

P A S T E L E G R A M: Marfa

A U T O B O D Y

Ballroom Marfa

By: Caitlin Murray
November 8, 2011

Featuring Meredith Danluck's *North of South West of East* (2011), a film commissioned for AutoBody at Ballroom Marfa, curator Neville Wakefield framed Danluck's film with works by Liz Cohen, Matthew Day Jackson and Jonathan Schipper. The show's concept—American car culture, mythology, and detritus—is general, yet the works by Cohen, Day Jackson, and Schipper engage the concept with particular and compelling representations. Using "the car as an entry point, a subtle connective tissue,"¹ Danluck's film is well-made and compellingly presented; however, its subtlety works ineffectively within this exhibition, turning the featured work into a curious outlier in an otherwise well-curated show.

The works by Cohen and Jackson emphasize the technical and aesthetic aspects of the car in its Platonic state, the combination of which elevates the car from functional object to icon. Probably the show's most impressive work is Cohen's *Trabantimino* (2002-2010), a hybrid car that combines a Trabant (a car manufactured in East Germany starting in the late 1950s) and a Chevrolet El Camino, hand-built by the artist over the course of several years. The work appears alongside *Proper Planning Prevents Poor Performance* (2007), a set of ink jet photographs that each depicts a single tool used in the hybrid's construction. The photographs are positioned high on the walls and line the perimeter of the exhibition space. In this position they seem to represent a pantheon of creativity, gods dressed in humble cloth.



Liz Cohen, *Trabantimino*, 2002-10 and *Proper Planning Poor Performance*, '07; installation photo by Fredrik Nilsen Studio. Courtesy Ballroom Marfa.

The pairing implies that AutoBody does not divorce itself from the bravado involved in the culture of muscle cars, though it's possible that these works appear together due to space constraints. Day Jackson's presentation of the engine as Prometheus' heart and Cohen's photographs linking the female body to car manufacturing posed together explore the tendency to anthropomorphize the automobile.

Jonathan Schipper's *The Slow Inevitable Death of American Muscle* (2008) furthers this conceptual thread. Schipper attached two cars, an '83 Chevy Camaro and a '93 Pontiac Firebird, to a steel hydraulic track. The installation enacts an extremely slow game of chicken in which neither driver bails. The cars crush each other by inches, one each day, over the course of the exhibition. If the car is indeed "American Muscle," Schipper appears to investigate what happens to a body that is all muscle and no brain.

Lastly, Danluck's film, a loosely structured aperçu of several lives intersecting on the U.S.-Mexico border, is beautifully shot and well-installed. The use of Marfa residents (who were not professional actors) in the cast was risky but paid off with a number of surprisingly good performances. But despite the film's narrative and visual strengths, it doesn't address the show's concept—the projection of the human body onto the car and the Car as myth—as overtly as the other works do. Every other work in AutoBody is either composed of actual cars or pieces of cars, while Danluck's film is more subtle. When placed in comparison to the other pieces, the film seems less a centerpiece and more an addendum. However, that a strong work is the show's blind spot demonstrates AutoBody's overall success.

1. As the exhibition text describes Danluck's film.
2. According to the exhibition's checklist.



Jonathan Schipper, *The Slow Inevitable Death of American Muscle*, 2008; photo by Fredrik Nilsen Studio. Courtesy Ballroom Marfa.

Three Cohen photographs appear in the same small exhibition hallway as Day Jackson's *Heart of Prometheus* (2009), a 1957 Chrysler Hemi Display Engine built by Don Garlits.² Day Jackson's sculpture consists of the engine placed atop a crystalline steel bar lattice. Here is the fire that Prometheus gave the Americans, the work seems to humorously imply. Combined with Cohen's photographs—all of which feature a woman performing as a highly sexualized Rosie the Riveter of sorts and the word Zwickau (the town in East Germany that manufactured Trabants)—Day Jackson's *Heart of Prometheus* takes on further meanings.