

NATURE ON OUR TAIL

Three Ways to Evolution

by Blair Schulman

Like curious tongues and tails, Davin Watne's collision of man and animal is beginning to crawl all over us. We have been challenging these four-legged creatures since the first caveman realized a good slug to the head can become dinner — it has been a battle of wills ever since. In a long overdue one-person exhibition, Watne's *Life is a Collision* presents the animal as having begun to supersede humans once again, going after our relentless trail of accomplishments, which have become fodder for their advancement.

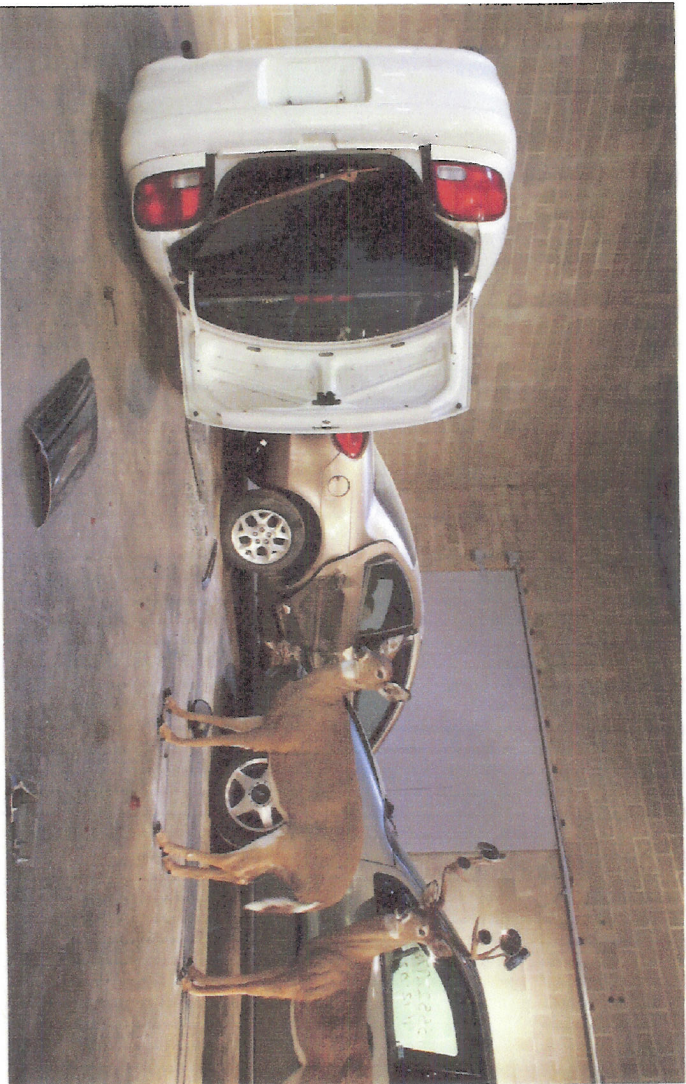
This ambitious exhibition pushes in a unique direction. First, three large-scale paintings each depict a lone automobile after its demise. Chaos: it brings everything to a standstill, and then another story takes shape. Having been in an automobile collision himself several years ago, Watne speaks of the sudden attachment to a corporate structure that follows a car accident. Suddenly, all that metal, glass, and speed stops short, and insurance, auto-body work, health care needs, and endless paperwork introduces itself, unwelcome, like parents at a teenage pot party. And if another person is involved in the accident, we are attached to them for years to come as well. After all the annoyances, however, we recover, or at least begin to move on. But a wrecked vehicle, if man decides not to rescue it, is on its own, and the animals in these paintings adapt to these supposed abandonments. If they have figured out how to survive despite our endless subdurus and incessant logging, they can adapt here as well.

Watne's love of the fast, aggressive car comes from his long history as a Kansas City artist. Automobiles have been depicted in a variety of his exhibitions and more recently in his designs for Dig-it-Panicles. The owner of the former Dirt Gallery, Watne has shown for many years the might of the muscle car. His momentum in this show, however, takes a pretty twisted turn: the sudden helplessness of these machines and the antagonism on the part of the animals is almost sexualized and is depicted with a raw energy in his testosterone-fueled painting.

