

Scott Hocking: Detroit Nights



“I Sue Big”—Self-portrait on Davison Mound, Valentine’s Day, c. 2000

*Scott Hocking was born in Redford Township, Michigan in 1975. He has lived and worked in Detroit proper since 1996. He creates site-specific sculptural installations and photography projects, often using found materials and vacant locations. Inspired by anything from ancient mythologies to current events, his installations focus on transformation, ephemerality, chance, and discovering beauty through the cycles of nature. He is left-handed and wears contact lenses. He has a speech impediment and was once hypnotized in an effort to correct this. He is a Pisces, born on the day of creative isolation, in the week of the loner, and the year of the cat. A psychic once told him he would have an average life and die at 88. This piece first appeared in [Dérive—Zeitschrift für Stadtforschung](#) (Journal of Urban Research) *Nº70*: Detroit. Scott Hocking’s work is currently on view at the [Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum’s Field Station](#). Support for the Field Station series is provided by the MSU Federal Credit Union*

For the first 12 years of my life, I lived on a dirt street. Trucks would periodically come by and oil it, to keep the dust down. We had ditches, a rotating assortment of broke down cars being repaired covering both the driveway and lawn, and a couple of big trees in the front yard—the bigger one was whitewashed at the trunk. It was a working-class neighborhood; kids everywhere. Our parents would yell our names at dinnertime, or at dark, or whenever we had to come home—because we were always outside, somewhere. We lived in an 800-square foot house, which sold for 800 bucks a couple of years ago. A

handful of houses down the street, perpendicular to ours, was the industry-lined C & O Railroad. Ziebart Rustproofing, Profile Steel and Wire—whose giant front lawn we used for baseball games; the signpost that read “No Ball Playing” was home plate—and further east, a sprawling 7-Up Bottling Plant. There was a “pedestrian walkway” between the steel and pop factories, allowing people to walk to and from the railroad. On the other side of the tracks, the streets were paved.

The consistent sound of the freight trains along that railroad, blaring their horns as they came and went through the night, has stuck with me my whole life. There’s something soothing about it. Rhythmic. Spooky. Lonesome. A part of the country-ish city atmosphere that I grew up within. Those tracks drew me in as a kid. My first explorations into the wild, I suppose, began with walking the overgrown and hidden pathways that these tracks carved out. Sneaking in the back of Koenig Fuel and Supply, and sling-shooting rocks from atop their gravel hills. Exploring the undeveloped back end of Detroit Memorial Park West cemetery, where we once found a human leg bone, with the kneecap still attached (later, determining we were cursed for having it, we returned the bone). Sitting on a viaduct while a train sped by, nearly being sucked into the vortex it created. Climbing inside dormant boxcars, just to see what it might be like. And that glimmer of an idea—those beckoning boxcars—might have been the real draw, what really captivated me as I heard those horns in the night: The idea that there was a guy out there, alone, in the darkness, passing through our little nowhere town as we all slept. Driving that train, going wherever, cutting through cities, towns, prairies, states. I imagined it as freedom. Traveling. Exploring. Escaping.



Self-portrait walking the Detroit & Pontiac Railroad, c. 2000

For the past 16 years I’ve lived about the same distance from the railroad tracks that I did as a kid. A two-minute walk from the old Grand Trunk Western Railroad line that birthed the Detroit auto industry. Henry Ford’s first factory, the EMF and Studebaker factories, an Aerocar shop and dozens of Fisher Body factories all lined this railroad, along with various related industries, machine shops, tiny churches and diners. Piquette Street stretches eastward from Woodward, crossing John R., Brush, Beaubien, St. Antoine, Oakland Streets, which follow the paths of the old ribbon farms; crossing the last remaining sliver of Hastings Street—a once bustling corridor of African American culture and history, now buried under a superhighway; and terminating at Russell Street, as the GTRR passes overhead. A walk along the GTRR is a walk through Detroit history.

