

Art and Design Senior Thesis

detroit aglow  
art from

Elyse Shapiro

Think about Detroit. What thoughts are the first to come to your mind? Could it be the decay of abandoned homes, hospitals, schools, and stores? How about the local inhabitants with a reputation for crime and violence? The city's stagnancy while the car industry crashed within it, or the corruption of its previous governmental employees? Whatever it is, Detroit undoubtedly has a negative reputation with those unfamiliar to it.

Over the past 60 years, Detroit's population has declined significantly from 1,850,000 in 1950, to 713,000 in 2010 (Detroiturbex.com). With so many people leaving Detroit, many of its buildings became vacant. In Detroit neighborhoods, the demand for shelter was substantially lower than the market value, resulting in more vacant buildings and easy targets for arson (Linebaugh). The population decrease also led to the closing of many churches, train stations, government buildings, and schools. The city is designed for the occupation of 2 million people, and less than 1/3 of that number remains today (Detroiturbex.com). Detroit is currently losing nearly 10,000 people every year, and the shrinking population has led to the abandonment of over 10% of the once glamorous buildings (Linebaugh).

While the ruins of the once industrious Detroit may appear unattractive and undesirable for many, I find them rich with historical discourse and urban culture. When observing warehouses, churches, and other structures in Detroit, I cannot help but to dream of these buildings restored to a former glory as recent as the 1950s. The goal of my work is to reveal and inspire; not all of the buildings are abandoned and destroyed, not everyone is participating in criminal activities, and not everyone is unemployed and living on welfare. Utilizing imagery from the city of Detroit as inspiration for my illustrations and designs, I have created lighting fixtures that portray Detroit in an alluring and hopeful light.

For my Integrated Project, I created a series of lighting fixtures that feature lampshades made from large scale stencil cuts that display the city as I currently find it today, a silhouette of what used to be. The stencils are hand cut and are supported by a second layer of imagery on vellum that adds detail to the images. The images are in response to the remaining infrastructure of Detroit including the Packard plant, graffiti tags around the city, abandoned schools and churches, and historically significant buildings like Central Station. Much like these buildings, the stencils are stark, cut only into black paper. While Detroit's architecture is rich in color, the lighting fixtures will only entail black and white imagery suggestive of reminiscence. The three lighting fixtures vary in size; one hangs from the ceiling, while the others are placed on pedestals. By placing them in the center of the gallery, I hope to give people the ability to walk around the pieces and examine every inch of their circular structures.

A great deal of my work is influenced by urban culture and street art. Many graffiti artists are viewed in a controversial manner; though the majority of street art is considered a form of vandalism, it has the ability to express political and social agendas through an artistic lens. Blu and Os Gemeos are brothers who work together to create large scale street art on abandoned buildings throughout the world. Their work moves past the art of tagging and political messages by actually doing something direct to the

problem they perceive. To directly attack the problem at hand in this manner is an artistically rich and cost efficient way to improve a struggling city.

