

Revived with Scott Hocking

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Five months ago, when I first learned I would be creating content for the Knight Arts blog, I made a mental list of the people and things I would like to write about. Sitting right at the top of that list is one of my idols and 2011 Kresge Fellow Scott Hocking. Since then, I have been gearing up for this very moment when the accomplished Detroit artist and I could have a little chat, the results of which I've posted below.



"Relics" at the Detroit Institute of Arts, 2001.

I've been a huge fan of Hocking since I first heard of his work in 2005, when he and Clinton Snider were recreating their piece "Relics" for Artcote in Windsor. The process for creating "Relics" included venturing into abandoned or neglected spaces and collecting objects of meaning to then be reconfigured into a large-scale installation. (That was originally shown at the Detroit Institute of Arts in 2001). For me "Relics" evoked a strong feeling of closeness to the city that I had been utilizing as my playground. I was in the midst of a body of work titled "The Detroit Ruins Project" and the duo's work crystallized a lot of the thoughts I had been having about the unique conditions that arise from living in a city with overwhelming socio-economic issues and an overwhelming amount of vacant space. Hocking, a multidisciplinary artist whose work is dependent upon the forgotten spaces where he practices, does not only take from the buildings and streets he wanders, he gives back. In pieces like "Ziggurat" (2007-2019), "Garden of the Gods" (2009-2010) and "New Mound City" (2010), he takes objects found in abandoned buildings and gives them an entirely new aesthetic. Hocking thus creates a new context for their existence, they are no longer forgotten but cherished within Hocking's carefully crafted narratives. Hocking sets himself apart from the massive collection of decay artists by creating on a sophisticated level that adds dimension to monotony that can, at times, exist amongst the crowd. In his artist statement, he says, "The history and people of that place influence my artwork ... Focusing on cycles of life, death and rebirth, I try to connect our time with the past." At the same time he finds humor in his work and surroundings. His bio reads more like a wrap sheet, including the times he had been bitten by dogs and his favorite films "He has been arrested six times, and accumulated more traffic tickets than anyone you know." Yet he is a respected artist who has been exhibited nationally at the Detroit Institute of

Arts, Cranbrook Art Museum, the University of Michigan, the Smart Museum of Art, Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis and internationally at the Kunst-Werke Institute, the Van Abbemuseum and at the Kunsthalle Wien. He recently completed projects at Sculpture Space in upstate New York, the Bundanon Trust in New South Wales, Australia, and the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia. He is represented by the Susanne Hilberry Gallery and teaches at the College for Creative Studies.



"Ziggurat" at the Fisher Body 21, 2007-2009.

Vanessa Miller: If you could share a little about your background; what first drew you to Detroit and its buildings?

Scott Hocking: I grew up in Redford Township, on a dirt street that was periodically oiled to keep the dust down. My neighborhood was sandwiched between a trailer park and an industrial park, which backed up to the railroad. My father worked on cars in the back and front yard. Some of my earliest memories are of riding in a car, knowing we were on our way to the junkyard by the color of the overpass girders (light blue) I could spy out the window. So, by the time I could leave my street on foot or a bike, I was exploring these industrial places. Walking along the railroad to abandoned factories and sneaking over the back fences of cement yards and cemeteries. For money, I collected empty beer bottles from trashcans and dumpsters. My environment was grimy and hardworking. A lot of my artistic tendencies can be traced back to these early habits and necessities. As I got older, my explorations just expanded further out in all directions, from inner city Detroit to the Northville Tunnels.

VM: I believe you consider yourself a sculptor, yet your work lends its self so well to photography. I feel that it is very sophisticated to consider what the final image will look like, especially because the locations you use are often difficult to get to and the work is ephemeral in nature. Can you comment on this?

SH: Well, I'm definitely a sculptor first, but even that term sounds somehow too classical for what I do. I'm drawn to working and building / destroying things with my hands, but I like to think that I can manifest an idea in whatever medium seems best. Sometimes photography seems best; other times I might feel like doing drawings or collages. I'm pretty open that way. I've recently started using my Canon to film things, which is another can of worms. I just think I'm evolving. And I don't like to feel stagnate or stuck in some style; I start to rebel against that feeling. As a kid, I drew and played music. I didn't think of building things as sculpting until college. Now I see everything as a multidisciplinary project. When I'm working on a photo-installation project, I'm making two exhibitions — one for the viewers of the photos and one for the people who discover the actual installation and say, "what the fuck is this?" I'm never sure how anything will end up, but I do a lot of aiming and balancing.



"Garden of the Gods," 2009-2010.

VM: In a film (part of a five-part series for German and French television) you mentioned you like to work alone so that no one can see how dumb you are (in regards to placing yourself in dangerous situations). Can you describe an example? Have you brought other people along?

