THE AUTOMOBILE AS A THEME
FOR A SERIES OF SCULPTURES

A Thesis
Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree Master of Fine Arts

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1970

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Personal thanks are extended to Professors David Black
and John Freeman for their help and guidance in their dual
capacities as teachers and advisors.

Mr. William Ramage has been most competent in the solution
of technical and aesthetic problems as they arose in the foundry.

My sincere appreciation is given to my wife, Patricia,
proofreader and typist for this thesis.

Thanks to Lynne Melchior for the final typed form of
this paper.
INTRODUCTION

This paper began over two years ago in anticipation of the completion of the program for the Master of Fine Arts Degree. Even before coming to this university, the theme was developing. Few of those early thoughts are present in this paper; mentally it has been written and rewritten many times. In its development and revision to final form, nuance and subtlety became very important in separating meanings.

The observation that the teacher teaches the latest thing he has learned applies to this thesis. If it were to be written next month or a year from now, it would not be surprising to find in it a change in tone and posture. As in many human enterprises, this thesis is limited by the findings developed to date.

The program at Ohio State has helped me to have the incentive to continue in personal research and to pursue a direction which is particularly my own. To find that direction has been the search for the past two years. Finding it is the topic of this paper. Unfortunately, too many times the artist/man is considered as a sort of removed or impersonal being. Often those most knowledgeable in the field of art belie this impression. A paper of this nature suddenly focuses that wonder, knowledge and doubt that one experiences in a
confrontation between art and self. One makes a stand of his beliefs in a personal statement.

In accomplishing these objectives, it was necessary to investigate the nature of knowledge as it is used to interpret reality. Parallels are drawn between the problems of general knowledge and the artistic experience. Line is put forward as the appropriate practical vehicle to reconcile art and experience. In trying to explain developments and attitudes about the topic, the automobile, literature from the period being discussed was used whenever available.

This personal investigation of the ramifications of a series of sculptures involving the automobile has attempted to hold a many faceted human experience up to light. The influences, processes and implications are revealed in hope of reincarnating the experience "to make."
It is a paradox that man's search for understanding often
destroyed that for which he looked. Before achieving the intel-
lectual sophistication of the question, man was forced to operate
at an empirical level, to accept as magic what he did not compre-
hend. Man had to be satisfied to observe and be acted upon. In
due course, individuals and groups started organizing obser-
vations into a hierarchy of experiences. Removal from the role
of participant to spectator, forced man to ponder the reason why.
By giving meaning to experience, man entered the abstract, sub-
jective condition of moving from a perceptual to a conceptual
world. In replacing the *prima facie* of time and space with
symbols, magic was changed from what was once entirely external
reality to what was invented by his interior mental images as it
synthesized experience. The fallacy of such ordering and sub-
sequent symbolization was the imperfect metamorphosis of objective
reality to subjective experience. Man's ideas necessarily ex-
panded or reduced the *prima facie* from one kind of reality into
another.

The expression of these observations went through a kind of
practical transubstantiation resulting in a visual artifact or
icon. The image, to this still formative mind was still the
reality it represented. With the further abstraction of picto-
graph and writing came the concept of poesy, a kind of metaphor
related to aural traditions and subjugated to the laws of rhetoric, attention still being given to a supposed authenticity of interpretation.

As societies plotted against other societies for a mythical supremacy, more sophisticated concepts based on numerical values developed which made the final transposition of human knowledge of reality into a theory of science. As a third generation abstraction, science theoretically persists until the present time as the most valid method of understanding reality. Thus man as an individual has finally been brought to full alienation from primary sources and experience to a profound dependency on symbolic synthesis for his understanding.

Plato is regarded as the first man in Western Civilization to attempt to organize reason as a vehicle to scientific knowledge through a concept of primary causes and the idea of the good. Included in his researches was the question of Art. Plato, in asking "What is it?", assumed that there was an absolute answer. It was not until much later in the history of human affairs that men realized there were no fixed solutions to this question. Each new generation of artists has broadened the application of the word Art. Hindsight reveals that through time the question has become converted. The possible answers have become more encompassing. The objects outside the category
have become smaller in number while the items included have become more numerous.

