

GAGOSIAN GALLERY



Chris Burden is leading me up the muddy path to the summit behind his studio. I'd spied an odd-looking sculpture at the top of the hill and asked him what the hell it was. It looked to be nothing less than a medieval Genoese watch-tower. As we huff and puff, I begin to feel

guilty for dragging him along to get a closer look, and fear that at any moment he and his roly-poly frame will begin a slick and dangerous descent.

The piece turns out to be an actual bunker, made of layered bags of cement left out in the rain. Burden gives me a boost to scale its slippery surface—it's been pouring for days in not-so-sunny California—so I can have a look at the manhole cover he incorporated as its roof. When lowered, it offers absolute protection from marauders or, for that matter, from the coyotes you can hear off in the hills.

"I sold one of these to a collector in Brazil," Burden tells me. "He also owns Samson." I'm confused for a second because I've only just met his three dogs and isn't Samson the yellow Lab? Then I realize he's referring to another sculpture, one that rigs a 100-ton jack to a gear and a turnstile that visitors have to pass through. If enough of them participate, the giant timbers extruding from the jack will, like the sculpture's biblical namesake, bring down the gallery walls. *Samson* the sculpture is a neat coupling of engineering precision and intimations of violence—a dynamic that's also unmistakable in his stark hilltop bunker.

Chris Burden has gone from the bad boy who got shot for his art to an enlightened engineer with nothing left to prove. By Eric Banks

structural integrity

Photographed by Jonas Karlsson



A photograph of artist Chris Burden in his studio. He is standing in the center, wearing a blue V-neck sweater over a light-colored collared shirt and dark trousers. He is looking directly at the camera. In front of him is a large, complex kinetic sculpture made of metal frames and many small, colorful Hot Wheels cars. To his left, there are tall, narrow wooden structures. In the background, another person is working at a table. The studio has large windows and a high ceiling.

HIGHWAY HYPNOSIS

Chris Burden
tends to
Metropolis II, a
wildly kinetic
sculpture involving
1,200 Hot Wheels
at his studio in
Topanga, CA.

t

hrough its slits I get a sentinel view of the mountains that separate Los Angeles from Burden's Topanga Canyon home and studio complex. (He shares the grounds with his wife, Nancy

Rubins, a sculptor who also shows at the Gagosian Gallery and whose specialty is assembling cataclysmic-seeming bursts of boats or airplane parts.) The canyon's remoteness is a matter of psychological rather than physical fact, and though it is a ruggedly beatific spot, it somehow never leaves my mind that its woods were once filled with FBI agents peering through their binoculars at blacklisted actors and Red folksingers like Woody Guthrie, who retreated here in the fifties, or that it was an early home to the Manson family. That overtone of the illicit, of potential violence, is almost cinematic.

In his studio, Burden is like a kid running amok with giant toys. He's short and stocky, with his hair styled like a monk's tonsure. In sneakers and chinos, he walks and speaks fast and wired like some early Scorsese character. The property is strewn with junk—a rusting steamroller is the first thing visitors see. After we come down the scraggy hill, Burden, now 62, proudly points out and then fires up his mining locomotive, which sits on real tracks next to a burned-out trolley and a small boxcar. He's planning to build a rail tun-