Over the course of 20 years, the remnants of historic Piquette Street became a kind of second home to me. I started exploring the decaying hulks of the Studebaker plant and Fisher Body 21 in the late 1990s, when their abandonment by previous owners was still fresh. Like my childhood experiences, I found myself hiking up to the railroad grade via desire

paths, climbing through fence holes and busted open doorways, and into these once-bustling buildings of industry, now quiet and still. Cavernous is an accurate term to describe them, not just because of their interior size and space, but also because of their transformations into man-made caves: stalactites and stalagmites formed throughout these often cast-concrete structures, as years of water permeated the roofs and floors. The gentle sounds of nature echoed inside these caves: from rhythmic drips of water to gushing waterfalls during a storm, the whistling wind through broken or non-existent windows, swaying and flapping debris hanging from the ceilings, the sudden fluttering of startled pigeons. I found solace in the quietude and natural reclamation in these spaces. I craved it in my life, and sought it out where I could find it. In these historic Detroit factories, built along the railroad over 100 years ago, and left for dead by the 1980s, I found my church-like experience. My freedom. My escape.



“Fog Ship Fisher”—from Ziggurat & Fisher Body 21, 2007–2009

In 2007, I started working on a project within the Fisher Body 21 plant, one of the last standing factories of Piquette Street. I’d wake up in the morning, walk to the corner gas station to buy a coffee, newspaper, and maybe a hard-boiled egg, and hoof it to the 600,000-square foot former auto plant, an approximately 5-minute walk from my studio. I had spent 10 years getting to know this place before deciding to work inside—onsite, as opposed to removing materials for use in my studio. It took me 8 months to complete an installation in there—building a large stepped pyramidal structure I called Ziggurat—working through 3 seasons and many setbacks and delays.

Once, while hunched over the pyramid in an awkward position, my lower back spasmed and I was incapacitated on the frozen floor. I lay there unable to move, wondering if I would have to call for help from the 3rd floor of an abandoned factory. But it was a cold March, and the floor was still covered in an inch of ice—suddenly the freezing winter weather that made for harsh working conditions was my best friend. I laid on the bed of ice until darkness, when I became cold and numb enough to crawl to my feet and gingerly walk home—where I stayed out of commission for a week. On another occasion, I was out of town for 6 weeks, returning to the pyramid and FB21 after the Springtime had thawed Detroit. The entire sculpture had shifted, collapsing from the melted ice it was built upon. I had to remove and rebuild large sections of the it, losing weeks of work. Then, there was the time I was inside when a crew of professional scrappers were removing pipes with gas-powered saws. Suddenly all of the saws stopped and a quiet came over the scrappers. When I asked what was happening, one of the scrappers told me that the City of Detroit was currently re-fencing the building. I looked out the window and saw a crew of workers putting up 8-foot chain-link fence around Fisher Body. I said, “good luck,” and left. The

next day, when I returned, I found that the scrappers had not only escaped their cage, they also took the entire new fence: they simply waited until the city workers had finished, cut the newly installed fence, rolled it up, and left.



“Country’s Fire”—from *Scrappers*, 2003–2004

Walking home from Fisher Body in the dark was just another aspect of the meditation for me. I had been walking Detroit for years, especially in the late 90s, when, for 3 years, I was without a car. Viewing the city on foot, from the railroad tracks, provided a unique, solitary perspective, and directly connected me to the lingering industrial past. Walking, in general, allowed me to observe minute details of the city, the things you miss while driving. It also put me into the midst of often-unpredictable circumstances—and encounters with Detroit wildlife. Once, while walking to Fisher Body at dusk from my home on Kirby street, a pack of 3 stray dogs began to bark at me. Unexpectedly, one of them ran up from behind and bit my right leg. I swung instinctually, and yelled at the dog. He backed away at my bark, but the other dogs rose to support him. Suddenly I felt the fear arise in me: I couldn’t fight off 3 dogs. I continued to walk toward the Plant, looking forward, appearing calm, hoping the still barking pack would retreat. Somehow, they did. And although I had a nice puncture wound on my calf, I felt lucky.