The Dadaists of our century, dominated by Duchamp, began a direct frontal attack on the existing values and sensibilities of Western Civilization. They tried to cast the shade of their own nihilism over the remaining concept of art as a totem to the dignity of man. Dadaist satirization of the phenomenon actually revitalized and fertilized the activity by raising new questions.

So from this enriched position the artist of this century is presented with several possibilities. On the one hand, the artist may remain in a kind of aboriginal innocence, allowing the experience of reality to act on him. He may be a perceptual poet who consciously distills qualities from one reality to another or he may become an axiometric conceptualist who invents his own reality and meaning. Each position has its unique problems as has been suggested by the physical limitation of the symbol or in this case, the artifact.

The primitive working directly with experience feels the continual frustration of his inability to perfectly transpose the intensity of experiences. Whatever his means, he can never duplicate the experiences themselves. The perceptual poet, having more understanding of the nature of his means, develops a vocabulary of metaphors to communicate. His is the problem of values and shades of meaning, whether to expand or reduce the
texture of his experiences. The artist of conceptual
persuasion has the problem of reducing particulars to generali-
izations. His reality becomes substantiated through the
"objecthood" of his artifact. Because of the very personal
interrelation between this type of artist and his work, he
constantly becomes enmeshed in the esoteric. The generalizations
are resolved in many instances by semantics. Erroneously, the
object is presumed to be a sum of its parts. Thus even in direct
confrontation with the concept of "objecthood", reality again
becomes distorted. What should be a visual experience becomes
literary. Logically and ideally the artifact should exist as a
pure visual experience with no questions asked.

Often under the guise of new freedom, lies an unforeseen
slavery and academism. With the development of Pragmatic
Philosophy and the parallel denial of "universal truths for all
time" new promise was held for the final release of modern man
from the shackles of antiquity. Each new value was to be
measured for its supposed validity through its interaction with
contemporary experience. Among notions questioned were the
transcendental qualities of beauty: truth, harmony and goodness.
Their dismissal has in fact shackled the artist with a new set of
standards in what portends to be an aesthetic free-for-all. In
large measure, truth, harmony and goodness have been exiled for
an aesthetic of the new, different and unusual, accidentally
beautiful or ugly as the case may be.

It remains for each artist to find his own means within the limits of his integrity. He must escape the bondage of what is irrelevant but at the same time remain bound to what he cannot change, his dependence for the distillation of his experience, whether perceptual or conceptual, upon synthesis. To respond fluently and sensitively the artist must strive to perfect the unity of his plan, material and physical skills into their final consummation for a new thesis, his meaning. While the task is inviting, it is one reconciled by humility. When that fails, humor.

Of all the tools available to the artist as vehicles for his meaning, only one was invented and conceptualized by man. All others were found in nature. This tool, line, is one that I find most useful and appropriate in my work as an artist in describing sculptural form. As an abstraction of man's mind, line imitates what he knows but cannot see. Line describes the interior energy and stresses of vitality contained within form. It builds planar surfaces, the prerequisites of mass, volume and form. Proceeding in direction, moving through time in its extension, line acknowledges the action-reaction of movement and its resulting inertia. In my own work this phenomenon is used as a premise for implied motion and time duration, past, present and future, and might be termed "line in direction".
Line as it is drawn becomes a point in progress, proceeding in direction from point "was" to point "is". As line is established in an environment it becomes predictable to the future tense. 

Past "was"

Present "is"

Future "will be"

It is line in progression from point to point, here strained, there relaxed, that insures the plausibility of implied sequential happening. Movement empirically assures an episodic or time sense. Thus I accept line as the genus or structural core-pinning of any work which portends animation or more importantly, anima.

Line was used as a premise for a series of sculptures using the automobile and roadway as a theme. Though these sculptures do not subscribe to any particular canons or artistic movements, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, chief apostle and theorist for the group called Futurists, describes their conception very well, saying in 1909:

the world's splendor has been enriched by a new beauty: the beauty of speed...A racing motor-car, its frame adorned with great pipes, like snakes with explosive breath...a rearing motor-car, which looks as though running on shrapnel is more beautif-ful than the victory of Samothrace.²

This was a pre-Dada statement.

