Crash Tested: Galactic Modern

A thesis submitted to the college of the arts of Kent state University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

by

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I make sculptures that are optimistic and simple in form. They draw on cues from automotive design to examine how form can be seductive and have a sense of cleverness. Like cars, their pristine craftsmanship provides a preciousness that borders on fetishization.

The forms of my work are intentionally low, stable, angular and geometric. The objects have a perceived weight that is heavy with a low center of gravity and a wide stance that provides stability. The angular geometric qualities and small size of the dimensional objects become almost gemlike, providing a sense of preciousness. I have chosen to use simple forms that cause details of the edges, corners and gaps be amplified. The negative space underneath the pieces between the pedestal and object and below the cantilevered planes gives the forms a sense of lift. Like the tires on a car, the negative space provides tension between the piece and the surface that it sits on. The lines within the forms are meant to mimic the panel gaps of automobiles and also act as a point of tension between the sections of the forms. These small gaps create the illusion of the pieces being a skin that has been wrapped around a frame.

My approach to form has been heavily influenced by automotive design. Specifically the designs of Marcello Gandini while he was employed by the Bertone coach builder in Italy. He is partially responsible for the Italian wedge style found in many 1970’s and 1980’s luxury sports car designs. He uses simple lines and elongated or shortened proportions to create complex forms, this is a jumping off point for my use of geometric forms and clean planes. These qualities came as a result of his architectural approach to design, where assembly and mechanics are paramount and body styling is a response to the mechanical and rigid inner workings. He styled cars to be assembled with flat planes to create angles and volume. These aspects of the cars he designed have a spirit of progressiveness as they appear to be space-aged. I want my work to
create a similar experience of approaching the object and being drawn to examine it from all angles because of its details and strangeness.

My appreciation for the aesthetic of automobiles comes from my fascination with model cars growing up. I had built many models cars as a child in a variety of sizes but were almost all vintage or exotic cars that I could only dream of seeing in person. My affinity for these small scale model cars help cultivate my affinity for small items. Gandini’s design credits include Lamborghini’s, Alfa Romeos and Maserati’s, these model cars were low and angular and small in comparison to the averages cars introduced in the 1970’s. This smaller style car allowed for all the details to be prominent. Because of their low stance these cars had a very low center of gravity providing stability on the road. These highly crafted cars are regarded as precious because of their precision and scale. I want my work to be aspirational, attentive to detail and treasured in the same way these model cars were to me as child.

I approach color as a material for construction. I use glaze as both a surface treatment and a voluminous material that allows me to further manipulate the angles of the form. The hues are chosen through the contemplation of the dimensions and angles of each individual polygonal form. Each object has a distinct form - with specific edges that creates a range of shadows from dramatic to subtle. I control this shadow shift by applying different glaze color combinations with varying airbrush techniques. I thoughtfully choose colors that will enhance the mood of a form or shape. The colors are rooted in the tradition of race cars and hot rods, as well as factory custom colors of vintage guitars and basses. By using color shifts that are analogous I create a visual tension that is broken or challenged by the tape lines and gaps in the form. I think that forms that are simple and bold have an aggressive stance because they appear as if they are about
to move, have a sense of bravado. I will choose red and black to amplify this attitude. If a form is a bit more subtle and sleek I will choose blues and greens because of their more calm nature and I will choose yellows and oranges if the form appears to be more flamboyant and boisterous. Through airbrushing I am able to achieve intricate blushing surfaces that create visual color vibrations causing tension within the objects surface. This pulsing of color demands the viewer to inspect the pieces more closely and experience each object more intimately.

My work exploits car culture’s fetishization of beautiful objects. This body of work reflects the values of collectors of Italian supercars specifically. Based on interviews that I have read and listened to, these cars are often a reference to women, they call their cars “her” and “she” or even give them a feminine name. The cars are presented as a very specific stereotype of women, one of elegance and involved in high-end fashion. I find this comparison interesting because of the lines and presence of the cars. They are angular, low, geometric and a bit macho in style. The body of a car is saturated with thick, vivid, slick colors. Casual references to the female body by collectors and enthusiasts causes the car – to become a precious, female, sexualized object. These cars where designed to reflect a culture of romance as a result of the desires of their drivers and the companies that built them. I am using this sensibility to create work that is visually attractive and seductive in the same way cars are. The admiration of a car that is prized procession and a commodity is an intimate experience between the owner/driver and the car itself.

