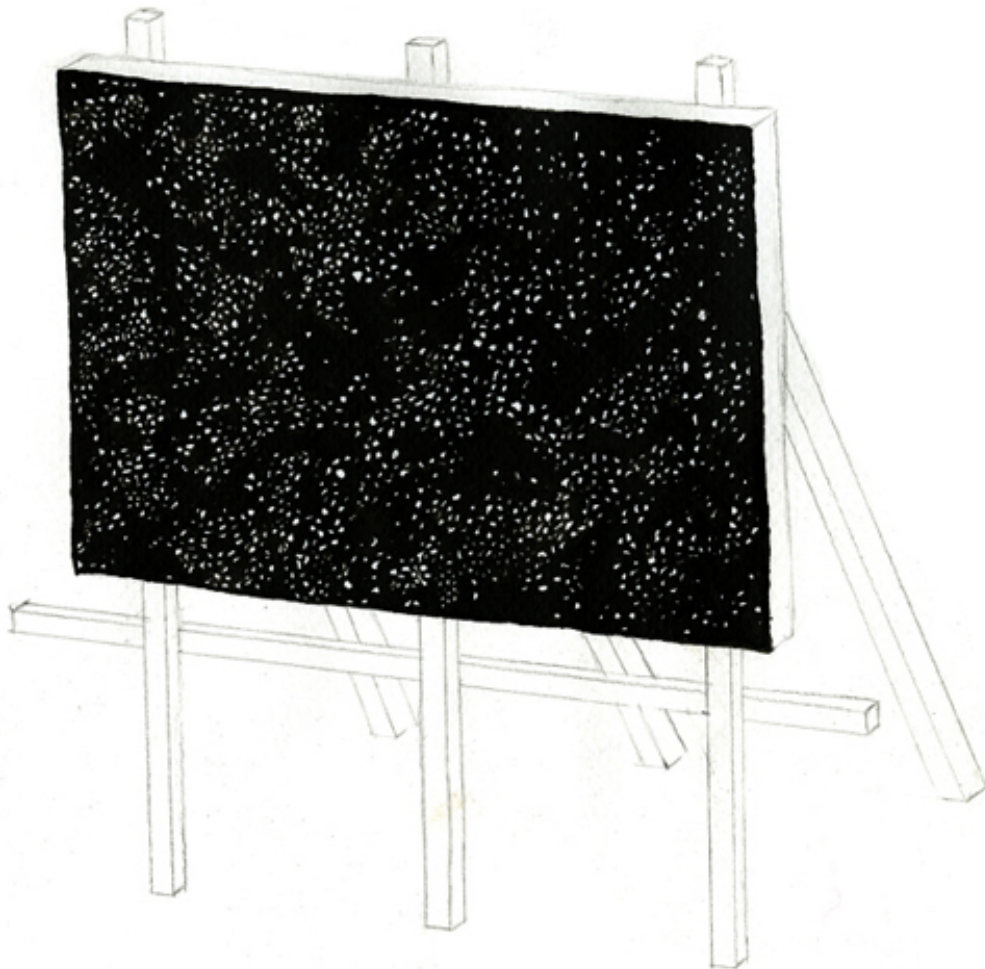
*When we were 18, I went to visit Margot in Decatur, Illinois. A small city three hours south of Chicago surrounded by cornfields and cows. She had started college the year before, but was forced to drop out when an unexpected relapse happened. It was early fall, before the weather really breaks and you can still wear just a sweatshirt at night. The first night of my visit we piled into a small station wagon and drove out of town for at least an hour down dusty thin roads through Illinois farmland. We were going to a place they called "the silos". Two rusty old grain silos that looked like they hadn't been used by anyone in years stood next to the road. For us they were landmarks in an otherwise flat and unremarkable landscape, a destination and a place to stop. Getting out of the car and looking up, the sky was like nothing I had ever seen before. Perfectly clear, it was covered in thousands of tiny points of light. For hours, the group of us lay in the middle of that empty road next to the crumbling silos and looked up.*

I had never actually seen the stars until I was almost 20 years old, something I didn't know until this night when I was given the privilege of being witness to a perfectly clear sky. It's these memories that I carry with me whenever I look at that photograph, or spend some time looking up at night. To this day looking up at the stars is an experience that fluctuates from being intensely personal, making me feel incredibly small and isolated, to linking me to the world and serving as a reminder of the inherent connections that exist between all things.

