

Wednesday, April 1, 2009

Artist spotlight: Scott Hocking



This week's Time magazine features Scott Hocking's stepped pyramid made of wooden floor tiles in an empty auto plant. The sculpture was destroyed in an EPA cleanup of the site. (Scott Hocking)

Detroit artist finds beauty amid the city's manufacturing blight

Michael H. Hodges / Detroit News Arts Writer

The pyramid is gone now.

It rose slowly, brick by wooden brick, majestic and mostly unseen in the middle of the abandoned Fisher Body #21 plant in Detroit.

The pyramid, by Detroit artist Scott Hocking, stood for about six months -- the wooden floor tiles it was built from catching the rising and dying sun, day in and day out, a funereal presence apparently so arresting that scrappers stealing copper wiring from the ceiling directly overhead were careful not to disturb it.

A Time magazine photographer happened upon the installation, and his picture stretches across two pages in this week's issue (April 6), in a story on Detroit urban visionaries.

Speaking Sunday in his studio on a bleak east side avenue, Hocking says he hardly works at home anymore, preferring on-site projects, like the late pyramid.

Over the years, Hocking, 34, has prowled abandoned plants and warehouses all across Detroit, becoming one of the town's chief urban spelunkers, often called on for tours and advice.

"At heart, I'm really an explorer," says Hocking, an intense, wiry guy who grew up in Redford and Livonia, and graduated from the College for Creative Studies.

"In another life, I probably would have lived in the woods," he says. "But I grew up near the railroad tracks and industry."

As a consequence, he finds himself helpless before the city's ruined beauty. Soon he was rescuing the discarded and forgotten on those forays, often the industrial objects that dominate his installations.

Like much of his art, the pyramid sprang from an almost irritated desire to get people to admit Detroit's tragic beauty.

"That's the great thing about his pyramid," says fellow artist and occasional collaborator Clinton Snider of Bloomfield Hills. "It doesn't play any tricks, but it refocuses your eye and you see differently."

Pyramids loom large in Hocking's world, transfixed as he is by ancient symbols. In 2001, he built a used-tire pyramid at the Bloomfield Hills home of Julie and Robert Taubman, who were hosting a fundraiser for the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit.

Hocking's work isn't limited to geometric structures, however. With "Animals," which showed at Ferndale's Susanne Hilberry Gallery in 2006, he sculpturally transformed taxidermist animal models, and then invited fellow artists to help paint them. Eyes and ears are missing here and there, and the animals -- painted in lurid colors, and adorned with images like SpongeBob SquarePants or a buxom pinup girl -- are mostly caught in traps or hooked to medical-testing devices.

But back to Hocking's studio, so jammed with artwork and the raw materials for art -- mostly rusted bits and fittings from industry -- that you have to wonder where he could work at home in any case.

The wall to the right of his desk is entirely taken up by carefully stacked wooden crates jammed with found objects, many of them rusted and industrial.

It's a fragment from "Relics," which he and Snider showed in 2001 at the Detroit Institute of Arts, part of "Artists Take on Detroit."

Unlike "Relics," Hocking expects the environment to influence his outdoor and on-site installations. So he wasn't that distressed to find that the Environmental Protection Agency, in an unrelated cleanup last September, had removed everything from Fisher Body #21, pyramid included.

Hocking already had luminous photos of the work.

Plus, a shot of the suddenly blank site where the pyramid once stood provided a dramatic conclusion to his photo series, "Heartland Projects," which showed last year at the Van Abbemuseum in the Netherlands. It travels to Chicago's Smart Gallery in October.

You might worry that someone like Hocking would be a prime target to be lured away by the mother of all artistic temptation, New York City.

But in a refrain that you hear more and more from local artists, Hocking says he finds infinitely more freedom here -- in part because of Detroit's abandonment -- than he could in other, glitzier cities.

"The city is my studio," he says. "I can do things here I can't do anywhere else."

mhodes@detnews.com (313) 222-6021

Find this article at:

<http://www.detnews.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20090401/ENT01/904010310>



Hocking is mesmerized by rust patterns on metal panels, and has framed some for his "Salon Series."
(Brandy Baker / The Detroit News)



Taxidermy models that Hocking uses for artworks sprawl across metal, wood and brick in his crowded studio.
(Brandy Baker / The Detroit News)



This is the present scene at Fisher Body #21 after the EPA cleaned out the whole place, pyramid and all. (Scott Hocking)



Detroit sculptor and photographer Scott Hocking discusses his life and art in his jammed studio in a bleak part of Detroit's east side. (Brandy Baker / The Detroit News)