STAIR MASTER

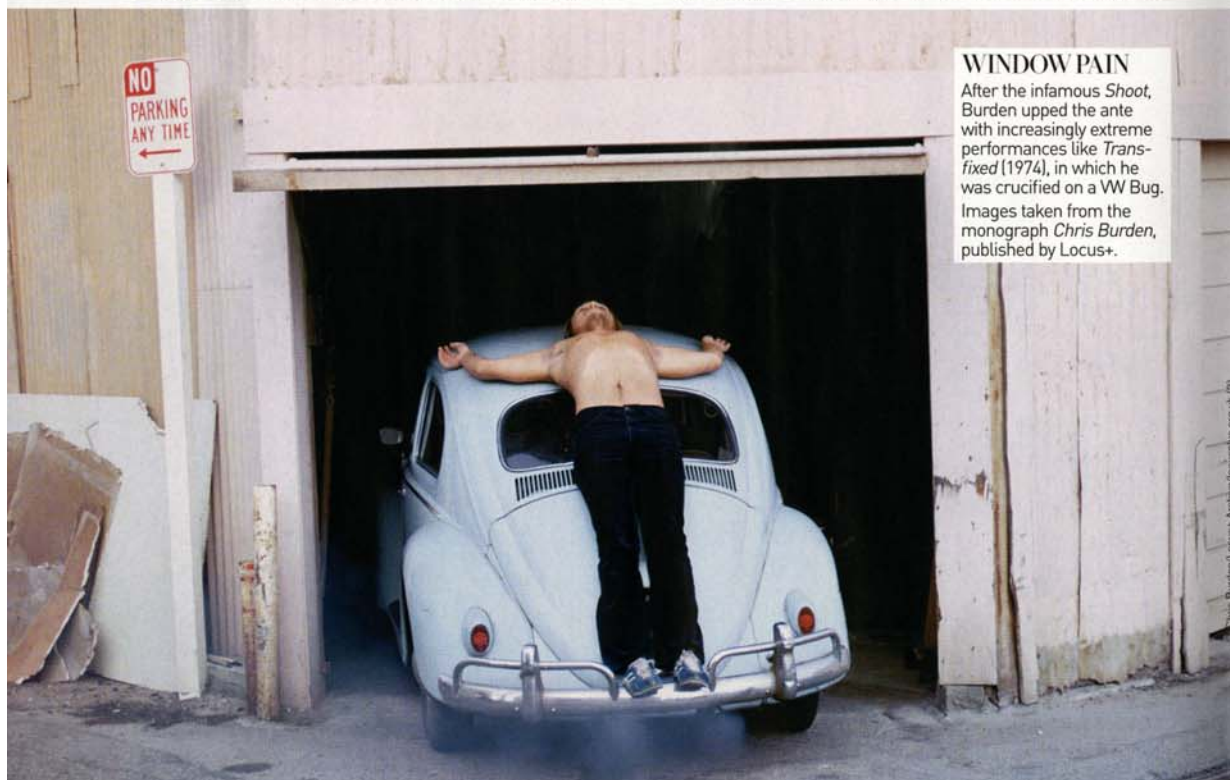
For *Kunst Kick*, Burden recruited a friend to kick him down two flights of stairs at the Basel Art Fair in 1974.

nel through the mountains a couple of hundred yards from his studio. The thing is, he's serious, and given how he has tested the limits of what an artist can do—even what art can be—for almost 40 years, you have to believe he'll figure out a way to pull it off.

Most people know Chris Burden through the myth-making stories of his earliest work, at the beginning of the seventies, when he was among the more extreme artists channeling the anger of the times into now classic pieces of performance art. Among the cognoscenti, his feats of endurance and dalliances with danger es-

tablished him, fresh out of the fine arts program at UC Irvine, as the most fascinating and provocative of the West Coast "body artists"; more popularly, thanks to a performance involving a friend with a .22-caliber rifle, he was the man-who-got-shot-for-his-art. What few guessed then was that Burden would turn out to be an engineer at heart, one who had never quite left his childhood building kits behind.

Burden never had children, but with *What My Dad Gave Me*, the installation that debuts this month in front of Manhattan's Rockefeller Center, his serious pursuit of kid stuff comes full circle. A 65-foot-tall "skyscraper" (it's really more the structural skeleton of one), the work is a demonstration of engineering might. It's built entirely out of Erector Set parts—specifically, the Mysto Erector Number 1, the inaugural one



WINDOW PAIN

After the infamous *Shoot*, Burden upped the ante with increasingly extreme performances like *Trans-fixed* (1974), in which he was crucified on a VW Bug. Images taken from the monograph *Chris Burden*, published by Locus+.

One urban myth that won't quite die is that Burden was actually killed doing the piece.

put out by inventor A.C. Gilbert in 1913—and, once you count the nuts and bolts, contains a million components. Burden created replica parts from the originals and assembled the sculpture in three sections in his studio. So hulking are the resulting segments they had to be airlifted by helicopter out of the canyon in a West Coast version of the Jesus-flying-over-Rome scene in Fellini's *La Dolce Vita*, to be put together elsewhere in Los Angeles.

