



Richard Lewis, Hispano Suiza Chrome, 2015. ©

# THE SOUL OF AN OLD MACHINE

Lyman Allyn's 'Luster' exhibition celebrates our fascination with cars and motorcycles

By JOHN RUDDY  
Day Staff Writer

If your local art museum displayed 55 realistic paintings of washing machines, would you check them out? How about microwaves, or even computers?

Didn't think so.

Paintings of cars, maybe? On the one hand, they're just another machine essential to modern living, arguably less so than computers.

But cars, man, they're cool.

That's reason enough to go see "Luster," a celebration of automobiles and motorcycles, at the Lyman Allyn Art Museum in New London. The vivid and sometimes eye-popping show renders its subjects in the styles of realism and hyperrealism, paintings that look uncannily like photographs.

The whole idea is as American as sailing down the highway, singing to the radio with the windows up so no one can hear you. The bond you feel with your vehicle at that moment is perhaps the same one that makes you want to enjoy cars as art.

Are we still a car-obsessed country? Maybe a little less so in the age of Uber and Zoom, but not much. The show seems to correct for this by featuring largely older vehicles, which somehow cast a stronger spell.

You feel the connection when staring at the grill of a 1931 Rolls Royce Phantom II glistening in the sun, or admiring the no-nonsense profile of the Ford GT40 that dominated at LeMans in

the late 1960s. The canvas is so large, the detail so realistic, you want to hop in for a lap around the track.

The show is a traveling exhibition curated by David J. Wagner that has been touring the country since 2018. About 15 contemporary artists are represented, each one's works grouped together, often illuminated by their commentary.

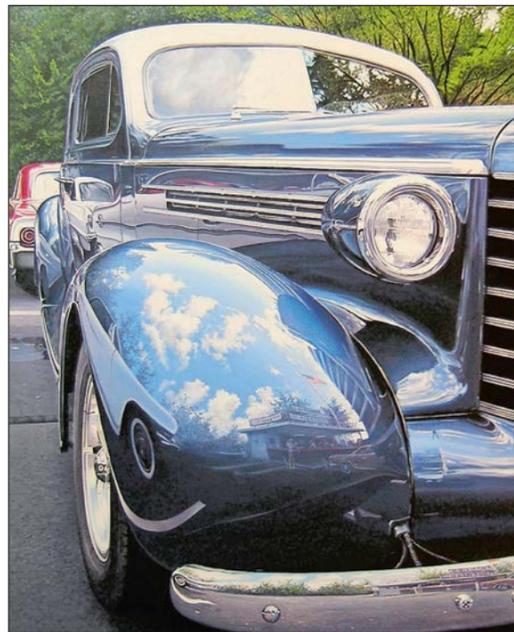
The paintings vary in style and subject, but many have two things in common. One, the framing is tightly on the vehicles, without a lot of landscape, people or other context. Sometimes a hubcap is the whole scene. Two, there's endless fascination with the reflective properties of sheet metal and chrome.

"The reflections on the surface of the automobiles allow the viewer to go deeper, to see something more than the form," artist Cheryl Kelley writes. "There is a quality of mystery that I experience with reflections that I want to convey, to take the viewer out of the mundane, into a dream world."

Another artist is less interested in dreams than in popular culture. In four acrylics on canvas by Robert Petillo, what's reflected isn't mysterious, it's our world. "Heartland" shows a fragment of small-town Main Street shimmering in the chrome. A flagpole, post office and gas pump are distorted in different ways as the sun catches them in various places on a Harley-Davidson.

"I took over 150 pictures and used the best of the best to create this painting," Petillo writes.

SEE EXHIBITION PAGE D3



Robert Petillo, Frankie's Root Beer Stand, 2007. ©

## IF YOU GO

**What:** "Luster: Realism and Hyperrealism in Contemporary Automobile and Motorcycle Painting"

**Where:** Lyman Allyn Art Museum, 625 Williams St., New London

**When:** Through Jan. 2

**Hours:** 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday, 1-5 p.m. Sunday

**Admission:** Adults \$12, seniors \$9, students \$5, children under 12 free

**Information:** [lymanallyn.org](http://lymanallyn.org)

Kris Preslan,  
The Old Indian,  
2014. ©



Joseph Santos, Chevy Bel Air, 2013. ©

# Exhibition showcases automobile and motorcycle painting

## FROM D1

In his “Frankie’s Root Beer Stand,” the fender and bumper of a 1937 Oldsmobile Coupe are the twin means of reflecting the title dining spot. The same scene, with a carhop on skates at the counter, is caught in both places, but it’s full and rounded in one, squashed and elongated in the other.

Some artists use cars to reflect other cars, as in John E. Schaeffer’s “Candy Apple Tuxedo,” one of the first paintings to greet visitors to the gallery. The scene is an auto show, and the body of a 1940 Ford reflects another Ford of similar vintage in a triple portrait. It appears straightforwardly on a door panel and more fancifully on the curves of the front and rear fenders.