On another occasion, I arrived back in Detroit one night via Greyhound bus, and decided I would walk from the Howard Street station back to my home in Hamtramck. The approximately 6-mile walk took hours, and midway through, I’m sure I was questioning my decision. Near the sprawling vacant lots that used to exist at Forest and Russell (where a Federal Reserve Bank now sits), the panicked sounds of a pheasant pierced the night. Suddenly, the bird shot up out of the overgrown grass, and, just as startled, a Pitbull came running out of the field right in front of me. All 3 of us shocked to find each other, I was petrified with how quickly this dog appeared, nearly running straight into me. But the dog was shocked as well, and upon seeing me, hightailed it the opposite direction, straight up Russell, as fast as he could. I stood there for a solid minute, watching him run off into the darkness. Again, lucky.

And then there was the time I took the wrong city bus on a weeknight, and ended up Downtown, stranded in Cadillac Square. Suddenly I was no different than the bus-fare beggars, without money for a transfer, stranded far from my destination. I made the decision to walk, being only 2 miles or so from home. And again, the Detroit night provided a surreal circumstance. In those days, 20 years ago, the Downtown stretch of Woodward was nearly a ghost town after dark, especially on weeknights. The blocks between Campus Martius and Grand Circus Park were colloquially known as the Wig District, with a few of the remaining functioning businesses being wig shops. I could walk directly down the center of the road, without seeing a soul. As I crossed over the I-75 interstate, the skyscrapers were behind me, and the expansive

flatlands of the Cass Corridor and Brush Park lay ahead. Only the glowing yellow awning of a 24-hr. check-cashing shop in the distance showed signs of life, in the days when streetlights were unpredictable and sometimes non-existent. As I walked up the center lane in the darkness, I saw something shoot out of a Corridor side street: A man, running as fast as he could, darted across Woodward. I stopped walking, and watched. Maybe 100 feet behind him, and gaining, was a dog, chasing him. The man was running for his life. In a matter of seconds, I watched him run out of the darkness, with the wild dog following, and just as quickly, both he and the beast disappeared into the Brush Park neighborhood, without a sound. The whole thing happened in what felt like an eerie vacuum. Like living tumbleweeds rolling across the deserted landscape of Detroit. I waited another 10 seconds or so, and began walking again, straight up the middle of the road.



“Night Window”—from *Ziggurat & Fisher Body 21*, 2007–2009

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“Grand Trunk RR, West”—from Detroit Nights, 2007-present

Over the years of working in vacant structures, there were times when I would be stuck in buildings until the night. Occasionally, I would be hemmed in by prowling police, waiting for a trespasser like myself to stumble out of a vacant structure. In the old days, I would be removing more materials than photographing, and I avoided being seen coming or going at all costs. Before I had a car, I would push shopping carts full of salvaged junk from buildings to my studio. A scrapper pulling carts up and down the streets was commonplace back then, and cops rarely turned their heads at this activity. But entering / exiting a structure was different, and an easily ticketed offense. Getting caught was never part of my plans, and seriously compromised my romantic aspirations of meditative solace. Yet, it has been a part of the nighttime routine for as long as I can remember. Photographing some of the more hidden scenes of Detroit has taken me into many forbidden zones. The long-vacant toxic wasteland of the former Uniroyal Tire Plant, with its scenic riverside views; The cathedral-like pillars of the I-75 Rouge River Overpass; The shuttered Riverfront-Lakewood Park and its adjacent Fox Creek canals; The isolated island of earth I call Davison Mound that sits between freeway interchanges, and, of course, the various active and defunct railways that circumnavigate the city. Part of finding these silent places was also being silent myself. Being still to avoid being caught, as much as being still to have an isolated, meditative experience. Much like when I was a

kid, sneaking out at night to explore the railroads and have adventures to hidden, forlorn locations. Part of the experience was risky, of course, but there was a sense of freedom found in the rule-breaking. And when I was young, the risk was more pronounced, perhaps more important.

