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Essays by  
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**PENNSYLVANIA ACADEMY OF THE FINE ARTS 2011**





# ... we hope for better things

BY REBECCA RUTH HART

Previous spread:

**Scott Hocking**

*Zeus Whirlwind* – from the series:

*Garden of the Gods*, 2009 – 2010, 2010

Archival pigment print / Mixed media installation

Print: 33" x 49.5" / Installation: Dimensions variable

Photo courtesy of the artist and Susanne Hilberry Gallery



For nearly ten years I awoke shortly after 2:00 a.m. I wondered why my sleep was fitful: why it was always 2:12 – 2:14 when I checked the clock; why I was awake despite few worries. Why not 2:15 or 3:00 a.m.? Why would I waken if I didn't need to use the bathroom or cough? Why, if I was not too hot or cold? Why, if others in the house did not stir? Something somewhere broke the nocturnal stillness of my sleep and wrestled me into consciousness. One Michigan evening our windows were open to the sweet coolness outside. The din of Woodward Avenue, America's first paved highway, could be heard a half block away—on weekends, cars and hotrods race or cruise up and down this road until midnight. Then silence falls. One night I slept uninterrupted at 2:12, and the night after, and the next. Since fall last year I've had sound sleep. I was given back those few minutes to sleep and somehow managed to stay asleep all night.

Months later something clicked in my head: the parts train rumbling north, supplying the Pontiac GM truck plant, woke me so predictably for a decade. Idled in September 2010 by the restructuring of the auto industry, the train no longer made deliveries in Pontiac; it no longer stopped traffic several times each day as it switched onto sidings off-loading chassis and coupling-on containers filled with newly assembled Chevrolet Silverados and GMC Sierra pickup trucks; it no longer roared and clattered me awake at 2:12 a.m. as it rushed to Pontiac. The schedule has changed; the plant has been shuttered. The plant is weathering, its machinery removed and reused or sold elsewhere, its vast parking lots grow high weeds, its supply roads have gone to gravel in eleven short months, half empty coal cars have become mammoth planters for ghetto palms and other trash trees, and its 1,100 employees are moving elsewhere in search of work.

The story behind my wakefulness and the inherent rhythms of capitalism highlight the tangible histories that undergird Scott Hocking's studio practice. He works in buildings, now silent, that once were vibrant manufacturing hubs.





**Figure 6.** Scott Hocking, *Zeus, Ice* (from the installation project and photo series *Garden of the Gods*, 2009 – 2010), 2010, Archival pigment print / Mixed media installation, Print: 33" x 49.5" / Installation: dimensions variable, Photo courtesy of the artist and Susanne Hilberry Gallery

**Figure 7.** Scott Hocking, *Sisyphus and the Egg of Rejection* (from the installation project and photo series *Sisyphus and the Voice of Space*, 2010), 2010, Archival pigment print / Mixed media installation, Print: 33" x 49.5" / Installation: dimensions variable, Photo courtesy of the artist and Susanne Hilberry Gallery

His actions interface with the process of abandonment and the progress of ruin. He enters shuttered buildings to explore and categorize the remaining materials, to map the geography of these vast structures (the Pontiac plant covered 3.4 million square feet), to reuse the fabric of the structure, and to create new mythologies that celebrate the past and consecrate these structures in ruin. Working with these vast spaces and structures, the romantic eloquence of decay is always operative. In Hocking's practice, though, simple sculptures are built, materials ordered, and patterns observed. His constructions, made on site in decaying and sometimes collapsed areas of these buildings, are subject to the elements and physical forces that promote ruin. This work is presented in the artist's exquisite photography and in installations made from materials removed from post-industrial sites. In Detroit, many early auto assembly plants were designed by Albert Kahn and are made of reinforced concrete. The architect pioneered this type of construction at the Packard Motor Car Company plant in 1903 – 05, which closed in 1958 when the last Studebaker rolled off the line. These long-vista buildings are among Hocking's favorite worksites. For fifteen years he's surveyed the terrain of the decaying plants; sharing the space with graffiti writers, squatters, and scrappers; working among equipment simply abandoned the day the plant closed; walking through interiors now exposed to the elements through structural failures.

It's more than a scavenger's eye that guides the artist. Hocking traverses abandoned plants scanning the remains—looking for typologies—which he assesses and inventories with the precision of a librarian. Then he gathers a single type of material—wooden flooring, old work gloves, bricks or other construction materials, old cathode ray tube televisions—and crafts simple, direct forms and installations. For his best-known series, *Ziggurat and FB21* (2007 – 09), made in the Fisher Body Plant #21, Hocking used 6,201 wooden floor tiles to build a stepped pyramid (see page 124). His labor to make a structure with religious connotations honors the labor and enterprise of the thousands of people who once populated and toiled in the plant. Recalling the venerated architecture of ancient cultures with its stepped form, Hocking's work inscribes a nearby locality with universal meaning. He links local history to global narratives.