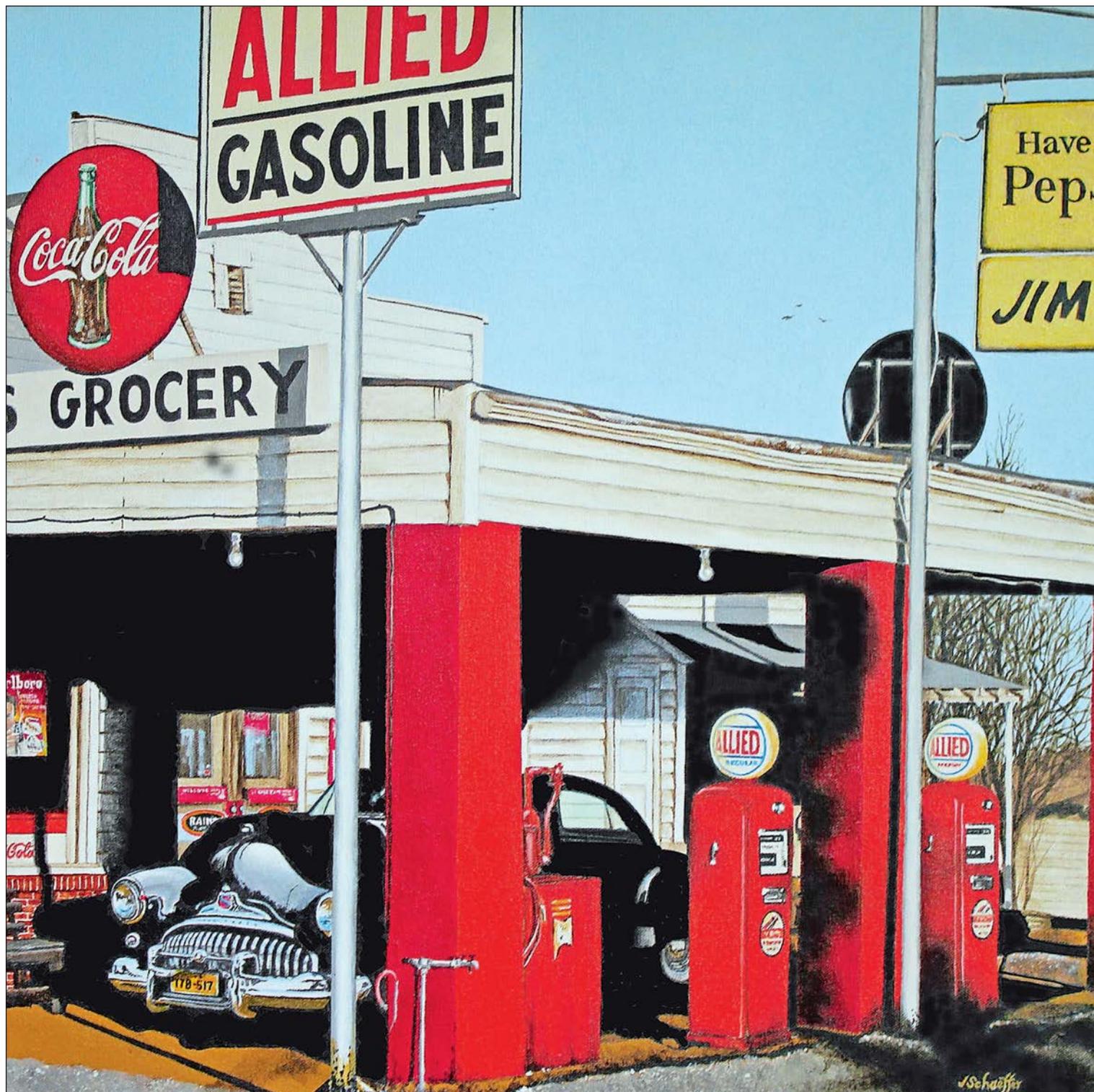
Richard Lewis expanded the cars-reflecting-cars idea into a series of watercolors he writes was inspired by his twin sons. The series is represented here by “Alfa 8Cs,” which again portrays two similar vehicles in proximity at a show.

“It took quite a few shots to get the reflections to be perfect,” he writes, noting that the painting took 600 hours over seven months to complete.

The frequent focus of Joseph Santos, who also works in watercolors, is urban and industrial objects like machinery and neon signs. When he turns his attention to cars, he follows his usual approach of “searching for the abstract patterns and beauty created by the rust, dirt, steel and other weathered and decaying materials.”

His four paintings zoom in on details of vehicles that have seen better days. The headlight of a 1957 Chevrolet Bel Air is rimmed with rust, and the pale green paint has worn off the hood. The grill of a 1962 Ford Falcon fills another canvas, the dented hood unable to fully close. These are classic cars, but not the gleaming restorations displayed at summer events. Instead the artist celebrates the authentic scars of high mileage and time’s assault.

A fuller view along these lines is Harold D. Zabady’s



John E. Schaeffer, *Fill'er Up*, 2017. ©

“Timeless Beauty,” an oil on linen that shows an old Jaguar E-type strapped onto a flatbed, on its way to either the junkyard or, hopefully, restoration. The badly corroded body still flaunts the alluring curves that made it an icon in the '60s and '70s.

A minority of the artists

choose vintage motorcycles as their muse, and the result is often extreme closeups that explore the tangle of pipes that make them run.

The most interesting bike paintings are broader views from unusual angles, like Ken Scaglia’s “Please Be Seated.” The subject is a 1938 Harley-Da-

vidson, the perspective is from above, and the focal point is the seat. Its power to inspire is enigmatic, and it’s not very comfortable-looking either.

It’s hard to say what motivates the creation of these labor-intensive and literal representations, but their hold on the viewer is undeniable. If the

answer is elusive on the canvas, in at least one case it’s evident in the title.

Four watercolors by Kris Preslan show enticing classics from the '30s and '40s. With obvious yearning, she named the paintings “Cars I’ll Never Own,” Nos. 9, 10, 12 and 15. One of them is a mesmerizing,

head-on view of an MG with its side hood panels lifted. The headlights gaze out tranquilly as if to say, “That’s right, you’ll never own me.”

Probably not. But if you can’t own it, maybe painting it is the next best thing.

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