

## Urban Relics and Icons

January 12 - February 26, 2003

An collaborative installation by Scott Hocking and Clinton Snider and a photographic installation by Armon Means

The psychological excavation of Detroit continues. This excavation has become a tradition in Detroit art culture, going back as far as the Cass Corridor movement of the sixties and seventies. For many of the Cass Corridor artists, found abandoned objects and materials were the mediums used for the creation of their works. Among a new generation, Clinton Snider and Scott Hocking have picked up a thread from these previous artists. In their "Relics" project, they have literally collected and extracted elements of their urban surroundings and presented it as itself. Unlike the artworks of the Corridor artists and their descendants, the relics of urban decay and abandonment are art in themselves, not simply the material used to generate new forms. In another form of excavation, Armon Means also collects. He uses the medium of photography to assemble visible threads he discovers in the urban environment. Using the visual languages that he encounters, he allows these languages to tell their story through their final assem-

bly as wall installations or as a photographic series.

Over thirty years ago, the artists who took up residence in the Cass Corridor of Detroit created a significant movement by exploring the textures of

decay. This group of artists has been well documented in writings and exhibitions. Most notably was the "Kick Out the Jams" exhibition at the Detroit Institute of Arts in 1980. "...whereas New York artists were working with latex and poly-

urethane, Cass Corridor artists chose to use power saws, bolts, machine parts, sign painter's enamels, aluminum paint, while, significantly, retaining such traditional materials as wood, canvas, oil paint,

**The investigation of a specific site is a matter of extracting concepts out of existing sense-data through direct perceptions... One does not impose, but rather expose the site...The unknown areas of sites can best be explored by artists.**

**-Robert Smithson**

pencil, pastel, and paper," as quoted from Jay Belloli's essay in the "Kick Out the Jams" catalog.<sup>2</sup> Artists like Gordon Newton, Michael Luchs, and Robert Sestock, used the found abandoned objects of the deteriorating core city as the material of their sculptures. They significantly re-constituted the materials they found into objects of representation (Luchs), or composition (Sestock). The collected raw materials were refabricated into a new construction based on the vision of the artist.

Other artists working in Detroit over the years have also explored the remnants of a city abandoned to

the poor<sup>3</sup> as a medium or material for creative activity, most notably Tyree Guyton, Cathy Peet and Eric Mesko.

Scott Hocking and Clinton Snider made a significant choice in their "Relics" installation, originally created for an exhibition at the Detroit Institute of Arts, entitled "Artists Take On Detroit." This choice was to use the materials they were finding and allow these found objects to communicate for themselves.

The "Relics" installation is a collection of thousands of urban cast-off discoveries. Rather than take the roles of the previous Detroit artists in reconstituting

the found objects and materials into new artworks, they saw these pieces as art statements of their own. They created hundreds of boxes, measuring about 18 inches square, and "secured" their finds into them.

These individual relics range from crusty old abandoned office fixtures, discovered by Hocking and Snider while exploring old warehouses and factories. Other boxes contain boxes. These boxes within boxes might contain mysteri-



Scott Hocking & Clinton Snider, "Relic," found object installation, Detroit Institute of Arts, 2001

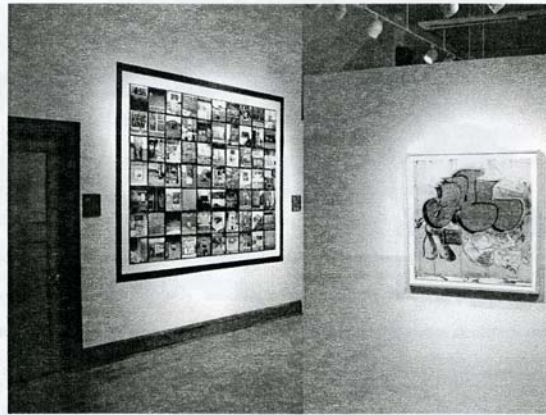
ous glass vessels or plastic widgets, the use of which is now unknown. In more boxes, the artists have found old signage, a variety of messages from the mundane to the sublime. These artifacts speak of an activity and of a time past. Snider and Hocking allow these voices to remain in the objects. The finished installation takes on the appearance of a mausoleum or museum, allowing the individual relics to speak collectively.

In a similar way, Armon Means allows the icons of the city to speak for themselves. In this case, the voices are allowed to indict themselves.

Much in the way an attorney like Perry Mason would ultimately get a witness to confess to a crime or misdeed. Means has used the collective voices of his found icons to confess to dilemmas if not to motives that borderline on criminal. For example, in one of his collections, he has assembled the liquor and cigarette billboard advertisements that permeate the poorer sections of Detroit. This oversaturation becomes a static witness to a manipu-

lative strategy.

In the "Aerosol Sunrise" series, he has collected images of graffiti that dot the urban landscape. These pieces of public language are often experienced in isolation separated from one another, separate voices, sometimes harmonious and sometimes at odds with each other. Means manages to find the unified voice of these icons and projecting a singular spirit that transcends the individual elements. Means then layers his own voice into the images with poetic written texts. These texts tease their way into the surface of the images.



Armon Means, "You Can Take a Nigga...", (rear) and one of five "Aerosol Sunrise," (front), 2002

In the early part of the 20th century, Marcel Duchamp shocked the world of culture by exhibiting his "readymades." These works consist of a standard store-bought shovel ("In Anticipation of a Broken Arm") or more provocatively, a urinal ("Fountain"). In these works, Duchamp was being playful and cynical about the nature of the art object and its place in established culture. In every case, Duchamp took something seemingly of little importance, and transformed it into something important. In the process, the objects lost their original voice. Hocking, Snider and Means have obtained items of interest, mostly created outside of the artist's con-

trol much in the same way as Duchamp's readymades. In these examples, however, the transformation of the objects works differently. It isn't the relics and icons that are changed so much as the observer's perspective on them. In these works, the artists have allowed the objects and icons to speak of their own history and in an art context where they might be received.

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1. Robert Smithson quote comes from "Lure of the Local," Lucy Lippard, *The New Press*, 1997, page 183.
2. Jay Belloli, "Kick Out the Jams," catalog essay, *Detroit Institute of Arts*, 1980.
3. Lucy Lippard, "Lure of the Local," *The New Press*, 1997, page 202.\*



**THE GALLERY** For over twentyfive years The Gallery at Marygrove College has presented provocative and entertaining art exhibitions. Many consider The Gallery one of Detroit's cultural gems. Both local and national artists have exhibited in the warm neo-gothic confines of the Liberal Arts building's fourth floor. Besides the Detroit art community, The Gallery serves the students.

This facility is where the students meet, interact, and critically engage working and exhibiting artists. The Gallery is also the place where scores of students learn how to present and articulate their own visual ideas. As Marygrove enters its 75th year, it is clear that The Gallery will be a critical component of the growth of the College and of the Detroit metropolitan artistic community.

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