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Artist transforms barn into ark

Michael H. Hodges, Detroit News Fine Arts Writer 11:51 p.m. EDT July 31, 2015



Scott Hocking poses for a portrait in a field of beets with the project in the background. Dale G. Young

Port Austin

Something strange and marvelous is rising above the beet fields that surround this lakeside resort at the tip of the Thumb.

A dilapidated barn from the late 1800s, carefully taken apart piece by piece, is being rebuilt by Detroit artist Scott Hocking as a huge wooden ark.

It's another monumental project for Hocking, who has a history of such site-specific installations, and the second step in a plan to repurpose 10 old barns in the region to create a sort of outdoor art gallery in the countryside.

"I'd had an idea about turning a barn upside-down for some time," Hocking says, "because barn roofs so often look like upside-down hulls. Then Jim Boyle came along and said, 'Want to do a project with an old barn?'"

Boyle, a co-founder of Hamtramck's Public Pool gallery, hails from Port Austin and cooked up the barns-as-art proposal a couple years ago along with local input.

"There are all these beautiful old dilapidated barns around the area," Boyle says. "I got interested in the idea of Detroit street art going rural and what that might look like."



Sculptor and photographer Scott Hocking is working on a new project with wood salvaged from an old barn in a sugar beet field near Port Austin, Michigan, in the Thumb. Dale G. Young

In the case of Hocking's construction, it's likely to look like nothing you've ever seen.

Cantilevered off four telephone poles, the sculpture, 60 feet long and 18 feet wide, looms up a full four stories in the air. Set against the flat green landscape, it's impossible to miss.

Friends have driven the 130 miles from Detroit — straight up Van Dyke Avenue — to assist Hocking, and for a week he had the help of Adam Oddo, a game-art major at Lawrence Technological University in Southfield.

But mostly the 40-year-old artist has done all the labor — including the terrifying bits way up high — by himself.

"I had to become proficient with a 60-foot basket lift and a 30-foot telehandler," Hocking says of the equipment used to hoist huge beams and fix them to the telephone poles. "I use a lot of ancient-Egypt techniques — a lot of leverage. There have been some scary moments."

Originally conceived as an "Emergency Ark," the project plays into the Hocking's fascination with mythic forms and structures from the ancient world.

Earlier sculptures included a ziggurat the 2011 Kresge Artist Fellow built in an abandoned auto plant, and a 10-foot-tall egg made from broken bits of wall plaster in Detroit's Michigan Central Depot.

But press Hocking on the ark metaphor — with its suggestion of imminent catastrophe — and he starts to backpedal, an artist unwilling to be hemmed in by public expectations.

"It's not going to be a boat per se," Hocking says. "It's a sculpture."

He laughs. "It'll be a sort of wooden-vagina-spaceship ark. I'm not interested in redoing Noah," he adds, "but I do like messing with mythology."

And the Flood, Hocking notes, is a nearly universal religious symbol found in most creation myths. Not surprisingly, the project has attracted attention.



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People routinely drop by to gape and marvel, while others — boaters, presumably — have slammed his nautical design, suggesting Hocking doesn't really know what a keel is. Another fellow named Hank spent 20 minutes deriding Hocking's chain saw, only to show up an hour later with a far better one.

"It's a little 'Twin Peaks' out here," Hocking says.

He adds that the barn's owner, Bill Goretski — who declined to speak for this article — drops by regularly and has been enthusiastic about the project.



Scott Hocking puts a rafter in place from a lift high in the air. Dale G. Young

Another enthusiast is Jeanette Ziel, whose barn on the dairy farm she and her husband own at M-53 and Stoddard Road was the first to get the artistic treatment.

In 2013, Detroit artists Steve and Dorota Coy, a husband-wife team who work under the name Hygienic Dress League, painted two sides of Ziel's barn, the first salvo in what Boyle hopes will be 10 barns transformed into art projects.

"There are always people stopping by to take pictures," Ziel says. And she endorses Boyle's larger plan for numerous barns.

"We like to promote art in the area," she says, noting she's an artist and belongs to a local arts league. "The barns will give people something to do on a Sunday afternoon."

That's precisely what Carl Osentoski, executive director of the Huron County Economic Development Corporation, is hoping for.

"We see the barns project as a huge opportunity to bring new people into the community and expose them to the upper-Thumb area," says Osentoski, adding that local reaction so far has been positive.

"I think people understand that this is a celebration of the rural character of the community," he says. The notion of startling art in the countryside, of course, is hardly new.

"Cadillac Ranch," with its 10 pre-1974 Cadillacs stuck nose-first in the ground outside Amarillo, Texas, has become a huge tourist draw. So has "Spiral Jetty," an vast underwater coil made from rocks in Utah's Great Salt Lake.

Catie Newell, a UM architecture professor and principal at Detroit's Alibi Studio, traveled all the way up Van Dyke several weeks ago to help Hocking and came away dazzled.

“Many of Scott’s projects are in hidden spaces, where you can’t necessarily see them,” Newell says. “But this is enormous — and so visible. I drove in from the east, and could see right away the great presence it will have in that landscape.”

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