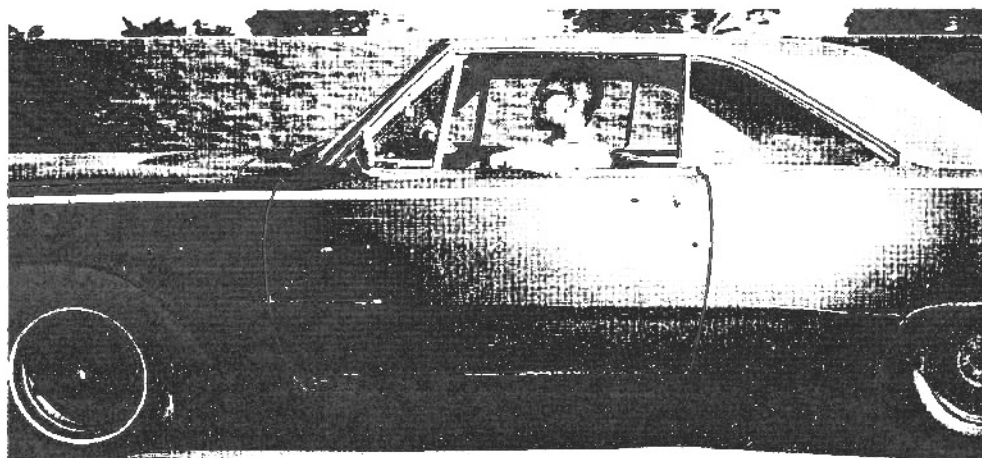


A Glance Backward While Driving Over the Edge *by Anne Pundyk*

Owning a car is an American birthright. It is the personalization of American power, prosperity, and autonomy. Regardless of the impact on the environment or national security, we Americans go where we want, when we want, and in the car of our choice. Speed is the hook: put your foot on the accelerator and go. At least, that's the way it's always been. Now, with the rapid slow-down of our economy, we are being forced to confront our relationship to our cars. Andrew Bush's "Vector Portraits," photographs of people driving their cars, can give us a place to start. Opening April 23rd, two Chelsea galleries—Yossi Milo and Julie Saul—are showing Bush's near life-size color images taken in the 1990s.

To shoot these images from his moving car, Bush mounted a medium-format roll-film camera in place of his passenger seat. Over a period of ten years, he drove the Los Angeles environs—and parts of the mid and far West, regularly trolling for people in their cars as subjects. Part anthropologist, part rogue state reporter, he was drawn to the momentary connection with fellow travelers, as he snapped the shutter. The technically impeccable, "straight" style of the photographs reveals a palpable intimacy—acknowledged or not—between the viewer and subject. The work's pathos and humor is framed by the relative sameness of the compositions. Always facing west, in profile, the rhythmically repeated aerodynamic elements encourage a focus on the details: a car door's do-it-yourself touch-up, a nose-ring, a hearing aid, or an involuntarily exposed tongue-tip.

We share Bush's communion with his subject. These are people we know: on their way to work or coming home, coming back from vacation, running errands, joy-riding, going out for the night, or on the job. His portraits are not airbrushed car advertisements—an easy contrast to make now that the industry's marketing forces desperately flood us with



Man continuing east at 67 mph on Interstate 10 near Palms Boulevard in Los Angeles at 4:14 p.m. in February 1991. From the series Vector Portraits, Digital C-Print. © Andrew Bush. Courtesy Yossi Milo Gallery, New York and Julie Saul Gallery, New York.

offers. The drivers' age, sex, and race cut democratically across all lanes, as do the make, model, year, and color of the cars. Embedded in the details is evidence of wear and tear on both car and driver, with an occasional passenger or two. As a series, the work becomes a collective portrait. This is an opportunity to see ourselves.

We are what we drive. Our cars reflect our public persona; they are a second skin or our second home. We eat, talk, bank, and, on occasion, procreate in our cars. With the change in our nation's fortunes, more of us may in fact be living out of our cars. Our individual economic struggles parallel the dire straits in Detroit. On top of massive declines in sales since last fall, this month, American car shoppers seem uninterested in design, price, or gas mileage. Who would want to buy a car from a company about to go bankrupt? Forget worrying about warranty service. Would the brakes work if its manufacturer is distracted by its own imminent demise? What caused this calamity for the American car industry?

