CONFESSIONS OF A WHEEL WORSHIPER

An abstract submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Sculpture

by

Michael Lupo

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The abstract of Michael Lupo is approved:

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Sincerely,

Michael Lupo
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ABSTRACT

CONFESSIONS OF A WHEEL WORSHIPER

by

Michael Lupo

Master of Art in Sculpture

January, 1975

I feel a creative impulse. That mystical, often mythic, motivation, that some say, sets the artist apart. Lucy Lippard, in *Six Years and the Dematerialization of Art* says... "They, (artists) are such in that they choose to effect". Though the source of the quote is controversial to some art critics, it felt right when I read it. I have always chosen to effect those around me. The media I choose and their dimensional realization are always secondary to the effect I wish to convey. If I state I'm an artist, people often ask, "Oh, you're an Artist? What do you do, Sculpture? Oh, do you work in stone?" For them the medium is the first concern, but not necessarily more important than the message, or the lack of one. I like the idea of Art that can be omni-lingual. People sometimes demand more information from my art than I wish to communicate, seeking perhaps something more profound, maybe frustrated by what they think is an inability to understand my "Language". I believe that as an artist it is my responsibility to supply the stimulus or juxtaposition of stimulii
in choosing to effect. I am a conceptualist who has chosen not to reject the object, knowing that I am free to reject it when it does not suit my purpose. Sometimes an object will stimulate the creative impulse and other times a thought or group of thoughts will cause me to manifest them in an objective manner.

I made a decision, that art for me, would have to be more than making pretty things or it was only masturbatory and not all the way. Having owned (or been owned by) 52 vehicles in a span of 18 years is, without a doubt, an all the way involvement, (however dubious), that is why I feel that no decisions I made in producing the nine pieces in this show were even close to arbitrary. Thus, I was moved to express as sculpture some examples of wheel worship as I have practiced it.

First, it was my willful decision to own the vehicles represented, either in whole or in Part. Second, out of 52 vehicles owned, I chose nine, which in a more universal and less personal level, represent various artistic design approaches. Approaches which have become almost cliches, yet hopefully resulted in creations of extreme fidelity to those design ethics or combination of design ethics; I.E., More is Less, Less is More, Function follows Form, Form follows Function, Form w/o Function, Function w/o Form, Form = Function and Function = Form. Third, I used part of my 7500 volume collection of transportation magazines
in the temple-like truncated pyramid shapes, covered with hub caps as icons to create a religious atmosphere.
CONFESSIONS OF A WHEEL WORSHIPER

Reception/Performance

and

Exhibition

Initially my plan for the reception of this exhibition of my sculpture was a rather traditional display of static three-dimensional forms to be viewed by the spectators with or without the presence of the artist. A buffet spread more sumptuous than is usually found at such openings was arranged for and even included wheel shaped cookies. In addition to this, and the 9 pieces of sculpture, I asked one of my friends to assist me in creating some supportive atmosphere for my work. I have known Vince Tourney since elementary school. Even in junior high school we were both heavily involved in building highly personalized vehicles in preparation for that day when we would come into manhood, which in the U. S. A. is signified when a boy receives his driver's license.

Vince was building a 1929 Ford pick-up truck with numerous modifications commonly referred to in wheel worship language as a "chopped, channeled, shortened and bobbed 29A-bone phone booth, with a suicide front end and a full-house flathead four-banger". My project was "a '48 Merc powered, full-fendered 29 A-bone roadster with zephyr cogs in a 39 floor box and a chopped rag-top".
Sometime in the twenty years that have passed since the birth of these projects, it became apparent that my friend's automotive creations always had a little more style, a little more attention to details, a more craftsmanlike approach than mine or any of the hot-rods, customs and sportscars of our wheel worshipping contemporaries. In short Vince is an artist. He has the seriousness of intent, a conscientious uncompromising attitude, a responsibility to his creative impulse that I feel any artist who wishes to be anything more than a celibate must address himself to. It is an attitude that I have only rarely seen in practice and certainly includes the legendary Von Dutch, the only artist of the wheel worship cult to be included in *Pop Art Revisited*. With this in mind I asked my friend to add his newest wheeled creation to my exhibition, a 1948 MG-TC.

