

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Mangled Roadsters, Erotic Bodywork Star in Car-Art Show: Review

Review by Martin Gayford



Feb. 19 (Bloomberg) -- Sex + technology = the future.

At least, that's what the late writer J.G. Ballard (1930- 2009) suggested. As an equation, it's a little less fundamental than $E = MC^2$, but it gives some idea of the contents of "Crash: Homage to J.G. Ballard," at the Gagosian Gallery, 6- 24 Britannia Street, London WC1 (through April 1).

To get the full picture you need to stir in other ingredients, such as horror, dystopia and wrecked cars. The show features a range of work by artists from Salvador Dali to Damien Hirst, all allegedly connected to Ballard's world view.

Basically, this is a large mixed exhibition of contemporary and not-so-contemporary art in a bewildering range of media and idioms. It does propose some intriguing ideas, one of which is the prominence of the car -- and therefore the automobile smash -- in modern culture.

Obviously, the internal-combustion engine and sexuality are closely connected in many minds (though perhaps not green ones). You only have to look at carmakers'

advertisements to grasp that. One of Ballard's best-known novels is "Crash" (1973), an exploration of the psycho-sexuality of the road accident. He also put together an exhibition, in 1970, that consisted entirely of crashed cars (the reviews were bad).

This might seem like a specialized interest. Cars and car smashes, though, have been a leitmotiv in 20th- and now 21st- century culture.

'Explosive Breath'

The Futurist Manifesto of 1909, one of the founding documents of the Modernist movement, begins with a euphoric account of a car accident, and contains the famous claim that with "its bonnet adorned with great tubes like serpents with explosive breath a roaring motor car ... is more beautiful than the Victory of Samothrace."

"I have used the car not only as a sexual image," Ballard wrote, "but as a total metaphor for man's life in today's society." There are plenty of examples of car art on show. Pop artists loved cars and crashes. "Green Disaster" (1963) is the aftermath of an appalling pile-up from one of Warhol's bleakest and most successful series of work. "Hers Is a Lush Place" (1958) is an examination of the eroticism of 1950s U.S. automobile bodywork by Richard Hamilton.

Actually, more could have been included. Two notable sculptors -- the American John Chamberlain and the Frenchman Cesar -- have spent whole careers making art out of crushed cars and car parts (Chamberlain does it better). There is, though, a marvelous bit of squashed-automobile assemblage on show at Gagosian: Rauschenberg's "Jockey Cheer Leader" (1987). Nobody ever put bits of contemporary urban detritus together to more lyrically beautiful effect than Rauschenberg.

Urban Carnage

That makes his piece a misfit in the exhibition, which dwells more on apocalypse, carnage and the weirdness of the modern city. Ballard was an admirer of the Los Angeles-based artist Ed Ruscha, whom he once remarked "has the coolest gaze in

modern art.” A couple of Ruscha pieces are included in the Gagosian show, though not his very Ballardian series of photographs of gas stations and Los Angeles parking lots.

“Ballardian,” by the way, is a genuine adjective, defined by the Collins Dictionary as resembling the world described in his work: “dystopian modernity, bleak man-made landscapes and the psychological effects of technological, social or environmental developments.” That covers just about everything these days, so it’s not surprising that such a variety of art can be shoehorned into this rambling yet thought-provoking show.