In my early teens, I once snuck out at night with a friend, hiked through that antiquated ‘pedestrian walkway,’ along the C & O Railroad, and hopped a fence into the 7 Up Bottling Plant’s parking lot. Like a quiet cat burglar, I managed to climb into a large dumpster filled with returnable soda cans, pull out 3 large, clear plastic bags full, and toss them back over the fence. In the middle of the night, we went through our spoils in my garage, surveying how much money in 10-cent ant-covered cans we had stolen. It wasn’t the first time I’d stolen something, but it was the most elaborate nighttime plan I had concocted. By my teenage driving years, the nighttime mischievousness had turned into random thefts and adventures. Driving around town during the wee hours, removing and relocating neighborhood lawn ornaments or miniature golf statues with such frequency that it once became a game between multiple friends to see who could accumulate the most stolen items. Jumping fences to use stranger’s backyard pools or trampolines. Driving all night, westward along the “mile roads,” until they became gravel roads in the sticks. Again, seeking out the dirt roads, seeking out the hidden places, seeking to find the darkness. Over time, whatever juvenile interest I had in nefarious activities given way to the real draw: I needed the escape that the night provided. Whether it was an escape from my family life as a child, an escape from my tribulations as a teenager, or an escape from the city itself as an adult, the night provided a different world from the day.



“I-75 Over Carbon Works and the Rouge”—from *Detroit Nights*, 2007-present

Similarly, when I first started exploring the vacant buildings of Detroit, I was focused on removing wasted materials, reclaiming / saving these little bits of history that were lost in a slowly decaying structure. These objects were useless to the scrapper, having no semi-precious metal or architectural detail value. But to me, they were fragments of history. They were also free materials to a broke artist. All of the sneaky skills I had practiced since my youth benefitted this new art practice. And although I was still technically trespassing and stealing, my spitefulness for whomever owned these historic structures, and who consequently let them fall into such disrepair, was justification enough for me. The fact that someone had enough money to not only own such monstrous factories, but also be willing to let them decay because it was financially cheaper than renovating or demolishing them, was infuriating to me. These people clearly didn’t care about history, or the surrounding neighborhoods, or the city itself—so why should I care about them? This attitude propelled my work for years. And I continued to remove materials from buildings and create artworks with the reclaimed debris.



“Fox Creek Lamp”—from *Detroit Nights*, 2007-present

But this method began to slow over time as well, as I stripped away another layer of what really drew me to these locations. Eventually, I came to realize that it was the locations themselves which I really needed. The materials inside seemed like a reason to go there, but I didn’t need to remove them. I could work with them onsite. I could photograph the entire process and attempt to translate the feeling of being onsite. I could do what it was that I’d been drawn to doing my whole life: Travel to these locations, explore and experience them, and temporarily escape into a different reality. For me, it was the closest I could get to nature. My art practice had crystalized into to finding some kind of solace, spending time there, documenting it, and moving on.

Photographing Detroit at night has become the epitome of this aspect of my art practice. I’m not venturing out at night to build sculptures after hours. I’m not looking for materials to acquire under cover of darkness. I’m not driving around with friends, fucking around for fun. I’m no longer doing the things I used to do. Photographing at night is like stripping my practice down to only the most essential aspects. The exposures needed guarantee long moments of silence, stillness, solitude. Some shots require me to spend hours in one location, moving the camera slightly, focusing, waiting, counting, observing, meditating, moving the camera again. It helps me practice patience. It’s a kind of discipline. And it connects me to the same qualities and reoccurring themes of my life. I’ve lived in Metro-Detroit for 42 years. I’ve found the remedy to my wanderlust through travel, but I still live here because I can still find inspiration, and the kind of places I love. I can still find hidden corners of the city, seeming unchanged since my childhood. I can still find the dirt roads and junkyards that have shaped my aesthetic. I can still find a stray dog that turns out to be a fox on a street corner at 3 am. I can still find an untouched snow-covered field on a crystal-clear winter night. And I can still find the beckoning vanishing point of an endless railroad track, illuminated by an approaching freight train, slowly rolling by. Alone. Free. A ghost.

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The Detroit Nights photo series and other works can be found at: www.scotthocking.com

Scott Hocking’s [current installation](#) at the MSU Broad is an imposing structure created from discarded railroad ties.



“American Axle Snowdrift Seascape, Groundhog Day”(above), “Polar Vortex Blood Moon Lunar Eclipse, West” (below)

