



Hocking's "Finned WWII shark plane."

Bloody beasts

Hilberry hosts a crass menagerie

by **Dennis Alan Nawrocki**
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Hocking and friends' installation.

Two by two they boarded Noah's ark eons ago. Now, one by one, the cruel fates that have decimated the shipbuilder's precious living cargo are laid bare by Scott Hocking and his posse of artist-collaborators in *Animals*. Noah's heroic rescue of the animal kingdom seems to have come to naught, as envisioned in this tour de force of some 40 life-size animals painted in cheery carnivalesque colors. Indeed, at first glance, it's the coloristic swagger of this ersatz three-ring circus that washes across the retina. Cheesy, garish hues and ditsy-to-bold patterns momentarily hold sway until the eyes calm, the mind registers and sorts, and the woeful plight of these endangered, mutilated — albeit gaudy — beasts becomes evident.

This, then, is no Saint-Saëns *Carnival of the Animals*, feel-good Disney film, Barnum & Bailey extravaganza or even *The Glass Menagerie*, but an indictment of man's inhumanity to the creatures of land, sea and air. Under this big top, mayhem rules.

Animals is a startling turnabout for Hocking, who's known for his salvaged object accumulations reverently or irreverently sited — *Relics* (with Clinton Snider) at the Detroit Institute of Arts in 2001 and *Tire Pyramid* on a lawn in Bloomfield Hills earlier this year. One of his day jobs — as an art handler for a fine-arts moving company — however, has often taken him to the Detroit Zoo for installation projects. It has introduced him to the perilous existence of animals, both wild and incarcerated. Hocking has also long been irritated by the themed public art shows in which various subjects — cows in Chicago, bears in Berlin, moose in Toronto, cars and trash bins in Detroit — are decorated by artists who vie for a chance to transform a municipality's object of choice.

Vivid recollections of such phenomena includes a gigundo, inflated gorilla bobbing above an auto dealership to advertise a grand-opening spectacle in some now-forgotten suburb.

As it turns out, there are a number of shops that traffic in fabricated animals and other objects for just such public events, as well as taxidermy studios rife with veritable bestiaries of foam and skinless animal casts. These forms, found and acquired by Hocking via the Internet (rather than scouring the inner city as he has in the past), were parceled out to some 30 artist-collaborators. It's a

strategy not unlike the protocols of public art contests. He instructed the artists to decorate the mutilated, flayed or entrapped creatures in tacky, sunshiny colors and designs of their choice.

And embellish they did! Faina Lerman covered a chimpanzee tethered to electrodes (as if undergoing a stress or aptitude test for science) with an overall pattern of the googly eyes and bucktoothed visage of Sponge Bob on a ground of marigold yellow. Rob Ribant's trapped and skinned mink, suspended from the ceiling, is meticulously rendered in red and yellow plaid, complete with matching plaid pool of blood on the floor below. Then there's Joe Ferraro's glitzy, mirrored, spinning disco ball raccoon, casting its shards of light everywhere, with its own mirrored blood pool below.

Sprawled lifeless on the floor, its severed penis by its side, the Ming Dynasty tiger by Kari Buzewski is transformed by a classic, all-over blue-and-white pattern evoking a precious porcelain objet d'art. And John Corbin's drowning polar bear, inscribed with its constellations, Ursa Major & Minor, slips under the dark, globally warmed Arctic waters now devoid of the refuge and safety of ice floes.

Walls festooned with trophy heads in a riot of solid hues, pebbly textures and striking patterns — note Matthew Blake's black-and-white checkerboard bobcat or Clinton Snider's flamingo-pink skinned deer with tie — evidence the ingenious, faux artlessness of these 20th century animaliers.

For his part, Hocking is responsible for, among a half-dozen examples, a small, floorbound "Skinned striped roadkill" (a squirrel) whose broad, 3-inch-wide body stripe must be the handiwork of a highway crew that painted a white lane marker across its midsection. He's also the creator of a 9-foot-long "Finned WWII shark plane" with amputated fins and tail strewn about its rudderless, left-to-rot carcass. Painted a drab olive green, the shark's body-fuselage is also a wrecked fighter plane, its nose painted with a bloodthirsty red mouth and jagged rows of teeth intended to embody the ferocity of pilot and squadron, like the art adorning a P-40 Flying Tiger.

The painfully visceral, sprawling carnage of *Animals*, successfully realized in large measure because of Hocking's drive and tenacity, suggests an artist ripe for reinvigoration. It comes from impatience. Hocking's not an artist on autopilot. With due deliberation, he's chosen his methodology and visual vocabulary based on the issue at hand.

Not least of his aims was to scuttle the clichés of a certain kind of audience-fawning, dumbed-down spectacle in favor of engaging and disconcerting viewers. Paradoxically, by aping the shallow allure of many public art events, Hocking reveals something truer and darker about the dire straits of our latter-day animal kingdom, now far removed from the benevolent Noah and his ark-riding menagerie. It is, distressingly, a realm where, according to a recent *New York Times* article, elephants, like stressed people, go berserk and become murderous as we encroach on their personal space.

Is this show melodramatic? Yes. But it's also, refreshingly and bracingly, a rebuke to human detachment and silent complicity in the fate of the animals. Hocking did not let us down, and his cadre of artists don't let us down either.

Scott Hocking's *Animals* runs through Nov. 25, at Susanne Hilberry Gallery, 700 Livernois St., Ferndale; 248-541-4700.

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