Frieze
November – December 2007

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Gagosian Gallery, Los Angeles, USA

Ready made are the lightning rods of the art world, if you look, and if your child ever makes it, we still sometimes wonder about emperors and their new high-end threads. Solve a puzzle, and we’re talking about art. Frieze, 20 years later, in this case Gagosian invited Chris Burden to put on a summer show, and it looked as though the idea was thought up during a telephone call. Under the request for a pause, the muffled sound of a hand over the receiver, then a quick “yeah, we can do that.” What was delivered to the gallery were simply two vehicles owned by the artist himself: Lotus (2006), a 1973 Lotus Europa (along with six photographs of the sports car), and Budweiser (2007), a 1954 International Harvester Trac Crawler (with four photographs). The title of this two-car garage of a show, “Yin Yang,” was the only clue pointing to any meaning, but it was all anyone needed, for while at first glance the show looked brashly extant, it was in fact quite full.

Colin Chapman, who founded the Lotus sports car company in Britain, always privileged lightness over simple packing more horsepower into a chassis (the American ideal), and this Lotus Europa, with its competition stripes and racing harnesses, seemed poised to slip around a track. Contrast this with the heavy-duty tractors, which spoke of farms, heartland, individual labour and a time before thoroughgoing industrialized agriculture. Both cars also operate as surrogates for the artist himself: the quick-manoeuvring Europa is a portrait of the artist as a working man, the stolid Budweiser (incidentally the same age as Fernando) a portrait of the artist today – still chugging along smoothly, in love with overalls, taking care of business. This incongruous pair, parked in the gallery’s Beverly Hills location (where you can always say you have more meaning and cachet than elsewhere), speaks volumes.

Chris Burden

These are objects that have not only been used but also cared for and loved. Driving them straight into the white cube reinvents them with a charm and dignity they deserve – more like exhibiting a loyal show pony and not a blender and refrigerator. From the freshly-waxed body of the Lotus forth its registration all up to date to the shiny silver of green growing out of the radiator of the tractor. To begin we can lock the personality that many of us invest in our cars (where others might see themselves in their pets). With that awareness three things become more than just vehicles, more than art even. They are some of the things that make our days bearable (or vulnerable as we shock ourselves). The photographs look almost surreal; exposures are wildly all over the place; sometimes out of focus, simply spot-on. They showed Burden standing next to his tractored steed, with a Cheechin cat, or barely peeking over his glasses. Others feature studio assistants, with Burden nowhere to be seen. This slightly awkward iconography is partly due to the fact that they were made with a large-format Polaroid camera (too big and exclusive that it requires its own technician to accompany it). Since each photo is unique, it is hard to get things just right, hence the range of exposures (and hence, presumable, the inclusion of assistants, probably substituting for Burden as he aimed at the right level and correct, like standing on a Hollywood set). Another layer of meaning to this oniric presents itself in the fact that the photographs, the one medium we usually associate with reproduction, are one-of-a-kinds. By contrast, the vehicles, although rarely seen on the roads, become the multiples.

This installation contains the sorts of quiet revelations mulled over for decades, slowly finding traction. If we look at the many dailies that sprout from Burden’s simple intervention, they pop up everywhere: old-news, Continental/Domestic, heavy/light, present/absent, original/modified, cute/ugly, easy/rigid, representation/impact, obvious/obscure. Some of the results resemble the reflections, flawed/eloquent; it is about loving objects, and at this time they often go to the collector who, however many thousands of bucks lighter in the wallet, feels the weight of wisdom that faced philosopher Luce Irigaray when she spoke of nearly a thousand years ago: “Be content with what you have rejoice in the way things are, when you realize there is nothing lacking, the whole world belongs to you.”

Jeffrey Ryan

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