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Scott Hocking's Menagerie

Susanne Hilberry Gallery

Through November 25, 2006



The solo show. The artist's most coveted spotlight. That mark of recognition that acknowledges you've paid your dues and now it's your time to shine.

If there are rules to follow as to what to show, they might not be about playing it safe exactly, but would likely not be about going out on a limb either. Bring together a mix of newer pieces along with relatively recent and related works and you've got the show. Abandoning one's overall thematic approach and way of working to try something new? Not really standard operating procedure.

Well that's exactly the approach Scott Hocking took, on perhaps the most prestigious of showcases in the Detroit area, the Susanne Hilberry Gallery, by not only making a bold conceptual leap, but in inviting 30 other artists to take part in the creation of the work as well. The results of this are a curious menagerie of mutilated and otherwise distressed fiberglass and plastic animals, cheerfully decorated and dressed up. Creatures large and small spread throughout the gallery, all in all a wondrous and provocative sight.

Hocking's approach has always been a varied one, but consistently emanating from a deep commitment to making use of existing derelict materials and finding beauty in decay. He's worked in rust – gaudily framing with the reverence of old master paintings, enshrined objects found in abandoned buildings, even constructed a pyramid of old tires. For the International Shrinking Cities project, he documented aspects of the lives of the scrapper subculture, and for his vast experience with Detroit's abandoned spaces, he's been giving unique Detroit tours to visiting artists coming in as part of MoCAD.

He gets around.

But little in Hocking's extensive body of work says anything about an Ark-full of creatures. When his solo show was put on the schedule about a year ago, he played with a variety of ideas for the venue right from the get go, looking to try something different, something he might always have wanted to do but never had the means or the right space to pull it off. The expansiveness of the gallery opened up a whole realm of possibilities. One such idea centered on a long time irritation with public art shows in the form of decorated cows, sheep, beagles, cars, and other critters, dotting the streets of cities across the world today. He points out that such art is edited and censored from a tourism approach, with little regard or interest in the potential of art. The results necessarily end up being decorative, happy creations, which might not seem harmful, but Hocking argues that in fact, they are. "Instead of art making you think, these don't make you think, and are the wrong direction for public art, especially in Detroit."

For some time as well, Hocking had had in mind a project addressing the treatment of animals around the globe either directly at the hands of humans or through the altering of the environment, including the poaching of gorillas for meat, the drowning of polar bears due to warming of the polar ice caps, and more. Originally conceived as a series of drawings, it dovetailed conceptually with this commentary on "Cows on Parade" and their kin. In his view, all these happy, colorful creatures, desensitize us to the true plight of living creatures, many of which are on the verge of extinction due to human actions. "Polar bears aren't walking around smiling, they're drowning." It was less about being preachy, and more about, "what's really happening."



So with a solidified concept and positive feedback from Susanne Hilberry, he started doing research last February, both about what happens to various animals and in finding a supply of suitable animal forms to put on display. Hocking, who'd spent so much of his time working in and around abandoned buildings, ended up spending long hours in front of a computer, digging through the Internet to find answers and materials.

As it turns out, there are whole companies devoted to the creation of fiberglass animals for the burgeoning business of public street art projects. Through EBay, Hocking ended up finding Patrick Keough in Nebraska (www.americasfiberglassanimals.com) who had bought all the molds from one such company, and was now making them on his own. Everything seemed pretty synergistic. The two hit it off and the price couldn't be beat, so Hocking paid 75% up front in April and then waited for a drop off date in late May. May came and went, and nothing happened, and a bevy of excuses were coming in from Keough, who then promised them by the first of June. June turned to July and the first trickle of animals showed up, but the exhibition date was getting closer. He started looking for alternatives including realistic skinless taxidermy forms and other plastic animals. Finally on August 12th, a majority of the large fiberglass animals were delivered – 11 weeks later than expected! To add to it, the final shipment didn't arrive until September 23, just two weeks before the show was to open.

Hocking had originally intended to put out an open call for submissions to decorate the animals just as is done with typical animal on parade shows. But with too few weeks left, and both his modifications depicting the fates these creatures suffer and the subsequent decorating to be done, he was out of time. And so he sent out a direct call to friends and fellow artists to help him complete this massive project. The response was enthusiastic. Artists who agreed to participate were instructed to decorate the animal in the "most arbitrary pc way" possible. While Hocking's role was to modify the form to show what's done to them, the artists were not to editorialize at all. Just to paint or dress up their animal, as if blissfully unaware of whatever fate had befallen it.