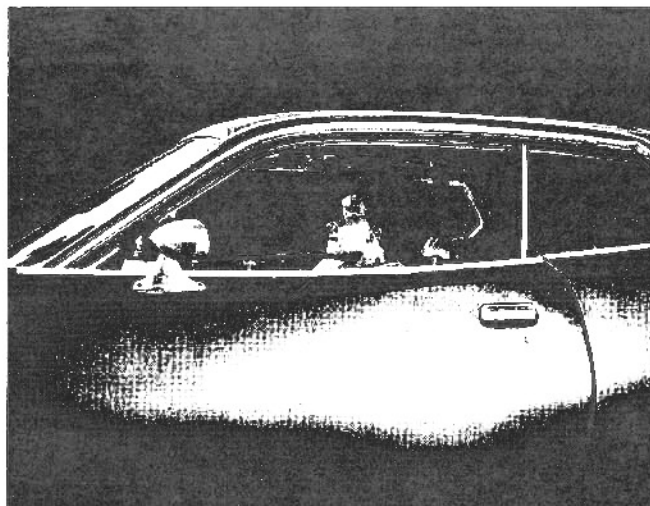
Gasoline prices doubled last fall just as reckless, mortgage-backed gambling poisoned the economy's life-blood. Credit was subsequently frozen, leading to the on-going pile up of job and home losses, shriveling consumer demand. And let's not forget the past 10 years of automotive excess, as Detroit cranked out SUVs and Hummers for a ready market. Yes, we've done this to ourselves—and, as such, the car industry continues to reflect America's place in the world.

As if predicting this dizzying economic collapse, Andrew Bush's photographs gradually prompt a surprising disorientation. Just how we are seeing these single speeding cars and the people inside them? There is no car window frame on our side. There is no solid ground for the camera. Our point of view is somehow that of a disembodied consciousness. First we see the driver, caught in perfect focus; then the cab of the car framed in a chrome-rimmed Cartesian cube. Gliding along the reflective surfaces of metal and glass, keenly aware of sun-baked paint and skin, we note the white splash of the camera's flash. A clue to the vertiginous reality of the image peripherally catches our eye: the yellow-green blur of a hedge, the patch of concrete highway spun to soft ribbons, the single spinning tire. Unexpectedly, we find ourselves feeling like a cartoon figure, moments after inadvertently running off a cliff. Our legs windmilling, we are precariously poised in mid-air.

Bush describes his titles as "stoppily objective," labeling one image: "driving somewhere in the last decade of the previous millennium (whereabouts unknown)." Roland Barthes says that photography shows "reality in a past state: at once the past and the real." Bush's work puts us in touch with our recent past. Significantly, we recognize the heightened innocence of "before." Palpable in the shine of the nicked metal door, the texture of skin on the driver's cheek is a sense of recognizing—moments before the possibility materializes—that we are about to crash.

Lingering with the photographs a moment further, however, another thought surfaces. Bush's car and driver portraits have stopped time; given us the chance to consider regrouping. What forces and bad habits have brought this essentially American industry to its knees? What can we do to change the picture? Using the power of American creativity and pioneering, early in the last century, Ford Motor Company's Model T "put America on wheels." This and other engineering feats are deeply embedded in our collective mythology. Can we use our Yankee ingenuity to trump the corroded political and industrial institutions failing around us? We can rethink the car and reclaim our independence. Once again, channeling propitiously both road warriors in their hopped up muscle cars and Astronauts on the moon in bouncing golf carts, we can drive west into the sunset. ☐

Anne Sherwood Pundyk is a painter and writer based in Manhattan. www.annepundyk.com



Andrew Bush, Person driving somewhere in the last decade of the previous millennium (whereabouts unknown). From the series Vector Portraits, Digital C-Print. © Andrew Bush, Courtesy Yossi Milo Gallery, New York and Julie Saul Gallery, New York.

Exhibition and Book Information

Yossi Milo Gallery: "Andrew Bush, Vector Portraits," April 23 - June 27, 2008. Reception and book signing by the artist on Thursday, April 23 from 6:00 to 8:00 p.m.

Julie Saul Gallery: "Andrew Bush, Vector Portraits," April 16 - May 14, 2008. Reception Thursday, April 17, 6:00 to 8:00 p.m.

Drive by Andrew Bush, Yale University Press, 2008