Becoming aware of my relationship to the sky pulls me out of the present moment, away from whatever is happening, allowing space for reflection. As Thomas Moore describes

it in his book *The Re-Enchantment of Everyday Life*, “We can look deeply into that night sky and see ourselves” (Moore, 358) It’s fascinating to me that looking at something so vast and all encompassing as the stars, a unifying force above all of our heads at all times, can also be such an intimate and personal experience. This dichotomy between public and private, connected and isolated is a thread that runs not only through this image and my perception of the night sky, but in the problems I had been trying to solve in my work, and questions about my role as either an insider or outsider in Detroit.

Thinking about these parallels and the streets I had become acquainted with in Detroit, I made another sketch that turned my drawing of the stars into an image on a billboard.



Most commonly used for advertisements, we have become accustomed to billboards presenting us with products and services we are supposed to feel like we desire, things the advertisers assume the audience needs and doesn't already have. In Detroit, neighborhood streets are dotted with billboards of different sizes. Some used regularly for advertising, some-stagnant, showing ads from years past faded and peeling away from the surface. I'm interested in the billboard as a platform for public presentation and the potential to subvert their understood function by using them to insert something beautiful and poetic into an urban environment; using the billboards to "advertise" something that cannot be consumed, only thought about or sought after. I saw a potential opportunity in these pieces of disregarded infrastructure for me to expand my audience; reaching out to this community I became attached to by inserting my work into the street.

Felix Gonzales Torres, an artist who did numerous projects with billboards, often used this form of public presentation to talk about intensely personal and poetic moments from his own life. A series of untitled billboards originally installed around New York City in 1991



*Felix Gonzalez Torres, Untitled, 1991. Installation at 31-33 Second Avenue at East Second Street, Manhattan, for Projects 34: Felix Gonzalez Torres at MOMA*

feature a cropped image of Torres' own empty bed with white sheets pushed aside as if indentations of two bodies in the white pillows and sheets. Mourning the death of his partner from AIDS, this private image presented in such a public format is a way of reaching out to an anonymous public with feelings of love and loss that are universal to us all.

I'm interested in this dichotomy between private and public and how it can be expressed through the relationship of an image and how it is presented to an audience. Unlike Felix Gonzalez Torres' photograph of his bed, which is by nature private and personal, I see the image of the stars as universal with the ability to offer intimate and personal moments of reflection.



*Billboard Liberation Front, Altered Billboard, New York City 2010*

In contrast to Felix Gonzales Torres' billboard projects, The Billboard Liberation Front modifies advertisements on billboards in order to alter the meaning of the meaning in a politically subversive way. Since 1977, they have been "improving" billboards in order to make a public statement about the role of advertising in creating an American culture of consumption. In this recent altered billboard in New York City, Billboard Liberation Front painted over the words "of beauty" in the phrase "She is a thing of beauty" on this advertisement for Stella Atrois to make a statement about the objectification of women in both advertising and contemporary culture.

For me, the interest in billboards as a mode of public display in Detroit has less to do with the political implications of subverting commercial advertisements and more to do with bringing to life an unused piece of city infrastructure that was intended for public display of images. I am not interested in making a loud political statement with this work, but like Felix Gonzalez Torres, inserting something beautiful and surprising in an unexpected place. This is in itself a political act, but a gently one, preformed with subtlety. I'm interested in acts like this that are gently political; strong in their impact, but gentle in their delivery.



Placing the stars on a billboard lets people feel metaphorically the innate connections to nature and natural forces that are often lost in cities, similar to the way the urban farm does in a more literal and practical way. The stars aren't clearly visible in most cities because of light and air pollution, but I never set out to make a didactic statement about these issues in my work and an interest in them isn't why I became so infatuated with this idea. My fascination lies in the intimate, connective, spiritual, and hopeful metaphors that the stars contain and in knowing, through working with groups of people in this neighborhood, that these same metaphors embraced in efforts toward community revitalization.

The stars are always there, but cannot always be seen, like beauty, importance, and potential in communities that might be easily dismissed by outsiders or the potential for a vacant lot to become a community garden. As Shea Howell said of the importance of creative movements in Detroit in her article *Conversations on Race* in the Michigan Citizen, "Our new narrative begins with the creative impulse of the people of Detroit to recreate urban life, based on new values of cooperation, sustainability, community engagement, joy and beauty. This impulse is seen everywhere, in efforts to turn war zones into peace zones, vacant lots into gardens and pain into poetry" (Howell).

