

SEEING BEAUTY IN ALL STAGES: AN INTERVIEW WITH SCOTT HOCKING

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Lao Zhu and the Flour Factory, 2009

Human infrastructure can only withstand so much benign neglect before returning to nature. Much like the children of bohemian parents or the subjects of laissez-faire governments, the physical structures of built space will eventually succumb to wildness if left too long on their own. In no city is this process more apparent than in Detroit, where creeping vines engulf Victorian homes, trees sprout from the roofs of skyscrapers, and packs of wild dogs roam the streets. Nature has been slowly reclaiming the city for decades, disseminating a sense of wildness that many proclaim is a promise of renewal rather than an admission of failure.

Surveying the expanse of Detroit prairie, it does indeed appear that the city has been given a proverbial green slate upon which to rebuild and flourish as a newly incarnated future city. The future has not arrived yet, however; so for the moment, many Detroiters are making do as only Detroiters know how—embracing the period of transition with resourcefulness, ingenuity, and a sense of possibility.

Detroit-based artist [Scott Hocking](#) has been a life-long observer of a city in flux. His work explores the physical and psychological thresholds between crumbling infrastructure and flourishing nature. Through tactics that are technically illegal and certifiably insane, Hocking traverses vacant sites in forgotten corners of the world that are on the verge of collapse. His practice involves site-specific installation and documentary photography, where industrial debris becomes the backdrop for monumental sculpture. Beyond being the Andy Goldsworthy of urban detritus, Hocking's work arrests the ephemeral, and reminds us that decay is an equal cause for celebration within the journey we call progress.

Recently, I had a conversation with Scott amidst the well-categorized clutter of his Detroit studio.

Discussed: Kangaroos and giant lizards, the end of mystery, fucking with everything, scrappers, documenting survival, a four-story collapse, making lemonade out of lemons.



Sisyphus and the Voice of Space, 2010

Sarah Margolis-Pineo: *The most immediately striking attribute of your work is your depiction of site. Your photos have this other-worldly quality, like we're looking at bacteria blooming on a Petri dish rather than an actual place. Working internationally, you must see quite a bit, and I'm wondering how you select where to work. What is it about these sites that you find compelling?*

Scott Hocking: It's hard for me even to articulate what it is that threads through everything that I do. It's easiest to say that I work site-specifically, that I really just try to get a sense of a space and get ideas from my surroundings and from its history. I work differently in different places, but I end up being drawn to places that end up being somewhat forgotten, or maybe there's a sense of mystery, or of chaos, or of loss of control. I feel like when nature reclaims places there's a feeling that humans have stopped controlling it and it's gone back to this wild, organic way of moving and living. Often times, that can involve the decaying of the structures that we've built. I'm not particularly drawn to abandonment or decay by themselves, but I have an interest in these places that give me a sense of solace. In Detroit, going into an abandoned auto factory is my walk in the woods. It's the closest I can get to the top of a mountain peak—the top of a building. This is where I get my sense of wildness—my satisfaction in nature. I did this project in Australia in October, and I was in the bush. I loved it, because that was it—I was getting it from my everyday life. I walked out of my space to see kangaroos in the morning, and I hiked into the mountain and ran into giant lizards. I don't get that here, but I crave that wildness, and I think I get it from these spaces that have begun to be reclaimed by nature.

SMP: *It interests me that you characterize your work as site-specific, because your images also express a certain universality, or an ambiguity in the way of place. Is this intentional?*

SH: I think, for me, I may work from the site and get ideas from the history and the site itself, but in the end, what I want the images to convey is something more universal. I don't want people to look at the image and think: Oh, this is Detroit. Sure, people might recognize it, or know it knowing that my work is based here. But, I do try and emphasize that this could be anywhere, and what is behind it speaks to people everywhere... It might sound grandiose or dramatic, but I'm trying to talk about people—about humans on earth, what we do, what we've always done, how we're really no different than we've ever been. When I put a pyramid in an abandoned building, one of the many things that I'm thinking about is the fact that it's a ruin within a ruin. One is ancient, and I'm building a new one, and what's the difference? Why do we look at some ruins with reverence, and see others as failures? Why can't we realize that we've been creating things since the dawn of time, making structures and objects with our hands, and at some point they decay, at some point the civilization that made it fails, at some point the city in which it was made disappears? It's not the end—there's never an ending. So maybe there's a certain countering to the idea that this is the end of something, that this is a failed city, or a failed industrial age. I just see it as a constant cycle that we're in the middle of. I just try to find the beauty in all the stages.



