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ARTS

Eight Detroit artists to watch in 2022

Maureen Feighan The Detroit News

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It's no secret Detroit oozes creativity. But it's one the rest of the world is still discovering.

And that's setting aside our iconic music and car design. When it comes to the visual arts, artists across Metro Detroit are putting our city on the map not just in Michigan but nationally with shows, exhibitions, commissions and more that ultimately explore what it means to be human.

Jonathan Harris, 33, a Detroit native now living in Bloomfield Township, is a local painter whose career took off in 2021 after his evocative painting, "Critical Race Theory," went viral on social media. The painting — which has been shared 11,000 times on the Facebook page, The Other 98% — depicts a futuristic world in which historic figures, such as Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X and Harriet Tubman, are literally painted over with white paint.

Harris, who just started painting full-time more than a year ago after leaving a job at Coca-Cola, said he's been painting since he was a child but didn't realize he could make it a career until recently. An exhibit he curated last year, "Bonded," at Detroit's Beacon Park, will move this spring to a new gallery opening in Pontiac.

"I wanted to create what I was seeing in my head on canvas," said Harris, who has a degree in graphic design and is now selling prints of his "Critical Race Theory"

painting on his website. "...I said I'm going to take a chance with my art to see what happens — and the best things happened."

Harris is one of eight artists to watch in the year ahead. Some are muralists; others are sculptors. Many are fine artists. All of them are pushing boundaries with pieces that explore identity, culture and the world around us and who we are in it during such a tumultuous time.

Sydney James: Name a big mural festival anywhere in the country and there's a good chance James has been a part of it. Just back from Miami's hot Art Basel, the internationally renowned art fair that brings together thousands of artists and art fans from all over the world, the Detroiter now is gearing up to be part of a group exhibition, "Revelations," opening to the public Saturday at M Contemporary Art in Ferndale. The show follows a big 2021 for James, who co-organized Detroit's first ever, BLKOUT Walls Mural Festival last summer in the city's North End neighborhood.

Rashaun Rucker: A former longtime Detroit Free Press photographer, Rucker's art still includes photography but he also does printmaking and drawings. "My art examines social and cultural issues in America, with a particular focus on human rights, mental illness, the Black experience, and the influence of inequality," he said in an email. The Grosse Pointe Park resident also will be featured in the "Revelations" exhibit at Ferndale's M Contemporary Art with James. And he has a piece now on display in the group exhibition, "Reckoning: Protest. Defiance. Resilience," at the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture. He's getting ready, meanwhile, to open his first solo show on the west coast at the Charlie James gallery in Los Angeles and has his first solo museum exhibition coming this fall at Detroit's Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit.

Christopher Schanck: Schanck, a Texas native and graduate of the Cranbrook Academy of Art, decided to stay in Detroit after graduate school because he

wanted to start his practice in a city where he could take risks and "start a new life." "Detroit chilled me out and gave me the space to redefine my professional and personal goals," said Schanck in an email. His work is a hybrid of sculpture and furniture, blending biomorphic forms with "elaborately crafted symbolism." In mid-February, Schanck will open his biggest solo show to date, "Off World," at New York City's Museum of Art and Design.

Sheefy McFly: It's impossible to pigeonhole McFly. He describes himself as a visual artist, rapper, DJ, producer, designer and "legendary Detroiter." His bold, playful, surreal work is like a mix between late American artist Keith Haring and Picasso. Like James, he has murals all over Detroit, including at the new Monroe Street Drive-In in Detroit. McFly's exhibition, "Eyes Watching You," at Detroit's Spot Lite Detroit runs through February this year. "This body of work was very expressive," wrote McFly on Instagram. "I didn't focus on profit. I just put my mind on illustrating my soul. I expunged it onto canvas at that time."

Austen Brantley: Brantley discovered sculpture in high school when a ceramics teacher saw his potential. His delicate, life-like works are now on display all over the country. Two permanent sculptures were unveiled last year, including a bronze statue of Ernest Burke, a Negro League pitcher with the Baltimore Giants, and one of humanitarian, Havre De Grace, in Maryland. Brantley now has a show up through March at the University of Michigan Medical Center. He also has pieces on display in group shows in Chicago and New York.

Mario Moore: Detroit native Mario Moore's paintings are so intricate and detailed that they almost look like photographs. Moore had a solo exhibition, "Enshrined," in 2021 at the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History that's headed to Los Angeles in 2022. Moore also was included in the Wright's recent exhibition, "Men of Change." Moore also will have a piece in the upcoming Cranbrook Art Museum exhibition, "Homebody," that opens later this month.

Desiree Kelly: Drive to Meijer's new Rivertown Market on East Jefferson and you'll see a bright, fun mural Kelly painted that depicts her young daughter. Kelly's murals have popped up all over Detroit, including one in front of the Wright museum that she painted of Jennifer Hudson portraying Detroit's own Queen of Soul, Aretha Franklin. This month, Henry Ford Health System will unveil a series of portraits at its West Bloomfield location that Kelly painted.

mfeighan@detroitnews.com