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What to See in New York Art Galleries This Week

By Jillian Steinhauer

Michelangelo Lovelace

Through June 16. Fort Gansevoort, 5 Ninth Avenue, Manhattan; 917-639-3113, fortgansevoort.com.



Michelangelo Lovelace's "Standing at the Fork in the Road at Temptation and Salvation," from 1997, on view at Fort Gansevoort.

For more than 30 years, Michelangelo Lovelace has been making paintings that represent the world he inhabits as a black man living in low-income neighborhoods in Cleveland. Briefly a student at the Cleveland Institute of Art and a disciple of the renowned folk artist the Rev. Albert Wagner, Mr. Lovelace has become something of a local treasure. But unlike Mr. Wagner, recognition of his art has not carried far beyond Cleveland. Until now. Fort Gansevoort has mounted his first exhibition in New York, titled "The Land," after a nickname for his home city.

With 16 paintings created over 22 years, the show is an introduction to Mr. Lovelace's style, which blends the directness of much outsider art with a cogent political awareness and a penchant for allegory. Street scenes dominate. Some are snapshots of everyday life, like "At the

Intersection of Eddy Road and St. Clair Avenue” (1997), which offers a bird’s-eye, almost vertiginous view of that crossroads on Cleveland’s east side, where, because of segregation, the city’s black residents have historically been confined. Others are allegories, like the large, powerful “Standing at the Fork in the Road at Temptation and Salvation” (1997), which manifests a reckoning for many poor Americans. Police cars are a presence throughout, as are signs demonstrating Mr. Lovelace’s wit (“Champagne dreams on a beer paycheck”) and bricks. Whether they’re targets of gun violence or climbing to reach the other side, Mr. Lovelace’s subjects are constantly up against physical walls.

There are happier scenes; two recent paintings show a parade and a block party, with attendees facing the viewer and smiling. But Mr. Lovelace’s strongest works are those like “Life Trapped in the Bottle” (2004), which shows a mass of miniature figures crammed into an oversize liquor bottle. He has a distinctive ability to dramatize the intractable social forces that threaten to drown us. *JILLIAN STEINHAUER*