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Life Is A Highway: Art And American Car Culture At The Toledo Museum Of Art

"You will do better in TOLEDO." City motto of Toledo, Ohio.

Carriages. Trucks. Tankers.

I come from a family of heavy vehicle manufacturers and repairers, who opened for business in Chicago in 1859. German emigrants from Darmstadt, they started out by building "carriages, buggies and wagons of all descriptions" before expanding into specialty transportation equipment. Jacob Press Sons, as the family firm was named, was an early adapter and modifier of machine powered-vehicles. Wheels and axles were in our DNA. Automotives are in my blood.

Trucks (and cars) were just always there.

In the 1950s and 1960s, several uncles and cousins were car crazy gear heads. Over time, my uncles, cousins, dad and brother would own an encyclopedia of car brands. My Uncle Jack drove a Ford T-Bird (Thunderbird), a car he replaced yearly. My Uncle Dick drove a Cadillac. My Uncle Bob drove a Chrysler. My Uncle Norman and my dad drove the more modest cars of "junior executives" a/k/a

salesmen: Dodges, Oldsmobiles and Plymouths. But my dad aspired to more, a Lincoln. He also had owned a 1929 Ford Model A. That car was central to an assortment of family memories and comedic nightmares. My personal auto-phobia has been transformed into auto-nostalgia, with memories of car-enabled drive-in restaurants and movie theaters (!), roadside breakdowns and empty gas tanks and hitchhikers and hobos.

In postwar America, the car was the thing. Gas was cheap. America had become a nation of drivers. By the end of the 1960s, nearly one in seven Americans was directly or indirectly employed by the auto industry. Cars were authentic signifiers of economic realities and aspirations, as well as taste and status. Whole neighborhoods and suburbs in and around Chicago could be defined by the residents' cars parked on the streets or in driveways. The car was and is a multi-purpose, -functional vehicle, fulfilling daily chores, carrying birthday and wedding celebrants (as well as the deceased and funeral mourners) and touring the US.

Far removed from *The Art of the Motorcycle* (Guggenheim, 1998), *Life Is a Highway: Art and American Car Culture* is an exhibition about how car culture was depicted in art. The Guggenheim show focused on the engineering, design and art of 114 actual machines: motorcycles. *Life Is a Highway* is going to appeal to both art and car lovers. It cannot fail, since it takes a sweeping view of how the car shaped America, especially after WWII when the Greatest Generation and their offspring explored and relocated around the country in its postwar expansion.

Curator Robin Reisenfeld dedicated *Life Is a Highway* to her parents and her “memories of our never dull family road trips,” a staple of postwar American life. She argues—in a highly readable, non-didactic catalog—“no other invention has exerted more influence in shaping twentieth-century American society, [and] relatively little attention has been devoted to its frequent appearance in American art.” Reisenfeld and her curatorial team have mounted an exhibition of more than 150 works that is visually diverse and personally engaging.



Robert Bechtle. *Agua Caliente Nova*, 1975. © ROBERT BECHTLE, COURTESY THE HIGH MUSEUM OF ART, ATLANTA. PURCHASE WITH FUNDS FROM THE NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS AND THE RAY M. AND MARY ELIZABETH LEE FOUNDATION, 1978.1.

Photography and paintings predominate. Works like Stuart Davis’s *Landscape with Garage Lights* (1931-32) is a proto-Pop depiction of the entire American landscape of that era. Thomas Hart Benton’s lithograph *Departure of the Joads* (1939) was a work commissioned by Hollywood to publicize *The Grapes of Wrath*, John Steinbeck’s Pulitzer Prize winning novel about the Great Depression

that was made into a film. Robert Bechtle, one of the earliest Photorealists, used a snapshot of his wife and children standing by a Chevy Nova—a simple, back-to-basics compact car, embodying "maximum functionalism with thrift"—above the canyon of the Agua Caliente Indian Reservation near Palm Springs, CA, to paint *Agua Caliente Nova* (1975).