Donnie Molls: Disposable Culture

Even after we discard them for scrap and recycling, our cars remain loaded with narrative, suggestion, and spectral traces of identity. Bidding on his fascination with objects and places that are overlooked or abandoned, and yet charged with the transient presence of absentia, Molls transforms the gallery space into a modern day memento mori with images of wrecking yards, tire piles, and car part graveyards. Our cars become a significant emblem of our consumption, our waste, our mutable identities, our optimism, and ultimately of our own impermanence. An apt signifier for the dystopian facets of the American Dream, and the ravages and remnants of its consumptive appetites and excesses, the wrecked car is a heavy ghost in the American landscape.

As a child, Molls observed the creation and destruction of the automobile first hand with his father, who built stock and demolition derby cars. Later moving to Los Angeles, an epicenter of car culture, he became fascinated with its aura of magic and prosperity. As a literal vehicle for social and cultural identity, the car is coveted, loved, fetishized, and emblematic. It is the nostalgic object par excellence: deeply rooted in the temporal as a cultural signifier of its time. Recently, the artist has returned to photography as an appropriately nostalgic medium to capture the car’s elusive sublime, and has documented custom-car culture, and its breakdown, across Southern California. The artist exposes photo negatives onto a prepared canvas, or steel panel, with coats of gelatino-silver bromide. He then paints and glazes over them with translucent layers and accretions of color. The hybridized composites, simultaneously photographic, painterly, additive, and reductive, alter the viewer’s perception of an iconic, and readily recognizable, symbol of consumption culture. We are sensitized to our own intimately subjective relationships to these charged objects, and the roles they play in the inflected scopes of our memories and cultural imaginaries. Like wrecking yards filled with discarded memories, these images become uncomfortably human in the suggestion of absent lives once associated with the castaways.
Fascinated by the heaps of dismantled and decommissioned vehicles, scavenged for their salvageable parts, Molls has created wall mounted sculptures and a site-specific installation built from blown-out pistons and used tires. Altogether new in the artist’s oeuvre, the objects are collectively arranged and mounted to the gallery walls and floors to suggest the overwhelming abundance of discards and castoffs that populate repair shops and car yards across the city. These “dead” parts are revived and re-positioned in rhythmic circles or massive heaps, taking on new formal life from the detritus and wreckage of human flotsam. These sculptural assemblages invoke the coexisting moments of creation and destruction in contemporary consumer culture, and the ambivalence of our own coexisting appetites for the new and the old, for the preservation of history and for its erasure. Disposable Culture laments the impermanence and instability of our loftiest tower of Babel.

Molls currently lives and works in Los Angeles. He began exhibiting in the early 1990s and his work has recently been featured in several group exhibitions including at the Orange County Center for Contemporary Art, Laguna Beach Art Museum, Riverside Art Museum, Irvine Fine Arts Center and at the new Lancaster Museum of Art; and recently in a solo exhibition with Carl Berg Projects. His work is included in several major art collections and has been featured in New American Painters, Rivera, Coast and Puta magazines.