SH: I just make a lot of mistakes on the road to finishing things. But in the end, I usually forget about all those obstacles — until I begin a new project and think, “oh shit, right, this is going to be tough!” I’ve got way too many examples. I’ve fallen through holes, been chased and bitten by dogs, encountered numerous questionable characters, had some volatile interactions and accumulated a bit too many concussions. When I installed the TVs atop those 15 foot columns for my “Garden of the Gods” installation, it was mid December, very cold, with 50 mile per hour gale force winds, and I was pushing the TVs above my head, up an old, sooty wooden ladder with a rung missing. Dumb. A smarter person would have postponed it a day. But I was determined to get it done, and I did — only dropped one TV. When I was building the “Ziggurat” in Fisher Body 21, my back spasmed, and I laid there prone for hours. Luckily, it was March, and the floor was covered in a couple inches of ice — like lying on a giant ice pack. I saw it as forced meditation. When I’m working onsite, these places become my studio, and I guess I like to work in the studio alone. Pretty typical, I imagine. I’ve brought friends along on occasion, but it’s rare.

VM: Your work is rooted in the reuse of existing and forgotten materials, does anyone ever ask you how you feel about buildings that are being torn down or rehabbed? How will this affect your work?

SH: Of course, I get asked this all the time — especially now that so many iconic Detroit buildings are either being demolished or renovated. I just hate waste, so I like to use wasted materials and spaces. Its also a remnant of my resourcefulness — I’ve been broke a long time; so using found materials makes sense. I don’t really get sentimental or nostalgic either, even though some of these places have become like second homes to me. When the Studebaker Building burned down in 2005, it felt a lot like a funeral pyre, and I definitely grieved. But there are always other places of inspiration to work from / within, and, despite all the changes around here, there’s still a ton of space and materials. My ideas are really influenced by my surroundings, so my work changes wherever I go. As Detroit changes, so will the work I make here.

VM: Can you explain a little about the piece that you are working on in the Michigan Central Station? How did that come about? Have you finished? Why the egg shape?

SH: The project at MCS was not a commission, but I have been given “permission” to work in there. I’ve been going into that building since the mid 90s, but I had a feeling something was going to change, and began seriously planning an onsite project more than a year ago. By last winter, I was plotting it out — moving marble fragments to possible sites. And by this spring, I had a chance encounter with a gentleman involved in the current clean up phase. He said, “I think I can get you permission to work in the train station,” and I said, “I’m already in there.” So, since June, I’ve been sanctioned to work in there, though I’ve been too busy to get in there much in November / December. The project is not done yet, but, like all of my projects, it’s always somewhat out of my control. If the clean-up crew gets to my floor before I’m done, oh well.

As for the shape, I decided on an egg a long time ago – it would be about 6 feet tall when done. The egg is an ancient traditional symbol of rebirth – the germinating idea or “unborn potential” yet to hatch. But its form is also familiar as a cairn; stacked rock piles used as markers since ancient times, demarcating sites of importance, from pathways to tombs. I’ve been thinking that the full title of the project should be “The Egg and MCTS, aka Andy Goldsworthy Did Not Invent The Fucking Cairn”

VM: I know you have done some work in other states. How does working in different conditions affect your work?

SH: Well, I love working site-specifically, and the challenges of coming up with ideas in different conditions. I’m very interested in the history of whatever environment I’m in — I’ve got a ton of ideas on the back burner, and sometimes I can integrate dormant ideas with new spaces — they just fit. I’m influenced by things I read, hear and/or see all of the time: from the archaic past to my everyday life. It all swirls around in my brain until I find a use for it, a lot like all the random junk in my studio. I honestly never know what I might make until I get there.

VM: I also love the photographic series that appear to be just observations of living in Detroit.

SH: Thanks, yeah, I think I started to notice so many little things I adore about Detroit disappearing, so I’ve been trying to capture some of these phenomena over the course of years now. Slow, cumulative projects, I suppose. I’m especially taken with words and the way their meanings are altered or become obsolete over time. I love symbology and thinking of our language as the indecipherable glyphs of the future. Painted signs or graffiti that shows the artists hand is worth documenting, because I see how quickly these things change and disappear. And I’ve been photographing the preponderance of boats dumped on Detroit streets for years. I feel there’s something poetic about it.

VM: What is next? Where can readers see your work?

SH: I have about 12 photos and an installation of stalagmites in an awesome exhibition called “Here” at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts Museum until the end of the year — it’s a fantastic group show in Philadelphia. The “Detroit Revealed” photo exhibition at the Detroit Institute of Arts is another great group show that features about eight of my photos from its collection and runs all the way to April. Both exhibits have kick-ass catalogs too. As for 2012, I’ve got a few group shows lining up and some amazing possibilities percolating, but I don’t want to jinx anything quite yet. I can say that it’s going to be a busy year, culminating in my next solo show at Susanne Hilberry, which opens in late November, and is titled “The End of the World.” Gonna go out with a bang.

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