MOTIVE through Automotive Compassionately Criticizing the Desires of Car Culture

Erika R. Lehrmann
University of New Orleans, erika.lehrmann@yahoo.com

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MOTIVE through Automotive
Compassionately Criticizing the Desires of Car Culture

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Fine Arts

By

Erika Lehrmann

B.F.A Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, LA
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Acknowledgements

I would like to dedicate this thesis to the family and friends who have passed during my time within the Master’s of Fine Arts Program at the University of New Orleans. I would also like to thank the Fine Arts faculty for their continual efforts, especially those of my committee: Kathy Rodriguez, Tony Campbell, and Cheryl Hayes. And lastly, I wish to grant the grandest of thanks to my family and friends for their never-ending support and encouragement.
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Abstract

My artwork represents my admiration and criticisms of car culture I have gathered throughout my personal experiences beginning at a very early age. The work exists in the form of drawings, paintings, prints, collage and sculpture. This work is created through the elements of personal narrative, desires, obsessions, and questions surrounding car culture and its influences. My intention to refurbish the icons of this culture has involved creating work that is both obsessive and critical for personal exploration and understanding of past memories.

Repurpose, Refurbish, Automotive, Desire, Obsession, Deconstruction, Idealization, Icon, Advertising, Pop Art, Nostalgic, Memories, Abstract Expressionism, Painting, Drawing, Printmaking, Sculpture.
**Introduction**

From a young age, my connection and affiliation with classic car culture has been the result of an overwhelming familial influence. I found an overpowering interest in the designs carried throughout the ages of the automotive industry all compiled in organized auto events that I attended with family members. I have memories of attending car shows on the weekends with my family and being attracted to the way body lines and reflections curved over the surface of any given vehicle. As well as being a young racecar driver involved in a motor vehicle accident, perhaps my fate was set in connection to car culture. With such an influential factor recognized at an early age, I wanted my art to represent those peaks of my interest. I had the urge to follow car culture through drawing, painting, collage, and some sculpture. I want my art to display my interests as well as my inevitable existence by the quantum forces holding me in place between these two cultural universes of automotive and artistic influences. This is my motive: to create a personal narrative of a co-existence where my own desires are questioned and questions lead to compositions.
Pop Art & Car Culture

When I first arrived at the University of New Orleans’ Master of Fine Arts Program, I was creating work solely based in the concept of repurposing car parts. I painted images of detailed refurbished classic cars on decaying pieces of automobiles. By integrating my two attractions to classic car culture and art making, I planned for a discussion to form around automobile refurbishment and repurposing. For example, I found the automotive *Glove Box Door* (Figure 1) in a junkyard rusting away to the elements and I thought I could question the expectation of refurbishing car parts outside of the traditional car paint and polish.

![Glove Box Door](image)

Figure 1. Erika Lehrmann, *Glove Box Door*, 2015, antiqued 1950s glove box door with acrylic paint, 8 x 18 inches

Pop Art influenced my representation of the restored truck on the rusted door to which it belonged for a few reasons. First, Pop Culture heavily influenced
car culture during its years of classic design and construction of these vehicles. Just as Andy Warhol used bright and vibrant colors or the repeated format of an image to grab the attention of the public, the car industry was doing the same thing.

![Figure 2. Andy Warhol, Marilyn Monroe Portfolio of 10 screenprints, 1967, 36 x 36 inches](https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/1517/installation_images/29?locale=en)

Warhol’s work was a direct reflection of popular culture around him and the mass production to produce these items. This included automobiles via the mass production of everyday items, which Warhol responded by imitation and referring to himself as “working as a machine.” Warhol did not use color as an element of

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emotion, but rather focused on color scheme. I have to think though that the element of color was in fact influenced by the culture he studied and therefore have ties to the color used by the auto industry due the Pop Movement. With names like “Sublime Green” and “Plum Crazy Purple” and the repetition in bodylines and curves, it is easy to see the connection between the Pop and Classic Car cultures. Warhol also turned this idea on its head by using these details, like color and repetition, to form commoditized artwork around it. It is hard to say why we are attracted to things we deem desirable, but commodity is almost always recognizable in mundane objects taken for granted. We place our own shifting values on everyday objects such as cars, soup cans or celebrities in Warhol’s case, and it somehow diminishes and mocks the reasons we are drawn to them in the first place. Just as Jeff Koons takes his fascination with everyday overlooked items and raises them to the stature of high art, I too interpret car culture as unintentionally doing the same. Now the two fetishes may differ as one is driven by pure intention while the other happens by chance, but the connection between the giant balloon animal that is no longer a balloon and the car that can no longer be driven is one in the same for me.

