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Art & Design Art review

Heartland

By Lauren Weinberg

[Smart Museum of Art](#), through Jan 17.



Scott Hocking, *Ziggurat – East, Summer, Fisher Body #21*, 2008. Courtesy of the artist and Susanne Hilberry Gallery

We're addicted to ruin porn. We salivate over photos of abandoned Detroit factories and feral houses. In the August issue of *Vice*, Thomas Morton condemned the genre. We realized he had a point. Then we went back to watching James Griffioen slide shows.

“Heartland” succeeds by neatly sidestepping ruin porn. Well, almost. Scott Hocking took his 2008 photo *Ziggurat—East, Summer, Fisher Body Plant #21* (pictured) in an abandoned Detroit factory, but the piece focuses on the pyramid of floor tiles he built there. Instead of wallowing in picturesque despair, the artist suggests something will grow out of it and reminds us human history in Michigan predates Ford and GM by thousands of years.

“Heartland” expresses optimism while acknowledging the problems of the economically depressed, racially segregated area cocurator Charles Esche describes in a catalog essay as “bounded by Minneapolis and Detroit to the north and New Orleans to the south.” As it celebrates artists from Chicago; Kansas City, Missouri; Memphis; and Detroit, the exhibition portrays their region as a model for future development: a place where locally oriented collective movements can thrive.

Esche is the director of the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, the Netherlands, where “Heartland” traveled before opening at the Smart. He organized the show with Van Abbemuseum curator Kerstin Niemann and Smart curator Stephanie Smith. The three identified the artists on view during a series of Midwestern road trips from 2007–09. Based on the [curators' blog](#), the exhibition’s rich catalog and a video of snapshots from their journeys that appears in “Heartland,” they seem to have had an unusually rewarding experience. So it’s unfortunate the show’s Chicago incarnation—which contains less than one third as many pieces as the Van Abbemuseum’s presentation—falls a little flat due to its small size.

Some of the intriguing projects on display address Midwesterners’ efforts to reacquaint themselves with nature. Greely Myatt’s site-specific *Cleave* (2008) covers a lobby wall with cotton-plant roots surrounding a hand-powered mower. Detroit Tree of Heaven Woodshop’s humorous installation documents the group’s efforts to make useful products from the “ghetto palm,” a weed growing from some of Detroit’s empty skyscrapers. Marjetica Potrc’s photo mural promotes Detroit’s Catherine Ferguson Academy, a school for teenage mothers that incorporates a working farm. While mainstream media seem to have just discovered urban farming, “Heartland” proves that urbanites already grow their own food rather than wait for manufacturing jobs to return.

Other projects are rooted in the built environment. The 22 comic-like prints in Kerry James Marshall’s series *Dailies* (2006–08) illustrate an imaginary South Side alongside the Chicago artist’s photos of the real one. During our visit, several viewers laughed out loud at Deb Sokolow’s *Dear Trusted Associate* (2008–09), one of the local artist’s signature narrative drawings, which embroils us in a loopy mystery involving the CIA, a Nigerian e-mail scam, struggling sculptors—and the Van Abbemuseum and Smart Museum.

Marshall’s and Sokolow’s pieces are typically strong, but we wonder why the Smart devotes so much space to familiar artists instead of people Chicagoans rarely encounter. Aside from Chicago and Detroit, Kansas City is the only place with a strong presence in this version of the show. After watching K.C. resident Cody Critcheloe’s hilarious video *BOY* (2009), an hour-long compilation of catchy, dirty songs by the artist’s band SSION, featuring crayon-drawn backdrops and plenty of cute boys dancing around in their underwear, we had to adjust our notions of the Bible Belt. The discovery that a city largely known for its barbecue is a hotbed of creativity makes it particularly frustrating that “Heartland” (in exhibition form—we have no complaints about the comprehensive catalog, which visitors can read in the gallery) can’t showcase more of the artists remaking “flyover country” in their own edgy image.