



Scott Hocking: Turning Things Upside Down

by Steve Pantan

On the morning of September 6, 1881, Boston residents awoke to a dense yellow fog that trapped the city in an unnatural twilight. The effect was so ominous that the *Boston Globe* reported people interpreting it as evidence of a widely repeated prediction that the world would end that year. In reality, “Yellow Tuesday” was caused by a massive fire the previous day in Michigan’s “Thumb” region. Its origin lay in the “cutover,” a frenzied harvesting of the Midwest’s white pine resources, which had, in just a few decades, effectively reduced formerly great forests into huge piles of kindling. The combination of a summer drought, high winds, and multi-

ple fires intentionally set to clear the land for farming led to a conflagration that burned an almost unimaginable million acres in a single day.

Traveling through the region today, it is hard to imagine such an apocalypse. Although the northern tip of the Thumb is little more than 100 miles due north of Detroit, the area has become a low-key agricultural region that sees few visitors. It is a landscape of quiet country roads, newly built wind farms, and endless fields interrupted by the occasional farm building or barn. Turn west off the main road down Oak Beach Road, though, and there is a point at which the familiar is spectacularly

punctuated by the dramatic sight of Scott Hocking’s *Celestial Ship of the North (Emergency Ark)* (2015).

Approaching the sculpture, visitors begin to realize its massiveness. At 40 feet high, 60 feet wide, and 20 feet deep at its broadest, it cuts an imposing figure from up close. Its dimensions—aside from the dramatically slender cross-section, which narrows almost to a point at the base—are similar to those of the decaying late-19th-century barn that previously stood on the site, a barn that Hocking collapsed and deconstructed to provide timber for his installation. The wood itself is rough-hewn, and it was almost certainly cut on site. It is a

This page and opposite: *Celestial Ship of the North (Emergency Ark) aka the Barnboat*, 2015. Site-specific permanent installation and photography, Port Austin, Michigan.

profound experience to run your hand along it and think that these trees grew in the original pre-settlement forest before being co-opted into human projects—first for agriculture, and then for art.

Hocking’s initial concept for the work came while driving through a typical Midwestern landscape, when he realized that a barn turned upside down becomes a boat. When he was later given the opportunity to choose a barn for an artwork, he realized that his vision could become a reality. Starting in early June, he broke down the structure, had four 50-foot telephone poles inserted into the ground, and finally began building his work



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around them. Working mostly alone—and developing precarious new ways of using a 30-foot telehandler and a 60-foot boom lift—he first framed and then gradually clad the structure from the top down. The arduous labor trig-

gered a repetitive stress injury that left him unable to raise his arms above his head. Work was temporarily interrupted by his participation in the Lille 3000 Triennial exhibition “Renaissance,” during which he constructed

Babel (2015–17) in the Gare Saint Sauveur, a former railway station. After he returned (somewhat recovered physically), he finished *Celestial Ship*, and the “Barnboat” project opened to a large crowd of locals and

Detroit art scenesters at the end of October. With Hocking’s help, a quintessentially Midwestern barn had metamorphosed into a celestial ship that could voyage anywhere envisioned by the viewer’s imagination.



Garden of the Gods, 2009–11. Site-specific installation and photography, Packard Plant, Detroit.

could look. Hocking says that this was common during construction, with people often stopping to talk. Some people in this conservative and religious area assumed that building an ark was an act of Christian faith. Others were more hostile. Mostly, though, they just stopped to offer construction advice. Gradually, Hocking became sensitive to micro-tensions between the rural population and residents of the nearby small town of Port Austin. He feels that the project achieved important local validation when it survived a severe storm that damaged many other structures in the area. *Celestial Ship*, as the farmer who donated the barn proudly told his neighbors, “didn’t even lose a board.” If the work is a vessel, it is also a node that connects people and social networks whose orbits would not ordinarily intersect—an important function in a country polarized along partisan and urban/rural lines.

On a sunny but cold February day earlier this year, Hocking surreptitiously removed one of the lower panels and invited me to squirm awkwardly up into the innards of the structure. Brilliant light streamed through gaps in the lattice-like outer skin, generating a myriad of intricate geometric patterns. The

constantly shifting light, combined with complex inclined surfaces and the sense of the structure swaying slightly in the wind, created a disorienting experience, particularly for a first-time visitor, but Hocking climbed around with confidence. Another central reference point for the project was the idea

of the vessel as container. It is clear that his extensive construction period was a meditative process, and the structure holds a lot of memories.

Celestial Ship inevitably attracts a lot of attention, and as we looked through the horizontal gaps in the walls, a car halted so the occupants



Above: *Ziggurat and Fisher Body 21*, 2007–09. Site-specific installation and photography, Fisher Body 21, Detroit.
 Right: *The Egg and Michigan Central Train Station*, 2007–13. Site-specific installation and photography, Detroit.

The ark floats above a sea of fields where crops are planted and harvested according to the schedules of massive food conglomerates, and where much of the work is done by large-scale GPS-guided machinery. This agricultural context is as much a construction of the modern world as the former Detroit automotive plants where Hocking located earlier installations such as *Ziggurat and Fisher Body 21* (2007–09) and *Garden of the Gods* (2009–11). As with many of his projects, his ark inserts a mythically inspired object into an easily overlooked location as a disruptive strategy to overturn entrenched perspectives on the world. The Zen koan—a question that provokes the “Great Doubt”—is a key concept behind his work.

When discussing *Celestial Ship*, Hocking often returns to the idea



that the overarching motif is something “turned upside down.” There are countless ways to interpret his intentions, including the obvious one hinted at by the ark’s association with cataclysmic events—we are currently living in a world turned upside down by the prioritization of endless accumulation over

the health of natural systems, where biblical-scale deluges like the one recently visited on the city of Houston by Hurricane Harvey might be expected with ever-increasing frequency. In this sense, *Celestial Ship* might be the perfect symbol for the impending environmental catastrophe looming over us all.

Scott Hocking would like to thank Jim Boyle, whose 53North project works to pair Detroit artists with Port Austin-area barns; Bill and Loraine Goretski who own the barn used in Celestial Ship; and all the Thumb residents who provided financial, material, and moral support.