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I made the Pedal Car (Figure 4) piece based on this very idea, but refurbishing it was completely different than that of the Glove Box Door (Figure 1). While both of my artworks are revitalizing, one’s purpose is to create a different purpose while the other is to immerse myself in the process of restoring a mini version of a classic car.

This led me to yet another thought surrounding the door. Its ironic state of decay paired with its pristine counter part painting and affiliation to what it truly means to be repurposed opens up the discussion revolving around the objects we idealize and how some, like the Glove Box Door (Figure 1), fall from the eyes of the culture, which once created it. It was subject to its fate and I had hopes to

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revive it. It is isolated from its culture and lacks all the elements that would make it
desirable. I made it my mission to somehow give this object its desirability back. I
identified with the nostalgia associated with car culture through the use of isolation
and through painting isolated images of refurbished car parts.

This idea has continued to influence my work throughout my graduate
career. I isolated renderings of classic-era vehicles on associated car parts as a
means to refurbish, but instead the images became more decal-like on the broken
down surfaces. I became dissatisfied with painting on decaying parts, and pushed
my focus to decal-like renderings instead. Still highly influenced by Pop Art, I
decided to create screen printed, bright color-based images of cars in the form of
decals. These decals mimic the decoration on cars and depict the cars themselves.
For the green Challenger Panel (Figure 5), I thought it appropriate to cut the panel
in the shape of the vehicle to further isolate the image.

Figure 5. Erika Lehrmann, Challenger Panel, 2015, Acrylic paint on panel, 16 x 24 inches
I tried enhancing the decal concept by isolating the imagery, but after analyzing the *Challenger Panel*, the importance of isolation is just not as evident.

Moving forward, I got back to the basics of what I defined as a decal in reference to its use in car culture. This lead to the creation of the 1960’s Pop Culture influenced decals on metal (Figure 6). I screened these images using colors influenced by the 1940s, 50s, and 60s eras that I later transferred onto vinyl and then cut out as stickers.

![Figure 6. Erika Lehrmann, *Pop Art Decal*, 2015, Screen print transferred to vinyl sticker, 14 x 16 inches](image)

I felt a strong relationship between the decals I had created and car culture’s use of bumper stickers or body decals. I intentionally felt it important to mimic the decal illusion and thought hard about the surface I was putting it on. I strayed away from the car parts like I had been doing and went more with a simple panel of sheet
metal. I wanted to reference materials automobiles are made out of, but at the same time didn’t want the decal to degrade the already deteriorating surface of the car parts. Classic car owners are fanatics about their vehicles and most would avoid putting a bumper sticker on any of their wheeled possessions. Also, I was using the car parts as objects I could revise and not necessarily destroy further. This got me thinking about my approach to the car parts yet again and how in some ways, I was still preserving the parts as a pristine object.
Idolized Parts

I decided to return to the decaying automobile parts and focus on what worked for those pieces. I truly believe in the idea of idealization by the use of isolation. Personally, I am more tempted to ask questions about an object or image that is isolated than to an object that is placed in a setting. It creates a hierarchy for me. Why this object and why such importance? This led me into the next series of part illustrations. Feeling a sense of nostalgia for the familiarity of cars and their parts, I decided to use a monochromatic black and white palette. I chose this color palette to reflect a sense of the past, but yet can be read as a timeless component for the modern day.

My intention to isolate and disassemble the automobile has been a useful tool leading me back to the parts themselves. I introduced my personal connection to car culture even further through the use of my own experiences and memories covertly depicted in a series of drawings.
The objects including the Dead Alternator (Figure 7), Diffused Sparkplugs (Figure 8), and Darkened Headlight (Figure 9) are all representations of the familiarity I have gained to the parts throughout my involvement with automobiles.
as well as personal narratives and connections. I began thinking about the
disconnect given to the viewer in the absence of space or experience. By showing
the car part without the representation of the event or experience, I left the object
in a void.

Figure 10. Peter Cain, Z, 1989, Oil on canvas, 58 x 70 inches, Whitney Museum New York, NY

Taking notes from Peter Cain and his disfigured and deconstructed car part
paintings (Figure 10), I was intrigued by deconstructing the car into its various
parts. This formulated the concept of “deconstructing the idealization,” which for
me is the first step in questioning the desires surrounding these icons.

Compositionally, I have created a white void to show a lack of function, but also an idealized heavenly space. This empty space only allows for the perfected versions of the parts without the imperfect functions of reality present in my personal experiences.

I was also influenced by Robert Longo’s *Men in the Cities* series (Figure 11). I am only giving the viewer part of the information, much like Longo and conceptually identify with his use of the white space.

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Figure 11. Robert Longo, Untitled, “Men in the Cities” Series, 1980, Charcoal & graphite on paper, 96 x 60 inches

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I am trying to directly sever myself from the subject matter as well as create a space that is almost angelic enough for such an icon. The void lends itself to the emotional ties I have with the subject matter, including those of my desires with car culture, versus relying on the surroundings of the subject to define the context of the image.