## INTO THE STREET



At the intersection of Chene and Canfield, in Detroit's Black Bottom neighborhood, there is a small billboard that sits on a pole about ten feet off the ground. Like many other nearby billboards identical to it, it appears in various states of occupation. When no advertisement is adhered to the surface, a large painted black dot is visible, placed there by Tyree Guyton of the nearby Heidelberg project as a symbol of blight in the neighborhood.



*Billboard with stars at Chene and Canfield, Detroit, MI January 2011*

I decided this small billboard was a perfect location for the stars. That intersection has empty lots on all four corners, which means the billboard is framed by the sky, not blocked by any building in front or behind it. Having chosen the location and taking a cue from the Billboard Liberation Front, I solicited the help of a friend who helped me wheat paste a large printout of the stars onto the metal surface. It was invigorating, exciting, adrenaline filled, and cold, and I was pleased with the results, but the most amazing thing is what happened after the image was up – Nothing at all.



*Empty billboard structure at Mack Avenue and Mt. Elliot Street*

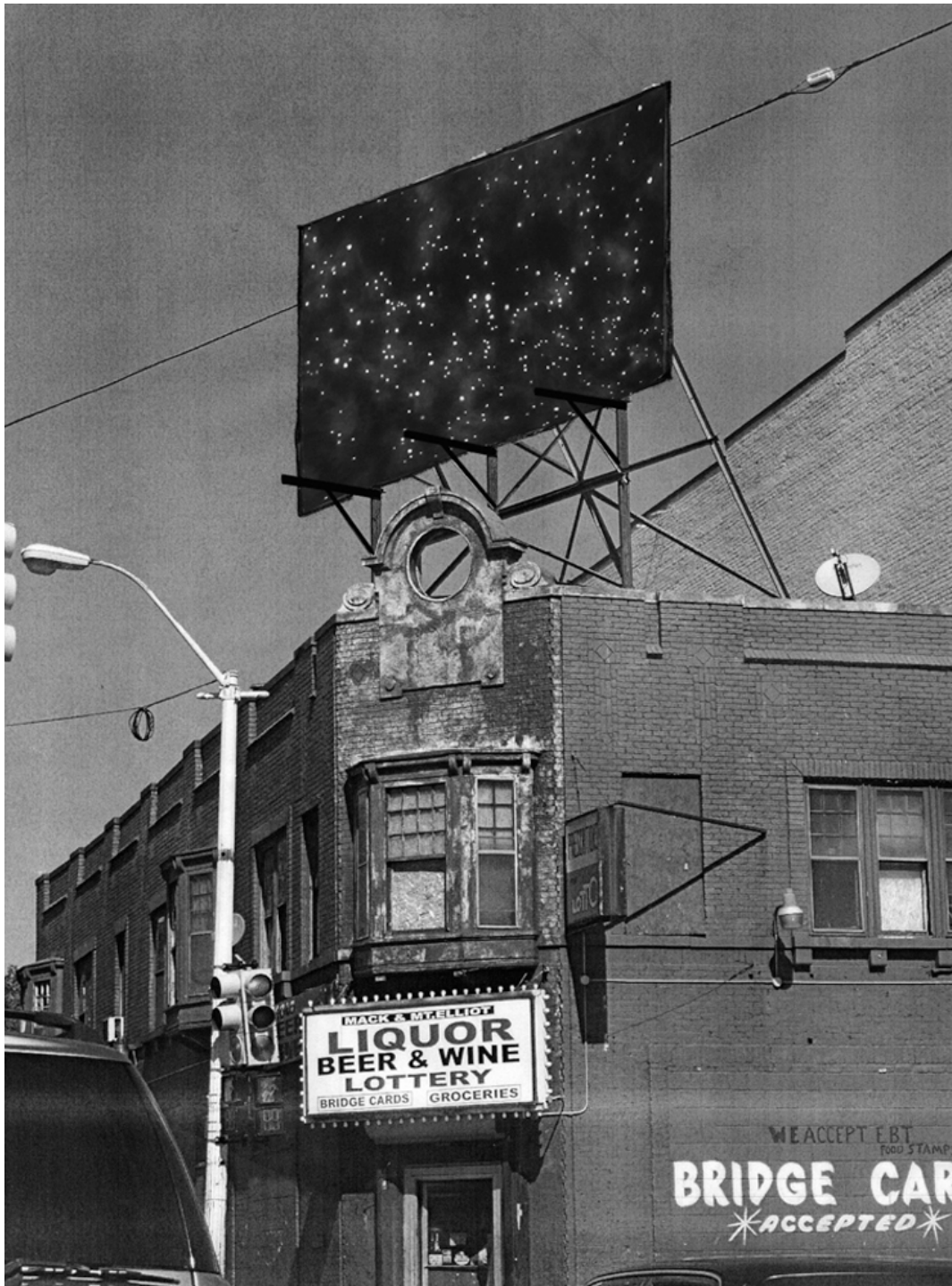
Afterward, I knew that instead of simply placing my work in the neighborhood, I needed to integrate it somehow. The kinds of interactions I craved would never happen if I simply swooped in to put up my work and leave. It was the integrated mixing of people and opportunities to work alongside others that got me hooked on coming back to this neighborhood again and again after all and its this kind of collaboration I wanted to foster with my work.