Ziggurat and FB21, 2007-2009

SMP: You seem to take an almost ethnographic approach to collecting data on decaying works of culture. Do you see yourself as an urban anthropologist in a way?

SH: I was transient for years, and didn't go to art school until I was about 22. When I first went to college, I had lots of interests including anthropology. I took a number of courses actually, and I found out very quickly that I am way too impatient for the scientific method. So, for me to claim that I'm an ethnographer, anthropologist, archaeologist, you name it, would be a slap in the face to those who have studied for all those years. I'm an amateur at best—I feel like I have the curiosity, without any of the knowledge. If I was to excavate anything, you'd find out what an amateur I am. I'm okay with wrenching something to death, just shaking it until it falls loose, or kicking it until it's down... I have no problem fucking with everything, and I'm sure scientists would be a lot more finicky about disturbing the site.



Relics, an installation at the Detroit Institute of Arts, 2001

SMP: *It seems that the installation-aspect of your practice—the way that you build in the field to create sculptural works within these sites, speaks to processes of myth-making. Is myth something you consciously incorporate into your work?*

SH: Yeah, for sure. I love mythology, and I've started to really become inspired by ancient ideas—mythologies and ancient sciences more than anything. I don't pay attention to the current art scene—I don't know what is hip right now. I just know that my ideas come from generations ago, and somehow I'm more inspired by that. Mythology exists outside of time...

One thing that I appreciate about ancient ideas is that they were often more lyrical, and there was a sense of mystery. Today, we've destroyed all our mysteries! We've figured them all out and are looking at them with telescopes or microscopes, taking things apart. I feel like there isn't enough mystery, whereas in ancient times and myth, there was a lot. If you even read it now, you don't know what they're talking about; so there's a part of me that likes to try and create this sense of mystery or myth when I'm in these buildings. And it could be as simple as someone coming into a building and discovering the Ziggurat, or discovering the TVs on the columns in the Garden of the Gods. It could be as simple as me creating a sense of: who the hell did this? When did this happen? What the fuck is this?! For example, building the pyramid—it's a universal symbol that has existed on all continents since we've first started building things, and we have no idea why. It's still a mystery to this day. Some people might look at my work and think: wow, this is an amazing thing, while others might look at it and laugh. It might be a joke, and I love how it can be interpreted in so many different ways because it's an archetypal symbol. I like playing around, to be honest. There's a part of me that's very serious, and there's a part of me that likes having a sense of humor about things. I like being open minded and I like that art can be perceived differently by different people because of our different backgrounds, and god knows what. So I don't like to narrow in too much. I like to maintain that nebulous quality.



Garden of the Gods, 2009-2010

SMP: *Can you speak a bit more to your process? How do your projects, like Garden of the Gods, [which was installed and photographed in Detroit's landmark Packard Plant], usually unfold?*

SH: Garden of the Gods was fun because those pedestals were formed when the roof collapsed and those columns were still standing. Immediately I thought of pedestals. If you've ever been to Rome or any of the ancient cities, they have statues up on pedestals—gods or warriors to be revered. I thought there needs to be some gods up there, and as luck would have it, in another part of the building that was used for storage was filled with television sets. Hundreds. And this was almost too easy for me—the idea is almost too simplistic that the TVs are new gods, and I'm going to put

them up on these pedestals. But I have to admit that it was just too good to resist. I'm sure other artists would have taken it a step further, but for me, I'm a simple guy, so I thought: these are our new gods, I'm going to put them up on the pedestals, and I'm going to name them after the twelve classical Greek Pantheon gods.

