

March 2016

Detroit's Heidelberg Project Celebrates 30 Years

The controversial art installation marks a notable anniversary, surviving contempt at home, a series of fires and the very blight that inspired its creation three decades ago.

By ALEX P. KELLOGG

Tyree Guyton's colorful, cluttered studio—nestled in Midtown and easy to spot from Woodward Avenue—overflows with the types of discarded objects that have captivated his distinct imagination for years. Family photos, doll parts, ragged American flags and piles of toy trucks are stacked next to vibrant, abstract paintings of smiling faces, surreal clocks he concocted and, of course, his signature polka dots.

A 60-year-old Detroit native, Guyton is arguably Motown's most famous painter and sculptor. He's also all but certainly the city's most controversial artist.

The father of five is the mastermind behind the Heidelberg Project. The self-described "open-air" art project of decorated homes and empty lots meant to push back at urban decay celebrates its 30th anniversary this spring.

The Heidelberg Project is named after the block Guyton grew up on. It stretches across several blocks of a now-blighted lower east side neighborhood. Guyton's 78-year-old mother, Betty, and a sister still live there, surrounded by Guyton's art, a colorful kaleidoscope of worn, painted shoes, children's toys, vinyl records and more decorating empty lots and half-finished or half-ruined homes.



Photo: Lauren Jeziorski

Heidelberg draws hundreds of thousands of visitors annually, according to Guyton. He first began sprucing up empty lots on his east side block in 1986. Thirty years later, he is seen as a visionary in international art circles. His work is in the permanent collections of the Detroit Institute of Arts, the University of Michigan Museum of Art and the Studio Museum of Harlem—all major accomplishments. Plus, he says he enjoys not just a degree of success, but a degree of artistic freedom and financial security he could have never imagined even a decade ago.

Yet Guyton's rise has been a rocky one.

In the 1990s, the city of Detroit twice bulldozed abandoned homes he'd decorated, and in recent years a dozen, unsolved arson attacks have wiped away whole chunks of the public art space. Six prominent art



installations—with names like the House of Soul, the War House and the Clock House—were completely destroyed.

Those close to Guyton credit his unique force of personality for the project's survival in the midst of such adversity. In person, the quirky artist's own stubborn determination shines through.

"I'm not here to paint a picture of pity, because I've had a great time," Guyton told BLAC from his 9,000-square-foot Midtown studio, which also includes his nonprofit's offices and a loft-style living space he shares with his wife, Jenenne Whitfield. "I believe there are no mistakes in the world, and if you're going to be great, you've got to go through something."

Guyton, whose five children are from previous relationships, married Whitfield in 2001. Their marriage extends into their professional lives; she also serves as the executive director of the nonprofit wing of the Heidelberg.

She's really the backbone of his operation, he says. Their partnership has allowed Guyton to focus solely on creating more art while she draws hundreds of thousands in grant funding and oversees a handful of full-time staff—three full-timers, three part-timers and an intern, a larger and far more stable operation than in the past.

Also a Detroit native, Whitfield stumbled on the Heidelberg Project in June 1993 after making a wrong turn down Guyton's old street. Not long after being mesmerized by a sea of children surrounding Guyton and his art, she left a successful banking career to help him out.

"My family, my friends, they all thought I was nuts," Whitfield laughs. "I was climbing the corporate ladder. I left behind profit-sharing, 14 years of seniority and all of that. I thought I was going to be instrumental in launching something."

She was absolutely right.

Nowadays, Guyton often checks the temperature in the room by deferring to his wife. Their quick, direct banter is sprinkled with everything from affection to constructive criticism to reproach. These candid exchanges are what make the relationship work, they say. "That's part of growing, that's part of creating this evolution," says Whitfield, whose work with the project has earned her own set of accolades.

Guyton has traveled to nearly two dozen countries—Brazil, Switzerland, Germany, Hungary and Ecuador among them—to exhibit or discuss his art. In November, Guyton and his wife were in Shenzhen, China building an installation named Power to the People that went on display at one of the country's major art festivals.

Heidelberg's past highlights are memorialized on its website. An exhibit entitled What Time Is It? at Lawrence Technological University ran in February. Detroit Wallpaper recently began selling wallpaper of weather-worn, stacked shoes and other images from Guyton's work.

"Tyree is extremely prolific," Whitfield says. "He's always creating."

But the project has at times enraged its neighbors. A 1999 New York Times piece noted "the farther people lived from the Heidelberg Project, the more they seemed to like it. It's most passionate admirers



tended to be Europeans."

Even the couple admits they never get the reception among Detroit's Black elite that they have in chichi art circles abroad.

"The African-American community still does not quite understand what we do," Guyton says. Whitfield puts it more directly: "We've had it the hardest from our own folks. They just did not get this."

One of 10 children, Guyton grew up fighting to survive. His family subsisted on welfare and he had limited interaction with his biological father, a construction worker who took little interest in him. His grandmother's longtime boyfriend, Sam Mackey, filled that void. Mackey gave him his first paintbrush when he was 9 years old and helped with the project until his death at 94 in 1992.

"It wasn't easy," says Guyton's mother, Betty. "But we got along. We might not have been middle class, but we were a family that stuck together."

Guyton says his upbringing taught him "you have to become a fighter. You have to become what's right for yourself."

Guyton was a bit unsure of himself before a vision from God divined the creation of the Heidelberg Project in his late 20s. He even dropped out of the College for Creative Studies after a semester of bad grades. Ironically, CCS awarded him an honorary doctorate years later in 2009. A notification he will be honored with his second honorary doctorate just came in the mail from the Ecumenical Theological Seminary in Detroit.

While Guyton's neighborhood was mixed-race, far more stable and working class when he was a child, it's dotted with empty lots today. His desire to be a part of Detroit's revitalization is finally coming true as the city begins to recover, if sporadically, from years of decline. He hopes that recovery will one day reach his old neighborhood.

"They've been hugely entrepreneurial, fearless and necessarily outspoken over a period of extraordinary transition in Detroit, and they've shown incredible fortitude and vision during that period," says Brett Egan, president of the DeVos Institute of Arts Management at the University of Maryland at College Park, which provides training, consultation and other support to hundreds of artists and artistic organizations around the world.

The DeVos Institute has worked with Heidelberg on long-term planning, marketing, fundraising and board development for the past five years.

"Every time I've been in his presence ... it's clear I'm in the presence of someone who's a servant to his vision," says Egan, who describes Guyton as "gentle and determined" even though the neighborhood he works in is "on a razor thin line on the best day between comfort and crisis."

Guyton has become more refined over the years as well.

"He used to show up to everything in just jeans and a shirt. Now he shows up in a bow tie and he finds himself in a sports coat," says Charles Anderson, a local magistrate and longtime friend. "There's that coming of age. It's really subtle things that you've seen over the years."