

REVIEW

## Detroit: Artists in Residence @ the Mattress Factory

May 7, 2014 by [Robert Raczka](#)



*Coronal Mass Ejection*. Scott Hocking. 2013. Fiberglass, wood, paint, steel, iron, rust, epoxy, foam, slag, coke, dirt, stone, textiles, lamps, various adhesives, hardware, and found objects. Photo credit: Mattress Factory and Tom Little Photography.

Detroit, in the news as of late for a now-familiar litany of urban blight, bankruptcy, and slashed services, seems to be forging a new oddly fashionable identity for itself as the latest urban frontier. The curatorial statement for *Detroit: Artists in Residence* cites the artists' connection to their environment and their reactions to the swift socioeconomic changes on their home turf. JFK famously observed, there is opportunity in crisis. Though, for Detroit the opportunities thus far seem more cultural than economic, of the

kind more readily capitalized upon by a college-educated creative class than by laid-off factory workers. But for some, a locale with low rents and the freewheeling attitude that sometimes accompanies a fraying social fabric, offers real appeal.



*Diptyching*. Nicola Kuperus & Adam Lee Miller. 2013. Audio, video, wood, doors, exterior lights, ladders and paint.

Photo credit: Mattress Factory and Tom Little Photography.

This group of new installations (all dated 2013) provides some basis for a compare-and-contrast overview, including a sense of attitudes and concerns that characterize at least some segment of the artists working there. Not unpredictably, a dialogue between the decrepit and the revitalized, or at least partially rehabilitated, dominates the exhibit, in some cases sitting squarely at one end of that dichotomy. *Diptyching* by Nicola Kuperus & Adam Lee Miller, a work about renovation in-progress, displays piled up contractor materials and equipment along with a humorous video of counterproductive effort and comical danger. Kuperus and Miller, also musicians performing under the name ADULT, leverage sound for a significant element of their installation, alerting the approaching viewer that things are not going well on the jobsite.



*My City Is Your City*. Jessica Frelinghuysen. 2013. Found alley wood, paint, tin cans, speakers, collected sounds.

Photo credit: Mattress Factory and Tom Little Photography.

In the catacomb-like basement, Scott Hocking's *Coronal Mass Ejection* takes the opposite rust-belt route, wallowing in the pocked decrepitude of a recreated train car previously used to transport molten iron at the Carrie Furnaces steel mill in Rankin, an industrial suburb of Pittsburgh featured in the recent film *Out of the Furnace*, 2013. The industrial hulk of the train car has a surreal presence partially buried in the basement. A chorus of what look like biblical-era mummies straight from a haunted house, stands vigil and make the work feel even more uncanny. Hocking is a poet of the forlorn. Although recently I have not heard Pittsburgh referred to as a rust belt city, enough industrial scrap still remains that Hocking's installation feels site-specific in that it resonates with Pittsburgh's history even as Hocking's aesthetic feels tethered to Detroit.

Some of the installations embody aspects of both the worn and the renewed. Jessica Frelinghuysen's *My City Is Your City* features a forest of trees made of scrap wood yet is also clearly new in its contemporary design. Tin cans on strings dangling from the trees on strings reward the listener with sounds recorded in a neighborhood home to many new immigrants. Frelinghuysen spent 4 years venturing out in her self-designed



Sound-Collecting Suit (displayed along with the installation) recording sounds and voices in her adopted neighborhood of Hamtramck, an actual small city within Detroit's city limits. The effect celebrates difference as enriching the social fabric, rather than eroding it.



*Cured*. Russ Orlando. 2013. Auto parts, salt, chain, meat hooks, metal, porcelain, slip, canvas, string, wire, school bell, pot, plexiglass. Photo credit: Mattress Factory and Tom Little Photography.

Russ Orlando's *Cured* upcycles salvage from trash to art with the application of generous, even excessive, amounts of salt compounding the oxidation of rusting scrap metal. Learning of Detroit's salt mines inspired Orlando. In a multi-faceted, punning way, here "cured" refers to the question as to whether or not Detroit's problems can be cured as well as the use of use of salt. With blue-tinted light filtering into the room, the contrast of salvaged metal systematically arrayed like a display of equipment or individual sculptures against white walls and pristine flooring, heightens the aesthetic of textured decay.



*1913 Revisited in Three Parts* – (1. *The Assembly Line* 2. *Global Time Synchronization* 3. *Rite of Spring Premiere*). Frank Pahl. 2013. Mixed-media. Photo credit: Mattress Factory and Tom Little Photography.

Frank Pahl's *1913 Revisited in Three Parts* straddles past and present, repurposing discards to create a nostalgia-hued multimedia environment of dimming lights, wavering shadows, and minimalist music emanating from old console organs. Pahl's artist statement expresses misgivings about modernity, assembly lines, and the military-industrial complex but the installation's overwhelming charm buries the critique.

Design 99: Gina Reichert & Mitch Cope's *Following the Sun 2* is a Zen-like contemplation chamber of boulders set in geometric fields of retro-mod color. Additional features include high-tech components that collect wind and solar energy. Reichert & Cope's unconventional practice combines art and architecture, including founding Power House Productions, which seeks to stabilize neighborhoods through art and culture. *Following the Sun 2* is aesthetically pleasing as well as functional and even inspirational as it builds on the past, dwells in the present, and seeks to provoke into being something constructive in the future.

Without the Mattress Factory making any extravagant claims, the exhibit implicitly represents both Detroit the city and current art activity in it. Though representing a city of

any size with only six artists and collaborative teams is seriously partial, at best. Still, the vision of Detroit that emerges reflects ambivalence toward decay, variously bemoaning, I think and embracing decrepitude as an iconic aspect of the city's identity in recent decades while trying to move beyond the confines of the rust belt.

*Detroit: Artists in Residence* remains on view at the [Mattress Factory](#), 500 Sampsonia Way, Pittsburgh through May 25.



*Following the Sun 2*. Design 99: Gina Reichert & Mitch Cope. 2013. (3) 265watt photovoltaic panels (roof mounted), (3) 200watt wind turbines (roof mounted), (3) plasma monitors, (3) dump load resistors (heat source), Michigan Pictured Rock stones, plywood and lumber, 24volt DC electrical components and meters, latex paint and polyester wool blend felt, slate chalkboards, conduit. Photo credit: Mattress Factory and Tom Little Photography.

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Robert Raczka is an artist and a regular contributor to *Pittsburgh City Paper*.

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