There has been a tendency to equate change with progress
and good in the twentieth century. The automobile as an instrument of change, had a profound influence on the alteration of habit, mores, mobility and environment of the individuals, families, towns and nations in which it developed. In the United States, a country saturated in the conservatism of its puritan origins, where individualism was exulted, until it was practiced, many of the national ills have been placed at the door step of the automobile. It has been blamed from the pulpit for the loss of religious faith, erosions of morality, family instability and general individual corruption. Politically it has been the subject of tirades on the excesses of labor, the excesses of management, the cause of national corruption, pollution and its contribution to the ills of the national economy (in bad sales years). The motor-car's damnation continued on ad infinitum.

In the beginning no one wanted the automobile encroaching upon his privacy until, as it turned out, he could afford to own one. Relatively few could before World War I. By 1917 a series of factors reduced the impediments to car ownership. They were: a rapidly growing population, sharp increases in individual buying powers, price reduction of vehicles through mass production and the introduction of installment buying. The race for ownership began. "Soon all America would be living dangerously either inside of or in the path of a Model T."

By 1927, fifteen million Ford Model T cars had crossed
the assembly line and of course this does not acknowledge the contributions of the competitors. Ford ended production of this model, begun in 1909, in 1927, bowing to change in public tastes and introduced what came to be known as the "yearly model concept." Under this concept sales were encouraged by building a yearly product that attempted to obsolete the designs of the previous year. More concern was given to the consumer and his wants and needs. The automobile soon reflected trends from other fields, women's fashions, architecture, interior design and surveys on the latest in public taste. Design criteria were developed. The car was to be built around the human form, proportioned for convenience, comfort, safety and ease of handling.

By 1933 new attention was being given to more adventuresome exterior design in the hopes of spurring sales. Similarities were noted between the car frame and the fuselage of the airplane. The car body too, lent itself to streamlining. Forty-five and fifty miles per hour wind tunnel tests were performed, weights were shifted and designs altered. Vehicles were made longer and wider. Skirted fenders, V front grills, slanted windshields, doors cut back over the fenders and sweeping tail lines all testified to aerodynamic efficiency. By 1935 new trends had been established with the introduction of the all steel turret top. Motorists began to prefer two door
and four door sedans over open cars. 8

Even with the idea of the car being as beautiful as it was useful, not all comments were favorable. Writing from Europe, but with the remarks applicable to the American situation, Ozenfant declared:

Mechanical shapes thus illustrate the properties of certain bodies under given conditions. The engineer cannot give free rein to his imagination, otherwise his connecting-rod will break... Think of the crazy coachwork invented by aesthetic body-builders when engineers were content merely to construct chassis! Even nowadays coachwork is not free from the same reproach, when the engineer has been aping the artist, and designing bodies.

Aesthetics, introduced into the sphere of mechanics, is always an indication of inadequacy somewhere... the most efficient unit is the one that will inevitably be adopted everywhere. When the time comes there will be no place for aesthetic ingenuity, which serves to hide the absence of knowledge.

To date Ozenfant's absolutist theory has materialized in very few industries, indeed.

The period 1930-1940 has been my main source of inspiration in the production of the series of works being considered in this paper. It was a neutral period for the United States. There was a feeling of optimism that once economic problems of the depression were solved, we could once again live in a condition of pastoral contentment. We as a people believed in patriotic righteousness and isolationism from the rest of the world. Problems would occur but they could be remedied. Everyone was tooling for the "modern" life. Arm in arm the educated and
uneducated, the rich, the poor, skilled and unskilled were
marching to the promised land of the New Deal. Even artists and
ingineers had continued their fraternizing; General Motors
testified:

In recent years, through such joint efforts of artists
and engineers, sound artistic principles have been
applied to hundreds of things in everyday use — from
the package of perfume we buy at the store to the
motor car we ride in. Not only has the influence of
the artist been multiplied by science and industry, but
modern research has provided the artist with a much
more exact knowledge of artistic principles. No
longer is it necessary to depend entirely upon
"impressions" and that vague faculty known as "taste"
in arriving at critical standards of comparison in
artistic fields. It is true, of course, that art
cannot be produced with pure mathematics and applied
science alone — there must always be the added
ingredients of human feeling, inspiration and
imagination that are the mark of the truly great artist.