"To get it here, we'll have to close down Fifth Avenue," says Rochelle Steiner, director of New York's Public Art Fund, which is presenting the work. "One of the things I love and respect about Chris is that he's really hands-on—the sheer putting-together of a work of almost a million pieces. But it's also the hands-on mental thinking that goes into it. It's not like, 'I have an idea, can you figure out how to make it stand up?'"

Burden shows off the diamond-shaped patterns on one of his Erector Set pieces and points out their resemblance to those on the Turkish rugs draping the railing around the second floor of his hangar-like studio. "People were doing engineering long before it had a name," he says. "I mean, 'How do you build a castle?' 'Ask my grandfather, he knows how to build a castle.' How did a lot of this shit get built?" For him, the engineering impulse that lies behind *What My Dad Gave Me* is as sharp as steel Erector edges: His father was an engineer who worked at Rockefeller Center during the late fifties.

Returning to the scene of his father's work with a boy's toy skyscraper must feel Oedipal, or Prodigal, or something.

Burden headed west in 1964, after high school in Cambridge, Massachusetts, intending to become an architect, but wound up studying studio art instead. By the time he was getting his M.F.A. at Irvine, the hottest program on the West Coast, the art world was undergoing seismic changes and Southern California was far from

immune. John Baldessari was turning out deadpan photographic work and conceptual word paintings. Paul McCarthy was doing abject, scatological performances with ketchup, milk, and, ahem, *chocolate*. But none of these artists were as notorious as Burden, who for his 1971 M.F.A. thesis performed *Five Day Locker Piece*, in which he had himself locked in a two-by-two-by-three-foot school locker for just under a week. (The piece exacted a heavy physical toll, but Burden would not let it show; still, it was a common refrain for critics to ask whether he would live to see his thirtieth birthday.) His bad-boy credentials were sealed with the notorious *Shoot*, which he performed later that year in a studio in Santa Ana: There he had himself shot in the left arm with a rifle at 15 feet.



OEDIPAL WRECKS

A mash-up of model trains and construction materials, *Medusa's Flying Moon* shows the love of engineering Burden learned from his father.

"The word spread that there was this weird guy who did these aggressive things," says Peter Plagens, who covered Los Angeles from 1969 to 1976 for *Artforum*. "Not that many people saw *Shoot*, but it became iconic. In its day it was like Damien Hirst's shark." (One urban myth that won't quite die is that Burden was actually killed doing the piece.)

Can you top having yourself shot? Burden upped the ante. Invited to do a performance for a television station, he arranged to be interviewed on camera but wound up holding the host at knife point (*TV Hijack*). He lay down in heavy traffic on La Cienega Boulevard covered in a tarp and surrounded by flares for 15 minutes (*Deadman*). Near LAX, he fired shots at a jet passing overhead (747). He crawled nearly nude through 50 feet of broken glass (*Through the Night Softly*). In *Trans-fixed*, he had himself crucified on the back of a VW Bug, which was then rolled out into the street for two minutes. Performing a work called *Kunst Kick* at the Basel Art Fair in 1974, long before that fair had become the chic supermall it is today, he had a friend kick him down two flights of stairs.

From the well-heeled, hedge-funded vantage of the post-9/11 art world, Burden's work of the time looks frighteningly irresponsible. Who wouldn't shrink in front of photo-documentation of the artist pointing his revolver at a jet airliner? But the facts underlying how Burden worked head off this critique. His performances were as stage-managed as anything we see on film or TV today, and were executed in front of tiny word-of-mouth groups. They were as much about the proposition, the planning—*Tonight, the crazy daredevil performance artist will do X, Y, and Z!*—as about the raw deployment of anarchy and terror.