Knowing this may be unobtainable to some viewers, I paired an *Automotive Manual* (Figure 12) depicting these images with narratives describing my connections to the parts.

![Automotive Manual](image)

**Figure 12. Erika Lehrmann, Automotive Manual, 2016, 8.5 x 11 Booklet**

This is the first time I wrote about my personal affiliation to the individual parts. I discussed the idea of stories associated with the drawings of the *Serpentine*
(Figure 13) and *Tainted Tailgate* (Figure 14), but felt the telling fictional stories in the *Auto Manual* left me somewhat uncomfortable.

I felt untruthful to my motive and initial interests by creating stories I had no connection to following the original three of the *Dead Alternator*, *Diffused Sparkplugs*, and *Darkened Headlight*. I had no connection to the newer *Serpentine* work, and felt it did not belong in the format of the manual. To continue would be an act of betrayal of why I made the manual in the first place. I had deviated away from the disassembled pristine parts and the original idea of refurbishing the decaying elements of the work to focus more on the viewer’s understanding leaving me to feel more like a novelist rather than an artist.
**Wreckage**

I decided to make my experiences more prominent in the work to justify not having to tell my story through text. This led me to creating two self-portraits; one included my reflection in the fender of a classic car (Figure 15), while the other depicted of a younger version of myself during my years as a junior dragster driver (Figure 16).

The white void remained and particularly with these pieces, help to demonstrate the prominence of isolating my emotions as well as my initiation of self into the artwork. Self-reflection became an overpowering element of this work. After evaluating these pieces and my intentions for creating it, I felt as if my personal narrative was distracting from my originating interests. Again, it was uncomfortable to address these issues in my work and to have such close
connections and narratives critiqued. I was caught between wanting to express my placement between these two cultures all while desperately trying to camouflage its existence. I never wanted to become the subject matter of my work, but rather be the influence for its creation using my own ideas and experiences.

I began to circle back to the concept of idealization through the use of isolation. Wanting to explore the basic principle that an object of interest can be displayed as having higher importance via isolating it within a composition, I returned to the drawing board. I needed to pay more attention to what exactly I was idealizing and how I could shift the ideas revolving around typical idols of car culture outside of self-portrayal. I decided to explore the deconstructive and demolition component of what I had attempted to create through my repurposed and refurbished mindset. In response to my own discomfort with representing myself in a personal way, I found I could address the narrative of my own car crash less directly with drawings about car wrecks. I introduced the wrecked vehicle in Wrecked Dreams (Figure 17) for a number of clarifying reasons.
The first and the most obvious reason is that the wrecked version of a car is the last to be idealized by car culture aficionados who typically praise the refurished garage stricken trophies. It is also a counter-act against what I had currently been creating. By introducing the wrecked car, it allowed for my personal experience to exist while still accessing the criticisms I continue to explore surrounding the classic car culture. My own experiences no longer had to be center stage for open discussion, but highly influenced the content of this work.
My criticism extended further, however. I wanted to critique the preciousness that surrounded these industrial objects and culture. I wished to distinguish the “real” from the advertised experience. I had been researching and gathering material from automotive magazines about these idealized objects and using these as a reference for my own work. I realized that the experience I was being told (or sold) was in all actuality irrelevant to the object itself. The inadequacy of these objects could not live up to the experiences of their advertisements. For me, this helped to reiterate the idea that obsession over these or any objects for that matter, can hinder or persuade my own understanding of my experiences. It would seem as if the advertisement for these vehicles and their parts could be viewed as the object’s reputation and its use was of little importance. This greatly intrigued me and propelled my artwork into the next series of content and questioning.

Advertisement led me to use the magazines themselves. I began using the white void as the subject rather than an element of the work by removing the object of interest within the ad. In the Shadow Box Cut-Out series (Figure 18), it is important for me to create this void rather than just show it.
By choosing the shadow box, I had space within the frame to use as an element in collaboration with the white void. I personally felt the absence to be much stronger in collaboration with the depth of each shadow box. I decided to display them in such a way that would give a visual void yet also comment on the preciousness surrounding these objects. I enjoyed how the advertisement changed by just the removal of the car or other objects of interest. Words shifted in meaning and phrases began to interact with the voided shape.

The advertisement description had become more than just adjectives on a page, but rather I saw them as a collage of descriptive words on the cover of an un-
descriptive object. I thought about how I could do this with my own work by referring to an object via shape and using collage as a method for mismatched parts.
**Dismantled Drawings**

By scanning my own drawings and collaging them onto canvas, I was able to make references to automotive shapes. In the piece entitled *World of Wheels* (Figure 19), I was able to refer to the obvious shape of a wheel, but also use the photocopies as a means to create depth and illusion with pieces of my own drawings.

