

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

ARTICLES

Building Monuments Amid Detroit's Modern Day Ruins

by Sarah Rose Sharp on May 11, 2015



Scott Hocking's "Ziggurat" was assembled from 6,201 found blocks inside the Fisher Body Plant, over the course of eight months.

DETROIT — It is easy, when considering the staggering legacy of human history, to think about it as a series of things that took place in the past. It's much harder to remember that we are all a part of history, inasmuch as our present-day actions will one day be past, and because interpretation of historical events is often pieced together much after the fact, leaving us to our best guesses as the inheritors of the evidence that remains.

Detroit-based artist [Scott Hocking](#) is concerned with this evidence: there is a clear through line in his prodigious body of work that explores the artifacts of the city's modern day ruins.



Hocking speaking at Delray Neighborhood House (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

Just what he is seeking came into momentary focus during his recent [presentation at the Delray Neighborhood House](#), where he led by discussing his fascination with “what we leave behind” and how quickly nature reclaims that territory. In one movement — which includes projects like [The Way of the Shovel](#) and [Roosevelt Warehouse and the Cauldron](#) (2007–2010) — he meticulously excavates found objects from some of Detroit’s best- and least-known urban decay sites, warped by fire and water damage, time and disuse, and gathers them in displays of interpretive archeology. In a counter-movement, he builds new monuments within these spaces, using the found detritus at the sites to create ancient shapes and structures that seek to juxtapose our own time with times past. Once completed, often over the course of months or years, and typically without permission, he leaves these pieces — such as “[The Egg and Michigan Central Train Station](#)” (2007–13), “[Ziggurat and Fisher Body 21](#)” (2007–9), and “[Garden of the Gods](#)” (2009–11), in the country’s single largest industrial ruin, the Packard Plant — for random encounters. “If there’s a sense of mystery to it,” Hocking says of his installation sites, “then I’m happy.” Often, in the near or long term, they return to the detritus from whence they came.



From Hocking's 'Garden of the Gods' series, wherein he improbably mounted the dumped shells of television sets on the columns formerly supporting the roof of the Packard Auto Plant



An image from Hocking's 'Scrappers' series: Stacy and J stripping copper wiring

The third, overarching movement in Hocking's practice is photo-documentation, which he adopted in the course of his [Scrappers](#) (2000–4) project, and which has continued alongside his labor-intensive gallery and site-specific installations. There is a clear hunger in Hocking's work to capture something from the discarded materials that abound in a city with "abandoned streets made for cars, with abandoned boats on those streets" — the subject of his ongoing [Shipwrecks](#) series. After an overview of his work, Hocking's talk centered on his obsessive interest in Native American–built earthworks and the products of mound-building culture, which abound throughout the Midwestern lake country and indicate a 6,000-year-old history that remains only vaguely understood. ("[Memorials of a Half Century](#)," written in 1887 by Bella Hubbard, remains one of the definitive texts on earthworks as a geological feature.)



"Detroit Midden Mound" (2008), Hocking's first iteration of his mound inquiries

Hocking has been mulling over [The Mound Project](#) since 2007, and his fascination seems to peak in specific iterations, such as "[Detroit Midden Mound](#)" in 2008 or "[New Mound City](#)" in St. Louis in 2010. In both cases, Hocking has begun a process of creating new mounds, amassed from discarded items or heralded by landmarks discovered at sites where historical mounds once stood, including a toxic rubber glove mound and a chemical drum pyramid, both located at former mound sites around St. Louis.



The toxic glove mound built by Hocking at the site of one of St. Louis's former ancient mounds.

This rebuilding of mounds carries with it a yearning, a bit of humor, and a kind of danger. The remaking of ancient and ostensibly venerated earthworks points to a clear desire on Hocking's part to connect with lost or hidden chapters of history. In discussing his research on the ancient Copper Complex society, which inhabited Michigan from 4000–2000 BCE, he expressed frustration over finding barely “a paragraph about something [a culture] that lasted thousands of years.” The new mounds represent a kind of surrogacy—faced with a lack of factual data, Hocking begins to remake history in his own image. Of course, a white artist reinterpreting Native culture carries with it a deeply problematic element, of which Hocking is keenly aware: he prefaced his presentation by saying, “First of all, I’m just a white dude who came from a little white trash town called Redford, Michigan,” and appraised the audience of his continuing efforts to secure a research grant that would enable him to focus more resources on finding and preserving traces of this obscured history. During the open discussion that followed the talk, Hocking questioned attendees about anecdotal evidence or possible leads on more information about Detroit’s lost mounds — only one of which stands today, at historic Fort Wayne, though many others are commemorated on old survey maps and exist in vestiges, such as the eponymous Mound Road. “I’m trying to document all this stuff before it disappears — again,” Hocking said.



Hocking excavated and reassembled abandoned items within the former book depository for Detroit Public Schools, which left behind a particularly poignant set of damaged remains.

As with much of Hocking's work, the risk of appropriation is balanced by his humility and humor in dealing with matters of history — whose subjectivity he readily acknowledges. He likened the dislocating effects of encountering one of his site-specific installations to the same “confusion that archeology has to deal with in piecing together what was happening” at a given time. While some mounds were indisputably ‘ceremonial’ — a term Hocking reviles for its vagueness — he argues that the practice of midden mounds, basically ancient waste dumps, means there is already a thriving modern-day custom of mound making, as humans displace earth and stack up demolition waste in the process of building or tearing apart pieces of infrastructure. What will these contemporary earthworks look like on day? Perhaps like Hocking's [Tire Pyramid](#), a work commissioned by the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit that used 2,109 tires and which Hocking proposed on the condition that the museum pay for recycling. “So those tires got recycled, and I got to ruin their [a sculpture park in the affluent suburb of Birmingham, MI] lawn,” he joked.

“I'd grown up with a lot of negative opinions about Detroit,” Hocking said, “but I'm only 40, so I don't remember it in its heyday. To me it's always looked this way, and it's not necessarily a depressing, sad landscape.” In fact, Hocking expressed a bit of wistfulness for the time

when Detroit was more remote, more forgotten. All the more reason to reflect on how we perceive the past, and how we will be perceived in the future. Through photos, research, and his own artistic practice, Hocking is engaged in an arresting lifework of creating subjective history and mythology with the tool every human is given to understand what has come before him: the prism of his lived experience.



After warning Hocking that the former train station could not support the weight of the egg he was building out of marble slabs on the fourth floor, excavation crews built a support beam on the floor beneath to enable him to complete his work.

Scott Hocking's [talk](#) at the Delray Neighborhood House (420 S Leight Street, Detroit) took place on April 30.

Tagged as: [Detroit](#), [Scott Hocking](#)

<http://hyperallergic.com/205716/building-monuments-amid-detroits-modern-day-ruins/>

Hyperallergic is a forum for serious, playful and radical thinking about art in the world today. Founded in 2009, Hyperallergic is headquartered in Brooklyn, New York.

©2014 Hyperallergic Media, Inc. All Rights Reserved. | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Use](#) | [Comment Policy](#)