

## From a Tower of Babel to a Concrete Ziggurat, an Artist Erects Monuments to Human Endeavors:

Scott Hocking has spent months making labor-intensive constructions inside abandoned buildings or amid their ruins, creating mystical monuments that pay tribute to history



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*Old* by Scott Hocking, installation view at David Klein Gallery (image by Robert Hensleigh and courtesy of David Klein Gallery. All other images courtesy of Scott Hocking unless otherwise noted.)

DETROIT — Artist [Scott Hocking](#) is known for his site-specific installations, often executed in locations outside the normal run of mainstream existence. For a time, the city of Detroit was more or less his playground, and Hocking would spend weeks or months creating labor-intensive constructions inside abandoned buildings or amid their ruins. These works represent just one category of subjects for Hocking as a photographer; others include scappers, bad graffiti, abandoned boats, nocturnal tableaux, and oddities that punctuate Detroit's varied landscape, even as waves of development drive the city to increasingly become a part of the normal run of mainstream existence.



Work-in-progress shot of “*Celestial Ship of the North (Emergency Ark)*” (2015) in Port Austin, Michigan

As select parts of Detroit have changed, Hocking has moved further afield, invited to create installations in places like Port Austin, Michigan, Lille, France, and New South Wales, Australia, to name a few. On display at [David Klein Gallery](#) in downtown Detroit are two shows by Hocking, collectively titled *OLD*. In the smaller gallery are the photographs of works from the last eight years — a [celestial ship](#) (nicknamed the “Barn Boat”) (2015), a [Tower of Babel](#) (2015), and two smaller works riffing on the “[Triumph of Death](#)” motif in art history (2010), including direct references to works by Pieter Bruegel and Sidney Nolan. In the anteroom and main display space of the gallery, Hocking has assembled a new installation work, clearly motivated by time spent in the Paris catacombs on the same trip to France that facilitated the Babel installation, and his longstanding interest and research into the Copper Complex civilization, which occupied ancient lands that are today known as Michigan.



“*Babel*” (2015-16), a site-specific installation created by Hocking as part of the Detroit portion of the Lille 3000: Renaissance triennial festival



“The copper mining in Michigan’s UP has been going on for thousands of years,” writes Hocking in the statement that accompanies *OLD*. “The earliest Natives living in this region around the Great Lakes [are] classified as the Old Copper Complex or Old Copper Cultures, and copper artifacts from this culture can be dated up to 6,000-plus years ago (4000 BCE, etc.). Old. The ancient history of Michigan and Detroit is completely intertwined with copper.”

Hocking interweaves ancient history with contemporary locations, as well as his personal history with his family lineage. He has traced his Polish ancestry in Detroit back six generations, to the mid-1800s, as they eventually settled in the Poletown neighborhood of Detroit, near the copper-roofed St. Albertus, Detroit’s first Polish church. Hocking’s British ancestry can be traced to Cornwall, England, and according to Hocking, it was these miners who moved to Michigan’s Upper Peninsula to look for the copper and tin that had been there since time immemorial.



“*Old*” for *OLD* (image by Robert Hensliegh, courtesy David Klein Gallery)

“My copper-mining ancestors eventually migrated south to the industries of Detroit in the mid-1800s,” writes Hocking. “All in all, my English side can be traced back nine generations so far — seven in Michigan, six in Detroit. Old.”



“*Triumph of Death, Mounting a Dead Horse, 1/11*” (2010) is Hocking’s take on Sidney Nolan’s self-portrait attempting to mount a dead horse in the Australian desert. These works were undertaken at Bundanon Trust residency in New South Wales, Australia, which physically bordered Nolan’s property.

One can find no fault in Hocking’s thorough methodology and harmless penchant for self-mythologizing — after all, he is in the business of building mystical monuments, and truly possesses the kind of drive to, say, spend a summer building an ark out of a desiccated barn, or an entire winter [assembling a ziggurat out of stray concrete blocks](#) in an abandoned factory. [When I went to visit Hocking in the midst of his barn boat project](#), and he alighted from a scissor-lift to greet me, sunbaked and wild-haired, I thought of how absolutely insane Noah must have looked to his neighbors. Hocking’s work is carried through by a maniacal work ethic, perhaps genetically rooted in the copper mines and forged over generations in the crucible of Detroit’s budding industrial revolution.

Experiencing the works in person is far more impressive and startling than seeing them in photographs, though the labor Hocking has brought to bear is still evident. The centerpiece of the DK gallery space is a notoriously difficult decorated column, and Hocking has tackled this head-on, making it the axis of a 360-degree installation of human skulls, tibias, and femurs, cast in gypsum and painted with a copper dust-laced finishing paint that oxidizes with the same effect as solid copper — the artist cast nearly a ton of bones for the project. It is an affecting burial pyre, and Hocking has extended the paint job all the way up the floor-to-ceiling column, which seems to radiate luminous blue at times.





(above) *Celestial Ship of the North (Emergency Ark)*” (2015) in Port Austin, Michigan, (below) Interior image of “*Celestial Ship of the North (Emergency Ark)*” (2015) in Port Austin, Michigan



This, and other small sculptural works, including bronze astrolabes, and a portrait of a deceased scrapper named Country Boy rendered in a cube of charred copper wire, are fascinating objects, well-constructed and beautifully finished. But they do not hold a candle to the uncanny sensation of encountering one of Hocking's works in person. These are monuments of human endeavor and in honor of human history, and they feel more powerful, more capable of tapping the universal thread of humanity, outside the structured gallery environment.



(Scott Hocking, *Old* - image by Robert Hensliegh, courtesy David Klein Gallery)

This is, perhaps, one of the perennial issues for David Klein, which has made a laudable effort to identify and showcase some of Detroit's greatest practicing artists over its years at the downtown location. The trouble is that Detroit's greatest artists — people like Hocking, and Power House Productions duo [Mitch Cope and Gina Reichert](#) — don't make work for the gallery. Art is one among the many tools they use to literally reshape the world around them, and when you remove it from the context of the world, it begins to lose its impact.

I mean this as no criticism of David Klein, or of Hocking. I suppose I yearn for a societal structure that can acknowledge the fundamental role artists play in our ability to imagine and build our world — one that could support them in these wild endeavors, rather than resign them to selling artifacts in galleries to support their working obsessions. A new model, or perhaps — when one considers that art began in caves, alongside considerations like staying warm through the night and not getting eaten by bears — a very, very old one.

*OLD* by [Scott Hocking](#) continues at [David Klein Gallery](#) (1520 Washington Blvd, Detroit) through June 23. David Klein has also produced a [catalogue](#) for the exhibition.

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