One portrait shows a cougar seemingly already aware of the human owner of the car; it's probably not returning and looks ready to pick apart the overturned vehicle to satisfy

Davin Watne: Life is a Collision

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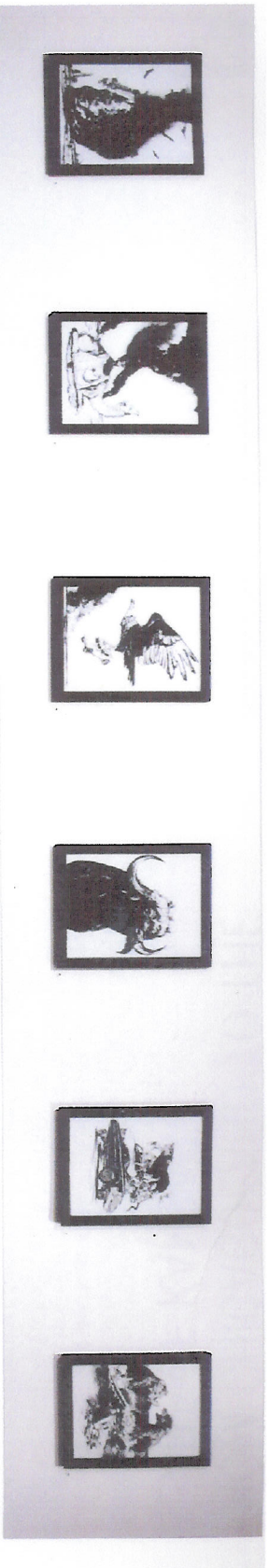
Installation view of *Life is a Collision*, 2016, truck and cougar sculpture, interior, automobiles floor-to-ceiling, Review Studios

its bloodlust. Another painting shows a smashed pickup truck as being observed by a pair of whitetail deer, the vehicle now powerless, having given up its status as deer-killer. In the third portrait, a pack of wolves does not seem to care if anyone is returning or not — that dead truck is their carcass, and they intend to have at it. Watne gives sleek beauty to his animals: his brushstrokes are lush and finely detail the wolves' fur so that you want to run your hands through it. Next to these animals, the wrecks look pathetic and vulnerable. Though well-rendered, they deserve to be devoured.

The Review Studios Exhibition Space is a challenging gallery to fill — it is cavernous. The prospect of such a huge air-to-floor ratio is intoxicating at first, but the

actual application can be overwhelming if one does not pull back and leave most of it alone. Watne did not bludgeon it with superfluous storytelling. He created a three-dimensional environment that allowed visitors — who really are more like voyeurs in this case — in on an intensely primal moment for the animals, their adaptation already underway.

Supporting the portraits was an installation of an actual wreck, which was funded by an ArtsKC Fund Inspiration Grant through the Arts Council of Metropolitan Kansas City. According to Paul Tyler, ArtsKC Fund grants director, "Davin made a persuasive case that the scale and size of the Review exhibition space was an invitation for him to expand the show into 3-D space.



Installation view of six silk screen prints (left to right): *Car Bomb*, *Burning Canal*, *Kulture*, *Cape Buffalo*, *Street Rai* and *Endling Bear* 2007, silk screen on paper, 24" x 18"
Photo: Michael Forrester



Installation view of three paintings (left to right): *Apart and Omega*, *The Alien*, *Unnatural Selection*, 2006, oil on canvas, 65" x 83"
Photo: Michael Forrester

He submitted a concept image for how the deer and the wrecked autos would heighten the impact — no pun intended — of the 2-D paintings and drawings on the walls." A minivan and two cars, one on its side, smashed up and ready for the scrap heap, were staged together to be the first thing visitors saw upon entering the gallery. The immediate area was strewn with broken glass, fluids, and fiberglass parts, and a taxidermied buck and a doe, which Watne says might be representative of the family unit that has also gotten away from man, stood in the middle, just observing. The buck wears, or has grown, rearview mirrors on the points of its antlers. The metamorphosis has begun. Though the installation was exciting to observe, certain details were overlooked: tow-lot markings betrayed the

vehicles' origins and subtracted from the spontaneity of the intended accident, and pieces of wreckage that did not match the cars were obvious. Ignoring these points and excusing enthusiasm that did give the entire exhibition its necessary ingredient, what is being said by Watne's work is worth listening to. Another wall, perpendicular to the three paintings, showed six silk screen prints, commissioned by Cannonball Press of Brooklyn, New York. On a much smaller scale and even more finely detailed than the paintings, they contributed to the idea of evolution. Here Watne traffics in superbly depicted bears, chewing up ships, a vulture clutching a Hummer, and a sad cape buffalo with oil rigs atop its head, to

name a few. These seem to be the incubation for his larger pieces.

Life is a Collision opens a door that takes advantage of the artist's skill and process-oriented ideas. Looking forward, the further evolution of man's egotistical ambivalence continues to be a great dialogue for Watne, whom we hope takes this exciting premise further. •

Dawn Watne is a Review Studios artist.

Based in Kansas City, Missouri, Blair Schuneman is author of *Love Letters to Myself*. He has been contributing to *Review* since 2002, and his work has also appeared in *Kansas City Home Design*.