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THE WAY WE LIVE

DETROIT FREE PRESS

SCOTT HOCKING'S



**ARTIST SEES
HOPE IN
NEGLECT,
TURNING
JUNK OF
DETROIT
INTO
SCULPTURE**

VISION

BY FRANK PROVENZO, FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

October 8th, 2004 - DETROIT

On the 5-minute drive from Hamtramck to his studio near a network of railroads and abandoned factories in Detroit's 'North End' neighborhood, Scott Hocking stops at a doughnut shop and orders a much-needed coffee. Then, he opens his wallet. *Nothing*. He reaches deep into his jeans. *Not a penny to be found*.

"I should have titled the exhibit, 'Save Scott from Bankruptcy'," says Hocking, referring to the exhibit of his photographs, sculptures, drawings and mixed-media artworks at District Arts Gallery in Birmingham.

Although he may be broke, Hocking's artistry is gaining worldwide attention; Just not enough to transform his struggling status - yet.

In the past several years, his work has been on exhibit at the Detroit Institute of Arts, he's had an artist's residency in Toronto, and in September he was flown to a conference in Berlin to address the topic of his art and the notion of shrinking urban areas.

"There's really a fascination with Detroit as a post-industrial wasteland; this place of Motown and electronic music," he says. "I wouldn't want to be anywhere else."

Things are going good for me, except, of course, I don't even have a bank account, and I'm flat broke."

Hope in neglect

On an early weekday, Hocking, 29, spends a few hours cleaning the Hamtramck studio of another artist. It's one of the many odd jobs - along with carpentry, building shipping crates and installing art exhibits at galleries around metro Detroit - that help him eke out a living as one of city's most resourceful visual artists.

Hocking's art is distinguished by his choice of materials - sections of car doors, partial shelves, random parts and metal bits - found in abandoned factories and boarded-up warehouses. He turns the objects into sculptures and fits many of them into traditional frames.

"People get hung up about thinking that something is art because it's in a frame," he says. "This is my way of saying, 'When the artist injects himself and manipulates the material, that in itself makes it art.'"

Hocking's art is rooted in the city's grit, grime and storied automotive history - yet it reflects the joy he finds there. He's relentless in cajoling beauty from decay, in finding hope in neglect. He bristles at the notion of being called a vandal for using pieces of crumbling buildings that aren't his property.

"I respect the environment and the history of these buildings," he says, noting that many of the pieces he uses don't even have street value as scrap. "I never damage anything. I'm just looking for intuitive connections, waiting for objects to give me ideas or speak to me in some way. Usually it's the things others would reject."

Rust never sleeps

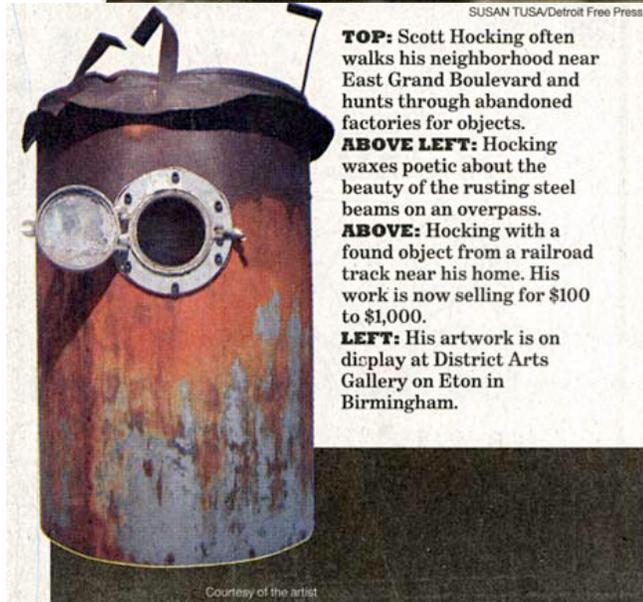
Sitting on the roof of the two-story former warehouse where he lives and works, Hocking sips water from a coffee cup. He wears a T-shirt with a derogatory political statement about President George W. Bush. His hair is messy and his clothes disheveled, like he's wearing the wrinkled sheets from the bed in the corner of his crowded studio. The rooftop overlooks alleys running behind houses and the clutter of electrical lines. Southward toward Detroit are silhouettes of the long forsaken Studebaker plant and Ford's Piquette Avenue factory, where the Model A was mass-produced.

