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Treasures from the forgotten

By Walter Wasacz

Think about trash for a minute.

Then think about its effects over time, say artists Michael Hall, Scott Hocking and Clinton Snider.

Consider that it is part of the natural order of things in a post-industrial world, where virtually all the things people consume will eventually end up abandoned, discarded, forgotten.

The three artists — who all live and work in Hamtramck — are giving museum-goers the opportunity to ponder the past, present and future of trash in two installations at the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA).

Called "Artists Take On Detroit," the show is getting rave reviews from critics and drawing art fans young and old. The exhibit is made up of 10 installations — which is a way of presenting art that can include film, video, sculpture, painting or other media.

The show includes several contributions by Mike Kelley, one of the national art scene's heaviest hitters. The noise-rock band Kelley helped form called Destroy All Monsters also has audio and visual work in the exhibit.

Tyree Guyton, best known for his neighborhood art project on Heidelberg St. in Detroit, has an installation in

"Artists Take On Detroit" as well.

But a great deal of attention has been given to the work created by Hall — called "A Persistence of Memory" — and Hocking and Snider, who combined on a piece called "Relics."

Collecting memory

In Hall's installation, long-overlooked pictures painted by Great Lakes regional artists hang facing the wall, with only their backsides staring back at the viewer.

Written information on the reverse side of the canvases tell entirely different stories than do the paintings themselves, which are never actually seen.

On the floor in the same room, an open dumpster rests on its side, with reproductions of the hidden paintings pasted to the inside of the receptacle door.

Hall said he rummaged through the DIA's storage room and chose 18 paintings that once made a mark on the local or national art scene, including one exhibited at the 1939 World's Fair and another at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1943.

But those works and others in Hall's piece are now so out of the public and curatorial mind that they — and the

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Post-industrial beauty

Scott Hocking (left) and Clinton Snider created an art installation from discarded objects found in abandoned factories.

artists who painted them — are mostly forgotten.

Hence, they have been relegated to the refuse heap of art history, represented by the welcoming presence of the dumpster.

"It's where everything ends up," Hall said. "The bottle that contained the most splendid wine, and the most beautiful children's toys are eventually disposed of and forgotten."

Hall, 60, has been a figure on the national art scene as a sculptor and critic for over 30 years. His work has been entered in the Whitney Museum's Biennial of Contemporary American Painting and Sculpture in New York, his public pieces are on display throughout the Detroit area and he headed Cranbrook Art Academy's sculpture department for 20 years.

Hall, who owns an art gallery in Hamtramck called G.A.S. (an acronym for Great American Stuff) is also well-known as a collector. He admits that the receptacle in his installation has an auto-biographical aspect to it.

"Of course, the dumpster is the collector in my piece; everything flows into it," Hall said. "It collects objects and it collects memory. There is a bit of me in that."

Beautiful relics

Hocking and Snider's massive piece — which includes over 400 boxes the artists constructed themselves and then filled with objects found in abandoned industrial spaces — also contains various personal elements.

Hocking worked on one wall, which he peppered with sculptural bric-a-brac he says were inspired by a youth spent living near railroad tracks and trains; Snider's wall has some whimsical, painterly touches, including the head of a toy horse the artist wedged into planks of wood.

"I come from a sculpture background, and Clinton (Snider) is a painter," Hocking said. "Most people don't know that we each were responsible for a wall, and I think that's a good thing."

The two began assembling "Relics" at separate houses in Hamtramck earlier this year. They found materials like old sinks, rusted pipes and chains, multi-colored stained-glass windows and smoke stacks in locations all over Detroit.

Once they filled the boxes with the stuff they found, Hocking and Snider hauled all of it to the art museum and installed it.

When describing the objects they used for the piece, both artists are quick to use variations on the word "beauty."

"I came away with a strong connection to Detroit from this experience," said Snider, 31. "I found some of the most beautiful things are things that have been discarded. What we did was like an archaeological dig."

Hocking, who at 26 is the youngest artist in the exhibit, said he fell in holes, was bitten by a dog and cut himself on rusty nails while he was collecting materials for "Relics."

Yet, he said, "it was all worth it. ... I found solace in those empty (industrial) spaces, which are reverting back to nature after man inserted himself into this environment. ... They are really good places to meditate.

"Clinton and I were able to find some of the most beautiful objects ever made there. ... No one would ever see them again unless someone did this."

"Artists Take On Detroit," an exhibit organized for Detroit's tricentennial, will be on display at the DIA until Dec. 31. For more information and museum hours call 833-4249.