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### Scott Hocking's Garden of the Gods

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*Garden of the Gods, Northeast, Snow.*

It was recently announced that after more than five decades of abandonment and neglect, the sprawling, decrepit [Packard Automotive Plant](#) on the east side of Detroit will be demolished by its ostensible current owner Dominic Cristini. (For news coverage, click [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).) Designed in the early 1900s by industrial architect [Albert Kahn](#), the 40-acre, 3.5 million square foot complex was once the headquarters and main production site for the [Packard Motor Car Company](#), one of the premier American luxury automobile brands of the 20th century. The plant was the first large-scale reinforced concrete industrial construction project in the world and at its opening in 1907 was considered to be the most advanced facility of its kind anywhere. The plant's opening preceded by three years Henry Ford's legendary [Highland Park Plant](#) (also designed by Kahn and immortalized by [Louis-Ferdinand Celine](#) in *Journey to the End of the Night -- for \$5 a Day*) and [the moving assembly line](#) by six.

Since its closing in 1958, the complex has progressively fallen into decay with several sections in collapse as a result of exposure to the elements and a succession of fires; although, most of the buildings remain structurally sound due to their reinforced concrete construction. Much of the wiring and other building materials have been stripped by scavengers over the years. In recent times, the plant has also served as an enclave for so-called [urban explorers](#), graffiti artists, and purveyors of the photographic genre known as "[ruin porn](#)." Without question, the most significant work done in this environment is that of Detroit artist [Scott Hocking](#).

Born in Detroit in 1975, Hocking has been surveying the postindustrial landscape of Detroit for more than a decade. His project [Relics](#), begun in 2001 in collaboration with Detroit artist [Clinton Snider](#), has collected thousands of found objects and organized them into various grid configurations, which are exhibited from time to time. The result of an ongoing series of [Situationist](#)-like [derives](#) (drifts) through the city's wastelands, *Relics* gathers up the castoffs of modernity's material culture and presents them as metonyms of

lives and livelihoods ruined in the transition from the [Fordist](#) to the [post-Fordist](#) mode of production, a tidal wave of creative destruction under which vast sections of Detroit have been literally and figuratively washed away. Permeated with the smell of grime and decay and odors of chemicals whose half-lives will persist into future centuries, the assemblages of broken toys, appliance fragments, rotted clothing, rusted machine parts, architectural remnants, and other abandoned ephemera, register the psychic realignment that has taken place in the migration from the age of mechanical reproduction to the regime of [neoliberalism](#), of all that was once solid melting into air.



Scott Hocking and Clinton Snider, *Relics*, 2001, mixed mediums (original installation view at the [Detroit Institute of Arts](#)). (All Hocking images courtesy of the artist and [Susanne Hilberry Gallery](#).)

Hocking's installation in the Packard Plant, *Garden of the Gods* (2009-2011), is among his most remarked-upon works, and it is arguably one of the most significant. Situated in a section of an upper floor where the roof has collapsed, the piece uses columns still standing amidst the rubble as pedestals upon which are perched old TV consoles retrieved from elsewhere in the building. (At one point in its devolution, the plant was used in part as storage space. One loft area was apparently used by a television repair and recycling service, the remains of which are still there.)

Taking its title from [a sedimentary rock formation](#) in the Shawnee National Forest in southern Illinois, *Garden of the Gods* takes each of its 12 monuments as a member of the Greek pantheon. Over time some of these have also fallen over and other pieces of the structure have collapsed. The process of entropy has been photographically documented periodically since the TVs were first installed in 2009.



Left: Scott Hocking, *Garden of the Gods, West, Summer*; Right: *Garden of the Gods, West, Winter*.

Hocking readily acknowledges the site-specificity of this and other works, yet at the same time he gestures toward a broader historical view. From a mythological perspective, *Garden of the Gods* is a meditation on the hubris and repeated failure of humankind's stratagems of control over nature, a mytheme that goes back into distant times. (For an excellent interview with the artist on this and other aspects of his work, see Sarah Margolis-Pineo's "[Seeing Beauty in All Stages.](#)")

Closer to the present, *Garden of the Gods* can be read as a dystopian reflection of the effects of spectacle society. Hocking talks of thinking about the site originally as reminiscent of a classical amphitheater, a stage upon which to present a cast of epic characters. Coming then upon the trove of abandoned television sets, he instantly made the connection between the upright pillars and the TV consoles as the appropriate *dramatis personae*. "It is almost too simplistic that the TVs are new gods," the artist has said. But I would argue that in this regard *Garden of the Gods* is in fact quite astute.

In his classic study [Television: Technology and Cultural Form](#), Raymond Williams asserts that the rise of TV as the quintessential mass medium of the postwar era is inextricably bound up in its ability to communicate over large distances via the broadcast signal. In the United States, television worked in concert with the personal automobile and the suburban single-family housing development to demassify the urban core and construct a national imaginary based on the concept of "[mobile privatization](#)," the idea that one could the survey outside world from the comfort and security of one's own living room. (An excellent study on the effects of this process in American society during the 1960s and beyond is Joshua Meyrowitz's [No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior](#).) And while the inner city has been substantially abandoned and thus devastated, the suburbs surrounding Detroit are actually quite the opposite. (Oakland County, just north of the city, is [one of the nation's most affluent areas](#).) Mobile privatization became the means by which the public sphere imploded only to be replaced by the isolation of a domestic simulacrum whose only respite is consumerism, the true god being worshipped through the medium of TV.

The physical and psychic traces of the repercussions of mobile privatization and its consumerist orientation are stunningly apparent in Detroit. In light of the recent, and some say terminal, crises of the [modern capitalist world-system](#), *Garden of the Gods* is a harbinger of what the future may hold.



Left: Scott Hocking, *Zeus Summer*. Right: *Zeus Destroyed*.

See more at [Scotthocking.com](http://scotthocking.com)

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