

# ARTFORUM

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## Scott Hocking

SUSANNE HILBERRY GALLERY

Mixing the documentary mode with lyrical fiction, “The End of the World,” Scott Hocking’s recent show at Susanne Hilberry Gallery, presented Detroit as a surrealist archive: a site of contradictions in which revolutionary energy erupts from abject decay. On display were photographs of the city’s urban ruins as well as sculptural accumulations of objects—primarily books and taxidermied animals—that addressed or were indigenous to the region. A rusting Ford Mercury body anchored the surrounding works. Parked atop a bed of rock salt, the auto stood as an objet trouvé emblemizing the upward aspirations of the Motor City.

The photographs come from two series. In “The Egg and the MCTS,” 2007–, Hocking documents his construction of a totemic sculpture in one of Detroit’s most famous urban ruins, the Michigan Central train station, a neoclassical structure that was built in 1913 and closed in 1988. Hocking’s solid, egg-shaped mass appears in his photos amid the decay of a debris-filled hallway—a disjuncture at once arresting and humorous. Meanwhile, additional photos from the same set detailing the site alone (its edifice, its grounds) likewise suggest a duality: the growth of wild vegetation and other signs of life against the building’s dilapidation in the wake of decades of neglect.

The other series on view, “Detroit Nights,” 2007–12, evokes George Brassai’s signature representation of Paris, to the extent that Hocking distills his own city by similarly using a filter of streetlights and fog. Through the younger artist’s lens, houses, factories, stores, gas stations, sports fields, highway overpasses, and the like appear as structures glowing from within, spaces made visible by way of diaphanous patterns of color and artificial light, as if caught in the act of metamorphosis. Although in “Detroit Nights” the artist’s manipulation of his environment is implicit, whereas in “The Egg and the MCTS” his construction is pictured as the physical, central subject, both series effectively conjure a sense of reality transformed.

Scott Hocking,  
*The Egg and the MCTS*  
#4718, 2012, ink-jet  
print, 33 x 49½".  
From the series  
“The Egg and the  
MCTS,” 2007–.



Yet Hocking is no simple fetishist of the “discarded” and “out-moded” of Bretonian decay. This Detroit native can be radically distinguished from the myriad artists who have ventured to represent this most photogenic of declining postindustrial metropolises by his physical engagement with the reality he depicts. More than just picturing Detroit, he has for years played with the ways it appears to others. Further, Hocking often uses the rubble of this city as raw material, organizing consumer and industrial detritus—from blown-out tires to crumbling blocks of rebar and concrete—into pyramids, mounds, and other shapes, situating these minor monuments in symbolically significant places (such as the MCTS, the Packard Automotive Plant, and the Roosevelt Warehouse). Under the artist’s gaze and cultivation, buildings long condemned appear as invitations, calls to embrace the abandoned or to reinvent the overlooked.

The worn, eroded, or partially destroyed nature of the subjects Hocking photographs makes him out to be a ragpicker of sorts, a melancholy scavenger on the streets of a shrinking city. But Hocking collects the objects he finds in his urban wanderings to build an informal archive of the postindustrial city, ordered according to its characteristic materials, products, and forms. The central installation in this show, *Mercury Retrograde*, 2012, which juxtaposes a ruined car body with a wall of vitrines containing taxidermy borrowed from the teaching collection of the Grand Rapids Public Museum, clearly demonstrated the core of Hocking’s practice. Evoking a sense of decline as well as transcendence, his totems articulate the improbable (even radical) nexus of Detroit’s urban, suburban, and rural spaces—places of “profane illumination” resting just beyond the reach of our unmediated gaze.

—Matthew Biro