AUTOSHOW

MICHIGAN ARTISTS EXPLORE THE IMPACT OF THE AUTOMOBILE ON 20TH-CENTURY AMERICAN CULTURE

PARTICIPATING ARTISTS
Zola Ajamu
Christina Bechstein
Allen Barke
Jef Bourgouin
Joe Crachialia
Robert Cramer, Jr.

Dick Jugert
Malt DeGarmo
Kelly Demmas
Elinor Dyk-Norris
Roni Eisenbach
Thomas Frank
Joan Gann
L. Saalfell Gardner
Tyrone Guyon
Brian Kremmer
Brian Kratman
Lester Leshay
Renee McGlathery
Catherine Peck
Aaron Ibn Pori Pilts
Bruce Thayer
Michael Vizekovich
Joseph Weiner
Marilyn Zimmerman
Gary Zych

EXHIBITION @ CRANBROOK ART MUSEUM
JUNE 1 - SEPTEMBER 1 1996

RECEPTION TO MEET THE ARTISTS
SATURDAY JUNE 1 1996
6 - 9PM

LECTURES BY THE ARTISTS ON THURSDAY EVENINGS IN JUNE
CALL 810 645 - 3323 FOR A SCHEDULE
On the Road

For some, the automobile conjures up images of cross-country rides to distant spots across the map. Others picture crowded freeways, rush-hour traffic and labyrinths of roads that lead nowhere and everywhere. Still others draw correlations to the environment or advertising or countless other aspects of society influenced by the car.

This summer, 29 Michigan artists, architects and designers display their interpretations of the automobile as Cranbrook's Art Museum joins the rest of the country in commemorating the 100th anniversary of the American auto industry. Individually, the works feature rusted automobile parts, billboards, junk yards and maps. Collectively, they celebrate the automobile while examining its tremendous impact on our society. The Cranbrook Auto Show runs through Sept. 1.

In the beginning . . .

The American automobile industry began humbly in 1896 when the Duryea brothers of Springfield, Mass., built, advertised and sold a production run of 13 matching motor-wagons, according to the American Automobile Centennial Commission.

Within decades of the industry's birth, Americans completely abandoned the horse and buggy, the fuel of choice switched from oats to petroleum and dirt roads gradually became paved. America's first cars were small and slow, but through the years they grew in size and speed before a 1970s' energy crisis forced the industry to downsize models for fuel efficiency. Early in the 20th century, automotive pioneer Henry Ford introduced the assembly line and changed forever the way industrial workers perform their jobs. Labor unions emerged, along with strikes, union-busting, unfair labor laws and, eventually, the National Labor Relations Board.

"We wanted to do something to commemorate this anniversary because of the obvious impact the automobile has had on metropolitan Detroit as well as our nation," said Gregory Wittkopf, director of Cranbrook's Art Museum. "This show may surprise some people. The name conjures up images of the Detroit Auto Show, but our show has little to do with the actual design of cars."

Left

Sho De Goer
Inner Tube Man, 1984
Rubber inner tube

Right

Marilyn Zemansky
A Reconstruction of the Highland Park Plant, 1984
Photographic collage

25,000 Employees at the Ford Motor Company's Plant, Detroit
Expansive machine tools operated by technicians and scientists at a Ford plant. The factory, the most advanced automobile plant in the world, is the model for American auto manufacturing.
Show reveals car’s impact on culture

By ROGER GREEN
ANN ARBOR NEWS BUREAU

BLOOMFIELD HILLS - Many Michigan institutions have mounted shows commemorating the 100th anniversary of the Duryea Motor Wagon, the first mass-produced motorcar.

Grand Rapids’ Public Museum is among the facilities sponsoring auto-themed shows; so are the Henry Ford Museum & Greenfield Village and the Kalamazoo Institute of Arts. Add to the list the Detroit Historical Museum and Detroit Institute of Arts.

Yet no institution has assembled a more inventive or thought-provoking exhibit than the Cranbrook Academy Art Museum.

On view through Sept. 1, the “Cranbrook Auto Show” comprises works by 26 unusually thoughtful Michigan artists working in a variety of media.

The automobile’s impact on U.S. culture is the aim of the exhibit, which should widen viewers’ horizons appreciably.

As might be expected, many of the media represented are experimental or non-traditional. Two conceptual pieces are especially noteworthy for expanding the limits of what art can address.

One work, the “Boundary Project” by Christina Bechstein, Ronit Eisenbach and Hank Scollard, consists of a map and a collection of commemorative postcards, mailed from locations along the boundaries separating metropolitan and suburban Detroit. The cards, reproducing original photos and observations, raise sensitive questions about the automobile as a means of white flight.

The other conceptual piece, photographer Thomas Frank’s “Spirit of Detroit,” is a grid of black-and-white pictures of stolen, stripped-down automobiles. Frank shot the pictures methodically over 12 months, in an area of Detroit known as the U.S. epicenter for stolen vehicles: the square mile bounded by Greenfield, Seven Mile, Southfield and Eight Mile roads. Documenting the gutted vehicles as neighborhood fixtures, Frank directs attention to a flourishing “alternative” auto industry, and the problems it creates for society.

