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Detroit Nights

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locations. materials



Photos - Scott Hocking

For the first 12 years of my life, I lived on a dirt street. Trucks would periodically come by and oil it, to keep the dust down. We had ditches, a rotating assortment of broke down cars being repaired that covered both the driveway and lawn, and a couple of big trees in the front yard – the bigger one was whitewashed at the trunk. It was a working-class neighborhood; kids everywhere. Our parents would yell our names at dinnertime, or at dark, or whenever we had to come home – because we were always outside, somewhere. We lived in an 800-square foot house, which sold for 800 bucks a couple of years ago. A handful of houses down the street, running perpendicular to it, was the industry-lined C & O Railroad. Ziebart Rustproofing, Profile Steel and Wire – whose giant front lawn we used for baseball games; the signpost that read »No Ball Playing« was home plate – and further east, a sprawling 7-Up Bottling Plant. There was a pedestrian walkway between the steel and pop factories, allowing people to walk to and from the railroad. On the other side of the tracks, the streets were paved.



The consistent sound of the freight trains along that railroad, blaring their horns as they came and went through the night, has stuck with me my whole life. There's something soothing about it. Rhythmic. Spooky. Lonesome. A part of the country-ish city atmosphere that I grew up within. Those tracks drew me in as a kid. My first explorations into the wild, I suppose, began with walking the overgrown and hidden pathways that these tracks carved out. Sneaking in the back of Koenig Fuel and Supply, and sling-shooting rocks from atop their gravel hills. Exploring the undeveloped back end of Detroit Memorial Park West cemetery, where we once found a human leg bone, with the kneecap still attached (later, having determined that we were cursed for having it, we returned the bone). Sitting on a viaduct while a train sped by, nearly being sucked into the vortex it created. Climbing inside dormant boxcars, just to see what it might be like. And that glimmer of an idea – those beckoning boxcars – might have been the real draw, what really captivated me as I heard those horns in the night: the idea that there was a guy out there, alone, in the darkness, passing through our little nowhere town as we all slept. Driving that train, going wherever, cutting through cities, towns, prairies, states. I imagined it as freedom. Traveling. Exploring. Escaping.

For the past 16 years I've lived about the same distance from the railroad tracks that I did as a kid. A two-minute walk from the old Grand Trunk Western Railroad line that birthed the Detroit auto industry. Henry Ford's first factory, the EMF and Studebaker factories, an Aerocar shop and dozens of Fisher Body factories all lined this railroad, along with various related industries, machine shops, tiny churches, and diners. Piquette Street stretches eastward from Woodward, crossing John R., Brush, Beaubien, St. Antoine, Oakland Streets, which follow the paths of the old ribbon farms; crossing the last remaining sliver of Hastings Street – a once bustling corridor of African American culture and history, now buried under a superhighway; and terminating at Russell Street, as the GTRR passes overhead. A walk along the GTRR is a walk through Detroit history.

In these historic Detroit factories, built along the railroad over 100 years ago, and left for dead by the 1980s, I found my church-like experience.

Over the course of 20 years, the remnants of historic Piquette Street became a kind of second home to me. I started exploring the decaying hulks of the Studebaker plant and Fisher Body 21 in the late 1990s, when their abandonment by previous owners was still fresh. Like my childhood experiences, I found myself hiking up to the railroad grade via desire paths, climbing through fence holes and busted open doorways, and into these once-bustling buildings of industry, now quiet and still. Cavernous is an accurate term to describe them, not just because of their interior

size and space, but also because of their transformations into man-made caves: stalactites and stalagmites formed throughout these often cast-concrete structures, as water permeated the roofs and floors over the years. The gentle sounds of nature echoed inside these caves: from rhythmic drips of water to gushing waterfalls during a storm, the wind whistling through broken or non-existent windows, swaying and flapping debris hanging from the ceilings, the sudden fluttering of startled pigeons. I found solace in the quietude and natural reclamation in these spaces. I craved it in my life, and sought it out where I could find it. In these historic Detroit factories, built along the railroad over 100 years ago, and left for dead by the 1980s, I found my church-like experience. My freedom. My escape.

