

At Murals in the Market, Detroit gets its own take on Stonehenge

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(Photo: Kimberly P. Mitchell, Detroit Free Press)

Detroit artist Scott Hocking has quietly created the city's own version of Stonehenge in Eastern Market. Like the prehistoric monument in England, Hocking's latest installation — dubbed "17 Shitty Mountains" — will spark questions and curiosity from adventurous patrons as part of the fourth year of the Murals in the Market public art festival, which kicks off Thursday.

It's fair to wonder how a series of discarded concrete sewer pipes came to be stacked as high as 22 feet and arranged as makeshift monuments behind the former Water Board building at 3500 Riopelle Street.

It's the type of trash-into-treasure public art installation for which Hocking has become known.

"That started with two main things — being broke and an abundance of wasted material around Detroit," recalls Hocking, a native of Redford Township who graduated from the College for Creative Studies in the mid-'90s and who has lived in Detroit ever since.

Along the journey that Hocking describes as a “white trash kid” transforming into a “knowledgeable artist,” he picked up a 2011 Kresge Artist Fellow in visual arts.

As one of Detroit’s most active and celebrated artists working today, Hocking uses the city’s vast inventory of blighted properties and open fields as an outdoor gallery for his installations. He regularly deploys the discarded materials and found objects he discovers in the immediate area. The final piece is often photographed by Hocking and exhibited, making him an artistic dual threat.

Hocking looked more like a construction worker than a notable artist when assembling the new Eastern Market installation.

“I looked like I knew what I was doing,” says Hocking, who wore a high-visibility vest and safety goggles while assembling the project via a telehandler, a telescopic utility lifter. “Only when you start stacking things up as high as I can and making a kind of shitty Stonehenge, only then do people start to think, ‘Wait a minute — that doesn’t look utilitarian.’ ”

Standing an imposing 22 feet, the tallest sculptures weigh 15 tons. Five others measure at approximately 14 feet tall. Altogether, the installation stretches 17 sculptures across about an acre of land.



Detroit Artist Scott Hocking, 43, says he used a telescopic handler to position discarded sewage pipes to make his art installation, "17 Shitty Mountains," in these abandoned public streets on Riopelle, Scott, and Eliot in Eastern Market as a part of the Murals in the Market in Detroit, photographed on Wednesday, Sept. 12, 2018. (Photo: Kimberly P. Mitchell, Detroit Free Press)

The installation is visible from Eastern Market’s main arteries like Russell Street, which runs through the heart of the area.

Their towering height brings a spotlight to a semi-secret stretch just north of Eastern Market’s core that’s at once off-the-grid entirely yet easily accessible and heavily trafficked by photographers and graffiti artists, who have already started tagging Hocking’s work.

It's one of the common denominators between graffiti artists and Hocking, who says he's often keeping "the same hours at the same places."

Both Hocking and his fellow street artists use photography to preserve their work because it's often only a matter of time before it's destroyed, altered in some way or lost completely.

Hocking's installation is one of two semi-permanent installations that will expand Murals in the Market's focus beyond murals this year.

Over nine days, the fourth annual installment of the public art festival will bring over 50 local and international artists and muralists together to bring a wide ranging stylistic splash, primarily in Eastern Market.

A robust lineup of events rounds out the festival this year, including a family-friendly block party with DJ Jazzy Jeff on Saturday.

In addition to Hocking, longtime Detroit artist Robert Sestok will install a sculpture in front of Eastern Market's Shed 5.

It's unclear what will ultimately happen to the installations, but Murals in the Market organizer Jesse Cory says both Hocking and Sestok's work will be in the area for the foreseeable future.

"Murals are not permanent and feel fleeting sometimes. Sculpture feels like it could be there forever," says Cory. "As an artist, sometimes you want to seek some sort of immortality. Putting a sculpture up and putting a placard there has a greater sense of that."

