

FORT GANSEVOORT

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Paint the Town

An Akron Art Museum exhibition featuring works by the late Michelangelo Lovelace reflects the city the Cleveland-based artist called home and his life there.

By Ilona Westfall – May 1, 2024



Michelangelo Lovelace, *At The Intersection of St. Clair-N-Eddy Road*, 1997, Acrylic on canvas, 63.5 x 72.25 inches
©Michelangelo Lovelace Estate. Courtesy of the artist and Fort Gansevoort, New York.

Complete with a church, pharmacy and corner store, the bustling streetscape depicts a stretch of Cleveland's East Side. But artist Michelangelo Lovelace's use of vivid primary colors on lanes and sidewalks packed with cars and people make the painting "At The Intersection of St. Clair-N-Eddy Road" a vibrant examination of city life.

Part of the exhibition "Michelangelo Lovelace: Art Saved My Life", on display at the Akron Art Museum May 4 through Aug. 18, the painting is included in a collection of over 100 drawings, sketchbooks, paintings and other works by the late Cleveland-based artist.

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Prior to his death in 2021, Lovelace would often tell the story of how he became an artist. After getting busted at age 19 for selling marijuana to support his family, the judge asked him what he could do. He responded that he could draw. The judge threatened him with prison if he saw Lovelace again and told him to stick to drawing. He did, studying at Cuyahoga Community College and the Cleveland Institute of Art, which kicked off a career where he examined his urban life, along with news and politics, in a highly stylized way of painting that resembled folk or outsider art.

“For most of his paintings, he worked in this somewhat simplified, very colorful style because it allowed him a greater leeway for inventiveness and made his work seem very immediate and honest,” says Jeffrey Katzin, senior curator at the Akron Art Museum.

In addition to bold color and linework, Lovelace also used text prominently in his paintings to emphasize issues or messages pertaining to urban life. For example, in his painting, “Hood Life,” billboards and store signs take center stage in a streetscape. The painting is paired with an interactive element in the exhibition that invites museum visitors to add their own text to a billboard.

The exhibition also features his “We the People” series that examines who gets to lay claim to the American flag, Lovelace’s response to the 2016 Republican National Convention in Cleveland. He also created the “Rodney King” series following the Rodney King beating and 1992 Los Angeles riots, where he expressed his take on police brutality and racial disparities in policing using graffiti-style text on a faux brick surface.

“He wanted his art to deal with themes that were directly connected to his own life,” Katzin says. “I hope that people come away with a sense of his perspective on some of the issues that come up in his work that remain pretty relevant.”