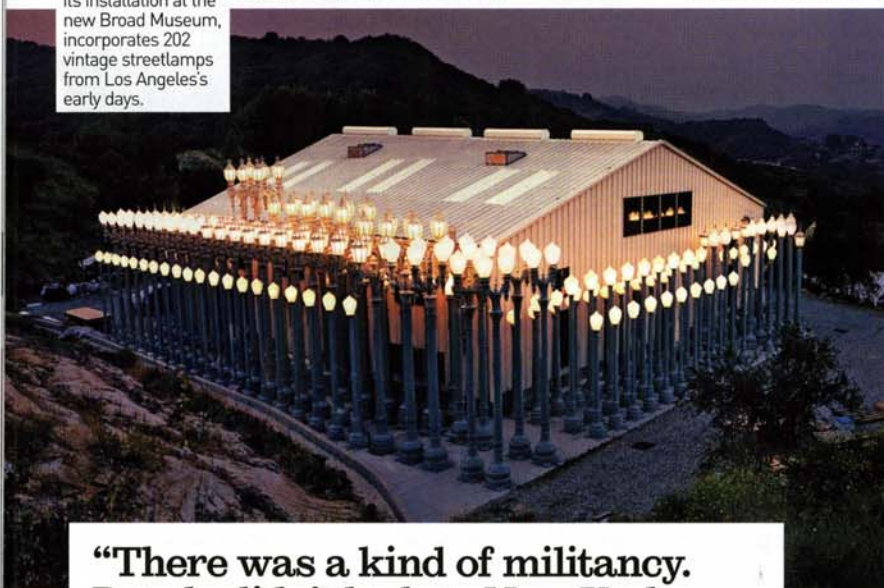
a

s he carried out ever-more-grueling pieces, Burden became a cult figure. Especially in Los Angeles, where the fledgling art scene was deeply paranoid about its small-beer status. Plagens says: "There was a kind of militancy. People didn't look to New York. Artwork wasn't going to be polite."

Art was made to be talked about among students and professors. The troika of artists who emerged in L.A. during the early seventies—Baldessari, McCarthy, and Burden (never close associates)—have made incredible work over careers that are today being recognized by museums, public commissions, and auction records. But their rising éminence grise status, which will always seem at odds with the rude way they entered the art world, would have been impossible without this early art-school fermentation. Burden began teaching at UCLA in 1978, the same year he received a Guggenheim fellowship; he got tenure in 1985. Rubins, his wife, also had a long career at the school. Both were magnets for young, ambitious students.

BACK LIT

Burden's nostalgic *Urban Light*, shown at his studio before its installation at the new Broad Museum, incorporates 202 vintage streetlamps from Los Angeles's early days.



"There was a kind of militancy. People didn't look to New York. Artwork wasn't going to be polite."

In November 2004, a 25-year-old UCLA student named Joseph Deutch was presenting the final work in a performance-art class taught by Ron Athey. He pulled out a replica pistol, put a bullet in the cylinder and spun it, and pointed the barrel to his temple and squeezed the trigger. When the gun didn't go off, he left the classroom. Then the students heard what sounded like a gunshot.

Burden did not take the imitation as a compliment. He never meant to become the mascot of risky performance art, and felt hassled by students who either wanted to make their mark in his shadow or "deconstruct"—in that art-student way—his macho imprimatur. Especially aggravating was a sophomoric catfight staged by two women as he walked the school halls. But for Burden, Deutch's

knock-off of *Shoot* sealed the deal. It was too cynical, too self-reflexive, too much a bracketed idea of violence and art history to take. Though no one was hurt in the incident, Burden insisted that Deutch be disciplined. He dismissed the performance as a form of "domestic terrorism" carried out inappropriately in a university setting. When the UCLA officials refused to acquiesce to his demands, Burden and Rubins resigned their professorships, an action that set off waves of Burdenfreude in the blogosphere: Someone wrote, "Used to have respect for the man's work, but now? I'm just disgusted. HYPOCRITE!" Another sniffed, "Your standard baby boomer hypocrisy [sic]."

Had Chris Burden become the Eliot Spitzer of the art world? "I should have retired years before the thing," he tells me as the rain begins to fall again and we duck inside the studio. Over the years he had watched how UCLA changed. "As we became higher-profile, the school attracted a different kind of student, and a different kind of faculty, too. The students thought this was going to be their pedigree, their meal ticket. It just became weird.... And finally this thing happened with that kid. I refused to go on campus unless

they put a restraining order on him, just on principle.

"And then based on my past performance, it became, 'Oh, you're such a hypocrite.' Well, I wasn't a student, folks. I did that in my own place, not on campus. The whole university setting is very constrained by all kinds of rules: no swearing, no 'Your hair looks cute, Betsy Lou'—boom—sexual harassment," Burden continues. "Bullshit. I thought, 'You know guys, I gave,' and so when they pulled that thing, I was just out of there."

