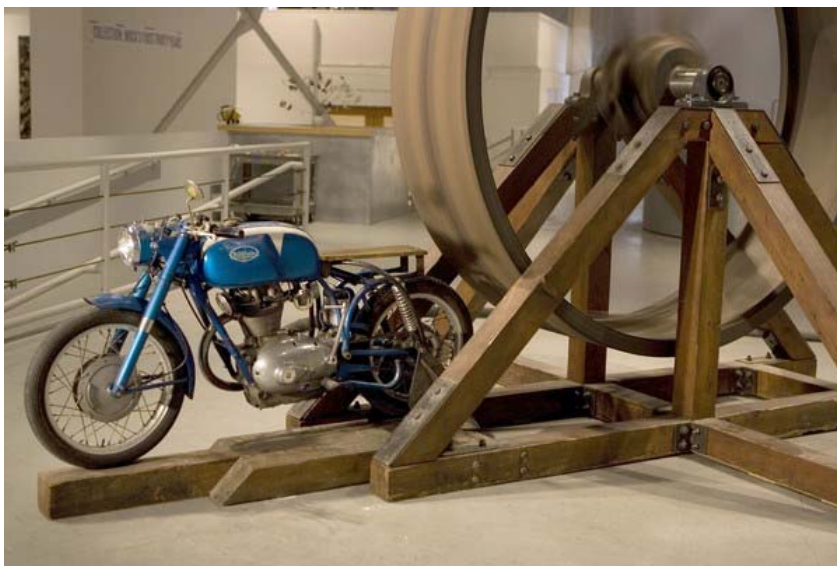


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## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

### MOCA revs up Chris Burden's 'Big Wheel'

The artist's massive installation piece, first shown in 1979, heads to the Geffen Contemporary as part of 'Collection: MOCA's First Thirty Years.'



Don Kelsen / Los Angeles Times /

ON A ROLL: "Big Wheel" consists of a 3,200-pound metal flywheel propelled by a Benelli motorcycle. For Burden, its "burst of energy" makes the piece come together.

Bifocals resting on his nose, Chris Burden mounted the scrawny Benelli motorcycle and kicked the machine to life. Revving the motor in first gear to make sure the 41-year-old beast would stay awake, he upshifted to second, then third, forcing the rear wheel of the tiny bike to spin faster and faster against the big wheel with which it was making contact.

With the motorcycle revved to 50 miles per hour, Burden's graying hair fluttered from the

wind generated by the enormous metal flywheel. He increased the speed to 60, the back of his navy blue polo shirt inches from the spinning 5,000-pound-mass. At 70, he pushed the bike forward, killing the motor and dismounting the machine that propels one of L.A.'s most esteemed kinetic sculptures -- "Big Wheel," which makes its return to the museum floor as part of "Collection: MOCA's First Thirty Years," opening Sunday at the Geffen Contemporary.

"It's pretty much the way I remember," said Burden, an L.A. art icon who hasn't seen "Big Wheel" in action since 2001, when it was last shown as a long-term MOCA installation that gave individual artists their own rooms to display their works.

In the 30 years since the piece was first created, Burden, 63, has enhanced his reputation as an artist who trades in grandiosity. His most recent works include "Divine Light," an installation of 202 vintage street lamps illuminating the entrance to LACMA since February 2008, and "One Ton, One Kilo," an exhibit that required the use of \$3.3 million worth of gold bars at the Gagosian Gallery in Beverly Hills last spring.

### **Off with a bang**

But "Big Wheel" is considered one of his seminal works.

"It's a legendary piece. It's iconic. Its place in [Burden's] oeuvre has not eroded with time. If anything it's continued to be one of the hallmarks of his career," said MOCA chief curator Paul Schimmel. "It's a piece that every time someone sees it they go, 'Oh!' It's been that way since the beginning."

"Big Wheel" in action is striking in its simplicity, mesmerizing in its movement and awe-inspiring in its scope and scale. The entire piece weighs 5,000 pounds, including the 3,200-pound steel flywheel (which was originally part of a generator and found in a Long Beach scrap yard), the 300-pound bike and the 1,500-pound trestle, which Burden

engineered himself using building timbers. As for the motorcycle, that was Burden's -- one of two vehicles he owned in his earliest days as an artist, the other being the pickup truck he used to haul the flywheel to his house.