Some artists’ non-traditional materials are unlikely car parts. Sculptor Joseph Wessner’s “Gethsemane” is an arrangement of leaf springs found in rear-end suspensions.

The springs, gracefully curved metal strips with one rolled end, can be read, Wessner says in a posted statement, as fists or arms in gestures of assertion or protest. They combine as a remarkably dynamic freestanding sculpture, a sea of emphatic thrusting motions seemingly frozen in space and time.

Matt De Genaro’s “Inner Tube Man” is a larger-than-life standing figure constructed of rubber inner tubes. The figure suggests that humans identify with, indeed become, familiar materials, not least those associated with motorcars.


Some of the artists work effectively with more or less traditional materials. Bruce Thayer is showing big mixed-media paintings — “ideological cartoons” says the gallery guide — critical of inequities in the auto industry. Catherine Peet contributed paintings of highway scenes exceptional for evoking atmosphere and light. Brian Kremser has on view handsome relief sculptures of carved oak, portraying auto workers as massive and heroic in the manner of Works Progress Administration art.

The “Cranbrook Auto Show” is a rich and stimulating assessment of social and cultural issues associated with motorcars. Viewers will find much to ponder in the exhibit. Many will return to the museum parking lot with altered feelings about their vehicles.

Matt De Genaro’s ‘Inner Tube Man’ at the ‘Cranbrook Auto Show,’ which runs through Sept. 1.

IF YOU GO: The Cranbrook Art Museum is at 1221 N. Woodward Ave. in Bloomfield Hills. Hours are: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Wednesday-Saturday (to 9 p.m., Thursday); and noon to 5 p.m. Sunday. For more information, call (810) 645-3323.
Contemplation FUELS ‘AUTO’ SHOW

‘Thanksgiving Day’: Catherine Pee was transforms the freeway into an energy source in this work, one of the pieces in a current Cranbrook Art Museum exhibit exploring the impact of the automobile on 20th century American culture.

BY MARY KLEMIC
STAFF WRITER

The “Cranbrook Auto Show” at Cranbrook Art Museum in Bloomfield Hills presents cars in a different light. You’ll see chassis that challenge the mind, tires that tread new ground, gears that shift perspectives.

The display, continuing through Sept. 1 at 1221 N. Woodward, celebrates the 100th anniversary of the first mass-produced automobile. In the exhibit, 29 artists, architects and designers explore the impact of the automobile on 20th century American culture.

The show travels inside and outside the museum, around the upper galleries and to the lower galleries. Participants speak about their work 7:30 p.m. Thursdays this month. The talks are included with museum admission.

Allen Berk’s oil paintings gently evoke the past with their soft colors. His “Figures with Cars” features short lines that suggest energy. Catherine Pee transforms the freeway into an energy source with such scenes as 1-75, wavy lines on the road convey radiating heat or energy.

Thomas Frank presents photographic portraits of abandoned cars in a variety of settings, including clean neighborhoods and rundown spaces. John Cusine shows photos of such scenes as an automobile graveyard and a row of cement highway barriers. Nature, seen in withering branches and other barren images in the scenes, seems to have died or is just existing. Ronit Eisenbach and Christina Bechstein use old photos and postcards to make an urban “boundary” connected to the auto. Joseph Craciola’s transfer prints give the look of another world to the sights of a blast furnace on Zeg Island and the Ford Rouge plant.

Marilyn Zimmerman’s 1916 photograph of workers at a car plant and adds representations of people who were barely represented at the time, including black women. Cesar Chavez and union organizers are seen in ghostly images in the corner. Brian Kremmer’s large, wooden images of workers, with their arms raised, give the feeling of heroism and revolution.

Jef Bourgeau of Rochester offers a war one. The McPhail looks at art through rear view and side view mirrors. Bruce Thayer’s works are like junk comics. They feature images that resemble icons. (Thayer has a concurrent live action show, “One Downstairs, Pits All,” in the museum’s deSalle gallery.) Meker Vidalovich’s “Hand Me a Screwing Baby” and “Hedonism” present larger expressive images in vibrant colors.

Some works put parts of cars or materials related to cars, to artistic use.

In his “Wheel and Deal,” Gary Zavok fashions the words of the titles from steal from abandoned auto factories and existing shops in Detroit. The piece, black in color — suggesting blue collar, perhaps — resembles a ribbon on a prize. Joseph Wesner of Birmingham made “Gethsemane” from parts included in his car and suspension that are both strong and flexible. In the work they resemble parts of fists. Robert Cane Jr. makes little figures out of such objects as mirrors and compact cases.

“Inner Tube Man” by Matt De Genuaro suggests how people identify with the auto. Dick Cruger presents an “Auto Rotomobile” with steel “pages” shaped like cars. His “Breathe” is another “book,” this one made from rubber and handled with a rubber glove.

The group “Keel Gnie Spirit” turned a car into a shrine, with tribal figures, a wave and a post like a totem pole with gear and wheels.

The show travels inside and outside the museum, around the upper galleries and to the lower galleries.