At the corner of Mack and Mt. Elliott, there is an empty billboard structure that has an incredible dominance over the intersection. I've been admiring this sculptural piece of aging city infrastructure above the brightly colored blue and red building, for years, driving past it on my way in and out of the neighborhood. When serious planning began for a night sky billboard in the same neighborhood as earthworks, it became my ideal location.

I walked into the liquor store in late January and inquired about the billboard to the man behind the counter. It happened to be the owner, Dwayne, who told me that it's been empty for at least 20 years and that he has tried numerous times to rent that space with no luck. He said if I was interested in using it he would be open to talking about it and that I should come back to him with an idea and plan.

I returned to Dwayne a week later with a collaged image of the night sky sitting on the billboard above his store. He agreed to let me go ahead with the project, contingent on the agreement of a rental price for use of the space. The layout of the image itself is taken directly from a celestial map of the stars at the latitude and longitude of that intersection and then cropped into a rectangle. It's exactly what the stars would look like from that spot, if they could be seen clearly.

Unlike the smaller billboard wheat pasted billboard in Black Bottom, using this structure gave me the opportunity to bring to life an aging piece of city infrastructure without feeling like I was inserting my work into the street without considering its relationship or possibilities to develop relationships to its surroundings. Working with the owner of a local business, I could begin to integrate this project into the neighborhood instead of simply using the neighborhood as its destination.





Something I really love about Detroit is the sheer number of hand painted signs and advertisements that dot the streets. It's a city where traditional sign painters are still making a living with their trade. Many business owners in the city can't afford commercially made signage for their storefronts, but the culture of sign painting in the city remains also because of the popularity of these paintings that allow every storefront to be completely unique.

Just north of the billboard at Mack and Mt. Elliott there is a pawn shop called "The Gold Mine", painted gold with watches, crosses, and guy stuffing cash in his pocket on the exterior. To the south on Mt. Elliott Singleton Cleaners, which has a number of locations in the Detroit, is painted with beautiful and precise text and images of freshly dry cleaned clothing. I appreciate this effort of local businesses and sign painters who take pride in the exteriors of these buildings, whose hand painted exteriors has always been a welcome change for me from the commercially produced environments I'm used to living in.

In addition to these paintings made for commercial businesses, there are other public art projects in the neighborhood initiated by community groups seeking to beautify empty lots and engage people in describing their hopes for the future of the community. One such project that served as an early inspiration for me is a small painting on a wooden frame that's installed in an empty lot on Chene St next to the sidewalk. It's a painting of someone's idea for what the vacant building behind the painting might be someday – a café

under a bright blue sky where people gather to eat and play Frisbee in the grass. It caught my attention because of its simplicity and the way it presents an accessible and direct message while still remaining compelling in its form and installation next to the street. The lines of the street and sidewalk in the painting and those in the real street align perfectly when viewed from the correct angle. This attempt at blending the image with reality intensifies our understanding of the situation, making the message direct and accessible by showing us what could be here that we may not otherwise stop to think about or see.



Understanding the piece I was going to make as an addition to this gallery already in the street, I decided to seek out a local painter to work with me to hand paint the image of the stars instead of producing it mechanically. Of the number of options I could have chosen to produce the billboard, including having it printed by a commercial advertising company or making it by hand alone, collaborating with a local painter made the most sense for a number of reasons. This way the billboard would be brought into the context of the neighborhood, and, having been made by a local sign painter it would be tied directly to images in the surrounding streets. Finding a collaborator would provide me the opportunity, also, to work side by side in collaboration with someone, acknowledging the artists whose work came before mine in those streets and letting the funding allotted for the project enter the local economy instead of a corporate printing company.

