

REVIEW BY NICK SOUSANIS
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**Clinton Snider:
Beauty from Decay
Compassion in Abandonment**

Art can offer a multitude of diverse experiences: visual stimulation, a record of events and times, an observation or statement of social or political nature, and emotional content – a visceral expression of the artist's perspective. Clinton Snider's current solo show at the Susanne Hilberry Gallery encompasses all of these aspects – each one informing and enhancing appreciation of the others. Through his work Detroit's abandoned landscape takes hold of our eyes, mind, and heart.



"Animals"

driven down or walked on in years.

Snider's multi-layered paint surfaces give the work an anthropological quality. Hidden layers make their presence known by how they affect the visible outer layers. Grass lots, for instance, are more than compositional blocks of color, they are dense, rich jungles that one could sink a hand deep into or lose something in its clutches. Weeds that break through the sidewalk reveal the presence of rich earth buried beneath the concrete. The curvature of the landscape implies the connection between these places and the rest of the world just out of sight at the edge of the horizon.

Snider's imagery is of the vacant shells of once vital and populated homes and factories now overgrown with weeds and full of broken and boarded-up windows. Yet despite the state of decay, Snider infuses the work with a strong sense of hope. His use of color is lively and varied, bright but not overwhelming, creating a vitality for what in reality must be grayer scenery. The color provides a touch of sentiment – a memory of a brighter past – as well as forward thinking – the promise of a better tomorrow. Whether a tree or a ubiquitous utility pole, each piece has a prominent vertical form, like a blossom reaching sunward in spring. Snider recognizes rightly that decay and growth are inseparable aspects of the cycle of life.

Snider's drawing reveals his care for the places and their stories. He renders the forms with an accurate, yet somewhat whimsical illustrational quality – the landscape curves and buildings lean and bend giving them personality and character. Snider shifts the perspective imaginatively to further draw the viewer into this environment. These certainly aren't "Whoville" streets, but they aren't as bleak as the subject matter might suggest either. If a comparison between Snider and Seuss seems odd, perhaps it might be tempered by associating Snider's buildings with Käthe Kollwitz's figures. Both are rendered with such empathy, that despite the downtrodden state of their circumstances, they still maintain a vestige of strength and dignity. To pick out but one example from Snider's work, in "Ronnie's Meats" a crosswalk sign's red palm flashes indicating "don't walk." The sign keeps futilely fulfilling its function, despite the fact that the street looks like it hasn't been





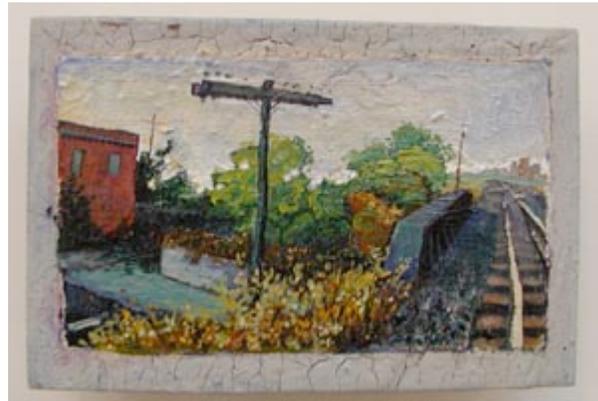
"Alley"

Snider all but abandons traditional canvases, instead painting on planks of wood that could have been (and likely were) found in many of the locales he portrays. This adds a meta-level to the imagery – the paintings are not only about something, they are made from that thing as well. The structure serves Snider's work in a variety of ways. In some pieces he creates an irregular shape that allows his already fluid perspective to extend further beyond the boundaries of the rectangle. Space is stretched visually and physically as well, as some of his most inventive surfaces not only extend in various directions but curve towards the viewer thereby adding to the perceived dimensionality. In some work, the spaces between the planks are quite distinct, fracturing the space and echoing the fragmented structure of the houses depicted. The arrangement of the wood pieces is in rhythm with the overall composition, prompting one to wonder whether the image composition came first and Snider built the assemblage to fit, or vice versa. In "Alley" the gaps between the vertical planks run parallel to a grove of trees. The trees' shadows crisscross against the wood. The cross of a telephone pole occupies a horizontal segment of wood which makes up the surface, providing the eye a place to rest from the up and down flow of the composition.

The use of such materials also ties into an idea of rebirth, as rather than ending up in a landfill they are now preserved and on display at an art gallery. This carries on the tradition Snider established with Scott Hocking in Relics (from "[10 Artists Take On Detroit](#)" at the DIA), where the pair turning derelict objects found in Detroit buildings, and transformed them into an installation. Snider has also created a delightful series of tiny paintings, more regularly rectangular in nature than the larger works. The paint on these pieces is thick and cracking, like the layers of paint on an old house

where each new tenant keeps covering up the chipping paint put on by the last owner. Whereas the larger works open up the space wider than the rectangle, these works are contained by a frame constructed through built up paint.

Snider's work is of course timely. The Detroit mystique generates countless hipster t-shirts around the globe and more serious curiosity in the form of such things as the "Shrinking Cities" project. Snider captures the abandonment of the former mecca of industrialization, not by overt politicization, but through honest observation and contemplation. By making the imagery beautiful despite the decay, he allows viewers to invest their care in what is depicted without forcing any point in their direction. To paraphrase singer Natalie Merchant, life is hard, but life is also sweet. Snider reveals both aspects in his work.



"Milwaukee Junction"

That Snider's images linger long after one has left the gallery and that each one invites repeated viewing is a terrific accomplishment. But he has done something more, in the way that he shared his perspective and his empathy with his audience he has made it difficult to view our surroundings in the way that we might have before. Clinton Snider not only has given us something to look at but affected how we look at the world. – Nick Sousanis