An image from the *Ziggurat* series was published in *Time* magazine and spread word widely of Hocking's practice. He has since been invited to work in industrial sites in St. Louis and Utica, New York, the scrub-jungle of Florida, the Australian bush, neighborhoods of Shanghai, and the landscape of Iceland. For these residencies, the artist made installations sensitively tuned to the history of a particular place. In Saint Louis, for example, he conflated the



history of the Mound Builders, once native to the shores of the Mississippi River, with the legacy of manufacturing, assembling a mound of rubber work gloves on the site of a former toxic waste transfer facility for a project entitled *New Mound City*.

As the work evolved, Hocking incorporated the language of mythology, not only in the titles but also in the work's scale and ambition. For a work that is part of the *Garden of the Gods* series (Fig. 6), the artist collected televisions from a ground floor room in the Packard Plant and positioned them atop structural columns on the top floor. The roof had collapsed at his worksite, exposing the giant mushroom shaped supports to the sky. Titanic in scale against the Detroit skyline, they mock the ambition of industrial capitalism, its demise most strikingly embodied in the abandoned plants.

This work recalls the past but looks to the future also. Unlike the elegiac incorporation of ruins in nineteenth century romantic painting, which attempts to recall a static moment in classical history, Hocking's installations are subject to the vagaries of time and the elements. The artist acknowledges that his installations are transitory and are preserved only in photographic documentation of the projects. His actions result in temporary structures that give mythic honor to local histories. Rather than creating romanticized views, he presents post-industrial spaces, no longer pristine but posed to become neo-Arcadias, reinscripted by the layering of their past with other histories.

This summer Scott Hocking's work has taken an interesting turn. He is working in the Michigan Central Depot, the decaying train station that has been a singular icon among the ruins of Detroit. This building, however, is undergoing restoration. The artist is racing against time as workmen clean, seal, abate, and re-glaze the station. About his project he writes, "[it] will be built with broken pieces of the sheet marble that used to line the walls and will take the form of an egg. A symbol that spans all cultures since ancient times, the egg represents the unborn potential yet to be hatched; the new beginning; the gestating idea; the primordial matter; creation." (Fig. 7)

In 1805, fire destroyed much of the settlement of Detroit, then the capital of the Territory of Michigan. The city's motto, *Speramus meliora; resurget cineribus* ("We hope for better things, it will rise from the ashes") embodies the fortitude of those who experienced this event. From the devastation, a vision for a grand city emerged, built with a radial plan and a largess of vision not previously imagined. The expansive spirit encouraged the entrepreneurial determination that propelled Detroit on for two centuries and, since the late 1960s, the motto is incanted each time that the city attempts to renew itself. Hocking hopes for better things and with shamanistic intent he notices, orders, builds, conflates, empowers, documents, and reflects realities explored by him alone. Detroit as neo-Arcadia is his proposition—that this place embraces its legacies as it moves from a platform for industry to that of a terrain that welcomes invention and meaningful action.





Throughout this discussion, when I make reference to Detroit I am referring to the incorporated city. Although abandonment and change is occurring throughout the area, it is most extreme within the city limits. Talent and resources available in the larger metropolitan area are being focused within the urban bounds. Detroiters speak of the economic tsunami or hurricane that struck here. We experience the effects of this phenomenon viscerally: seeing empty streets and buildings, having to plan to shop for food outside the city or at farmers markets, going to the suburbs for many services, wondering when we'll come upon an open business when driving, feeling our hearts beating a little faster when we pause to see change in our midst.

And indeed the engagements of these four artists—Chido Johnson, Liz Cohen, Scott Hocking, and Abigail Anne Newbold—highlight some of the city's ills. Johnson creates work that conflates, and thereby confuses, traditional cultural boundaries so that we are led to think more about a national ethos than race. His cultural miscegenation leads the viewer to rethink how identity is constructed.

Liz Cohen is a builder who assumes three identities: she is the maker, the owner, and the person who performs with her mutant car, *Trabantimino*. She participates in Detroit's love affair with the automobile and is an example of mission-driven design. Her hydraulic inventions are the envy of low-rider culture. She conjoined two cars, an East German Trabant with an American El Camino; two types of cars that when they were being manufactured during the Cold War would never have had influence on the design of the other. Yet through this example we learn that anything is possible, even incorporating ideas that formerly were heretical within the American auto industry. Moreover, Cohen certainly gives us a new persona for the traditional pin-up girl (or low-rider car owner): stiletto shod and bikini clad as one might expect but armed with tools suggestive of a dominatrix. Her sexualization of the car, by modeling as the owner pin-up girl, changes the dialogue about who, stereotypically, is a consumer of cars. Doubling her role—the owner and scantily clad model who sells it—Cohen empowers female enthusiasts while challenging misogynist advertising and, through her example, offers a different paradigm for auto manufacturing.