Juxtaposing beauty and ruin

In just a week's time, Hocking created a sprawling installation that's well-composed amongst the surrounding landscape, including the exposed, heavily tagged guts of the former Water Board building and the flora and fauna that has sprouted up in lieu of development.

"I think people can see decay and abandonment differently when they look at it in a different context," says Hocking. "If there's a kind of artwork made out of it, it starts to play with the ideas of what is a ruin versus what is a monument? What makes something a good ruin versus a bad ruin?"

Because of its high-visibility placement as part of a street art festival that was named one of the [best in the world by Smithsonian Magazine](#), this new work feels like a mainstream crossover piece for Hocking.

"It's not the typical place that would appeal to me, but it was perfect for this situation," says Hocking, who surveyed the site and used the cast concrete pipes he found nearby to construct the installation. "Normally, I might do something like this and not tell anyone."

For the past 20 years, Hocking has made the most from neglected materials that Detroit's decay has given him.

His installations are often hidden inside of iconic, abandoned buildings like the Fisher Body 21 plant in New Center and the Packard Plant on the city's east side.

The effect of seeing highly composed, meticulously arranged sculptures inside of crumbling buildings has a jarring effect that has defined Hocking's work.

"It feels like Scott creates a surreal world that's absolutely beautiful in a place that's really just vacant and derelict," says Cory, who plans to release a print of Hocking's installation in collaboration with the David Klein Gallery via his boutique publishing company, 1xRun.

"He makes you think about space in a different way and we wanted to convey that here."

Hocking often photographs his works and exhibits them in galleries like downtown's David Klein Gallery, which also represents Hocking as an artist.

Hocking says he enjoys the process of bringing his installations to a gallery audience that wouldn't normally seek them out in their natural habitat — abandoned and often-dangerous buildings in tucked-away corners of the city.



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"I want to work with a site – the history of a place, the energy of a place, the materials that it offers," says Hocking. "All of those things need to blend together. As the city of Detroit changes, so does my work," who notes that some of his previous installations in places like the Michigan Central Station couldn't be done today as the city's most iconic empty properties find new owners and get redeveloped.

Eastern Market has seen similar investment, including [several reported multimillion-dollar deals](#) to [purchase key](#) buildings in the market's footprint.

“It’s an exercise in letting go of possessing them in any way,” says Hocking. “I’m working on a site that I don’t own. I’m often trespassing. I’m using material that is not mine. I’m making something that is going to be destroyed by the elements, by people. It’s going to be altered — and I’ve got no control over that.”



Detroit Artist Scott Hocking, 43, sits in an abandoned sewage pipe as a part of his art installation in Eastern Market in Detroit in conjunction with Murals in the Market, photographed on Wednesday, Sept. 12, 2018. (Photo: Kimberly P. Mitchell, Detroit Free Press)

As Detroit stares down its growing pains, Hocking hopes his installations capture a somewhat fleeting identity of the city — and helps redefine the catch-all term of “ruin porn.”

“There’s sometimes aspects or elements of my work where people get irritated because they feel like it’s under the umbrella of ruin porn,” says Hocking. “But that’s become such an easy buzzword thrown around that I don’t think it’s been defined clearly enough.”

Hocking argues that “ruin porn” represents a “one-night stand” that takes advantage of the city and its circumstances.

Hocking, however, considers his relationship with Detroit to be a “long-term marriage” that has stretched across more than two decades of working and living in the city.

“Let’s face it — this building is going to be torn down or renovated probably in the next year,” says Hocking. (In 2017, Crain’s Detroit Business reported that a planned \$19-million development was coming to 3500 Riopelle where Hocking’s new installation is located.)

“Eastern Market is a hot commodity,” adds Hocking. “Working like this in this space that’s going to very quickly change, to me, it’s like a last little moment to highlight some aspect of it that’s not going to be there soon.”

Murals in the Market: Thursday through Sept. 22, Eastern Market, Detroit, www.muralsinthemarket.com