The wannabe campus gunman might be the artist's legacy among the *Jackass* generation, but it's a notion that frustrates Burden to no end. He always saw his performance-based work of the early seventies as a form of sculpture, one that rejected the two-dimensionality of painting and pushed sculpture to its logical limits as art in three-

dimensional—*real*—space. Those early performances helped found what critics at the time called "social sculpture," a term that included everyone from Joseph Beuys to the Austrian Aktionists to the dance-influenced coterie in New York that brought together Trisha Brown and Richard Serra.

To Burden there's no break between the works that brought him renown and those that followed. To be sure, they have never lost their edge: Think of the insidious proposition of *Samson* or his installations of cardboard submarines that sneer at military power. In *Flying Steamroller*, he created a 48-ton counterbalance that begins to lift a 12-ton steamroller off the ground as the vehicle reaches top speed, sending the whole rig spinning like

(continued on page 126)

See videos of *Shoot* and Chris Burden's other performance art at mensvogue.com/go/burden

SCRAPING BY

Burden constructed the 65-foot *What My Dad Gave Me* with one million Erector Set parts. It debuts this month at Rockefeller Center, where his father once worked as an engineer.





STRUCTURAL INTEGRITY

(continued from page 110)

a NASA centrifuge. But these are just echoes of his ferocious performance work. (Though the new stuff's connection to his earliest work may seem tenuous and subtle, his insistence on the relation is admirable in its take-no-prisoners gall.) One thing remains constant: In all his work since the mid-seventies, it's apparent how interested Burden is in technology and in the gee-whiz of simply getting something to work, no matter how improbable the result. When it's successful, that geeky drive is infectious.

As we listen to veterinary updates from his assistant about his black Lab, Molly, and the voices of NPR purr from the studio's speakers, Burden demonstrates an updated version of the slot-car-set-on-steroids piece he originally built with 80 Hot Wheels cars for a Japanese museum. The monster version will now include 1,200 retrofitted models—hollowed out and refilled with little magnets—that will

whirl around three six-lane tracks. Everything has to go smoothly, down to each centimeter-round wheel, for one slow car will gum up the entire circulation system.

Urban Light, an installation of 202 vintage L.A. streetlamps standing, lit, in solemn rows, recently made its debut with the opening of the Broad Contemporary Art Museum at LACMA, and is almost a pendant to his Hot Wheels work. After he bought two of the lamps in 2001 at a Rose Bowl swap meet, Burden began collecting these hulking relics of L.A.'s early days. "The guy said to me, 'If you're interested in more, I've got 80 out in Pomona,'" Burden says, "and I was like, 'This is interesting.'" *Urban Light* may be a simple statement—relishing the proud beauty of an obsolete thing—but it ties into the celebration of engineering glories of the past in *What My Dad Gave Me* by looking back to a time with different values. "The guy said something sweet to me," Burden recalls. "You are the person I knew would show up one day."

Despite the lamp man's prophecy, Burden has to live with both the good and the bad sides of the early reputation he made, which will thrive in accounts of contemporary art regardless of how the late sculpture is received.

The new pieces may have much less influence on art and society—but Burden doesn't seem to care. He's as proud of the ingenuity of the electropolishing technique with which he treated the parts of his Erector Set skyscraper as anything he's done. ("See," he tells me as he rubs the underside of a brace against my palm, "it's completely smoothed out. No one gets any cuts handling it.") Besides, it's his most deeply personal work. The gratification of expression trumps art-scene chatter anytime.

When I prepare to make the drive back, Burden hands me a collection of 21 short stories he's written. Their subject is coyotes, and it's easy to see how closely he sees himself as an atavistic creature of this rough patch of land. In "Cappuccino," he writes, "As I looked out the kitchen window, I saw a coyote staring at me, looking directly into my eyes. I responded to this challenge by immediately grabbing an empty wine bottle off the counter, kicking open the back door, and heaving the bottle as hard as I could at the

coyote who was running away. The bottle grazed the coyote and struck the ground, shattering into pieces. I went out and picked up the pieces of glass so my dogs wouldn't cut their feet." Like *Shoot* and his skyscraper, the terrain of Topanga and the coyotes that swoop down out of it seem at odds. But as stand-ins for Burden and his way of looking at the world, they make a pretty good case for giving up on pegging him, and instead watching and learning from his complexities. □