In 2007, I started working on a project within the Fisher Body 21 plant, one of the last standing factories of Piquette Street. I'd wake up in the morning, walk to the corner gas station to buy a coffee, newspaper, and maybe a hard-boiled egg, and hoof it to the 600,000-square foot former auto plant, an approximately five-minute walk from my studio. I had spent ten years getting to know this place before deciding to work inside – onsite, as opposed to removing materials for use in my studio. It took me eight months to complete an installation in there – building a large stepped pyramidal structure I called Ziggurat - working through three seasons and many setbacks and delays. Once, while hunched over the pyramid in an awkward position, my lower back spasmed and I was incapacitated on the frozen floor. I lay there unable to move, wondering if I would have to call for help from the third floor of an abandoned factory. But it was a cold March, and the floor was still covered in an inch of ice – suddenly the freezing winter weather that made for harsh working conditions was my best friend. I lay on the bed of ice until darkness, when I became cold and numb enough to crawl to my feet and gingerly walk home – where I stayed out of commission for a week. On another occasion, I was out of town for six weeks, returning to the pyramid and FB21 after the springtime had thawed Detroit. The entire sculpture had shifted, collapsing as a result of the ice it was built upon melting. I had to remove and rebuild large sections of it, losing weeks of work. Then, there was the time I was inside when a crew of professional scrappers was removing pipes with gas-powered saws. Suddenly all of the saws stopped and a quiet came over the scrappers. When I asked what was happening, one of the scrappers told me that the City of Detroit was currently re-fencing the building. I looked out the window and saw a crew of workers putting up an eight-foot chain-link fence around Fisher Body. I said, »good luck,« and left. The next day, when I returned, I found that the scrappers had not only escaped their cage, they also took the entire new fence: they simply waited until the city workers had finished, cut the newly installed fence, rolled it up, and left.

Often, I would have to work on the project at odd hours – because, as it turns out, no one pays you to build a wooden block pyramid inside an abandoned auto factory. I would work whatever jobs I had at the time, or whatever other art projects and deadlines I was in the midst of, and then squeeze in time to visit Fisher Body and the pyramid. It was always a question mark as to whether or not the ziggurat would still be there, or what condition it would be in. Despite the many delays and varying gaps in time between visits, the sculpture remained intact, only occasionally disturbed by passing graffiti artists and urban explorers. There were many days that I would arrive onsite at dusk, and work into the night. Sometimes I would use a headlamp to help me see, other times I would work by the strange amber ambient light glowing from the sodium vapor streetlamps



outside. The nights were even quieter in these caves, and I would often spend time on the roof before heading home, overlooking the illuminated city, and the constant stream of cars crisscrossing the I-75 / I-94 interchange. Urban exploring was not a full-swing trend back then, and I was almost always alone in these spaces. Building a weird sculpture in the dark, or sitting on the roof in some kind of quiet meditation. Every now and then, the silence would be broken by the low vibration of a freight train rumbling by, in and out of the darkness, an indistinguishable specter of every night train I've ever heard in my entire life.

Walking allowed me to observe minute details of the city, the things you miss while driving.

Walking home from Fisher Body in the dark was just another aspect of the meditation for me. I had been walking Detroit for years, especially in the late 1990s, when, for three years, I was without a car. Viewing the city on foot, from the railroad tracks, provided a unique, solitary perspective and directly connected me to the lingering industrial past. Walking in general allowed me to observe minute details of the city, the things you miss while driving. It also put me into the midst of often-unpredictable circumstances – and encounters with Detroit wildlife. Once, while walking to Fisher Body at dusk from my home on Kirby street, a pack of three stray dogs began to bark at me. Unexpectedly, one of them ran up from behind and bit my right leg. I swung instinctually and yelled at the dog. He backed away at my bark, but the other dogs rose to support him. Suddenly I felt the fear arise in me: I couldn't fight off three dogs. I continued to walk toward the plant, looking forward, appearing calm, hoping the still barking pack would retreat. Somehow, they did. And although I had a nice puncture wound on my calf, I felt lucky.

On another occasion, I arrived back in Detroit one night via Greyhound bus, and decided I would walk from the Howard Street station back to my home in Hamtramck. The approximately six-mile walk took hours, and midway through, I'm sure I was questioning my decision. Near the sprawling vacant lots that used to exist at Forest and Russell (where a Federal Reserve Bank now sits), the panicked sounds of a pheasant pierced the night. Suddenly, the bird shot up out of the overgrown grass, and, just as startled, a Pitbull came running out of the field right in front of me. All three of us shocked to find each other, I was petrified at how suddenly this dog appeared, nearly running straight into me. But the dog was shocked as well, and upon seeing me, hightailed it in the opposite direction, straight up Russell, as fast as he could. I stood there for a solid minute, watching him run off into the darkness. Again, lucky.

