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Artworks About Place Struggle Within the Confines of a Museum

Landlord Colors at Cranbrook Art Museum tries to “elevate” art borne of economic hardship and upheavals, but such art needs no elevation; the viewer must seek and find its level.

[Sarah Rose Sharp - August 26, 2019](#) (Excerpt from the full article)

BLOOMFIELD HILLS, Mich. — Scrawled directly on the wall in the second gallery of *Landlord Colors: On Art, Economy, and Materiality* at the Cranbrook Art Museum — the culmination of a three-year project by Andy Warhol Foundation Curatorial Fellow Laura Mott — are the red, spray-painted words: *Si tú eres artista, vamos a sufrir*. It translates to: *If you are an artist, we will suffer*. The statement is part of a work of the same title by Cuban artist Ezequiel O. Suárez. It’s meant as a direct commentary on economic disparity and opportunity in his native country following the Cuban Revolution, but it’s also a fitting motto for a terrifically ambitious exhibition that attempts to juxtapose the art and economic conditions of Detroit over the last half-century with those of various international locales in recent history: the Italian avant-garde from the 1960s to the 1980s, including the Arte Povera movement; authoritarian-ruled South Korea in the 1970s, which encompassed Dansaekhwa and Korean monochrome painting; Cuba after the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s; and Greece, following the 2008 financial crisis.



Source material for Scott Hocking, *Bone Black* (2019)

If the dozens of works on display at Cranbrook weren't enough food for thought, the exhibition is paired with the *Material Detroit* series, curated in close collaboration with Taylor Renee Aldridge and Ryan Meyers-Johnson. The latter takes the exhibition beyond Cranbrook's hallowed grounds to points of inspiration within Detroit's communities.

One of *Material Detroit*'s works is "Bone Black" (2019), a massive installation by hometown player Scott Hocking. Hocking transformed a huge warehouse along a sprawling stretch of land next to the Detroit River, once part of the Stroh's beer industrial empire, into a harbor for the ghost boats left to decay in Detroit's abandoned lots. Some boats are lofted into the rafters, others idle or slump on the floor, still others stand as sentinels hundreds of feet into the warehouse. Typical of the artist, the balance of aesthetic considerations, ambition, and sheer manic labor is arresting. The piece merits an article of its own, but in this context, it represents the often-limited capacity for institutions to present art of place in a way that does either art or place justice.

At Cranbrook, a good 40 minutes away, a reproduction of an 1892 photo, which served as the conceptual seed for *Bone Black*, is a stand-in for the installation. The image features a mountain of bison skulls, the product of a westward-expansion effort to destroy the native species — and, by extension, the native people that relied on it for their existence. Hocking was surprised to discover that the location of the familiar photograph — often seen as a symbol of the White, colonial conquest of the US territories — was Michigan Carbon Works, a business that still exists in Detroit. The skulls were the charred, carbon basis for a pigment called Bone Black. The image is displayed on a wall painted Bone Black, and alludes to Hocking's graveyard of boats, temporarily resurrected to roam again.



Installation view of Scott Hocking, *Bone Black* (2019), in Detroit

Although Hocking has executed installations in other locales, I suspect that his work is most stunning in Detroit, the place he knows best. When he flexes his astounding power to transform space in his native environs, he brings to bear his decades of searching and scavenging and indexing the city's lesser-run streets, its discard, its hidden excesses, its quixotic wealth of detritus. This is why Hocking's terminal outcomes are not the astonishingly labor-intensive installations themselves, but photographs of them. He understands not only the power of labor to alter the landscape, but also the power of leaving his work where it lays, to become part of the perpetual struggle between human development and the processes of the natural world.



Bone Black, detail view

Hocking also understands something that institutions — even those with the best intentions and most thoughtful processes — consistently fail to grasp about art of place: it must happen *in place*. *Landlord Colors* tries to “elevate” art and movements borne of struggles with economic hardship and upheavals, placing it on Cranbrook’s travertine floors, in its hushed, white spaces. But such art needs no elevation; the viewer must seek and find its level. *Material Detroit* highlights these works as living parts of the city. In this respect it more successfully captures the works’ spirit, but still undermines the power of art in a quotidian role. Art here runs the way the buses run: rigged-up, unpredictable, but moving people through their daily lives...

[Landlord Colors: On Art, Economy, and Materiality continues at Cranbrook Art Museum \(39221 Woodward Avenue, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan\), with an associated program of activities, *Material Detroit*, through October 6.](#)

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