A century ago, the area near the I-75 and I-94 interchange was the hub of the emerging automobile industry, an intricate network of railroad tracks that carried parts and autos on the Chicago, Detroit and Canadian Grand Trunk Junction railroads.

"This is the heart of Detroit's (automotive) history," says Hocking. "People just don't get off the main roads to see these places. If they did, they'd see beauty in the transition from what they were to how the natural elements are changing them."



SUSAN TUSA/Detroit Free Press



TOP: Scott Hocking often walks his neighborhood near East Grand Boulevard and hunts through abandoned factories for objects.

ABOVE LEFT: Hocking waxes poetic about the beauty of the rusting steel beams on an overpass.

ABOVE: Hocking with a found object from a railroad track near his home. His work is now selling for \$100 to \$1,000.

LEFT: His artwork is on display at District Arts Gallery on Eton in Birmingham.

Courtesy of the artist

Pieces from his forages are laid out on the roof: a section of a rusted door from a semi-truck, aluminum shelves, charred tires and fenders. From day to day, he watches the patina change; new rust patterns appear as a result of the metals' exposure to sun, rain, heat and cold. Hocking waits for the right compositional moment. Then, he might add a preservative coating, and a frame.

While getting inside an abandoned factory takes chutzpah, figuring a way to carry a 200-pound plate from one of the plants roofs is a test of ingenuity. He ended up rolling the piece to the edge of the road, and coming back with his truck to take it back to his studio.

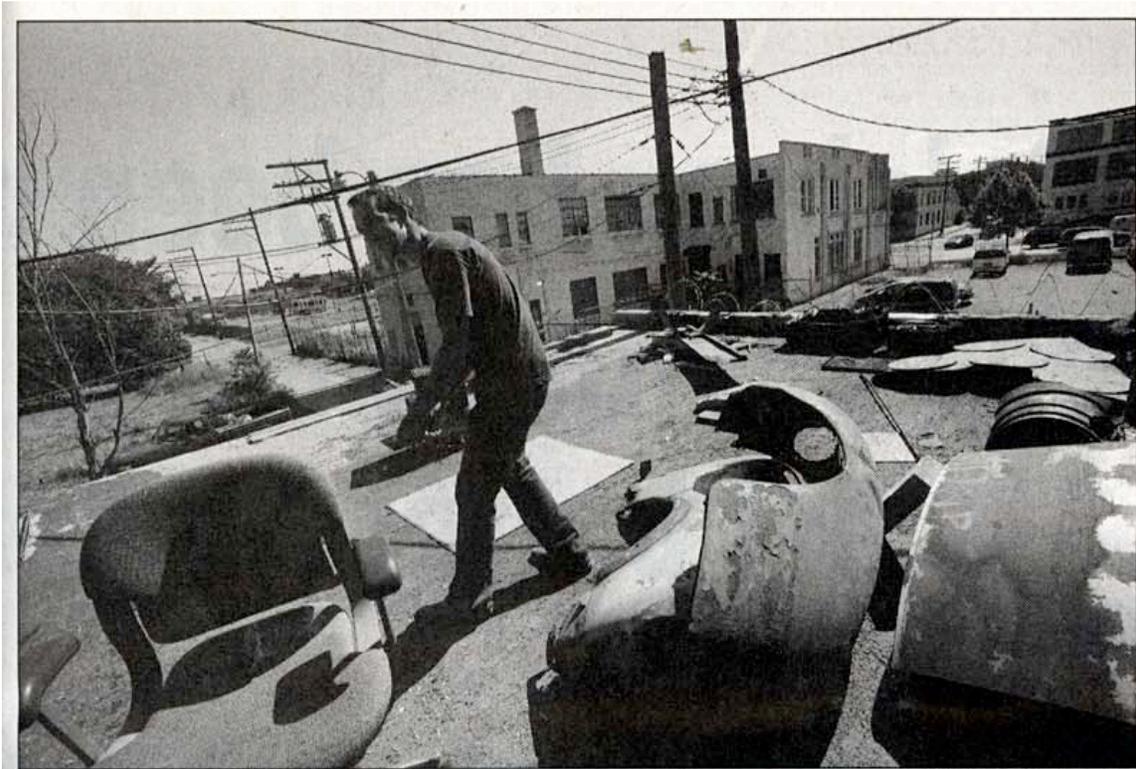
Hocking has fallen through floors, found himself trapped between walls and crumbling material, and has been chased by stray dogs. "I don't do this as an adrenaline rush," he says, pulling out a satchel and tossing the strap over his shoulder. "But I do love the feeling of being fully aware when you don't know what's going to happen."