A performance was not planned for the 8 P.M. reception, but with only 7 hours remaining, unsurmountable difficulties in finishing some of the pieces found me and a few helpful friends in a gallery only half complete in its installation. As a very vocal advocate of multi-media art and in the spirit of "the show must go on". I reviewed my limited alternatives and with the timely appearance of over a dozen fellow artists we went ahead with the installation. From this point on we, and subsequently the invited
public, shared in a phenomenon of momentus energy that can only be described as performance. This demonstration of miracle like, positive energy was witnessed by most all in attendance and at 8:30 only the Lotus Elite piece remained outside of the gallery.

With an unprecedented crowd of nearly 200 spectators I felt it necessary to create somekind of diversionary tactic to enable us to slip the Lotus Elite into its repository with as little fan fare as possible. This was successfully accomplished by having the MG-TC and a Norton motorcycle driven directly and loudly into the midst of the crowd at precisely the moment the Lotus was slipped in from behind a curtained glass door.
MIDDLE CLASS AMERICAN BLUE DREAM

Because it is a massive use of the superfluous detail, an addenda to the mundane boxiness of the station wagon that symbolizes the upward striving of the middle class.

The shape, because it is beautiful of itself, it is a symbol of the American dream machine syndrome and metallic blue because it is the color statistically more popular than any other.

I owned a 1964 Oldsmobile Vista Cruiser for 2 years. The skylight roof inspired this piece. I exaggerated the design by using the same part from 2 cars, increased its appeal to fantasy by opaquing the glass and mounted the result at a slightly precarious angle. To the common-place, almost non-denominational metallic blue color I added pearlescence for a more obvious surface enhancement. By adding a projector Middle Class America Blue becomes a confessional, beaming images of my past experience with wheels. It is an example of form before function.

The station wagon by its very name denotes a utilitarian function to such a degree that by the late fifties the station wagon was a symbol of one's having reached a certain middle-class level of responsibility. With this in mind, General Motors sought to broaden their station wagon sales to include a growing market of more youthful consumers, whose image consciencelessness had, until then, caused them to spend their automotive dollars on somewhat sportier
four wheeled concepts, thus, sometime in late 1963, General Motors introduced a new version of their Oldsmobile station wagon called the Vista Cruiser. Buick, with a few cosmetic changes introduced a similar version. What set these vehicles apart from their mundane metal stable-mates was a less than subtle intrusion on the rear half of their characteristic flat roofs, called skylights. These raised openings were filled with smoked glass and took a configuration seen only on streamlined Bonneville land speed racers. Not unlike the Vista-Dome rail cars we all remember from the back covers of childhood National Geographics, these station wagons were meant for first class family travel. If Chevrolet was the "bread" by which we would "see the U.S.A." and Olds, Buick and Pontiac were "cake of comfort", then Vista Cruiser was certainly the "frivolous frosting". Though many automobile journalist essayed the distinctive Vista Cruiser as comparatively beautiful, and though the raised roofline added a fraction of functional cargo area, the roof-borne windows also functioned as blinding portals to rear seat passengers, and in the safety conscious seventies the extra glass was seen by the federal government as dangerous in the event of a roll over. An immense force is needed to overturn such a vehicle in the 4000 lb. range, and the consequences are cataclysmic when considering that all station wagons are
little more than tin boxes surrounded by glass. Nonetheless in 1972, the wagon lost its raised sky-light, leaving instead a barely vestigial plastic covered rectangle above the front seat to justify Olds retention of the Vista Cruiser name.
IN THE PINK

Because the Cadillac is perhaps one of the most ostentacious symbols of conspicuous consumption.

Because the 1948-53 series is the progenitive example of fins & fishtails, and perhaps the most voluptuous, therefore pink and flesh-like in color. It is a good example of form without function since the form is not essential to its function as tail lamp and bumper.

