

Scott Hocking — *Old*

In December of last year, I flew down to Florida: To check out the Miami art fairs, and to presumably get sick of the Miami art fairs, and then spend the rest of my trip driving a rental car through the Keys. I've been coming back to Florida for over a decade now, escaping Michigan winters, renting a car, and just driving, photographing, and exploring the strange, swampy state. But this was the first time I planned my trip around the fairs. I had a great time meeting up with friends down there — saw some interesting work and amazing performances, and definitely had fun going to the bar at night. But the art fair scene can also feel pretty gross. And after a few days I was exhausted by it. I hopped in my rental and headed for the Keys.

The Keys were still recovering from Hurricane Irma, and I'm sure they will be for a long time. There were mountains of trash and debris everywhere, boats strewn about, entire houses moved off their foundations. The water had literally just rolled waves over some of the islands. It was intense to see. On one of my final nights down there, I got a hotel on Big Pine Key — a little roadside joint I've stayed at before, but Big Pine was one of the worst Keys hit. That night I had a dream. I saw that I had created an exhibition where I had filled an entire gallery with human bones. Like an exposed burial mound. Or the iconic image of American Bison skulls to be used as fertilizer from 1870. I sometimes get ideas for artworks from dreams. And this one seemed especially pertinent after my contrasting experiences at the art fairs and driving through the devastated Keys.

Over the past year, I've been learning a lot of family history, through the painstaking research of my Floridian uncle, and a Polish relative. I found that my Polish ancestry goes back 6 generations, to the mid 1800s, settling in the Poletown neighborhood of Detroit, right near the copper-roofed St. Albertus, Detroit's first Polish church. My British ancestry can be traced to Cornwall, England, the southern peninsula of the UK. It was these Cornish copper and tin miners that moved the Michigan's UP to mine the copper and tin up there in the Keweenaw Peninsula. My copper mining ancestors eventually migrated south to the industries of Detroit in the mid-1800s. All in all, my English side can be traced back 9 generations so far, 7 in Michigan, 6 in Detroit. Old.

The idea of copper mining being a huge part of my family history connected to an overall theme for me: The copper mining in Michigan's UP has been going on for thousands of years. The earliest Natives living in this region around the Great Lakes is classified as the Old Copper Complex or Old Copper Cultures, and copper artifacts from this culture can dated up to 6000+ years ago (4000 BCE, etc.). Old. The ancient history of Michigan and Detroit is completely intertwined with copper. Cadillac himself believed that the copper had been brought across the Atlantic by ancient Phoenician sailors.

In my time making art in Detroit, copper has always been the most coveted scrap metal, scavenged from any place possible. My 2003-2004 project "Scrapers" was all about the scrap metal scavengers that I basically worked alongside in vacant buildings around the city. The price of copper was directly connected to world metal markets, including wartime effects on metal prices - and when the Iraq war was in full swing, copper prices skyrocketed. The copper roof from the Lee Plaza, omnibus bars from working Edison substations, wiring from underground and from street lamps, pipes from Scott Fountain on Belle Isle, the Hurlbut Monument at Waterworks Park, crypt doors from Woodmere Cemetery, the "Millennium Bell," - anything and everything that had copper in it, was attempted to be scrapped. Scrapping has slowed in Detroit in the last 10 years, but the importance of copper in Detroit is a thousands-of-years-old system - moreover, it's a continual form of currency, trade, and a coveted material.

For me, these layers of Detroit history, or human history, or personal history, all tie together. Just like the Catacombs under Paris, with the skulls and bones from over 7 million bodies, laying under a city with millions more in cemeteries, and over 2 million living people walking around - the history of Detroit is built on the millions of people before us, and literally, beneath us.

The idea of time, how long humans have lived here, how old and ancient this place is, along with my own family history here - hundreds of relatives before me - from Copper Harbor to Poletown to the little township of Redford. And my own time here, making art for over 20 years, living in the same neighborhood for 17 years, and spending so much of my time learning City history, documenting Detroit, traversing every street, studying old maps and reading old history books. Everything feels old. This place feels old. I feel old.

All of the projects in this exhibition tie into these concepts for me - from the mythological symbolism of an ancient vessel, an Ark, the "Celestial Ship," an old barn literally rebuilt upside down - only to sit and slowly weather away as had been doing since the 1890s - old. The tower of Babel, steeped in ancient myth and symbolism, built out of old stones, in an old train station, in the old Flemish city of Lille - again, layered and layered with history. And the Triumph of Death, based on the Flemish painter Pieter Bruegel's painting depicting an army of skeletons taking humans to their deaths in all manner of ways, including the old crucifixion method called a Breaking Wheel — as well as Sidney Nolan's self-portrait of himself trying to mount a dead horse in the Australian desert: another image depicted in various Triumph of Death paintings. A portrait of long-gone Country Boy, the scrapper who lived in Fisher Body 21, and sold me the pile of charred copper wire that now takes his place. The bronze (copper + tin) spheres that I see as so reminiscent of rib cages, but also some kind of ancient astrolabe artifacts. And in a fitting personal connection, my Cornish ancestral name (Hocking), emerged from the Flemish people who migrated to Cornwall adding the Flemish diminutive "kin" to the Old English surname "Hocca." Again, my genealogy and all this old, old stuff. Old threads connecting it all.

When I decided to create an installation around the DKG main structural column, I wanted to take on the idea of bones *being* the column. Everything is built upon the bones of the people before us. The towers and cities we build are on top of the graves of the people before us. Especially in Detroit, where the most ancient Native-American burial mound sites and earthworks are now industrialized and hundreds-of-years worked over parts of the city. A connection to the ancient past, tied in with my familial past, tied in with my personal history. Digging down through the layers of history below us, from the Old Copper Complex to the salt mines: bones old bones old bones.