In the last analysis, art, science, and industry have
a mutual objective — the betterment of mankind and
man's life. The means are different, but the goal is
the same.10

Experience and Ozenfant not withstanding, this was the belief
held with a religious fervor. Strangely, those artists working
independently of the engineers and the automobile industry took
little notice of it before the 1950's and 1960's. Only after
Abstract Expressionism had spent itself did the artist refocus on
society, its mores and its popular totems as subject matter for
his expression.

Not altogether surprising, with his other contributions to
painting and sculpture in the twentieth century, Picasso used
the casting of a toy automobile body as the head of the baboon
in an assemblage cast in bronze called Baboon and Young, dated
1951. By 1957, Richard Hamilton, a British artist, was using
fender and bumper shapes in his painting and collage Hommage a
Chrysler Corp. Hamilton noted at the time: "The main motif, the
vehicle, breaks down into an anthology of presentation
techniques"; 'Pieces are taken from Chrysler's Plymouth and
Imperial ads, there is some General Motors material and a bit of
Pontiac."11 Baldaccini Cezar and an automobile compressor worked
directly with actual cars folding them into rectangular blocks as
in The Yellow Buick, 1959. A related concept, that of using
junked auto shapes welded into sculptures, was used by
John Chamberlain and Jason Sely in the 1960's. The automobile
and other vehicular references continued to play a rather con-
sistent role in the paintings and collages of James Rosenquist.
1, 2, 3 and Out, 1963, contrasts warm and cool, hard and soft,
sensuously depicting satin, automotive surfaces and wire. More
personal was the social commentary of Edward Kienholz's seduction
scene in the assemblage Back Seat Dodge-38, 1964. Other artists,
such as Allen D'Archangelo and Edward Ruscha have extended the
automobile-highway theme using service stations, highway signs
and other such objects in their work.

My present work in sculpture resulted from a myriad of
experiences, beginning with a series of wood carvings of
feminine forms in bikinis. Eventually entering my consciousness
were the "Falling Man" series of Ernest Trova mounted on wheels.
These works changed my conception of the conventional sculpture-
base relationship. It occurred to me to utilize the female form not for its human qualities, but for the psychological-sexual implications pointed out by Doctor Ernest Dichter in a study known as "Mistress versus Wife."

Car salesmen had noticed that men, while giving great attention to convertibles in the showroom, usually consummated a deal by buying a sedan. Doctor Dichter theorized:

... that men saw the convertible as a possible symbolic mistress. It set them daydreaming... The man knows he is not going to gratify his wish for a mistress, but it is pleasant to daydream. This daydreaming drew the man into the auto salesroom. Once there, he finally chose a four-door sedan just as he once married a plain girl who, he knew, would make a fine wife and mother. 'Symbolically, he marries the sedan...'. The sedan is useful, practical, down to earth, and safe.

My intention was to daydream, producing "auto-bodies", based on the feminine physique, that were nonfunctional, carefree, witty and literally a kindly auto eroticism. In a sense they combined into a synthesis suggested by Tom Wesselmann's works with the "Great American Nude" series and his somewhat out of character, Landscape No. 5, 1964, of paint and billboard construction with a Volkswagon theme. My conception was the Venus of Willendorf turned Volkswagon. Executed in ceramics, using an assemblage of wood, metal, plastic and rubber, only a few were completed to personal satisfaction. Most, admittedly, left something lacking in concept; they did however, contribute three developments to my work.
The first was the adaption of a convention popularly used in the narrative panel cartoon, that of the blimp or balloon related to the comic characters denoting sound or direction of movement. In my work they primarily denote the latter taking the stylized form of vapor or exhaust. The comics as a source of artistic influence have been traced by Doctor Stephen S. Prokopoff, director of the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia. Doctor Prokopoff, in introductory remarks relating to "Spirit of the Comics", an exhibition of works selected by him, states:

Comic strip elements were established firmly, along with other images of mass culture, as a viable material in art with their appearance in the work of several Pop artists during the late 1950's. The succeeding decade has witnessed both a striking growth of artistic interest in the comics and a diffusion of this interest into a multitude of formal and expressive contexts. The present exhibition [Huntington Gallery, Columbus, Ohio, February 23 through March 13, 1970] attests by its size and diversity to the vigor and richness of the comic influence. It makes clear too, the function of the comics, particularly of the 30's and 40's, as a colorful part of today's folklore - of the American visual and social landscape."

