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Artist Scott Hocking finds meaning and resonance in cast-offs from Detroit and industrial tailings from Pittsburgh

Coronal Mass Ejection blends elements of a Bible theme park and decommissioned steel mills

By [Nick Keppler](#)



Image courtesy of the Mattress Factory and Tom Little Photography

Scott Hocking's *Coronal Mass Ejection*

The Mattress Factory seeks out art from the world's potential conflict zones and ideological fault lines. Scouts from the North Side institution visited Cuba during the George W. Bush-era deterioration of relations with the island nation. Before that, they traveled to India, site of an unending drama of sectarian violence, hampered modernization and chronic poverty.

"We go places that are in a state of constant change," says Michael Olijnyk, the museum's co-director and co-founder. "We find that interesting art comes from places where there is a vast span between the rich and poor, and the status quo seems like it can't last."

The most recent collapsing hellscape to which they booked a flight: Detroit.

Sadly, the half-shuttered Motor City apparently has the kind of Third World-y atmosphere that draws The Mattress Factory. "It felt like Eastern Europe after the Wall fell," says Olijnyk. "It was barren. Entire streets were abandoned. People were living in houses that didn't have utilities."

At this ground zero of America's middle-class implosion, Olijnyk and his associates found Scott Hocking, whose work engaged the more ruinous qualities of his hometown. Hocking's installations have utilized stacks of old concrete, masses of plastic bags and the shells of scrapped cars. He has also photographed the explicit graffiti that dots the city.

Hocking, 38, sees himself as an artist-archeologist of a land that became like Troy or Pompeii too soon. "I try to hold up a mirror to hard times and ancient times," says Hocking. "I want to see what an archeologist who goes through the ruins of our society would." Olijnyk says he was impressed by the way Hocking "exposes us to things that have disappeared in our lifetime."

Hocking became one of six Detroit artists to accept a Mattress Factory residency. He built an installation entitled *Coronal Mass Ejection* in the museum's bare, partially refurbished basement. The work consists of two components: One incorporates Pittsburgh's own far-gone industrial past, while the other utilizes some of his best finds from Michigan's sea of abandoned spaces.

CORONAL MASS INJECTION

continues through May 25.

The Mattress Factory,
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factory.org](http://mattressfactory.org).

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Entering the room, the first thing one notices is what looks like a blast furnace half excavated from the gallery floor. The full-sized replica is made out of plywood and foam, but it looks real. Building it in the basement gallery, Hocking used oxidizing paint to give it a rusty look matching the floor. There is even a hatch



on top, suggesting the space from which molten metal would flow.

Viewers might see this sculpture as a tribute to Pittsburgh, Hocking's host city, and in fact it was modeled after the furnace located beneath Rankin's Carrie Furnace Hot Metal Bridge. Hocking sees it as "a big phallic object, with a vagina on the top. Symbolically, it talks about the hermaphroditic ideal that exists across mythologies."

(A "coronal mass ejection," by the way, is a massive burst of solar wind that might wreak havoc on power grids. It's "another form of destruction imagery," says Hocking. "It also has to do with worship of this massive blast furnace.")

The back of the room, meanwhile, features an assortment of found objects from two dilapidated Michigan tourist traps. Along the back wall is a choir-like formation of 4-foot-tall figures from a Bible theme park. (Imagine the generic robed people found in an illustrated children's Bible.) Peppered throughout the scene are dinosaur figurines. The juxtaposition calls to mind the much-mocked Creation Museum, in Kentucky. Hocking, however, is not making a direct commentary. "I see the room as a mix of symbols you would see if you dug up our society and saw it raw," he says.

The Bible figures come from the defunct Good Shepherd Scenic Gardens, near Traverse City, Mich. The founder's son was willing to part with them for \$20 a pop. The dinosaurs once adorned Prehistoric Forest, near Michigan's border with Ohio. (Hocking's most imposing purchase from that park, a 10-foot-long sloth, was relegated to the Mattress Factory parking lot.)

There is more to the space than initially meets the eye. Many viewers neglect to notice a ladder on the wall: The seamless combination of gallery space and artwork means that it's mistaken for part of room, not part of the exhibit. But climb up and look down a hatch and you will see a warm, red interior, recalling the fires that burned out in so many area blast furnaces a generation ago.

There might be more inside this sculpture; Hocking won't say. He also doesn't explicitly want to encourage visitors to break museum rules about touching artwork, let alone climbing inside a piece. But he will say this: "I spent most of my career illegally breaking into warehouses and abandoned places. I won't tell anyone not to do the same with my work."

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