And then there was the time I took the wrong city bus on a weeknight, and ended up Downtown, stranded in Cadillac Square. Suddenly I was no different than the bus-fare beggars, without money for a transfer, stranded far from my destination. I made the decision to walk, being only two miles or so from home. And again, the Detroit night provided a surreal circumstance. In those days, 20 years ago, the Downtown stretch of Woodward was nearly a ghost town after dark, especially on weeknights. The blocks between Campus Martius and Grand Circus Park were colloquially known as the Wig District, with a few of the remaining functioning businesses being wig shops. I could walk directly down the center of the road, without seeing a soul. As I crossed over the I-75 interstate, the skyscrapers were behind me, and the expansive flatlands of the Cass Corridor and Brush Park lay ahead. Only the glowing yellow awning of a 24-hour check-cashing shop in the distance showed signs of life, in the days when streetlights were unpredictable and sometimes non-existent. As I walked up the center lane in the darkness, I saw something shoot out of a Corridor side street: a man, running as fast as he could, darted across Woodward. I stopped walking, and watched. Maybe 100 feet behind him, and gaining, was a dog, chasing him. The man was running for his life. In a matter of seconds, I watched him run out of the darkness, with the wild dog following, and just as quickly, both he and the beast disappeared into the Brush Park neighborhood, without a sound. The whole thing happened in what felt like an eerie vacuum. Like living tumbleweeds rolling across the deserted landscape of Detroit. I waited another ten seconds or so, and began walking again, straight up the middle of the road.

Despite dozens of nighttime observations like these, overall, they were and are rare experiences. Anomalies. And as the city has changed over the years, they've become things of the past. The predominant experiences I have sought out and continue to find throughout Detroit at



night are those of strange solitude and unexpected peacefulness. From the rooftops of vacant factories, to the never-ending railroad trails, to the quiet hidden corners of a sometimes-rural city, I've found the natural darkness that's normally eludes a major metropolis. I've tried to capture it while I can, knowing that the neighborhoods of Detroit are constantly changing, and that many of these experiences, surroundings, and locations won't exist in the future. The once shocking lack of public lighting has been remedied, with long-lasting LED fixtures covering even the most desolate streets of Detroit. Many vacant areas have drastically changed, with new constructions covering former vacant lots of former neighborhoods and factories. The cycles of death and rebirth are visible in all their stages here. Shuttered Downtown skyscrapers and street level shops are now renovated and bustling with bars and restaurants. The former riverfront industries and railways continue to be replaced with well-lit boardwalks, bike paths, and copious amounts of security phones. Yet, for all the

changes, the quietude can still be found. The dark corners are still there. The wildlife that takes over the brownfields of former factories is still there. The pheasants, rabbits, raccoons, opossums, stray dogs and cats, foxes, deer and even coyote have found their way into the city, often using the hidden, overgrown railways as their nighttime paths. The night here can still be wild and placid, surprisingly filled more with the sounds of insects than of car engines.

Over the years of working in vacant structures, there were times when I would be stuck in buildings until the night. Occasionally, I would be hemmed in by prowling police, waiting for a trespasser like myself to stumble out. In the old days, I would be removing more materials than photographing, and I avoided being seen coming or going at all costs. Before I had a car, I would push shopping carts full of salvaged junk from buildings to my studio. A scrapper pulling carts up and down the streets was commonplace back then, and cops rarely turned their heads at this activity. But entering or exiting a structure was different, and an easily ticketed offense. Getting caught was never part of my plans, and seriously compromised my romantic aspirations of meditative solace. Yet, it has been a part of the nighttime routine for as long as I can remember. Photographing some of the more hidden scenes of Detroit has taken me into many forbidden zones. The long-vacant toxic wasteland of the former Uniroyal Tire Plant, with its scenic riverside views; the cathedral-like pillars of the I-75 Rouge River Overpass; the shuttered Riverfront-Lakewood Park and its adjacent Fox Creek canals; the isolated island of earth I call Davison Mound that sits between freeway interchanges and, of course, the various active and defunct railways that circumnavigate the city.