In the end, it was all for an image, but I love the idea that people will come across the actual objects. That interaction is a significant part of the way I'm working now. I alluded to it earlier when I said that I'm attracted to places where there's a loss of control and a little wildness. Detroit is that kind of place. When I'm working on projects like this, there's also a loss of control in terms of what I might do. I can't come home to the studio every day and resume working on the same project. I'm going out to a building I don't own that could be torn down, burned down, destroyed, renovated, boarded up, somebody could have broken in and knocked over or spray painted what I'm working on, they could have added to it, or the materials I'm using could suddenly be gone. There are so many variables I don't have control over—a hell of a lot of chance involved. It's sort of like working on a sculpture, and every night putting it outside to see if someone stole it in the morning. It's a real freeing way of working... I just try and trust the universe.



Sisyphus and the Voice of Space, 2010

SMP: *So I have to ask about the aestheticization of decay, since it's a very prevalent topic of conversation in the city at the moment...*

SH: It's so interesting that no one was saying "ruin porn" ten years ago... I've been really exploring vacant spaces and forgotten places since I was a child. Maybe it's in my nature, but when I grew up it was near the railroad tracks in a real blue collar neighborhood, so I was exploring these places as a little kid. So the notion of ruin porn,.. I understand where it's coming from, but I also feel like the media is coming late to the party.

People have been interested in doing this stuff for a long time, and the city is only now becoming overloaded and flooded with people "urban exploring" and taking photographs... Through the 70s, 80s and 90s, so much was abandoned in Detroit—places like the train station, Packard, or Fisher Body—these really trademark, vacant buildings in Detroit all happened in the 80s! It's amazing, these places looked like people just up and left work one day, and if you were the first guy to get in there, like a scrapper, you wouldn't have even known the place was abandoned. Coffee would still be out. So, these buildings look a hell of a lot different today than when I began working on this. I have always enjoyed going in these places, and for years I didn't take photos—I was just using the objects to make work. If I ever brought a camera it was to have an excuse if I got caught. And then very slowly, I started to take photos more because I began to want to document these places before they disappeared. A lot of these places became very cherished to me, and I began to see how fast they were disappearing. I never considered myself a photographer, and it

was through the process of taking these initial photographs that I became sensitive to the idea that I was just, as someone put it to me recently, “documenting survival,” and that wasn’t enough for me. So this path was good in the sense that it made me transition into photographing these places as larger installation projects. So now they’re just sets—I don’t have to create the whole environment, I just need to find the environment I want to create in. Other photographers will create environments in a vacant studio, and for me, my projects allow me to collaborate with buildings and collaborate with sites that I find mesmerizing. I know I’ve found a place to work in when I want to take a photograph of it alone. If I get that feeling, I think: Okay, this is where I’m going to build something. This is where I want to interact.



Roosevelt Warehouse and the Cauldron, 2007-2010

SMP: *You really seem to occupy these very uncertain, threshold spaces in the city. Is there a certain adrenaline rush that accompanies this type of work?*

SH: That is such a great word—I love the word threshold. It’s such an important word for me, because I feel like Detroit is on a threshold. These buildings are on a threshold. These are places in a space between what they were, and what they are going to be—they’re in transition. We’re always in transition, but sometimes transitions can take 40-years, or other times transitions can be catastrophic and can happen overnight.

The Packard Building for example, I was working in there through the winter, and by March, I had people coming through to interview me for upcoming exhibitions, [watch a video of Scott giving a tour of the Packard [here](#)]. Two weeks later, there was a four-story collapse, right where we were standing! Two weeks later! It was an unbelievable amount of space that just fell, and we all would have been crushed. I’ve been in buildings and places where I’ve done dumb things—fallen through holes, hit my head, been attacked by dogs. There are a lot of risks you take, and I don’t really get that adrenaline rush anymore, but there’s something about the way it affects your senses—they become heightened and aware. Again, in the same way they would be if you were lost in the woods. If you were lost in the woods or at sea, and you’re not in control and you’re not sure if a shark is going to bite you or a bear is going to come at you, that way your senses sort of open up in these situations is the same.

I think that is certainly appealing—that sense of being alive. You notice every fleck of paint on the wall, every sound you hear. A pigeon flies out and you have to be aware that it’s a pigeon and not something about to hit you. Your senses become heightened and I think I’m very attracted to that too.



