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Birth, death, regeneration mix in new Scott Hocking exhibit

BY MICHAEL H. HODGES / DETROIT NEWS FINE ARTS WRITER



Scott Hocking's "Mercury Retrograde" was also displayed at 2012 ArtPrize in Grand Rapids. (Susanne Hilberry Gallery)

Scott Hocking works with time and loss the way other artists work in clay.

The fleeting nature of man's accomplishments underlies almost everything this Detroit sculptor and photographer tackles, though if you look closely, here and there you find hints of possible resurrection. Nowhere is this more evident than in "The End of the World," Hocking's new show at Ferndale's Susanne Hilberry Gallery, up through Jan. 26.

Much of the present show is a reinstallation of what Hocking displayed at 2012 ArtPrize at the Grand Rapids Public Museum. The work, "Mercury Retrograde," featured almost all the elements here apart from his photographs.

"The End of the World" divides into four parts. There are groupings of Hocking's photographs; the lion's share are striking nighttime industrial landscapes or wan Detroit houses lit by a single streetlamp. At one end of the gallery, you'll find a pyramid made of stacked books — an

interesting, colorful collection of old-fashioned metaphysical works with hopeful titles such as "The Witness of the Stars."

The real fireworks, however, come in the adjacent room, where a derelict 1955 Mercury Monterrey with a jazzy hood ornament has beached itself on a pile of rock salt. Overseeing all this, and gazing at the aqua-colored wreck, are 300 stuffed owls, songbirds and other animals. The taxidermy specimens, borrowed from the Grand Rapids Public Museum, are housed in individual, portable diorama cases that Hocking has stacked much like his book pyramid. It's quite a sight.

So what's the deal with the dead Mercury at the center of things?

Hocking says it's a stand-in for the Roman god Mercury. The significant thing in his eyes is that Mercury was "a messenger between planes, and the transporter of souls to the afterlife." The pairing with the taxidermy birds isn't accidental. They're all "winged messengers," he says.

And there you find the show's unexpected hint of hope and resurrection. Those birds just might have a message for us, while the rusted-out wreck could ferry us to a new world — if only it had wheels. Indeed, the driver's door is wide open and beckoning.

Hocking explains that he's "playing with the idea of death as transformation, rather than an ending." As for the show's title, "The End of the World," he poses the rhetorical question: "Is there really ever an ending? Or just transformations?"

That question gives his nighttime shots of Detroit buildings, many taken during a heavy fog, a meaning that reaches beyond the obvious. That listing house with the two-story columns in "New Moon, Christmas Eve" might have "decay" written all over it, but Hocking sees it in the context of birth, death and regeneration.

"Scott really expands the question of the ruin and its place in Detroit," says Vince Carducci, editor and publisher of the online Motown Review of Art. "Cities rise. Cities fall. And cities rise again." A bit like the wood-brick ziggurat Hocking famously built years ago and shot in an abandoned Fisher Body plant, meaning is found in striated layers and may not reveal itself all at once.

As for "The End of the World," art historian Dennis A. Nawrocki says he was bowled over. "I thought it showed Scott's inordinate ambition," he says. "It's an installation where he pulled out all the stops."

Check it out, and see if you don't agree.

'The End of the World'

Through Jan. 26

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