Part of finding these silent places was also being silent myself. Being still to avoid being caught, as much as being still to have an isolated, meditative experience. Much like when I was a kid, sneaking out at night to explore the railroads and have adventures in hidden, forlorn locations. Part of the experience was risky, of course, but there was a sense of freedom found in the rule-breaking. And when I was young, the risk was more pronounced, perhaps more important. In my early teens, I once snuck out at night with a friend, hiked through that antiquated *pedestrian walkway*, along the C & O Railroad, and hopped a fence into the 7 Up Bottling Plant's parking lot. Like a quiet cat burglar, I managed to climb into a large dumpster filled with returnable soda cans, pull out three large, clear plastic bags full and toss them back over the fence. In the middle of the night, we went through our spoils in my garage, surveying how much money in ten-cent ant-covered cans we had stolen. It wasn't the first time I'd stolen something, but it was the most elaborate nighttime plan I had concocted. By my teenage driving years, the nighttime mischievousness had turned into random thefts and adventures. Driving around town during the wee hours, removing and relocating neighbourhood lawn ornaments or miniature golf statues with such frequency that it once became a game between multiple friends to see who could accumulate the most stolen items. Jumping fences to use stranger's backyard pools or trampolines. Driving all night, westward along the *mile roads*, until they became gravel roads in the sticks.

Again, seeking out the dirt roads, seeking out the hidden places, seeking to find the darkness. Over time, whatever juvenile interest I had in nefarious activities has given way to the real draw: I needed the escape that the night provided. Whether it was an escape from my family life as a child, an escape from my tribulations as a teenager or an escape from the city itself as an adult, the night provided a different world from the day.

Similarly, when I first started exploring the vacant buildings of Detroit, I was focused on removing wasted materials, reclaiming and saving these little bits of history that were lost in a slowly decaying structure. These objects were useless to the scrapper, having no semi-precious metal or architectural detail value. But to me, they were fragments of history. They were also free materials for a broke artist. All of the sneaky skills I had practiced since my youth benefitted this new art practice. And although I was still technically trespassing and stealing, my spitefulness toward whoever owned these historic structures and let them fall into such disrepair, was justification enough for me. The fact that someone had enough money to not only own such monstrous factories, but also to be willing to let them decay because it was cheaper than renovating or demolishing them, was infuriating to me. These people clearly didn't care about history, or the surrounding neighborhoods, or the city itself – so why should I care about them? This attitude propelled my work for years. And I continued to remove materials from buildings and create artworks with the reclaimed debris.

Photographing at night is like stripping my practice down to only the most essential aspects.

But this method began to slow over time as well, as I stripped away another layer of what really drew me to these locations. Eventually, I came to realize that it was the locations themselves that I really needed. The materials inside seemed like a reason to go there, but I didn't need to remove them. I could work with them onsite. I could photograph the entire process and attempt to translate the feeling of being onsite. I could do what it was that I'd been drawn to doing my whole life: travel to these locations, explore and experience them, and temporarily escape into a different reality. For me, it was the closest I could get to nature. My art practice had crystalized into finding some kind of solace, spending time there, documenting it and moving on.

Photographing Detroit at night has become the epitome of this aspect of my art practice. I'm not venturing out at night to build sculptures after hours. I'm not looking for materials to acquire under the cover of darkness. I'm not driving around with friends, fucking around for fun. I'm no longer doing the things I used to do. Photographing at night is like stripping my practice down to only the most essential aspects. The exposures need guaranteed long moments of silence, stillness, solitude. Some shots require me to spend hours in one location, moving the camera slightly, focusing, waiting, counting, observing, meditating, moving the camera again. It helps me practice patience. It's a kind of discipline. And it connects me to the same qualities and reoccurring themes of my life. I've lived in Metro-Detroit for 42 years. I've found the remedy to my wanderlust through travel, but I still live here because I can still find inspiration and the kind of places I love. I can still find hidden corners of the city, seemingly unchanged since my childhood. I can still find the dirt roads and junkyards that have shaped my aesthetic. I can still find a stray dog that turns out to be a fox on a street corner at 3 a.m. I can still find an untouched snow-covered field on a crystal-clear winter night. And I can still find the beckoning vanishing point of an endless railroad track, illuminated by an approaching freight train, slowly rolling by. Alone. Free. A ghost.

Scott Hocking was born in Redford Township, Michigan in 1975 and lived and worked in Detroit proper since 1996. He creates site specific sculptural installations and photography projects, often using found materials and vacant locations. Inspired by anything from ancient mythologies to current events, his installations focus on transformation, ephemerality, chance, and discovering beauty through the cycles of nature. The Detroit Nights photo series and other works can be found at: www.scotthocking.com