New Mound City, 2010

SMP: *In a way, your work forges new pathways through forgotten places, exposing fissures in the traditional urban network. It brings to my mind the Situationist tactic of *dérive*—the practice of walking “off the grid” in search of an unmediated, authentic experience within the urban landscape. Would you describe your process as an act of resistance?*

SH: Saying it's an act of resistance might be a little much... I do feel, though, that the reason I can easily let go of these objects that I'm making and allow them to be destroyed is because the process is more important to me than the object. So really, these experiences that I'm trying to seek out, I don't think I could find them without going “off the grid,” so to speak. Off the grid is where I have these experiences in my version of nature and can seek purity and solace, as I mentioned earlier. And it's not only a walk in the woods for me, but it's kind of like my church too. It can be a metaphysical thing—I basically meditate when I'm working in these buildings alone, like a monk stacking blocks in quiet, in the middle of nowhere, and in the middle of winter. It's a real peaceful, meditative experience to work like this, and often times, I have to break the rules and break the law to find this, but I'm certainly not going in there and saying: fuck you! I'm a bit more quiet about it.

It's about inner peace and peace of mind more than it is about the big FU to the powers that be. Now, on the other hand, if the powers that be were cool about things like this, then I wouldn't have to break the law. I do feel like in a sense: fuck you, because you've left these buildings to neglect, you own this space and it's falling apart. If you own this, I'm not going to call you up and ask you for permission, because I'm already pissed that you let it fall apart. I feel like you lose the right to say you own something when you've let something so useful and amazing go to waste.

SMP: *We've already spoken about the influence of myth, and I'm wondering if memory comes into play at all when you're at work in these spaces?*

SH: I feel like it's not my memory most of the time. There are many people who grew up in Detroit or one of the other cities that I've worked in, who might feel nostalgia for the past, and have certain memories of buildings—maybe even have family members who have worked there. There are all kinds of connections. In fact, when an article comes out, I've gotten emails from people who say: Hey, I used to work there! What's been surprising is that all of these people have written to tell me that they like what I am doing. My own sense of memory... I don't really connect in that way to these spaces.



Sisyphus and the Voice of Space, 2010

I don't really like the idea of nostalgia, I prefer to focus on the present moment and find the beauty in how things are now opposed to looking back on how they were. I tend to work in buildings that aren't very personal—they're places of work—factories. There may have been thousands of people working and occupying the spaces where I am working at any given moment. These sites don't quite have that trace, or energy, that a house might—where people lived and slept, family members loved and grew up. I don't really work in places like that, and I think part of the reason is because of the memory—the idea of who they were is still very strong there, and you can feel it and see it sometimes. I think I shy away from that a bit.



Tartarus, an installation at Public Pool Gallery, 2011

SMP: *There's such a fantastic history in Detroit, perhaps initiated in the 70s by the Cass Corridor Movement, with artists appropriating materials that are symbolic of crisis—the raw, discarded material of a city, to create artwork. I*

read this great quote the other day that was something along the lines of: we didn't have much, but we made art with it. Is this idea something that persists today in the city?

SH: I think it's continued. Personally, I have no history with Cass Corridor—I didn't grow up knowing about it, and I didn't know anyone involved until I started making art and meeting people who were part of that. Now we're good friends, and it's maybe through meeting people and gaining a bit of knowledge that you start to realize that it's all connected. For me, it's less about the lineage of the art world in Detroit, and more about Detroiters and the way we are. Most people who grow up in working class families and in working class neighborhoods in the city, this is how we work—we do with what you have, make lemonade out of lemons. Everybody, myself included, who has been making artwork in the city hasn't had resources to do anything but making with what you have. Sometimes you're living in squalor and trying to scrape by... The Cass Corridor people got a lot of notoriety, but shit, there were artists in the 80s living inside the Broderick Tower and Fort Wayne, and had studios in random skyscrapers that were virtually vacant because no one could afford to do anything in there. These artists may have not gotten the same attention, but that lineage is all the same—trying to use the spaces that have been neglected because creative people see potential there.

Congratulations to Scott for his award of a 2011 [Kresge Foundation Visual Arts Fellowship!](#)

Sarah Margolis-Pineo is a curator and writer. She is currently the Jeanne and Ralph Graham Collections Fellow at the Cranbrook Art Museum.

WRITTEN BY SARAH MARGOLIS-PINEO

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