*Inspiration:*

*Blu and Os Gemeos*



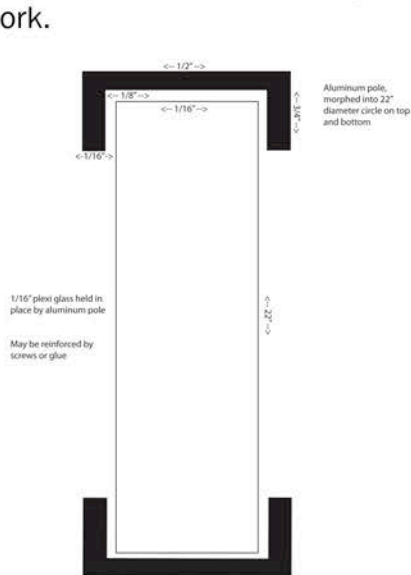
*Banksy*



*Kara Walker*



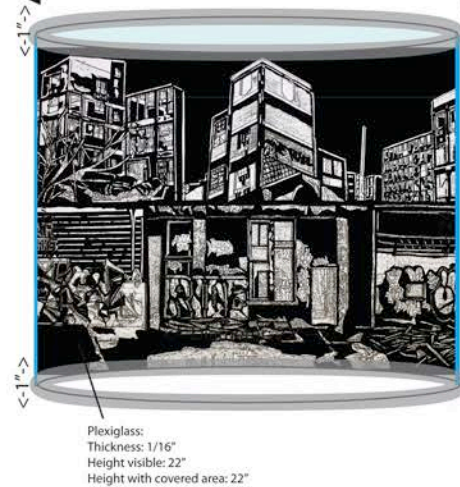
Political messages behind the imagery are vital in the satirical street art known by the artist “Banksy.” As an anonymous contributor to modern urban art, his work displays irreverent dark humor spray painted on buildings using a unique stenciling technique. I find Banksy’s work so intriguing not only because of its political significance, but also the technique used to complete his imagery. Like Banksy, the street artist Kara Walker uses stencil cutting. Walker is most well known for her signature cut- paper silhouette installations. While exploring themes of race, gender, sexuality, violence, and identity in her work, she works by cutting solely into black paper and displaying it on white walls. I find this work enticing due to its simplicity of materials, the contrast it creates from stencil to wall, and the thoughts that I find myself so enamored with after exploring her work.



*Sketch of polycarbonate being held within the lip of the aluminum structure.*

Outer layer= black paper  
Inner layer= printed vellum  
Rivets ever 4 inches around top and bottom  
Clouded polycarbonate top

Metal measurements:  
Height: 3/4"  
Diameter: 22"  
Outstretched: 69"



*Sketch for lighting fixture 1*

I found it to be a great challenge to create structurally sound and unique pieces that are still visually communicative and appealing. In the construction of these pieces, I utilized multiple studios and media, challenging my skills as a well-rounded designer and artist. The lamps get their shape from a combo metal/polycarbonate structure. Aluminum poling was morphed into a circle and welded together to create the top and bottom support. Once welded, the metal was ground down and sanded to make it more aesthetically pleasing and uniform throughout the surface. I aimed to make the aluminum appear as if it were taken from the remains of Detroit then recycled into the

lighting fixtures. Within the grove of the metal, polycarbonate with 1/16" thickness is held in place and reinforced with rivets to ensure stability. In addition, there are frosted polycarbonate pieces on both the top and bottom of the structure, so the viewer is unable to see within. The light source itself is a compact fluorescent light bulb with a moveable base. The 150-watt light bulb provides a bright, white light source that evenly distributes throughout the fixture. Because fluorescent lamps do not conduct a great deal of heat, the polycarbonate will be safe from melting or morphing.



*Morphing the 6 ft aluminum poling*

*Sawing off the excess metal*

*Weld after grinding and sanding*

In beginning to develop the imagery for my pieces, I went to Detroit and spent a day photographing abandoned homes, factories, hotels, churches, schools, and graffiti that inspired me. After uploading these photographs, I fabricated fictional views of the landscape of Detroit via Adobe Photoshop. While these images are all undoubtedly views of Detroit, by fabricating the scene, I was able to compile the most significant features of these areas together. With these buildings as a basis of inspiration, I hand cut the inch stencil, developing unique textures and intriguing detail, while keeping in mind that additional elements would be revealed with the printed vellum. Once cut, I had the imagery printed onto vellum and placed it beneath the black cut paper. After morphing the metal, I carefully placed the stencil and vellum within the polycarbonate and forced it into the frame. After ensuring its temporary security, I hand drilled into the polycarbonate along the side and throughout the metal and clouded polycarbonate top. The rivets were then secured within the piece, giving it an almost industrial look.

