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Video Artist Isn't Just Spinning His Wheels

Stephen Dean's 'Grand Prix' Takes Viewers on Bumpy Tour of Painting

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SANTA FE, N.M.

It's obvious that art often imitates life. And it's no news that life can sometimes imitate art.

But how many times have you seen art that's capturing life as it's imitating art?

The latest work from well-known video artist Stephen Dean, who splits his time between Paris and New York, manages that trick.

"Grand Prix," getting its American premiere at the sixth SITE Santa Fe biennial, has passages that look like the target paintings of Jasper Johns or the circles of Kenneth Noland. Washes of pure color sometimes flit by, Morris Louis-style, and there are flashes of Hans Hoffmann's saturated hues. Often there's the energy of Jackson Pollock or Clyfford Still, and there's usually some of the he-man heroism of a de Kooning action painting. At other times the pop-tinged number paintings of Gary Indiana come to mind.

Of course, there's not a moment that goes by when you're not thinking of the crushed cars of John Chamberlain.

Dean's piece was shot entirely at demolition derbies in Upstate New York.

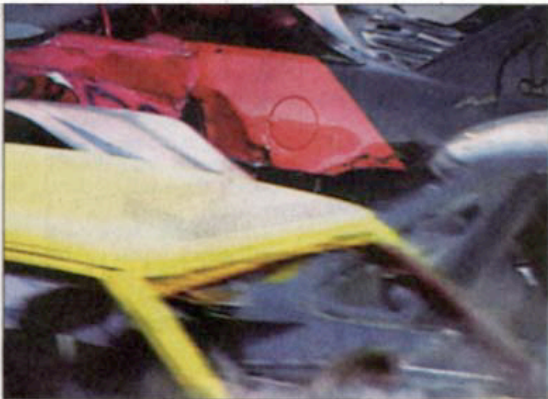
It doesn't try to turn its footage into abstract art by getting in so close that you can't tell what's going on. That abstraction from the world is an old modernist trick that's too tired to repeat. (An earlier Dean video of bright pigments being tossed into the air at a Hindu festival went nearly too far in that direction.) Instead, "Grand Prix" is shot in an almost objective, documentary mode but still invites a constant reading in artistic terms.

"Muscle painting," Washington artist Maggie Michael said with a laugh when

encountering the work for the first time, and that gets it very nearly right. The almost pointless machismo of the derby drivers is a close match for the macho pose that ruled the art world for so many years. From the 1940s on, brush encountered canvas the way bumper smashes door. Oil paint flew like mud from spinning wheels. Metal crunched and sparks flew in Manhattan sculptors' studios as much as on a derby pit Upstate. And, of course, pop artists bounced back and forth between the worlds of flashy art and trashy popular culture. Johns targets, in Dean's reading, are also spinning wheels; Indiana's numbers might as well come from an old jalopy's door.

Even more recent art has drawn on some of these same threads. The huge, colorful abstractions of German art star Gerhard Richter have a controlled, rhetorical aggression — rage in a tight place, on a short rope — that comes through in Dean's crash shots. Nearby at SITE Santa Fe, the noise art of a young collective called Thorns Ltd., from Norway, has comically close analogues in the feral soundtrack of "Grand Prix." The grungy work of German biennialist Jonathan Meese — manure-brown paint thrown onto scrappy collages; clay slapped and piled into vague reminders of a nightmare human form — shares an adolescent take on life with guys who like to smash old cars.

The clearest key to Dean's new work comes in its final shot. As the last car to die is winched away, the camera rests for a few seconds on an empty, mud-strewn course, with flashes of bright sky reflecting in its pools. Diagonals of black and brown across a cloud-white field: It's a dead ringer for Franz Kline's abstract sublimity.



IMAGES COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND GALERIE XIPYAS, PARIS

Stills from Stephen Dean's demolition derby video, one of the highlights of the Sixth International Biennial in Santa Fe.