

## Stick Shift: Chris Burden Makes Automated Art Out of L.A.'s Freeways

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Chris Burden is a 64-year-old California artist most famous—or infamous—for his performance pieces from the 1970s, in which he, quite spectacularly, had himself shot in the arm, stuffed in a locker, entombed under glass, hidden on a gallery platform for three weeks, and used as a human fire extinguisher. But he has also long had a fascination with automobiles, resulting in pieces like *B-Car* (1975), in which he built a functional vehicle that could go 100 m.p.h. and achieve 100 m.p.g., *Deadman* (1972), in which he lay under a tarp on La Cienega Boulevard surrounded by roadside flares, and *Trans-fixed* (1974), in which he was crucified on the back of a VW Beetle.

I've long been a big fan of Burden's work, so when I heard that he was completing construction on a new, automotive-themed piece for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), I figured that, in my role as [Vanity Fair's car guy](#), I should pop by his Topanga Canyon studio.

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His entire workspace is occupied by a phenomenal jumble—the piece I’ve come to see. Entitled *Metropolis II*, it is an intricate, fanciful, spiraling, wondrous, 600-square-foot portrait of Los Angeles. More specifically, the city’s freeways. “It’s not like a model train set,” Burden says as he guides me around the structure—an 18-laned tangle of hills, bridges, tunnels, ramps, overpasses, skyscrapers, spillways, and chutes. “We have suggestions of types of buildings you find in L.A. But they’re not models. And we kept the scale vague, making the cars the dominant element.”

The effect, as with much of Burden’s work, is both thrillingly disorienting and improbably mesmerizing. Twelve hundred vehicles circulate through the piece in a continuous loop at scale speeds of up to 240 m.p.h., pulled up through a trio of gravity-powering hills by a contactless system of magnets mounted to hidden conveyor belts. In a previous and much smaller piece (*Metropolis I*, 2006), the constituent cars were an assortment of consumer-grade Hot Wheels. But different models traveled at different rates, and were more or less prone to skid out, requiring extensive—and expensive—customization to achieve even flow. (“If a car flips over, the rest of them just keep coming—like a real freeway,” Burden explains with an impish smile.)

So for *Metropolis II*, Burden contracted with a manufacturer in Hong Kong to produce four custom car designs. “We ordered 34,000 of them,” he says, taking out a handful of the vehicles, each with his name and the name of the piece embossed on the undercarriage and on all four tires. “Someone said I should sell trackers on individual cars, so people can buy and find theirs in the system when it’s running,” he says. He’s also working on integrating a tiny video camera for a sort of real-time, Google Street View feed of his city.

In order to prevent pileups—and to ensure that no kids lose a finger—the piece will require two full-time attendants once it’s installed at LACMA: one circulating guard-like on the outside, and one sitting, like a carousel operator, in the center. This carny/panopticon theme seems to fit with my *Blade Runner*-fueled portent for Los Angeles, and I ask Chris if the piece is meant to be a portrait of the city’s future. “I thought it might be,” he says. “But while working, I realized that it’s more a model of something at the end of its life cycle—the freely driven car. Soon enough, you’ll get in and dial in the address, and you’ll have no say about how fast you go through the curves,” he explains. “So it’s more a portrait of something that’s about to end, like if I was making a model of horse-drawn New York in the early 20th century.”

His reflection on what this loss of free will might mean for driving? “I think it will be great,” he says. “Daily driving is a drag. And it’s dangerous, with everyone engrossed in their cell phones.” I counter, saying I think he’d be the type to want to lure disaster to himself. “Not me,” he says. “I wear my seat belt. In fact, I think everyone should wear a crash helmet too.” This from the man who conducted

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such perilous performance pieces in the 70s? “It’s still performative,” he says of *Metropolis II*. “But it’s doing the performance, not me.”

We follow up our tour of the studio with a walk into the 80-acre property that Chris and his wife, the artist Nancy Rubins, began acquiring in Topanga back in 1981. He shows me his car collection, which includes a BMW 530xi wagon, a Mazda RX-8, a vintage Porsche 911 and Porsche 914, a pair of Toyota pickups, a pair of Daihatsu Rockys, a Ford Fiesta, the aforementioned 1954 Fire Truck, and a 1949



International bulldozer. He shows me some of the 500 fruit trees scattered about, and another wing of the studio—this one lined with custom versions of the classic Erector Set pieces, which he’s used in a number of artworks. And he shows me his collection of railroad track and trolley cars, and talks about his fanciful desire to build a “Dinner Train” on the property—one that would wind along the hilltop on a path he’d have to grade, and cross a trestle he’d have to build, before entering a tunnel he’d have to blast through a cliff, all while serving foods caught and grown on site. “It would be like a sailboat,” he says wistfully. “It’s not about trying to get anywhere fast; it’s about the trip.”

Taking in everything that Burden has shown me, when we get back to his office, I feel obliged to ask him about the meaning of his obsession with toys. He nods carefully. “They’re what we use to teach children how to become adults,” he says. “They’re tools to adulthood.” The implication being, it seems to me, that this is a process that isn’t—that’s never—quite finished for him. And, by extension, as his audience, for us. As if to prove this, before I leave, Chris gives me a souvenir—one of the custom cars from *Metropolis II*, and he watches with obvious relish as I spin its tires. “It’s one of the cop cars,” he says excitedly. “Those are rare.”

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