



Galleries Article

Detroit

Elegy for a Dying City

By [jesse nathan](#) (Jan 18, 2008) [ShareThis](#)

- **Electric Works**
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Jeffrey Eugenides' Pulitzer-prize winning novel **Middlesex** is a coming of age story about the intersexed Calliope Stephanides set in Detroit. In it, Eugenides waxes poetic on the industrial morass – and storied heyday – of Michigan's famous metropolis. "Detroit was always made of wheels," writes the author. "Long before the Big Three and the nickname 'Motor City'; before the auto factories and the freighters and the pink, chemical nights; before anyone had necked in a Thunderbird or spooned in a Model T; previous to the day a young Henry Ford knocked down his workshop wall because, devising his 'quadricycle,' he'd thought of everything but how to get the damn thing out. . . Detroit was made of wheels." But Eugenides sets the novel in the present, when Detroit is a run down heap of has-been factories, populated by people struggling to get by and bums who remember the good-old days, filled with smokestacks and factories churning out cars by the thousands.

When I asked Katherine Westerhout why she chose to focus her creative energies on photographing this same city, no longer the splendid center of American auto manufacturing it once was, she replied that she was enticed by this very glory, former as it might be. "Detroit was once the richest city in America," she says. "The vestiges of its success are still apparent in the beauty of its architecture, much of which has been lost to fire and demolition."

Now, as Westerhout documents and spins to life these slumbering – or nearly dead – "vestiges," her photographs and the buildings in them stand as monuments to the chapter in American life described by Eugenides in his novel. It's as if America once was, metaphorically, a Detroit of sorts – and now, perhaps, the nation has moved on to a new posture and new priorities. Westerhout, it seems, wants us to note and pay heed to that passing, not so much out of nostalgia, but out of modest respect and a sense of rooted-ness in the history of our land.

Toward this end, Westerhout gives us breathtaking glimpses of old cafes, eerie shots of now-demolished structures like Tiger Stadium, telescoped photos of aquariums, dilapidated and dusty staircases, theaters, churches, opera houses and red-brick wonders. All are abandoned, forgotten, some no longer even standing.

But there's more to Westerhout's tour of Detroit than a depressing glimpse at the litterings of our own industrial-era adolescence as a nation. The artist believes that in these pictures of the past lie, nestled among the dirt perhaps, the germinating seeds of renewal. "Many of the buildings that have survived are either being restored or are awaiting restoration. The city struggles back to life," she says, "inspired by the numbers of good people who return to contribute to the revival of their city. It is one of the most soulful and creative places I have been in America."

This is the first photography exhibit at the newly refurbished Electric Works gallery – formerly Trillium Press, though the gallery still continues to publish, including a series of high-quality art books. As such, this show is a bit of a departure from the more avant, cerebral fare showcased over the past several months. New as this may be for the gallery, it's the kind of art that directs us towards some of the finer work being done in contemporary photography. For this, we are happy – and for Detroit, we are hopeful.

"Detroit"
at Electric Works
Show runs through Feb 16th
Free