The second suggestion was to be more direct by using scale model facsimilies of actual automobiles instead of more contrived body forms. My problem was to isolate the car from its casual experience and place it aside as a contemplative object. As a solution, production models of the nineteen thirties and forties, made unfamiliar by the passage of time, were chosen instead of contemporary designs. The prefabricated toys made today did not have the historical value or detail that I
desired, so I resorted to plastic scale model kits available in the hobby sections of department stores. Except for the temporal and fragile quality of their material, they are great engineering accomplishments in themselves. Impeccable in detail, one finds the smallest piece does fit snugly into place. While constructing them, I realized the irony of pure gesture which has crept into Art today. Gluing piece by piece seemed very mechanical and suggestive of "doing for the sake of doing."

Often only my conception remained significant after a night of model building. My approach to using historical vehicles was reinforced when I became aware of Claes Oldenburg's molded polyurethane and lithographic drawing, Profile of Chrysler Airflow, 1969. The Airflow car made its original debut in 1934.

The third notion which occurred to me was to introduce the unit of car and its attendant smoke into a quasi-environmental situation. Much of my former work had been immersed in a traditional sculpture-base concept. The base represented the finishing stroke and often lacked any relevancy to the actual sculpture. Awareness of minimal and environmental works suggested possibilities which negated the necessity of a base. As noted above, Trova's sculptures had suggested new and unique approaches to this problem. My return to a base concept represented a compromise. Now the base, besides providing a purely mechanical support for the work, became a highway. This had the effect of
unifying car, smoke and roadway. Special problems and criteria arose; the bases often resembled minimal works in themselves. To harmonize with the sculpture and its subject matter it was decided to keep them below eye level for a sense of distance and perspective. The roadway-environment became a horizontal plane or in some instances a slightly oblique surface which cut a vertical pedestal. Several variations were executed and custom made to the pieces they were to hold. Always the attempt was made to destroy the viewers awareness of a sculpture-base isolationism. These three ideas were to become the core of my thesis show.

The cars as they were assembled, though handsome, were fragile and impermanent. It was judged that plastic would not do as a final material in subsequent work. To change my concepts into a realization I entered into a type of metamorphism, using metal. The public’s identification of metal as an "artistic" and "noble" material would work for me also, but more importantly, would answer my problems of permanency. The supposition in a prototype was that the toy automobiles manufactured of extruded, thermosetting plastic would also melt and burn clean at the temperature required to burn wax from investment, using the cire perdue method in preparation for bronze casting. Once the plastic car kits had been assembled, they were reinforced in their interior surfaces by a \( \frac{1}{6} \) inch coat of petroleum wax to thicken the thin gauge of their shells as an eventual channel for molten
metal. Using an assemblist technique, they were combined with bulbous and flowing smoke shapes either reproduced from previously constructed plaster molds or hand fabricated from wax. In some instances parts to be added were constructed of balsa wood. After these assemblages were refined, tooled and finished, they were sprued and vented with wax rods and balsa strips in preparation for their investment and casting.

Using a mixture of casting plaster, silica flour and perlite of equal measure, this quantity was added to one half part of water. The resulting hand mixed slurry was then poured over the assemblage of plastic, wax and balsa wood and formed into a cylindrical mold, encasing the complete work. Only the top of a pouring cup, for the molten metal, and the ends of the vents remained exposed. This casing was placed in a burnout kiln and the temperature built up gradually to 1100° and left at that temperature for a two day period to insure a complete dissipation of any remaining carbon. At the end of this period the casings were removed from the kiln, rammed in sand, and the metal was heated and poured into the now empty mold. The supposition had proved correct and the resulting castings of the cars and their vaporous forms were successful. Plastic as a burnout material proved superior to the accompanying casted wax surfaces, showing little or no scaling and oxidation. This knowledge was the key to further production in silicon bronze.
and aluminum.