‘Inner Tube Man’: Matt De Genuaro made this figure in the “Cranbrook Auto Show” out of rubber inner tubes.
Exhibits travel different roads to show the auto's influence on our culture

By Joy Hakanson Colby
Detroit News Art Critic

One exhibit treats the automobile as an object of desire. The other takes a critical look at how the car has reshaped the American landscape while transforming the driver.

Together they celebrate the American Automobile Centennial this year, offering two intriguing perspectives on a subject that reaches us all.

You'll find the glamorous side at the Detroit Institute of Arts, where next week's The Car and the Camera: The Detroit School of Automotive Photography shows how Detroit photographers invented new ways of creating a national appetite for the automobile through advertising. This is the first time Detroit's commercial car photography has been deemed museum-worthy.

Cranbrook Art Museum, on the other hand, concentrates on how the car has impacted American culture with a group show by 20 Michigan artists. Dubbed Cranbrook Auto Show, this is a high-energy collection, offering insights that are funny, occasionally profound, often funky, satirical and unexpected.

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The sleek 1939 Packard coupe, far right, belongs to Ken Kercheval. Matt DeGennaro's "Inner Tube Man" towers nearly 10 feet in the Cranbrook Auto Show. Tyree Guyton calls his dotted car, above, "Driving to the Suburbs." He drove the vehicle from Detroit to the Cranbrook Art Museum in Bloomfield Hills.
Above: Tyree Guyton’s “Heidelberg Express: Driving to the Suburbs,” is a working car used to promote his “Heidelberg Project” in Detroit, in which Guyton used Heidelberg Street as a canvas for his paints.

Above right: Kebbi Gniw Spirit (Black Wing Spirit) is one of two outdoor installations at the “Cranbrook Auto Show” and was created by a consortium of eight Detroit artists. A rusted Chevy Blazer was towed to Cranbrook and, in a “Libations Ceremony” with tribal drums, the group paid homage to the spirit of the car.

always rah, rah,” said Rau. “We were so impressed with Bruce Thayer’s work that we gave him a one-man show within the exhibit — 19 works on paper and sculpture.” Thayer takes a satirical look at the automotive industry with his show “One Down-Sizing Fits All.”

The outcome of the exhibit has surpassed our wildest expectations,” said Rau. “The artists are providing an alternative viewpoint of the industry.”

The “Cranbrook Auto Show: Michigan Artists Explore the Impact of the Automobile on 20th Century American Culture” runs through September 1 at Cranbrook Art Museum. A special artists’ lecture featuring Marilyn Zimmerman, Bruce Thayer, Robert C. Ivers and Gary Zych will be held at 7:30 p.m. Thursday, June 27, in the DeSalle Auditorium. The lecture is included with the museum admission. Museum hours are 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays; 10 a.m.-9 p.m. Thursdays; and 12 p.m.-5 p.m. Sundays. Admission is $4 for adults and $2 for full-time students, children and senior citizens. Children under 7 and Art Museum members are admitted free. 1221 N. Woodward Avenue, Bloomfield Hills. (810) 645-3312.

The Car And The Camera

Just a short cruise down Woodward, another museum is celebrating the American Automobile Centennial through the visual arts.

The Detroit Institute of Arts is showcasing “The Car and the Camera: The Detroit School of Automotive Photography,” which spotlights the 1930s-1970s, a time when Detroit was the epicenter of American automotive manufacturing and Detroit photographers created new ways of shooting and seeing automobiles.

The exhibit, which opened June 16, features 75 color and black and white photographs, with some from the 1980s and 90s as well. The images were collected from the original photographers, Ford Motor Co., the GM Media Archives and the National Automotive Historical Collection at the Detroit Public Library.

In addition, visitors to the DIA should take another look at the “Detroit Industry Frescoes,” a tribute to auto workers and the auto industry by Mexican artist Diego Rivera. The frescoes portray scenes Rivera witnessed at the Ford Motor Co. Rouge Industrial Complex in the 1930s. The frescoes are in the Rivera Court.

This 1959 Buick Electra 225 is one of 75 photos featured in the “Car and the Camera” exhibit at the DIA.

“The Car and the Camera: The Detroit School of Automotive Photography” runs through Nov. 24 at the Detroit Institute of Arts. Museum hours are 11 a.m.-4 p.m. Wednesdays-Fridays, and 11 a.m.-6 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays. The exhibition is free with a recommended museum admission of $4 for adults, $1 for children and students. DIA members are free. 5200 Woodward Avenue, Detroit. (313) 833-7900.
Driving art

"Driving to the Suburbs," one of the latest pieces created by Detroit artist Tyree Guyton, left, is just one of 29 pieces of work exhibited during the "Cranbrook Auto Show: Michigan Artists Explore the Impact of the Automobile on 20th-century American Culture." Isabella Leone, a 21-month-old Troy resident, loved the look, which conjures up memories of Guyton's Heidelberg Project in Detroit. The "Inner Tube Man," above, was created by Matt DeGenaro, while the "Autobiography" was conceived by Dick Cruger. The show opened Saturday and runs through Sept. 1. Museum hours are 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays; 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. Thursdays and noon to 5 p.m. Sundays. Call 645-3312 for information.