## CREATIVITY AND DETROIT

It's not uncommon to hear artists, architects, planners, etc. speak of Detroit in terms of a "Blank Canvas", a city so empty and devoid of infrastructure that any range of projects could be possible. It's an easy way to understand and interpret the city as an outsider first encountering neighborhoods that often seem more vacant than populated. Spending time in Detroit, however, one realizes that just because places seem abandoned or not paid attention to on the surface does not mean they are void of activity. Overgrown lots and corners are often places where people gather to play or hang out and buildings that look vacant are often still inhabited homes or businesses. More importantly than understanding the ways that spaces like this are physically used, however, is to internalize that open space and lack of infrastructure does not equate to a lack of people, culture, and devotion to that place.

The "blank canvas" perspective is one often perpetuated in the media in such popular projects as photographer Kevin Bauman's "100 Abandoned Houses." This project documents abandoned homes throughout Detroit using the same exact camera angle and framing in each photograph, echoing the way publications like this promote a single sided understanding of the city as a whole.



*A selection of photographs from Kevin Bauman's "100 Abandoned Houses"*



Switching the lens through which one looks at the city, from one of simply identifying surface characteristics to one of appreciation for the people and culture of the city, opens up brand new ways of thinking about this place that is too often referred to as dead or dying. Community activist Shea Howell eloquently and powerfully describes the issue in an article from the Michigan Citizen:

“...we need a very different narrative than the one in the mainstream media. The first step in this narrative is to challenge the idea that Detroit is empty, dead, filled with ruins--a blank canvass, just waiting for young white male artists to come fill it. Instead, we all need to understand, share and celebrate the extraordinary creative legacy of this city, produced by people of many backgrounds, but especially by African Americans who created art in song, poetry, painting, dance, theatre and daily life, often out of almost nothing. African American culture in Detroit not only made a way out of no way, but that way was often forged in beauty. This legacy of creativity was fueled not only by individual artistic vision, but also by new ideas of human possibility...” (Howell).

Being a young, white, male artist myself and understanding the reputation that young, white are starting to gain in the city for projects that take advantage of vacant space without an understanding or acknowledgement of the context they are working within, I wanted to approach this project in such a way that challenged this developing stereotype. I recognize the inherent privileges that come with the position I inhabit and could not do a project in this neighborhood without finding a way to extend these privileges to others by integrating the project with some piece of the neighborhood fabric.

## BIRD'S EYE



An Article in the June 2010 issue of the Detroit Metro Times, by Detroitblogger John opens with the following description of work by an artist named Bird, "The place was a dump. It had been the office of a used car lot that was left to the weeds years ago, fodder for a bulldozer if anything were ever to replace it. So a fellow named Bird came by one day with a few brushes and some cans of paint and put two paintings here; one on this ugly shack and another on the empty building next to it, both of which he had to look at every day as he walked past... The artist carefully chose this spot. "If the building has potential and I think maybe in the future they might open it up or someone might rent it, I don't bother," says Lee Walker, the 52-year-old known around town simply as Bird the painter. "It has to be dilapidated — roof gone, no doors, basically abandoned." (Detroitblogger John)

After deciding I wanted to work with a local sign painter, I remembered reading about bird in this article, titled "Bird's eye, How an east side artist brings life to dead buildings and bed sheets." I decided to try and find Bird to tell him about my billboard with the stars on it, and see if he was interested in working with me. Little did I know I would be meeting one of the most experienced and prominent sign painters in the whole city, whose life work is visible in the streets of Detroit.

On a Saturday in late January, I found the mattress shop Bird works in with his cousins on Van Dyke. I knew it from the photograph in the Metro Times, a white cinderblock building that has a mural of a train carrying mattresses painted across the length of the front, by Bird no doubt. Bird wasn't there the afternoon I showed up, but I left my number with his cousin Juan and received a phone call from him the next day.

Later that week Bird and I met back at the mattress shop. We sat in my car outside the shop and I showed him pictures of the billboard and told him about the painting of the stars, making sure to be clear that I was looking for a collaborator, not someone to do the job for me. He doesn't get that much work in the winter, the time he usually reserves for working on paintings for himself. He was happy to have the job.

That day, Bird and I went on the first of several tours of the east side to look at his work. The first stop was just up Van Dyke from the mattress shop; a large painting on a the side of a mechanics shop of a green Chevrolet impala convertible jumping on hydraulic wheels. Underneath, hand painted text reads "We do up to 26in Wheels". Around the corner on 7 Mile is a daycare center covered in cartoon characters, another mechanics garage with Hummers and Ferraris on the outside and a pizza place. There is a beautiful painting on the exterior of Hat's Galore and More, near Gratiot and I-94, that Bird has been maintaining for years.