As metal casts were obtained they were reworked and tooled. As the cars had been virtually unchanged in their qualities through the process of casting, no attempts were exerted to alter their detail or character. Little sanding was required and except for the removal of flashing, caused in casting, they were merely polished. One of the aesthetic objections to using power machines as finishing tools on metal has been the claim of their harshness and the tendency to destroy subtleties and specific form. In my particular work, developing generalized, vaporous, bulbous shapes, the use of grinders and polishers seemed most appropriate to the form. While these machines did remove evidence of subjectivity and hand work, the effect was to reinforce a type of "cool" ambiguity and fluidity that I had desired in these pieces. Developed to a high polish and luster, the reflective, mirrored surfaces created an even higher interreaction with their environment.

For these completed objects, I would wish only a casual, visual confrontation. But with the relationships I have made, they have not gone unquestioned. My primary concern has been the juxtapositioning of two absurd ideas, one of casting plastic toys into metal and the second, of portraying smoke as sculptural form.

Traditionally, art has been concerned with realities of one
sort or another, usually in imitation of the real. Duchamp had resolved these differences by making the real, the reality. Called ready-mades, he exhibited *Fountain* and *Bottle Rack* in 1917. Part of my work presents the same paradox of the reality being the real. The cars, unchanged except for material, are objective forms. They are irreproachable and cannot be judged for their configurations within the context of my work. Aesthetic judgement is limited strictly to their accidental (in a philosophical sense) relationships with the connecting fabricated forms and environment. Entering this level of abstraction involves complex judgements of separating the real from reality, the objective from the subjective and the essential from the accidental. Less important, but equally tenuous, are questions of social message.

Among current national issues, being raised today, is the question of ecology. Erroneously, my work has been called a comment on smog and pollution. Topically, this is an indication of the temporality of subjective associations rather than the artifact. Care has been taken in the subjective selection of the elements in these sculptures to remove them from the contemporary condition. If the more current questions of ecology persists, perhaps it is a failing of the choices I have made.

If compartments must be labeled, the sculptures I have accomplished might more properly be called an unassuming romanti-
cism. Based in childhood memories, are the "old timers" pulling into the square at the farmer's market. They are the toys of youth raised for adult attention. These sculptures reflect the same kind of concern for the idea of the mundane rediscovered in aesthetic terms as Marinetti sought to express in his Futurist poetry. Other social implications become as valid as the questions "Was that hard to do?" and "Did it take long?" as measures of artistic accomplishment. Searching in this direction leads us further from our truth. No epic tale is told, only a metaphor for movement.

Two other observations have been made in regard to these works. Along with providing a trajectory of movement, the smoke becomes suggestive of other feelings. The first is the illusion of making the car look as if it is dissipating itself. This is the effect of freeing a large balloon full of air and as it loses gas, becomes smaller and smaller. The idea might have special appeal to a non-mechanic, who may very well believe the car operates in this manner when things go wrong. The observation is again the subjective opinion of a spectator.

One last observation is more difficult to dispute. This is that the bulbous forms are phallic in one sense or reminiscent of a paleolithic fertility figure in another. Knowing the sources of their evolution, it seems very possible that the thinking of the "auto-body" has subconsciously passed to the present
examples.

In this paper I have indicated the appropriate influences, developments and implications of my present work. In the past two years, I have sought to increase the diversity of my abilities by working in ceramics, cinema and sculpture. The influence of each has effected the others. The freedom given me to explore the sculptural applications of ceramics, wood, metal, and plastics often found me going in many directions simultaneously. Somewhat paradoxically, at the finale, I have returned to my starting point. This is not to insinuate that it is a return without development and reassurance. Armed with new skills, it is image making revisited. In this thesis show, the theme has been narrow and sustained, yet new possibilities present themselves for materialization. With these realizations, the future is not unknown.
FOOTNOTES


3 Cohn, David L., Combustion on Wheels. (Boston, 1944) p. 14.

4 Ibid., p. 155.

5 Styling Section of General Motors Corp., Modes and Motors. (Detroit, 1938) pp. 14-15.

6 Kuns, Roy F., Automotive Essentials. (Milwaukee, 1948) p. 5.

7 Ibid., p. 11.


10 Styling Section of General Motors Corp., Modes and Motors. pp. 10-11.


13 Prokopoff, Stephen S., Spirit of the Comics, exhibition catalogue. Huntington Gallery (Columbus, Ohio, 1970) ----.

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