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Archeologists of Meaning

Artists Scott Hocking and Clinton Snider uncover the doors to yesteryear.

Sometimes things seem to possess a life of their own. An unexpected encounter with an object from the past — a toy, a record album, a piece of clothing — can evoke a whole constellation of associations and emotions, vividly conjuring up life as it was once lived. Through our use of them and their proximity to us, objects can become carriers of history and memory, can acquire a voice.

Objects can speak to us personally or collectively; as the premier consumer culture, we're defined to a great extent by our things. And no location is more emblematic of that culture than Detroit. Once the capital of the industrial world, home of great factories, labor unions and the assembly line, arsenal of democracy, birthplace of the freeway, the

shopping mall and Motown, it has been characterized as “the capital of American culture.”

But this symbol of American industrial might has fallen far. With its abandoned houses, factories and churches, and its vegetation-choked empty lots where nature is reclaiming culture, Detroit brims with ignored and forgotten objects that speak to us of untold lives lived within the city — and that tell us who we are.

Two Detroit-based artists, Scott Hocking and Clinton Snider, recent graduates of the College for Creative Studies, have thoroughly investigated the abandoned spaces of Detroit and have used the entire city as their palette, gathering forgotten objects for their art.

For Hocking, exploring the ruins of Detroit came as a natural outgrowth of earlier experiences. A native of Redford, he developed an early interest in photography and documented the train tracks, cemetery and abandoned cement factory near his neighborhood. And then there were the Northville Tunnels: “It was an abandoned boys’ school and church on the border of Northville and Livonia,” he explains. “It was a crumbling square mile of ghost town, riddled with underground tunnels. There were rumors of torture, devil worship, dead bodies, but it was just abandoned. I could feel presences there, traces of things that happened. I found old signs that no longer held any meaning because there were no longer any people around. Today the place doesn’t even exist.”

After the car that was to take him to Alaska was inexplicably wrecked in a freak accident, Hocking made the life-defining decision to remain in Detroit and become an artist. As a student at CCS, he found himself living in the Cass Corridor; Hocking started going into abandoned buildings just because they were there. Describing those experiences, Hocking says, “It was like a solitary adventure or meditation. I regained touch with myself when I was angry or upset. Plus I was broke and had no money for art supplies, so I started collecting found objects to use in my sculptures.”

In his second-story loft in a reclaimed industrial building near East Grand Boulevard and I-75, Hocking points toward the window and declares “out there is my studio.”

Hocking continued to expand the territory he was exploring, soon losing all fear and sense of boundaries. One early project that resulted, 2222 Bottles, was displayed on the southwest lawn of the Detroit Institute of Arts in 1998. It consisted of 49 wire-mesh trash baskets arranged in rows and filled with empty liquor bottles that had been collected off

the streets within walking distance of the DIA. Each basket was graced with a brief poetic text describing an experience or encounter Hocking had while collecting the bottles.

Snider, a native of Oklahoma City, came to Detroit in 1972 and later studied painting, psychology and philosophy at CCS. One step in his artistic journey was his discovery of landscape painting. At first lamenting the lack of subject matter in Detroit, he one day realized that by setting up his easel in Eastern Market, under viaducts or in the midst of abandoned industrial sites, he could meditatively engage with what he saw while simultaneously revealing inner emotional states.

One of his early works, *Lost*, depicts a thicket of delicate leafless trees created by paint drips emerging from a blistered, abstract landscape created out of the texture of the paint. Above is a narrow strip of sky, while below, embedded in the painting, is a row of red tiles gleaned from an abandoned auto shop, still showing scuff marks from machinery and boots. Etched into the tiles, like a fossil, is the image of a dead bird that Snider saw in the building where he retrieved the tiles. The painting explores Snider's interest in the way man-made objects merge with nature, recording the process by which they are first imposed upon and then reclaimed by it.

Both artists were galvanized when they first heard about the "Artists Take on Detroit" show, a series of installations by local artists sponsored by the DIA through the fall and winter of 2001. The pair decided to collaborate, initially considering building a monumental tire pyramid to be constructed on the site of the old Uniroyal plant on Jefferson, which Hocking characterized as "an obelisk of our own to the year 2001," a reference to Kubrick's monolith. But this concept proved too impractical and was soon relinquished in favor of another entitled *Relics*.

"We knew we would get a larger forum than we ever had before, and we saw it as an opportunity to overwhelm people with sensory information," explains Hocking. "We wanted to somehow replicate the experience of being in an abandoned building, completely surrounded with information, like millions of paint chips littering a floor, or the way light would enter the space through the windows, or the infinitely intricate veinlike patterns in the cracking paint on the walls."

Snider likens the initial concept to the excavation of an Egyptian tomb, and ponders the implications of such an activity: "Where does it happen, this phenomenon that a place at one time is thriving, and then it's not? Around us things are getting buried and we're not watching it happen. People move on with new technologies and the useless technologies left behind crumble."

Strongly reminiscent of the legendary work that came out of Detroit during the Cass Corridor's artistic golden age in the '60s and '70s, *Relics* consists of more than 400 modular boxes that can be stacked or arranged to accommodate any space. Each box is a sculptural unit unto itself, constructed from the detritus of Detroit's post-industrial glory: drains, drill bits, lightbulbs, shoe trees, piano hammers, oil cans, bathroom fixtures, tools, fans, mattress springs, plastic toys, beverage cans, rope, valves, gauges, pipes and gears. These objects are all worn, used, rusted, weathered and aged; they carry the patina of time past and passing.

"Nature begins to take apart what we once struggled to assemble," note the artists in their concept statement. "There is a threshold that is hard to pinpoint, when the man-made object becomes nature again. The difference, if there is one, is blurred. But we see the beauty of this threshold every day. Sidewalks crack with plants and anthills; rust stains run down street signs; flakes of paint stratify brick walls; wood structures warp and buckle from rain and snow; 10-story buildings grow trees on the roof — Detroit is this transition."

To enter the space where *Relics* is displayed is like walking into a hushed, dimly lit chapel, each box akin to a reliquary. To see all the boxes together, stacked to form an imposing, solid wall, is to be in the presence of the soul of this city. Reclaimed from the oblivion of our crumbling industrial infrastructure, these mute assembled objects silently sing, and speak to us with tremendous eloquence and power.

Relics by Scott Hocking and Clinton Snider will be on view at Hocking's studio in the W.F. McGraw Building, 7332 Oakland Ave., Detroit, 11 a.m.-8 p.m., Saturday, June 1 or by appointment. Call 248-470-5726.