Bird's most recent work is on Gratiot between 7mile and Burns. The past couple summers, on days off, Bird had been slowly transforming this section of the street with un-commissioned paintings on buildings that are abandoned or unused. All within close proximity, Bird has painted a larger than life Michael Jackson dancing under a spotlight, a portrait of Barack Obama, and a mural of Mickey and Minnie Mouse in a pink Cadillac convertible. Detroitblogger John quotes Bird describing this work "If I don't see no future for the structure I'll try to put some artwork up there that beautifies it. It's like when you see an old abandoned building, you think about the decay of the city...the sad part of it. But if there's some art on it that catches your eye and it's a nice piece it kind of lifts your spirits." In talking with me about it, Bird describes it as more than a way to beautify a decaying street. For him, it's a way of advertising his work (each painting has his phone number painted there as well) and a summer activity for him and his kids, who brings along to help with the hope that they will follow in his footsteps as painters.





## SERIES OF EVENTS

The billboard structure I chose for our painting of the stars was based mostly on its aesthetics and location in a neighborhood I am already familiar and comfortable with. I find the steel structure itself to be beautifully designed and positioned at an off center angle on the corner of the brightly painted building. The business underneath the billboard I chose could have been anything, but it happened to be a corner store, like many all over the city that I have learned about through conversations at Earthworks.

Though Detroit's population is around 80% African American, it's estimated that approximately 80-90% of Detroit's independently owned liquor and grocery stores are run by middle eastern immigrant families and their descendants, according to *Arab Detroit: From Margin to Mainstream* (Nabeel and Shryock, 153). The owner, Dwayne, whose family fits this description, is from West Bloomfield, a wealthy Detroit suburb.

Dwayne and I both come to this neighborhood as outsiders, to the place and culture, but with opposing intentions. His to sustain a profitable business by whatever means necessary and mine to participate in community development programs while learning from people that live and work there. From what I learned in conversation with him, Dwayne's family has owned that building for decades. His father once ran it and now works only part time behind the counter while Dwayne works the majority of the open hours and keeps the place running. He has spent far more time in that neighborhood than I have, but we seem to hold opposite perceptions of the place. The majority of my time has been spent working in gardens and schools with various kinds of people and his behind a bulletproof glass counter for hours on end selling liquor, beer, cigarettes, and a limited amount of groceries to people that come into the store.

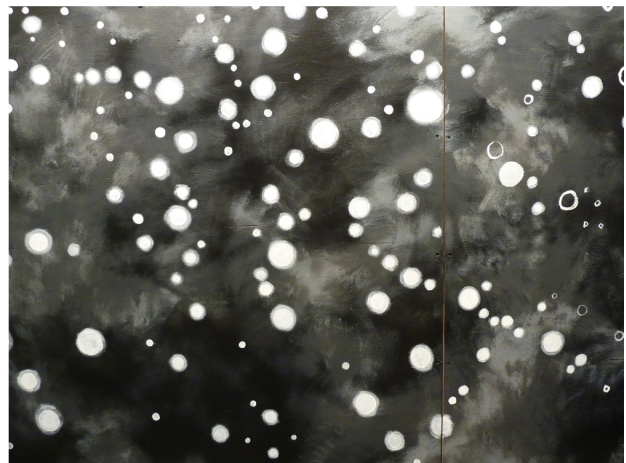
Negotiating the use of the billboard and a rental price was by far the most frustrating part of this project. Trying to come to an agreement with a storeowner who had very little interest outside of the fact that this could potentially make him some money forced me out of my idealistic imaginings of how the project would unfold as well as optimistic hopes and understandings of what he could



*Bulletproof glass counter inside Dwayne's store*

and should do as local storeowner to give back to the community. Entering this business relationship with Dwayne I unconsciously assumed that he, like other local business owners I have met, would see himself in a position like this. It should have been obvious from the beginning that his interest in the neighborhood and my project is one only clouded in dollar signs. Though we ended up agreeing on a fair rental price, the experience gave me a better understanding of the complicated divides between classes and cultures in Detroit and a quick first hand look at the challenges that activists here face in their efforts to create a community of fairness and equality.

While I haggled with Dwayne over a rental price, Bird and I got to work painting the stars. On the days we worked, I picked up Bird at his house, in a neighborhood Detroitblogger John describes as “far outside of downtown, deep inside the inner city, a maze of beaten-up old homes on crisscrossing side streets in what has become Detroit’s hinterlands” (Detroitblogger John). Every day we worked we made the transition from Bird’s street driving downtown to University of Michigan’s Work Detroit Gallery where we painted the twelve plywood panels that fit together to make up the surface of the billboard.



