

Tony Nadler's 13 Bicycles

Tony Nadler has been assembling individualized bicycles for about eight years. Before that he was styling Datsun 510's, his economical choice in a long line of cult cars, scions of the Kali-like progenitor, the little Deuce Coupe (1932 Ford). A cult car is a tabula rasa, a vessel for personalized stylistic gestures; the teardrop aperture of the tail-light, the hooded brow of the headlight, the angle of the body to the horizontal, the finely-tuned throaty exhaust. Neoclassical to Mannerist.

The cult of the hot-rod/customized car surfaced with the re-tooling of North American industry for mass consumer-product production after the Depression years of the 1930's and the 2nd World War. Like Bebop and zoot-suits it was a reaction to off-the-shelf product brands. The basic formula: seek out the core generic product and personally alter it. At first it was Fords, preferably the business man's coupe (representing the lone frontiersman) rather than the family model. When these became scarce, eventually family models were allowed and then even Chevrolets. For whatever hermetic reasoning, Dodge bodies were seldom included even though their revolutionary Hemi engines were accepted as hot-rod propulsion. As a reaction, Chrysler began marketing their own off-the-shelf muscle cars for cult wanna-be's, like the 1970 Dodge Charger, fetishized by Richard Prince.

By the seventies, California artisans like the Barris brothers, who led the customized car cult with their body styling along with pin-stripers Von Dutch and Big Daddy Roth, had passed on their the blue-collar skills. The recipients, the anomalous new working-class Mexican-Americans, continued to personalize car styles adapted to their own cultural identities. Today, if you want to tweak your wheels you drive to Tijuana.

I spent my teenage years in the 1950's in a small industrial city in southern Ontario that specialized in textiles and metal works. My older sister, a proto-beatnik, had a friend with a souped-up Ford that he and his partner used as a get-away vehicle, robbing banks in small towns with imitation hand-guns (a pointed index finger in a coat pocket) and out-running the cops like latter-day Bonnie and Clydes. They were corralled the first day the police had access to two-way radios in their cruisers. Hey, this was car culture. In high-school, rumor was that nerd Rodger, secretary of the student council, was grounded after borrowing the family car for a Saturday-night date. On her way to church the next morning, his mother discovered a bare footprint in the frost on the back-seat window. Pre-"the-pill", how many boomers were conceived at the drive-in movie.

Before I was old enough to earn a driver's license, I was thoroughly indoctrinated into personalized car culture. I watched and listened to cool cars prowl the main drag, I hung around the fringes of the local hot-rod club, *The Strollers*, and I ardently pursued several magazines dedicated to personalized car aesthetics. I learned the stylistic order of gesture stemming from each cult-car based genre, finite mental categorization. When I got my license, I eventually acquired several cult acceptable cars, older Fords and Chevs, but I

never managed to do any cool alterations. Before I got around to it, I more or less ran them into the ground. I suppose it was a class thing. My father was a successful traveling salesman who purchased a new middle-class car every year. I didn't inherit the manual skills of engine mechanics or bodywork, but the categorization of styles within genres molded my adolescent mind. A decade later when I found myself in a liberal arts program, art history found me. I received an undergrad degree in Art History and a scholarship to do post-graduate studies in sculpture in London.

In the year 2000, Gordon Hatt, who was curator in the civic gallery in the city of my 1950's auto-indoctrination, mailed me a photo-copy of an essay by art critic and historian Dave Hickey titled, "*The Birth of the Big Beautiful Art Market*" (Art issues #19,1996). I was astonished. To me, no analysis of post-fifties art in America rung so clearly. The analogy on which he hung his concept of the democracy of art on the street was the American customized car culture. I could never write a précis of a Hickey essay, the economy of language defies distillation. You can find "*The Birth of Big Beautiful Art Market*" in a book of Hickey's essays titled "*Air Guitar*" (Art Issues press, 1997).

Also in 2000 when walking in the Washington Heights neighborhood of Manhattan, I witnessed a posse of young Latino men peddling by on Schwinn cruisers that had been radically altered to mimic severely chopped Harleys. Again, a generic classic American production-model customized. A transference of the California Mex-American low-rider redefined by economics. Since then I have seen customized Schwinn on the streets of Seattle in my too infrequent trips to that liberal American city.

For a bit of a reverse segue: Henry Miller in his semi-autobiographical writing based in 1930's Paris, the *Tropics* and "*Black Spring*", frequently lauded the bicycle and the freedom that his prowess in maintaining and riding it afforded him. When his writing finally paid him enough to buy an automobile, an ancient Cadillac, Miller was 50-years-old. He purchased it to facilitate his on-the-road trans-America travelogue "*Air Conditioned Nightmare*". Henry felt a victim of the machine. When breakdown finally forced him to look under the hood, what he hopelessly described was "a calliope playing in a tub of grease".

Duchamp had presented a bicycle wheel as ready-made art, with a stool as its pedestal, eighty years before his ready-mades were referenced by Richard Prince's muscle cars. The urban utility of the bicycle is depicted in Vertov's "*Man with a Movie Camera*", (Russia 1929), and De Sica's "*The Bicycle Thieves*" (Italy, 1948). Truffaut's "*Jules and Jim*" (France, 1962) presents the bicycle, Miller-like, as a vehicle of romance and eroticism sustained by an indelible, haunting musical-score.

Closer to home and now, the shoe-designer John Fluevog and his wife Ruth peddle about Vancouver on their individual imported high-framed reproductions of a 1890's Danish bicycle. Occasionally they can be seen tooling around town in the Fluevogmobil, a road-hugging customized car that at a glance I took to be constructed from the bulbous cult classic 1949 Ford-Mercury. It turns out to be a personalized 1965 Jaguar Mk X.

As I said previously, Tony Nadler was customizing Datsun 510's. As the supply of older cult classics became expensively rare, out of expedience, newer production brands and models were canonized. A Jaguar Mk X, jeez Fluevog, I don't think so.

Tony said that he painted his customized Datsuns in a grey-tone scale, mainly flat black. This subdued the body mass and emphasized body outline, a strategy he carries to his bicycle creations. If he switched to bikes for green reasons, lack of finances or both I didn't ask. He is a postal worker and recently a musician in a surf-band. He lives and builds his bikes within the confines of a clean bachelor-size downtown condo which is stuffed with banks of amplifiers, guitars and various other instruments and tools. 13 cars, even small Datsuns, could present a spatial problem. The man has an artist's obsession with every finite detail of his bike production. He has assembled a few bikes for close friends but the bulk of his production is for his own personal use. At one time or another he uses all these two wheelers for urban transport. The public sees them.

Though the generic components of his individual bicycles are usually definable, the frame, the handle-bars, the seat, each assemblage is ingeniously unique with a style that is recognizably his alone. The sparse lines of an oval-track racer that for street use allows one front brake. A faux-military bike with shell-case panniers. A hyper balloon-tired American cruiser with an elegant British saddle. Hopefully Tony can be persuaded to part with some of these creations to help finance other works and maybe make room for a comfortable piece of furniture in his condo.

In these days of virtual reality with most of North America's tool and dye facilities moved off-shore there is very little realization of manual skills. Tony is an exception.

I don't think he thinks in terms of art versus outsider art, he just does it. This could be a true example of what Dave Hickey defines as the democracy of art on the street.

Tom Burrows, February 2009