Making this work involves steps that mirror the industrial process of assembling automobiles. I connect slabs into closed forms and shape them by adding planes and rounding off or sharpening edges. This parallels the method of using sheets of metal to create curves and
edges. By using slab construction I can precisely control every edge and line on the piece. Using a spray gun to apply glazes allow me to control the colors very precisely to create a surface that is seductive. After the colors are applied in many thin layers, I then apply two to three layers of a clear glaze that smooths out the color and adds an extra layer of thickness and shine to the colors. By taking advantage of the properties of clay and glaze I am making work that has a direct link to process, the same way that industry takes advantage of the qualities of specific materials for specific applications, such as carbon fiber for lightness or powder coating metal for a more durable surface. The precision of these objects erases the hand so that each piece exists as its own entity and mirrors the industrial craftsmanship of commercial products.

I am unable to escape the influence of Ken Price. I have the utmost respect for Price’s work; it resonates with me on a level that I have not felt before. Price’s seductive forms are familiar and strange at the same time, their surfaces vibrate and their intimate scale speaks to precious objects. He plays with eroticism and fetish in his work that my work can elude to as well, but my approach is much more subtle in that regard. Price’s approach to color was undeniably cool, calculated and outrageous at times, creating surfaces that would glow and pulse just from the combinations of color. I am making work that draws on the same qualities that Price valued in his work. I also want to make work that causes visual pleasure through familiarity and strangeness.

My work also makes reference to 1960’s formalism, as it is upfront about its form and material, nothing is hidden. John McCracken, Donald Judd, and Larry Bell exemplify this approach historically. Their work was a direct reaction to abstract expressionism being fraught with emotion and physicality. They chose to make work devoid of emotion and metaphor that
aims to create an intangible experience that is only attainable in combination with the viewer. Their use of geometric forms, nuanced and subtle color choices and sleekness, defines this work visually. I am not interested in making work that is devoid of metaphor instead I am influenced by this work mostly on an aesthetic level, using bright colors, and sleek surfaces. My work is influenced subtlety by Judd and McCracken’s approach to making work. Their approach to material has been a major influence, they are using materials for what each material does and how it acts to directly support their concepts. I am influenced by their idea that their work is dependent on the viewers experience to build meaning beyond the artist’s framework. While McCracken and Judd made work that was direct in its human size to create a 1-to-1 relationship with the viewer, I am aiming for a different scale relationship. My scale of my work relates to the human body in a more sensual way, it can be experienced more privately and is the size of something that can be picked and taken with. My work is more specific in its references to the experience of admiring automobiles, so it is dependent on the viewer’s experience with cars but is also guided toward stability and preciousness.

I make objects that share the values of styling and design cues from the automotive industry examine how polygonal forms can resonate with qualities of optimism, simplicity and beauty. I am using clay and glaze a small scale to create sense of preciousness with gem like objects to create an intimate viewing experience. The objects are highly crafted and precisely assembled to mimic industrial produced goods of high value. My work conjures sense of nostalgia because of its direct reference to the model cars that I built as a child. The work becomes an object that seduces you to have an experience with it, guided by ideas of optimism and simplicity.
Figure 1
*Jade Wedge*
Glazed Ceramic
2018
8” x 4.5 x 5”
Figure 2
*Blushing Blue*
Glazed Ceramic
2018
16” x 3” x 4.5”
Figure 3

*Slick Brick*

Glazed Ceramic

2018

9” x 2.5” x 4”
Figure 4
*Sharp Sunset*
Glazed Ceramic
2018
14” x 6” x 5”
Figure 5
*Young American*
Glazed Ceramic
2018
4” x 2.5” x 18”
Figure 6
Desert Haze
Glazed Ceramic
2018
7” x 6” x 5”
Figure 7

*Melon Cat*

Glazed Ceramic

2018

6” x 5” x 4.5”
Figure 8

Dead Icon

Glazed Ceramic

2018

9” x 10” x 3”
Figure 9

*Miami*

Glazed Ceramic 2018

8” x 5” x 4”
Figure 10
*Sharp Sunset*
Detail
Figure 11
Miami
View 2
Figure 12
*Melon Cat*
Detail
Figure 14
Jade Wedge
Detail
Show Card
References


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