The example of this school of styling that I owned was a 1950 convertible and was living proof that Detroit can build a comfortable, powerful car, and still maintain a relatively economical 17 m.p.g.
ROADSIDE SHRINE TO OUR FORD

Because most of the 15,000,000 model "T" Fords produced were devoid of superfluous detail and almost totally functional.

Because Henry Ford is considered one of the Gods of the Industrial Revolution and the father of mass production, and because I feel Ford had a better idea. It is a good example of form following function, function = form and less is more.

The remains that constitute this piece were found in the burnt out rubble of the now infamous Spahn Movie Ranch, one time headquarters of Charles Manson, whose conviction, perhaps not coincidentally, was helped along by his initial arrest for his involvement with stolen dunebuggies.
LESS IS MORE

Because it is the most efficient and quickest way for a human to move without an outside energy source. Because of its almost total lack of superfluous details. It is functional in the extreme, yet in denying its function it remains a beautiful shape. The black chrome finish was added, because a handbuilt machine weighing less than 20 pounds deserved it.

The bicycle was made in 1963 by E. George Bates, an ex-racer in Plaistow, England. I found its rusted remains in the back yard of a friend's home in east London recognizing it as a high quality handbuilt, I decided to bring it home to California and restore it. Before leaving England, I visited the shop of Mr. Bates and his pleasurable response to my plans reinforced my decision to make it not only functionally renewed, but an artistic statement.
FUNCTION BE HANGED

Because it is a symbol of function with total disregard for form, as such it demonstrates the puritan work ethic. It is an honest shape in that its basic configuration has not changed in 50 years since its function has remained that of compressing air. I chose to finish it in raw steel to reinforce this honesty.

The compressor was manufactured in 1932 by the Wayne Co. of Los Angeles, and the pumping portion by the Curtis Compressor Co. of Boston. I purchased it from a friend, Steven Hensley, who's family the compressor had faithfully served, from 1932 until I took possession in 1972. It functioned for 40 years without major breakdowns of any kind. I chose to reward it with a complete overhaul and refinishing.
PORTABLE WHEEL MEMORIAL

Because in a chauvinist oriented, double standard culture the automobile has become more than physical transport, it is a projection of our sexual fantasy, an ego projection on wheels, a demonstration of virile potency.

The ovoid chain wheel guard shape symbolizes, in womblike protection, the effect of streamlined shapes and fender skirts and various covers used by auto designers to deny the function of the auto altogether. I used the wheel puller as an aggressive symbol, a phallic juxtaposition not unlike flaring wheel wells, spinnered wheels and jutting vehicular protrusions found on more sports oriented vehicles.

The wheel guard shape is from a laundry machine built by the Oakland Machine Works in 1927. The wheel-puller is of unknown manufacturer, circa 1930.
VESPA TEARS FOR JAN

Because they are a vestigial art-deco appendage to the motor scooter, which itself is only a diluted example of two wheeled worship, an unorthodox design compromise considered dangerous by many motor cycle experts and enthusiasts, due to its small wheel's lack of gyroscopic longitudinal stability, and because Jan, is to me, and most who know her, an "original" unorthodox person imbued of infectious integrity.

I found the Vespa (and thus, the parts used for this piece) in a friend's barn in Los Altos Hills, California. He is an eccentric nuclear physicist who keeps an 850 lb. pig named "Peter Porker" for a pet. In his own eccentric way he offered the Vespa to me on the condition that I get it running first, a possibility he thought dim, since his genius lay in thinking physics law, rather than acting it out mechanically. Taking up the challenge I tinkered with, and shoved the scooter about and 20 minutes later owned a shabby but running Vespa.
The Lotus Elite is one of those few cars that has pleased the eye of almost all who have viewed it. From the debut of the prototype at the Earl's Court London Motor Show in 1957 until September of 1963, only 988 were produced yet the Elite's sculptural shape was not easily forgotten. Colin Chapman wanted to create a series-production road car that would furnish a reasonable amount of creature comforts, weather protection among them, without compromising those virtues of handling and performance, that the Lotus marque was already famous for in competition. To do this he decided to start with the complete drivetrain of the Lotus formula two, single-seated, Grand Prix cars. This was not a new idea in itself, as Maserati, Ferrari and others had based road cars on this principle. The problem that usually arose in trying to make a street-legal car from competition bits was one of added weight and complexity. To solve this, Chapman designed a monocoque, (or single-shell), fibre-glass structure that functioned both as chassis and body. Frank Costin designed the outer shell configuration. Costin's more notable designs include the "C" and "D" series Jaguars which led to the highly successful XKE, a design which has remained basically the same for 13 years. Though Chapman's first attempt at a practical road car, the Elite, from its
inception, gave better performance results than he could have hoped for, regardless of its power to weight ratio of only 1:14 (an average American passenger car is around 1:20 while a "competition only" dragster is about 1:1).

