

Clinton Snider

Tangent Gallery
715 E. Milwaukee Avenue
Detroit, MI 48202
313-873-2955
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Vince Carducci

With its thousands of deserted, moldering buildings and blocks upon blocks of empty, broken streets, Detroit is the mother of all scrap yards. And ever since the late 1960s, when abandonment of the city by businesses and the populace began to explode exponentially, its trove of cast-offs has been mined by legions of scavengers, including at least two generations of visual artists. True bricoleurs, these cultural producers have worked by bringing the refuse of life into the refuge of art, imbuing the otherwise forgotten with renewed significance and thus value. Thirty-three year old Clinton Snider is one of the latest to emerge, having received his BFA from Detroit's College for Creative Studies in 1997.

Snider's most significant project prior to this exhibition was his collaboration with Scott Hocking in last year's *Artists Take on Detroit*, an exhibition presented by the Detroit Institute of Arts to mark the tricentennial of the city's founding. Their piece, *Relics*, was a room-sized installation that used a floor-to-ceiling grid structure to contain and order all manner of "Detroitus"—battered ductwork, rusted machine parts, rotted rubber fittings, discarded housewares, etc.—retrieved from expeditions spelunking in the city's cavernous factories and foraging among its heaps of rubble. Snider and Hocking took the term "relic" to have two senses: as something outmoded and as something talismanic. Their archeological approach reaffirmed art historian Rosalind Krauss's assertion of grids as modern yet romantic, as capable of being both discursive and symbolic. (While the grid references the matrix of scientific taxonomy, for example, it also evokes the window, icon of spiritual illumination.)

Located in a former offset lithography shop in the middle of a gritty midtown area called Milwaukee Junction, Tangent Gallery was a fitting venue for Snider's work. Perhaps best known these days as the neighborhood where Eminem's fictional character Rabbit plies his assembly line day job in the movie *8 Mile*, Milwaukee Junction was the Silicon Valley of the age of mechanical reproduction. Henry Ford's initial research and development work took place there. General Motors, Packard, and Studebaker also maintained large facilities in the area. It is where hundreds of automobile industry start-ups, like their dot-com counterparts of today, burned through wads of venture capital without ever turning out a marketable product much less turning a profit. All this and more of what sociologist Zygmunt Bauman calls "solid" modernity have long since melted into air.

The works in the Tangent show created in the afterglow of *Relics* reflect its methods and lessons. These pieces are suave, marked by a facility in crafting multifarious collaged elements into seamless wholes. The best of them is *Figure of Eight*, where the grid again serves to organize disparate pieces of Detroit's forsaken material culture. Krauss notes that grids work their magic on both space and time: the components of *Figure of 8* originally had unconnected industrial and residential uses; they come from different periods in the city's past. What connects the mechanical gears and cams, weathered wood pieces, twisted metal scraps, and other discards is the numeral 8, which appears in each grid section. (Eight is the number of cylinders in what engineers consider to be the smoothest-running gasoline combustion engines; it is also the numerological symbol for infinity.)



Clinton Snider
Figure of Eight, 2002
73 X 56"
Mixed objects/media
(Photo by Eric Wheeler)



Clinton Snider
Ruins, 2002
Oil and Latex on Canvas
60 X 120"
(Photo by Mitch Cope)

The newer work is even more interesting, though; it builds a new representational order literally upon the debris Snider has collected and adds narrative content to its visual form. In these pieces, which are basically paintings executed on junk substrates, the material aspect of art work is always evident. In *Ruins*, for instance, a large-scale visionary panorama of Detroit's postindustrial landscape, the distressed surface is everywhere palpable even though it is completely covered by the painted image. *Tree of Heaven* shows a leafless example of the ubiquitous "ghetto palm" standing in the foreground of an overgrown lot with a deserted neighborhood in the background. Painted on top of retrieved strips of lumber, the conventional "window" view is interrupted by the different lengths of board that have been hammered together, subverting the rectangular plane of traditional easel painting. Melancholy seems to be the pervasive mood here, but not entirely. After all, it was a tree of heaven that grew in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. So on one level the painting is about the decline of modern civilization in Detroit, but on another arguably more important level, it is about the persistence of life even in the city's most desolate provinces.

This was Snider's first solo exhibition. And it was an auspicious debut indeed.

Vince Carducci writes about art and culture.



Clinton Snider
Tree of Heaven, 2002
95 X 61"
Oil on wood
(Photo by Mitch Cope)