Almost 40 years into a storied career that began with a bang and continues to race along with a large-scale sculpture involving 1,200 Hot Wheel-type toy cars, Burden owns "way too many" vehicles, he says, such as a 1956 Ford fire truck, a diesel mining locomotive and a French Citroen Camionette. He has an enduring fascination with all types of transportation, from trains to planes to automobiles.

And bikes. The day before "Big Wheel" was brought back to life for the MOCA exhibit, Burden purchased his first motorcycle in years: a single-cylinder 1978 Yamaha SR500 that he's "too scared to ride on the street. I promised my wife I wouldn't ride it," Burden says. This, from a man whose provocative and dangerous art pieces include "Shoot," the 1971 video in which he had a friend blast a rifle shot through his arm, and "Trans-Fixed," a 1974 performance in which he had nails driven through his palms for a crucifixion atop his Volkswagen bug.

Burden seems oblivious to the irony. Today, the scars are nearly invisible. His hands were unaffected; and his upper left arm shows the barest trace of an event Burden describes as "gross" and "depressing" and "painless." It lasted less than a second but formed the basis of a legendary, if controversial, legacy.

"Big Wheel," first shown in 1979, is significant because it marks a transitional period for the artist once known as L.A.'s bad boy and for the art world as a whole. Burden was moving from performance pieces to sculpture when art was morphing "from a gallery and museum orientation to art that was installation-oriented, using very untraditional materials," Schimmel says. "It's among the earlier pieces that anticipate that move of artist toward installation."

## **Powerful presence**

It was also created the same year the Museum of Contemporary Art was conceived, making it a perfect entryway piece for the new MOCA retrospective in the Geffen Contemporary building, highlighting works from "1980 to Now." The Grand Avenue museum will feature earlier works.

There's another reason the piece is parked just inside the front door. The bike that powers the flywheel is run every few hours to keep the piece in motion, and its exhaust needs to be vented outside the building. As it is, at least 100 feet of tubing extends from the bike's tailpipe, snaking through the gallery foyer and out the side door.

For the last few years, "Big Wheel" has been in storage, like many of MOCA's large-scale installations. But a few months ago, the bike that powers the piece was detached from the mother ship and delivered to Leif Lewis, the motorcycle mechanic who'd been commissioned to fix the bike after decades of abuse.

Lewis, 39, is the designer of high-performance Wagner Lewis clutches, and it was the Benelli's slippage-prone clutch that was in dire need of replacement, having been tortured by dozens of gallery and museum employees who had to hop on the bike and ride it every four hours to keep the piece going. A native Scotsman whose sedate Valley Village home belies his own colorful history, Lewis is a former motorcycle stunt man who, in the late '80s, was part of Europe's mechanical Circus Archaos.

"This is so me," Lewis said of the project, which not only involved replacing the clutch on the motorcycle but honing the cylinder, rebuilding the shifter, cleaning out the oil pump, un-gumming the carburetor, replacing a blown headlamp fuse and sourcing a vintage battery.

## **'Heart flutters'**

Fixing the little wheels that power the big one "is a lot different from fixing a bike for the road," Lewis said, the blue carcass of the Benelli jacked up on an air lift littered with a propane torch, flashlight, socket wrench and other tools of the trade. "It's like getting a bike prepped for a race. It can't fail, and it needs to go like hell."

Lewis hadn't even heard of Chris Burden when he was asked to restore the bike by a client who is a MOCA employee. Logging on to YouTube and checking out videos of "Big Wheel" and other classic Burden sculptures, such as "Flying Steamroller," Lewis became a fan.

Burden's work has that effect.

"My heart flutters every time," Lewis said of the piece he saw live and in motion for the first time in early October.

"Yeah!" he yelled from the sidelines as Burden upshifted through the gears and got "Big Wheel" rolling for its first MOCA run in almost eight years.

"For me, it's about this burst of energy that's absorbed by the sponge," Burden said of the piece. "You take those few seconds of acceleration, and that small amount of time and energy is then slowly bled out and you get to see it. That's why it works."

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