The Elite won the first two races entered at Silverstone and Mallory Park, England in 1958. In 1959 at Le Mans, an Elite finished first in class and eighth overall, at the Nürbergring 1000 km race it was first in class again. The Elite repeated its domination of class at Le Mans with 1st place and 2nd place in class again in 60, 61, 62, 63, and 64, when the factory teams were withdrawn from competition to concentrate efforts on the newly introduced, higher production, Lotus Elan. The Elite chassis/body unit cost became prohibitive at higher production levels and with the roof section serving a major structural function, the Elite could not be modified to satisfy an import market demand for a open car, (not surprisingly, sunny California is one of the largest importers of the Lotus product).

It is also very important to note that the impressive Elite track record was chalked up while maintaining an even more impressive fuel consumption average of 30 miles per gallon.

My Lotus Elite is the result of a high school dream. After school bench racing with my friends, we would conjure up visions of the "ultimate car". With the Elites's racing success current news, the idea of a road car that
didn't just "look", but "was" performance, was infectious indeed. I had to have an Elite. I suppose the Elite was also an early design lesson. It is probably the classic example of the cliche contemporary design ethic of "Less is More". It is without parallel in terms of efficient utilization of materials, from its own aerodynamic simplicity, to its meager consumption of fuel, (while still giving a beautiful shape with exhilarating performance and handling). From a more philosophical point of view the Elite is a contemporary parallel to "The Meek shall inherit the Earth". If super cars like the Ferrari and Corvette were "Goliaths" then the Elite was close to being "David".

In view of the 1970's, with much concern over energy consumption, the Lotus Elite, which won the "Index of Thermal Efficiency" award at Le Mans for 3 years in a row, is a perfect example of sophistication versus brute force, and perhaps a design concept which should be re-examined despite governmental effort to force 2 ton, 10 mile per gallon behemoths on the consumer, in the interest of public safety.

The Lotus is finished in flat grey, one, because its restoration is not finished, and two because I feel a pleasing shape can stand on its own, and grey is neutral.

I protected the Lotus from touch and almost from view.
because I see the automobile as an object of instinctive
lust, a point that is well borne out by statistics on
impulse buying. The Lotus Elite was the "Wheels" I had
"Lusted" for since adolescence, and if by some strange fate
I must be assigned an ego-projection, or if one believes
in reincarnation, then let me be a Lotus Elite, as I
would not be ashamed to emulate its virtues in a world
of depleted energy.
Because it is yet another efficient alternative solution to the problem of personal transport. It is a design that takes uncommon thought and concentration to drive, yet when driven gives the pilot and passengers most of the pleasure, while minimizing the peril, inherent in it's two-wheeled brother, the motorcycle.

Though not a complete, functional vehicle in fact, it is enough for a 3-dimensional "drawing", or "essence of motorcycle", to communicate to the viewer my manipulation or editorialization of its parts.

I purchased this vehicle from a friend I made in London, England, through our common interest in motorcycling. It has always amazed and pleased me to find that, regardless of cultural inequities, however mundane, the motor vehicle, (and likewise most modes of transport) becomes a common ground, a medium of interaction, or lowest common denominator if you will, in bringing people together, in spite of language and traditional barriers.