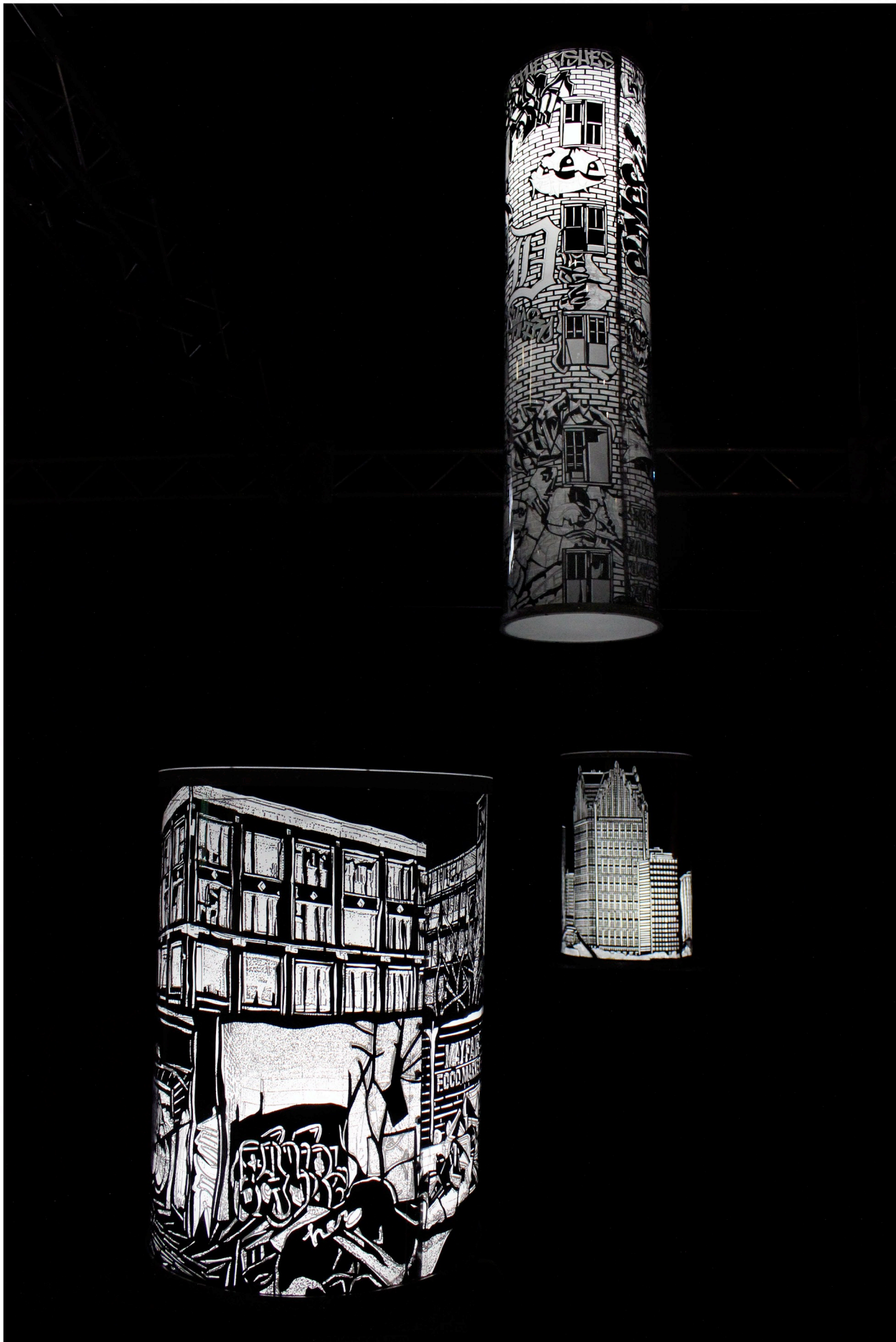


*The stencils while in-progress. From cutting with paper guide to completion with vellum beneath imagery.*



Throughout the year I have made great strides in the ability to communicate my ideas, execute the physical assembly of my pieces, and exhibit work that I am extremely proud of. For my exhibition, I displayed the pieces in the center a dimly lit room in the front corner of the Slusser Gallery. Repositioning of the pedestals and the hanging piece allowed enough room for full movement around the pieces in order to provide the viewer with every angle imaginable. The pieces appear as I had hoped; not as “ruin porn,” but rather as a tribute to the infrastructure that remains today. The stencil cuts are paired well with the vellum printed layer, catching both the viewer’s initial gaze and also drawing them in for more detail. The imagery in the lighting fixtures is stark, but the space undoubtedly feels warm, as if it were glowing. I feel as if my senior integrative project was a great success, and that my work brought light to the beauty of the city of Detroit that we see today.





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