The long months of waiting quickly ramped up into nonstop work at a feverish pace. Hocking began the work of prepping animals, which included removing body parts and filling back in the holes this created, building plastic blood pools, priming their surfaces (all in materials he'd never worked in before), and those that he didn't keep for himself to decorate were distributed to the willing participants. (Notice of Full Disclosure: this writer was given a pair of crows representing death by

West Nile Virus, which he did paint and which were included in the show.) Hocking and crew had little time to make it happen. Yet somehow, with pieces arriving and being painted in the gallery at the absolute last minute (and who says hanging a show isn't a spectator sport?), they all came through.



And what a spectacle! From Dylan Spasky's "Blushing Piglet Slaughtered Bank," a cheerily piggybank painted pig (complete with slot and oversized coin), hung up over a large steel drum for collecting blood to a de-finned shark, painted by Hocking to look like a World War II fighter plane, all the artists really went to town in making these things look like the sort of art works they're supposed to critique. The solo show became an opportunity for an assortment of Detroit artists to get to share in the spotlight. All in all, Hocking created a very egalitarian process from the naming of the work to sharing in the proceeds, with one exception, in that Hocking, just like the boards of public art projects, maintained final editorial control over what could or could not be done and included in the show.

There are too many of note to mention all, but to point out just a few: John Corbin not only colorfully decorated a Sea Turtle choking on plastic bags, but took on one of the largest pieces in the show, a Polar Bear, suspended from the rafters as if drowning, with the constellations of Ursa Major and Minor drawn upon its exterior. Sioux Trujillo's "Oil Drenched Sea Otter", adorned with fanciful native cave drawings and Kari Buzewski's tiger killed for its eyes and penis dressed up with ceramic floral patterns, were pulled off at great success. Faina Lerman decaled the ubiquitous and innocuous "Sponge-Bob" on a chimpanzee hooked up to electrodes, and Ben Kiehl painted a sheep watching TV (more Hocking's commentary on humans than animals) all in camouflage pattern. Mitch Cope extended the idea of public art one step farther by bringing in his neighbor kids to paint and draw on a giraffe with tail removed. The inclusion of a cow mutilated by aliens seemed a bit odd given the seriousness of the other animals, but Graem Whyte did quite a job painting (and building up relief) the globe onto the rather un-globelike form of the cow.



The other form of public art, the non-permissive sort, made a prominent appearance on a grizzly bear complete with gnawed-off leg remaining in the trap that snared it. It raises the question of whether such a thing is the work of an artist officially taking on the project, or a "tag" over the top of existing imagery. As it turns out, the painting was done over the top of Hocking's initial plan for the bear (to coat it in metallic blue paint complete with flaming decals), though with permission. When technical issues aborted that first idea, the anonymous graffiti artist came to the rescue at the last minute, which resulted in a strong piece both visually and conceptually, and a fascinating and integral element for a show commenting on public art.

For the buffalo, Hocking stuck about 20 arrows and drilled at least 2000 holes in it to simulate bullet wounds, which represented the ratio of the animal killed by Native Americans and its near extinction caused by later settlers. Clint Snider painted it with an elaborate if subtle, gorgeous, oversized wall paper pattern. The beauty of this piece as object, really points to the strength of Hocking's overall concept. It's hard not to like these as pretty and fun and cute. But it's our reaction that becomes disturbing. The painting glosses over what's truly happening here, which is exactly Hocking's point.



Behind the smiles, the floral patterns, the sunset scenes, and various sugar coated façades lies something more important. It's something visitors to the gallery might overlook altogether, or perhaps in their initial delight in the various artists' works, might provoke a much deeper awareness than a more direct approach might. And that awareness creates the possibility for better understanding and perhaps even action, somewhere down the line.

Perhaps then, this show isn't as big a conceptual departure for Hocking as it first seems from the imagery on display. He's still dealing with beauty and ugliness, only this time he's not revealing beauty, but using beauty to cover up and hence reveal the terrible truth below the surface. It's a nice reversal, and executed both conceptually and, with the help of a lot of friends, visually quite well. While Hocking maintains that his work is often motivated by irritation at something or other, it would seem it really stems from compassion: compassion for forgotten places and those things we'd rather keep out of sight, and hence out of mind.

Hocking's approach is a bold one. In being pleasing to the eye, the work ends up being unsettling in its subject matter, and leaves the viewer to think about the subject long after leaving the gallery.

And hey, that's what public art is supposed to be about, right?

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