*Painting in Work Detroit Gallery with Bird, March 2010*

Using the gallery as a studio gave us the opportunity to make the work we were doing visible. I thought painting them in the gallery instead of a studio or garage somewhere in the city would give us the opportunity to talk to people as we worked and get the word out about the project. I hung up a print of the night sky billboard sketch on the wall that faced the door and we spread out over the entire gallery, leaning plywood panels against the gallery walls.

We used Bird's brushes, "I have to work with my own tools," he explained on the first day as he showed me the difference between the angled brush, the flat brush, and the rounded brushes. We started by painting the panels black, then laying down various shades of grey make up what both of us started to refer to as "the smoky stuff". White dots to represent the stars came last, eyeballing their placement using the celestial map of the latitude and longitude of the billboard's intersection as a reference.

After we finished painting, the panels sat on display in the gallery for about two weeks along with a large charcoal drawing I made that sits on a scaled down wooden version of the billboard; a gallery version of the outdoor piece. We filled the other side of the gallery with Bird's paintings, his personal work that he makes in the winter between commissions for others. Unlike many sign painters in Detroit who, according to Bird, view their skills as only a trade, Bird also makes paintings for personal fulfillment. He most often works in acrylic and latex paint on old mattress tops and box spring frames from the mattress shop that he stretches in bed sheets instead of canvas.





As my relationship with Bird developed over the course of us working together I realized how important the opportunity to show in a gallery was for him. He has shown his paintings in galleries before but not for a long time. For me, it felt good to know I was providing him with an opportunity he had been craving for a long time. Since the piece I designed and we painted together was being exhibited in the street, and most of his work is displayed in the street it was kind of a nice opportunity for us switch places in a sense - him entering a part of my world and me entering a part of his. Giving Bird the wall space allowed me to extend the privilege of the gallery exhibition to Bird, opening up the gallery to a local artist and different kind of audience than would normally attend exhibitions there.



*Some of Bird's paintings on canvas, mattress tops, and bed sheets in Work Detroit Gallery*



*Installing painted panels onto the billboard structure (Photo: Max Collins)*

Two weeks after the painting was finished, an incredible crew of my friends and colleagues hoisted the panels up onto the roof with ropes and pulleys to install them on the billboard. Over the course of an entire Saturday, we worked together developing a choreographed system of pulling the panels up onto the structure and securing them into place. The day was long and tiring, but incredibly rewarding and filled with camaraderie I was happy the project could serve as an impetus for. For me, at least, it felt less like a day filled with hard work and more like a day spent working on something enjoyable with a group of friends.