![Figure 19. Erika Lehrmann, World of Wheels, 2017, Paper collaged on canvas, 36 x 36 inches](image)

The copies allowed me to create and recreate by using my own drawings as mediums and materials. The void was subtly present within the value shifts of the photocopies and the space between the contrasted collage pieces. This idea of
repurposing felt right in regards to my initial mission and interest upon arriving at the University of New Orleans. Instead of using actual car parts, I was now using my own drawings of parts to relay the deconstruction I had been trying to reach. Julie Mehretu’s drawings not only influenced my mark making throughout my early work, but was essential in creating my collage work. The use of space and incorporation of the void through mark making helped to create tonal shifts within Mehretu’s pieces, which I then studied for my own compositions.⁷

Figure 20. Julie Mehretu, *Auguries*, 2010, 12 panel aquatint, 87 x 180 inches

While my mark was made by collaged paper, I admired the busyness of Mehretu’s drawings and wished to incorporate the element into my collaged imagery. This collage method was also therapeutic as a means of deconstructing the preciousness I had illustrated in the *Automotive Manual* drawings (Figures 7, 8, & 9), *Serpentine* (Figure 13), and chrome illustrations (Figures 21 & 22).

This deconstructive idea was not my only tie to advertising, however. I was still interested in exploring the void and the connections I had established within the magazine advertisements.
Existing in the Void

I began the *Embossed Existence* series (Figure 23) as an extension of advertising influence and intrigue, but let my focus remain more on the reputations of objects’ advertisements versus the reality of their experiences. I used imagery of objects I had personal associations with and use throughout my everyday in an effort to confront my own desires and obsessions.

Figure 23. Erika Lehrmann, Embossed Existence, 2017, Embossed prints via the intaglio method, 5 x 7 inches

I found that in general, many consumer experiences fail to reach the expectations provided by their advertisement. As a consumer, I exist in this repetitive nature of purchasing the object of desire and its ghost-like inadequacy after consumption. I wanted the embossments to display such a concept by essentially being a fossil of their own advertised reputations.
This got me thinking about how the element of time is connected to our desires and how they shift. Defining what is antiqued or classic versus modern or contemporary and the fade of each era’s definition on our own obsessions intrigued me. In other words, what we value for being modern today will become antiqued over time and this may or may not affect our desires for said object. I thought about this relationship in regards to car culture and those parts I had once pulled from their fate of a junkyard. They had faded from their limelight over time and in some ways had become fossilized.

Figure 24. Erika Lehrmann, Faded Glory, 2017, Modeling paste & acrylic paint on canvas, 12 x 28 inches

I created Faded Glory (Figure 24) from this concept. Thinking about those faded desires as well as the immobilized fossil of the junkyard, this piece has become
encased in the irony surrounding the idealization and iconography of its nostalgic heyday. This work represents the fading of trends and obsession over time as well as lackluster consumerism establishing such obsessions.
**Conclusion**

I have managed to remain sincere in my work by being truthful with myself, my desires, my criticisms of those desires, as well as the expectations I have for work moving forward. I have let my own motives initiate and lead the creation and expansion of this work and felt the title of this thesis to be all encompassing of each series.

After assessing my work, I feel as if I have secured answers to some of the questions surrounding my initial interests and yet, have uncovered many more that still need exploring. It is obvious that my connection with car culture stems from an early family-influenced obsession and has led me down the path to investigate my own curiosity surrounding this kinship. Through it all, my initial desire to create work by repurposing dilapidated car parts has led me deeper into understanding my own obsessive nature. The objects I hold dear have compelled me to create work that dissects my definition of desire and to investigate the iconography these objects.

Playing with my own desire toward mundane objects while studying the work of great artists, such as Jeff Koons and Andy Warhol, has given me self-awareness in my process for creating. The body of work I created while at the University of New Orleans is the first work I truly feel connected to. My time in the MFA program and the work I made during it have given me a deeper
understanding of myself, my process for working, as well as my interests driving my work.

I feel armed with insight upon the completion of this graduate work and all it will lead to in the future. A panorama of ideas shifting throughout my cognitive thinking and artwork responses has left me with motives changing from series to series. ‘Why am I creating this work’ and ‘why is it important to me’ were questions I had to continually ask myself throughout this creation process. By criticizing my initial intentions, those concepts have evolved into exploring and expanding into work I am eager to continue.
Bibliography


**Vita:**

Erika Lehrmann was born in New Orleans, Louisiana in 1991 and grew up in Meraux, LA in St. Bernard Parish. Lehrmann currently resides in Mandeville, LA. She received her B.F.A. from Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, LA with a concentration in painting and drawing in the May of 2014. Lehrmann began her graduate studies in January 2015 at the University of New Orleans.