Like being in church

Around noon, Hocking crosses the once bustling boulevard, several blocks east of where the former GM building stands. He walks past warehouses, up a hill and over train tracks that once served factories along the lines, including the hulking Fisher Body plant. His routine: Squeeze through a hole in a chain-link fence, and step across a parking lot that is now filled with high weeds and trees. Hocking calls them ghetto palms. He's on the lookout for other scavengers, who peel away materials and sell them as scrap. Sometimes homeless people offer him a hand in carrying a heavy piece from the buildings. For Hocking, it's like stepping onto sacred ground.

"When I'm inside those buildings, it's like being in church," he says. "Dramatic light comes in the windows. It's just you and the smokestacks and nothing else."

Later, as he walks along the underpass near an abandoned factory, Hocking looks up at a bridge with graffiti sprayed on its walls, admiring the corroded pattern of rust. "Look at that," he says, "that's beautiful. We can't eliminate the past simply because we think it's ugly now."



SUSAN TUSA/Detroit Free Press

Scott Hocking stores some of his found objects outside to let nature do its corrosive, erosive work on the various metal he has collected.

HOCKING | From junk comes spirit of the city

'Scott Hocking: Drawings, Photographs, Sculptures'

Through Oct. 16
District Arts Gallery
955 S. Eton,
Birmingham
11 a.m.-5 p.m.
Tue.-Sat.
248-258-8916 or
www.districtarts.com

Making art

During the past 10 years, Hocking - who grew up in Redford and moved to Livonia, where he graduated from Stevenson High School - has lived on the streets and out of his car, or moved from one friend's place to another. The past is a difficult subject, but one that Hocking faces dead-on.

His parents divorced when he was 9. He watched his father hold many jobs, from factory worker to real estate agent to mechanic. "He taught me how to survive," he says, "and how to be handy with tools." Hocking lived with his dad, seeing his mother only once a week. He suffered from what he calls deep depression throughout high school, and was kicked out of the house. He struggled with drugs in his late teens and early 20s and supported himself with odd jobs. He dismisses the notion of a deep psychological connection between his personal struggles and his choice of spending time in abandoned properties. "I thrive on solitary experiences," he says. "It's just my way to find an inner peace. But really, I don't think I'm so important that I need to buy new material to make my art. I want to use the junk, and not add another layer of waste to this world."

Since August 2001, he has paid about \$600 a month to live in the two-story building owned by his older brother. It's parking lot is encircled by a 6-foot chain-link fence topped by barbed wire. He's come to terms with his calling as an artist - and the destitute life that often comes with the territory.

"Every day, I ask, 'What can I do to survive that doesn't compromise my integrity?'" he says. "The answer comes back, 'Making art.' Career goals? "I don't know what I'm doing the rest of the week," he says. "I'm just living day-to-day."

Not giving up

Eight years ago, he was planning to move to Alaska to work as a fisherman. Three days before he was supposed to leave, he was broad-sided while driving in his used Toyota Corolla, and lost consciousness. He had no car insurance, and was driving on a suspended license.

"For 30 minutes after the accident everyone came and went, and I was left at the intersection, unable to afford medical care, and without a car," he says. "I saw it as a sign that I wasn't meant to leave Detroit."

From that moment, Hocking says he pledged never to waste time. He entered the College of Creative Studies, pulling together a portfolio, graduating in 2001, the same year his work - along with collaborator Clint Snider - was featured in "Artists Take on Detroit" at the Detroit Institute of Arts. The exhibit featured the region's top contemporary artists who created works to commemorate the city's Tricentennial. The pair collected thousands of urban artifacts and set them in wooden boxes that lined a wall.

Hocking's current exhibit at District Arts Gallery has been well received by visitors, says gallery director Christine Schefman. A 12-part photo series on abandoned buildings and several of his frame found-object pieces sold shortly after the exhibit opened. His work ranges from \$100 a photo to more than \$1,000 for a sculpture. "People are seeing that his work is so much about the culture of this region," says Schefman. "Ten, 20 years from now, he's going to be making art because it's just a part of him. He's not someone who gives up."

That is Hocking's deepest connection of all to the spirit of Detroit.

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