*View of the billboard being installed from the street (Photo: Max Collins)*



*The finished piece, right after installation (Photo: Max Collins)*

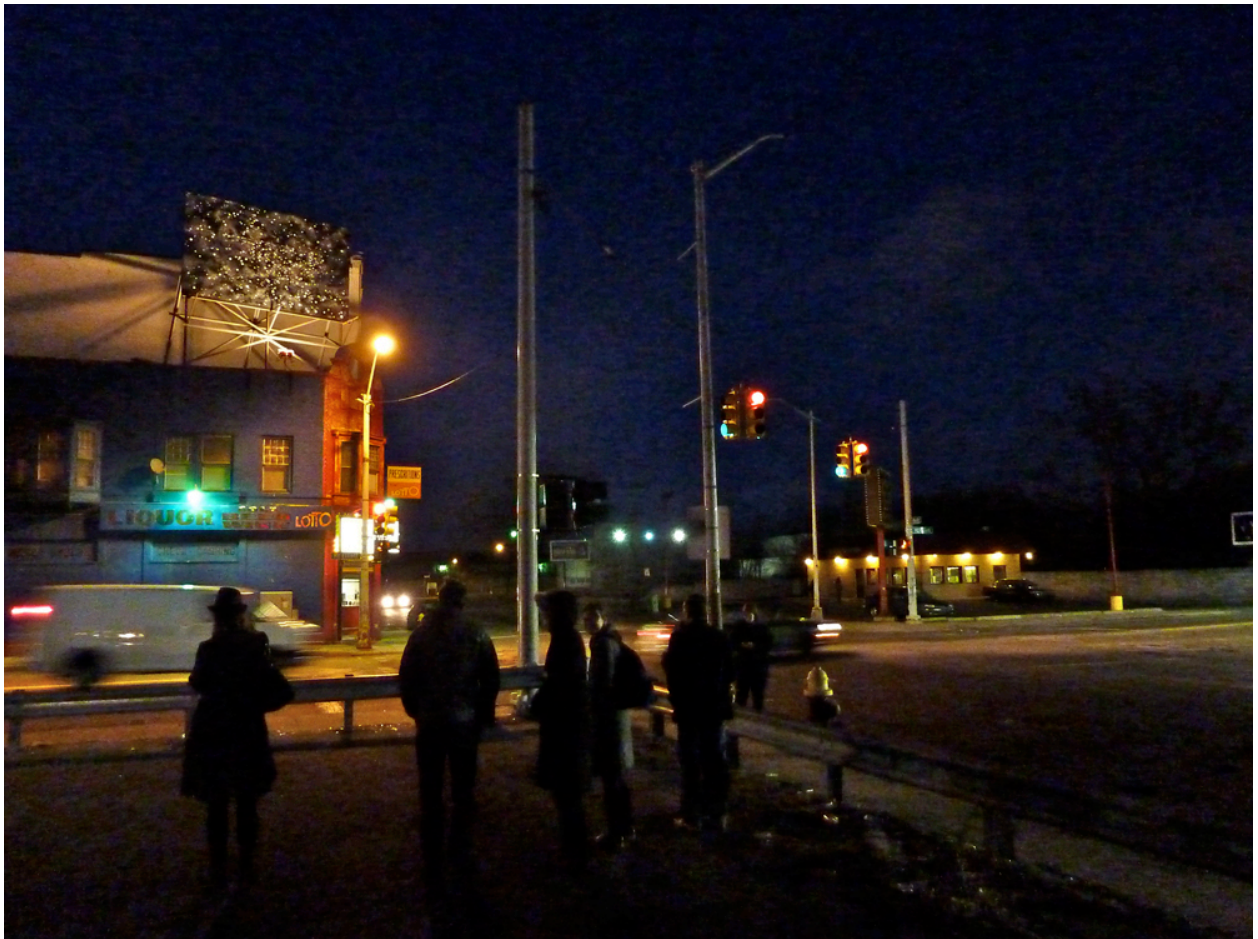


*Photo: Max Collins*

The final exhibition that accompanied the project at Work Detroit Gallery featured Bird's paintings and video documentation of the process of making and installing the billboard.

The video can be seen HERE or at: <http://vimeo.com/22428957>

During the reception, visitors were able to travel down Mack Avenue, from Work Detroit to Mt Elliott St. to see the billboard itself. Lit up when the sky gets dark, people can stargaze from the parking lot across the street any time of day.



*Stargazing from the parking lot across the street (Photo: John Kannenberg)*

## CONCLUSION

I can only hope that the stars on the billboard might provide experiences for others as they see it from the street that are similar to my experience of looking at the stars – evoking memories of times and people past as well as connections to the future. I’ve come to think of this as a gift of sorts, but not only the gift of allowing people to see the stars, day or night, in a place where they aren’t clearly visible. It’s a gift for me as well.

For me, this project encompasses both the physical object of the billboard installed next to the sky above that intersection as well as the days, weeks, years, of work towards building the bridge that allowed me to integrate people and desires from seemingly separate aspects of my life. It’s a culmination, in some ways, of efforts made and work extended to a place that I once saw as outside of me, but now have a history in. Looked at in this way, it’s not the painting on the billboard that’s the final product, but the experience and the process of building and maintaining connections, this history, which I’ll carry with me. And in this sense, it’s no culmination at all, but only a beginning.



## REFERENCES

Ault, Julie, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, Göttingen: Steidl, Gerhard Druckerei und Verlag, 2006

Bauman, Kevin, "100 Abandoned Houses." Web. 20 March 2011

Detroitblogger John, "Bird's eye, How an east side artist brings life to dead buildings and bed sheets." 30 Jun. 2010. Web. 20 March 2011

Howell, Shea, "Conversations of Race." *The Michigan Citizen*, 11 Nov. 2010. Web. 20 March 2011.

Moore, Thomas, *The Re-Enchantment of Everyday Life*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1996.

Nabeel, Abraham and Shryock, Andrew, *Arab Detroit: From Margin to Mainstream*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2000

Napier, Jack and Thomas, John, "Manifesto." *Billboard Liberation Front Creative Group*, Web. 20 March 2011