Scott Hocking finds beauty among the remains of the city. His photography and installations confer mythic dimensions to the landscape. The artist overlays his work with titles that recall Greek gods to imbue his structures with mighty and generative power. In contrast, other artists working in Detroit record the same sites as melancholy places, locations that show the process of decay and ruin unlike the open narratives that Hocking proposes.

Abigail Anne Newbold takes the depopulated city as inspiration to forge a new way of living within the American urban landscape. She bases her practice in commercially available commodities combined with artist modified and handmade craft objects. These combinations invite others to recombine her kits, to make them personal. In a DIY community, they remind Detroiters that we were once a maker culture, a people deeply involved in all aspects of the auto industry; that hands-on work is part of innovation, that the time given to making something can insure its quality, and that re-thinking how we use objects may lead to better understanding their utility as re-purposed commodities.

In Detroit now, incubators for diverse industries are growing, filling to capacity. Neighborhoods targeted for growth are beginning to thrive. Businessés are offering home mortgage incentives to lure employees to move back into the city. Artists are re-envisioning their practice, using the city as raw material and attracting others here to join them. Detroit was the city that was synonymous with the American auto industry and popular music of the 1960s and 70s. The maker/inventor, make-what-you-will attitudes that sustained it are thriving and showing new options. The artists included in *here.*, through their studio practice, posit their own solutions to some of this region's ills. Creative and entrepreneurial ingenuity once made Detroit a thriving city. Why not take the examples of Johnson, Cohen, Hocking, and Newbold as viable options for the future? *Speramus meliora; resurget cineribus*. We hope for better things. We hope that that the city resizes, rethinks, reinvents what urban life is in a shrinking city. For in that re-creation, Detroit is a lived here, a place in the momentary present looking to an enduring future.



## SCOTT HOCKING

Born 1975, Detroit, Michigan

Lives in Detroit, Michigan

I am interested in forgotten places, and things kept out of sight. I don't know if this is because I am from Detroit, a city that has been known for forgotten neighborhoods and structures for most of my life; but I try to work the same way no matter where I am. I pay attention to my surroundings, exploring and gathering images and materials to create installations and photography projects. My installations often use objects found on site, and their lifespan is left up to chance.

Detroit is a fitting city for this kind of practice, and living here over three decades, I know my surroundings well. I've got a perpetual long-list of ideas—maybe a testament to the complexities of Detroit, or any place where you decide to hunker down and dig deeper. When I was a teenager, I wanted to leave; I tried (and failed) a couple of times. At 21, I had a car accident, days before moving away. It was surreal. I took it as a sign—maybe we're born in a place for a reason? I decided to try my hand at art, and within months, I was in school.

15 years later, I'm still here, and still inspired. I've experienced the Motor City on foot, found solace within the empty factories and overgrown lots, and discovered beauty in the decay and transformations. This is my home base. It has taken time, but I love the clarity that comes with that time. And I don't plan on leaving anytime soon.

Native Detroiter Scott Hocking uses the material ruins of the city to create site-specific installations. He explores derelict buildings and collects the abandoned objects and materials that he finds. The artist also extracts materials during his explorations. These specimens are catalogued and carefully stored until there is enough of a single phylum to be made into a gallery installation. The artifacts on display for **here** are mineral deposits, stalagmites created as water invaded derelict structures. Hocking's installations in abandoned factories are often epic in scale with titles that invite mythological associations: *Zeus Whirlwind* (2010) or *Sisyphus and the Voice of Space* (2010). For *Garden of the Gods* (2009 – 10), he collected televisions left behind when the Packard Assembly Plant was deserted and placed them atop exposed martini glass shaped columns that stand among the ruins of the collapsed roof. He then documented the installation over a period of a year, noting seasonal changes in light, weather, and disintegration. Some of Hocking's favorite locations for interventions, like the Packard Plant, are abandoned Albert Kahn industrial buildings. Noteworthy for vast expanses of clear space, light, and geometric repetition, these ruins still reflect the order and logic of their design. The rhythms of architectural elements syncopate the artist's interventions, highlighting the tension between order and disorder. In these apocalyptic urban sites, Hocking's installations are American Arcadias: his interactions yoke the remnants of the built environment to ancient sagas, imbuing their entropic spaces with an energy that suggests the possibility of emergent new life.

Opposite top:  
*Hephaestus and the Garden of the Gods, Snow* – exhibition print from the series: *Garden of the Gods*, 2009 – 2010, 2010  
 Archival pigment print/  
 Mixed media installation  
 Print: 33" x 49.5"/Installation:  
 Dimensions variable  
 Photo courtesy of the artist and  
 Susanne Hilberry Gallery

Opposite bottom:  
*Ziggurat, East, Summer II* – exhibition print from the series: *Ziggurat and FB21*, 2007 – 2009, 2008  
 Archival pigment print/  
 Mixed media installation  
 Print: 33" x 49.5"/Installation:  
 Dimensions variable  
 Photo courtesy of the artist and  
 Susanne Hilberry Gallery



