

Features

A New American Gothic

WALTER WASACZ | TUESDAY, OCTOBER 20, 2015



Cosmic drama is beginning to shape the skies over Michigan's thumb. There are storms ahead as I roll north on M-53, the great Van Dyke Road that connects Detroit (West Village to be exact) to the eastern edge of Saginaw Bay. That's a stretch of about 130 miles, ideal for a day trip that might have been taken much the same way over half a century ago, when my parents would drive up from Hamtramck to the beach at [Sleeper State Park](#) outside Caseville for sun, fun, and a cold swim in Lake Huron.

I feel a psychic, prenatal connection to this place. My time travels come easily here. Back and forth I go from the early 1950s (hello, mom and dad) to the present as I cross Sanilac Road and begin to scan the vast spaces -- farmland, patches of forest, the sky -- that go for miles in all directions. At Mushroom Road, a few miles from the Huron County line, I notice the clouds above appear to be racing at a northwest to southeast diagonal. What had been fluffy and white closer to Imlay City is now jagged and dark. The area had been hit with severe weather just a few days before, when a tornado roared through the small town of [Owendale](#), about eight miles west of this highway.

That same day in August, violent weather also struck closer to the tip of the thumb, where Detroit artist Scott Hocking is building a boat made from a disassembled barn -- a "barn boat" made from repurposed pillars and planks. It is upside down now but appears nearly ready to float. An ark is what it looks like, and that's what many of the curious locals and travelers call it when they see it.

"Some people blamed me for the storms last week," Hocking says with a chuckle. "As if I hadn't started building it, the storms wouldn't have come."

Of course, that's not true (or is it, Scott?). The weather up here is famously unpredictable and often fierce. The sky is in constant motion. You can see it in panoramic, almost psychedelic effect when standing at the edge of a field of sugar beets or on the lapping shores of the great lake.



Before I reach Hocking's work site -- on Fehner Road just off Oak Beach Road about 1.5 miles from the water -- rain pours down, around Cass City and again just south of Bad Axe. I call Scott to see if he's there. He's seeing a chiropractor in Caseville today to address a pinched nerve in neck, an injury that occurred a few weeks prior while building the ark. The weather might be even crazier up there, too, which could alter our plans.

But it turns out that rain has come and gone, though the skies still threaten. As I approach by car, Hocking is at the project site, burning heaps of wood in what looks like a pyre from another era. The piece in progress is visible from the road. It is behind some trees and next to what looks like what remains of an extremely solid silo.

When I walk over to the fire, Scott says the chiropractor is helping, but he needs to slow down on the work, which he began at the beginning of June.

"I'm doing it myself, mostly. I had some help earlier, but when help would come up the weather was too bad to get any work done," says Hocking, 40. "I'm learning I have limitations. My neck got so bad I had to sleep sitting down."



Listening to Hocking talk about his seemingly tireless work ethic and his pain makes me grab for my own neck in response. He apologizes that he's unable to climb up on the boat to show me his way of working. Instead, he sits on a work bench in front of the silo and talks. Hocking is unusually verbal for a visual artist. Nearly everything is framed inside a personal story. He talks about having dinner with the mayor of Port Austin, and the conversations with the owner of the 1890s vintage farm where he is working and with the daily visitors -- "some just sit in their cars and don't come out to talk, but a few do," he says -- to the site.

Just as he says that, as if on cue, a car rolls up and a young woman gets out. She says she lives in San Francisco but is originally from Lexington, on the east coast of the Thumb. She's with her mother, who gets out of the car to take a picture of her daughter with the artist. The women drove up to Port Austin to see the work, which the daughter tells Hocking she learned about from a blog.

After they leave, Hocking says the younger woman's interest in the piece was for the religious meaning it had for her. He said she showed him some tattoos on her arm that spoke to her Christian values.

"That's cool," he says. "People get what they get from the piece. I'm not judging anybody."



[Hocking](#)'s is not the first name that comes to mind when thinking about rural art installations.

He is associated largely with works in abandoned spaces, old factories and warehouses, detritus collected along railroad tracks. His first major work (with fellow Detroit artist Clinton Snider) was called "[Relics,](#)" which was part of [Artists Take on Detroit -- Projects for the Tricentennial](#) at the Detroit Institute of Arts in 2001. I met him at that time, during a quick visit to where he then lived on Yemans Street near Conant in Hamtramck. The house was stuffed with pieces of industrial machinery, sheared off doors and walls, and other found objects that went into the installation at the DIA.

He's also done "Ziggurat," an installation at the Fisher Body 21 Plant made of wooden floor blocks; the "[Egg and Michigan Central Station,](#)" a sculptural installation and photography project; a photography book called "[Bad Graffiti,](#)" and much more. Shortly after I saw him in August, he left to do an installation in Lille, France. It's not the first work he's done in Europe. Hocking went to Iceland to do a [photo project in 2006](#). He was awarded a [Kresge Arts Fellowship in 2011](#). His work gets attention worldwide; Hocking has done projects as far away as Australia.



Jim Boyle, a senior program officer for the New Economy Initiative who grew up a few miles from the farm where Hocking is building the boat sculpture, says it was the "out of context" potential that brought the project together.

"We started talking about it a year and a half ago," Boyle says. "We had a conversation at Public Pool (the art space in Hamtramck that Boyle co-founded in 2010). We wanted to do more public art projects in Port Austin, and Scott said he always wanted to tear down a barn and rebuild it. It was a perfect match."

Boyle and some willing partners in Huron County were also behind the mural done by Detroit's [Hygienic Dress League](#) on another barn just south of Port Austin, which can still be viewed on Stoddard Road just east of Van Dyke. (See more photos of that project [here](#).)

"We got a swirl of support to bring Detroit urban art to Port Austin," Boyle says. "For Scott's piece we got a forklift donated, and the help of a local electrician. People came together to create something special out of insane Detroit creative inspiration."

Walter Wasacz is former managing editor of Model D. Among other things he is inspired by the drama of cosmic skies at the tip of Michigan's Thumb.



2 Comments

[Nancy Kotting](#)

Lovely.... Throughout Europe, it was often the ship builders who were called upon to build barns. The legacy of that is still seen in the roof structures of many standing in Michigan, built by knowledge passed down via the guild system. Go into a barn, gaze up to the roof and you will see the hull of a ship, inverted.

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