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Detroit, Detroit [\[Art\]](#) - ws - ws@thedetroiter.com

Susanne Hilberry Gallery

700 Livernois

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10-6 pm Tues through Sat.

Jan 24 through Feb 22

In "Detroit, Detroit", Susanne Hilberry Gallery brings together a collection of the differing facets that make up the Detroit art scene. While the genres included may come off as a bit disorienting, it is at the same time a testament to the amazing range that this city has produced.

The North Gallery contains a history lesson on the 30th anniversary of attempted art censorship at the DIA. At a time when the Vietnam War dominated the headlines, the removal of artwork from the DIA ignited attention around the country.

To quickly recap those events: (Hilberry offers a comprehensive look by putting the original newspaper stories on display). Having been juried by a nationwide panel, the 59th Exhibition for Michigan Artists was selected and hung at the DIA. After receiving complaints from prominent patrons concerning Bill Butt's WAMBA (a series of large photo prints of a man unbuttoning his trousers and revealing his underwear) and Brad Iverson's photo of "The Belle Isle Men's Room" (complete with graffiti), then DIA director Willis Woods bowed to pressure to remove the objectionable work, touching off the controversy.

What ensued was a nationwide media circus, the ACLU got involved, other artists in the show pulled their own work in protest and artists around the country lent their support. In the end a circuit court judge ordered the work reinstated.

While art overcame adversity then, thirty years later, works are still being removed from museums and war is still in the headlines. While the subject matter and the locations have changed, this show reminds us that we still have a long way to go, as long as we keep repeating our history.

Besides the "WAMBA" piece, and a strong series of black and white photographs by Iverson documenting Belle Isle including the Men's Bathroom piece, in Hilberry's other galleries, some of Detroit's finest, past and present are represented. The show presents perhaps two divergent paths on how Detroit artists go about creating beauty. In one corner stands Robert Wilbert alongside the generations of Detroit painters he influenced. In a town where the environment perhaps presents very little beauty this approach creates it through composition, color and subject matter on a canvas despite the

surrounding environment. On the other end of the spectrum is Gordon Newton, recycling the junk and detritus that make up the urban landscape and turning them into pieces of art.

Wilbert is a painter's painter, and the two pieces on display, a portrait and a still life, are a painter's paintings. Classic subject matter depicted with care and great skill. These are strikingly simple, refined works, but with so little he captures an essence of so much about what we find enjoyable in a painting.

Joyce Brienza's pieces continue in the vein of figurative, representational work, but she infuses it with a complex layer of narrative. She weaves not only symbolism, but also collaged materials into the pieces to craft visual cultural statements.

The constructions of Newton and Cay Bahnmiller are collages of a different sort. Rather than using collage to add to the piece, the collage of materials, from wood to Nintendo cartridges and paint is the piece. These artists demonstrate that art can be made out of anything, even that which we disregard. By incorporating these objects into the work, the objects carry with them particular cultural signifiers. Like symbols in a painting, each element carries with it particular meaning as itself and its condition and in conjunction with the other pieces.

Scott Hocking and Clinton Snider continue this lineage of the use of non-traditional materials. The two have collaborated before in "Relics" in ["Ten Artists Take On Detroit"](#) turning derelict objects from Detroit into a temple to our past. (A smaller version of "Relics" is currently showing at The Gallery at Marygrove College.) Both artists share a commitment to find beauty and rebirth from the midst of urban decay.

In the review of Snider's outstanding solo show at Tangent Gallery this past fall, I used the word "memory artist" to describe his methods. Snider accomplishes this by painting his industrial landscapes on industrial refuse itself. The work then functions on two levels at once – as the scene depicted as well as the materials that it is painted on. The idea of rebirth is present both the paint handling and the material choice. His further innovation of constructing irregularly shaped surfaces by rigging together found wood, gives a greater sense of depth and passage of time than the traditional rectangular canvas might.

Hocking is an artist who feels that new paints and canvases are more of a privilege than a right for an artist. Therefore his method is to make art from whatever is on hand. Using scrap metal, filled with rust and chipped paint, somehow, (and no doubt the photo here can't do it justice) Hocking creates ethereal, beautiful landscapes. It is no small compliment to state that he accomplishes more with this rust and tarnished metal, than many a painter has achieved through a cadre of expensive paints and linen canvases. To take one example, in "Nuages" Hocking creates a vibrant, shifting, convincing cloudscape that is simultaneously the unmistakable wear of entropy on metal.

Besides their appearance, the pieces function on another level as well – commentary through his use of materials. The meaning of the materials, and the memory it holds adds to its significance. The thought is beautiful too, the attempt to turn something we hold as so ugly, as wasted and then to turn it into art, it's truly touching and something to behold.

Detroit offers a wealth of possibilities for artistic expression. Be sure to check out "Detroit, Detroit" as it offers a great examination of where art has been in this city and where it will go in the future. -nick