

STEVEN LAURIE
Art of the
MOTOR



Steven Laurie: Art of the Motor © 2008



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One Piece at a Time

There is an evocative legend preserved in Johnny Cash's 1976 recording "One Piece at a Time". The song tells of a GM line-worker who embezzles auto parts to construct a Cadillac he would otherwise not be able to afford with his salary. At shift's end the worker leaves the plant with "a lunchbox full of gear", off to his garage where he works on his dream machine. In the end, his additive filching culminates in an unusual hybrid, a kind of chimera-Caddy made with purloined model parts spanning a quarter of a century. Ultimately, the tale celebrates the do-it-yourself (DIY) impulse; ingenious and empowering, even enticingly subversive.

Operating in true DIY spirit, Steven Laurie takes matters into his own hands. There is something in his custom-crafted machines which simultaneously critiques and plays with the hegemony of post-industrial consumer culture. The artist culls from the vast stockpiles of aftermarket glut and the overproduced component parts of our late-industrialized production lines. The machinery he generates embodies the look of light-duty construction and gardening equipment floor models plucked from the fluorescent-drenched aisles of a large box store. Making loose reference to chainsaws, leaf blowers, and exercise machines, each device captivates the observer with its potential. More often than not, Laurie employs the syntax of velocity and locomotion. Automotive components, muscle-car decaling and vulcanized tires allude to the promise of propulsion. It is interesting to note here that the artist was born in Oshawa and raised in the neighboring town of Whitby. It is not by chance that his creations bear the mark of this region.



Above: Stationary Rubber Burner, 2005

Below: Stationary Rubber Burner (performance), 2005



This suburban area has become shaped by the promise and repercussions of car culture. Not only does the area produce the products it consumes, its very success has become dependant on this cycle.

Process is paramount to Laurie's practice. At any given point, his studio/shop output is suspended in a provisional state of the prototype. His machines partake in the proclivity for the best-suited modification which will generate perfect performance. Innovation is not determined by economic factors or market success. Instead, it exists in its own, self-directed and self-defining terms. For example, the *Handheld Rubber Burner* (2005) is a machine bearing resemblance to a concrete saw. Its human-scaled, portable design permits an efficacy in producing free-wheeling marks. With this instrument, the artist has staged several performances in which he effectively draws a circular pattern on asphalt or MDF boards. This work converses broadly, not only with commercially-available power tools, but with art historical models too. Artistic precursors from the last century such as Franz Gsellmann, Rube Goldberg and Jean Tinguely created kinetic mechanisms from reclaimed parts. However, Laurie's single-wheeled *Burner* formally aligns itself with Marcel Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel*. Considered to be a seminal example of kinetic art, the readymade is a simple splicing of mass-produced products such as a bike wheel mounted on a kitchen stool. When asked about the purpose of his construction, Duchamp likened it to watching a flame in a fireplace, a kind of fabricated "distraction".



Above: *Stationary Revving Machine*, 2005

Left: *Handheld Rubber Burner* (performance), 2005

Below: Artist with *Stationary Revving Machine*, 2005



As with *Bicycle Wheel*, Laurie conflates components which would not normally operate together. Working outside of the engineering principals of parsimony, the use-value of these kinetic objects is vexed. Here the kinetic experience is one which generates nothing but enthusiasm.

Nowhere is this enthusiasm better felt than at a Steve Laurie performance. Each machine is activated in performances the artist stages, usually in conjunction with an exhibition. Within this forum, the sculptural objects are activated and imbued with a kind of kinetic paroxysm. Olfactory and sonic sensations envelope the spectacle. The smell of burnt rubber and engine exhaust congeals with engine revving, hoots and whistling from the audience. These events, usually held in close proximity to a gallery, blend “high” and “low” cultural conventions of a gallery going public and biker or car culture enthusiasts. The performances Laurie stages become the locus wherein the machine, intersects with its maker/ operator before a participatory crowd. The culmination of artist, machine and audience are the ends of Laurie’s process. At the other end of his working method—curiosity, inquiry and mercurial ingenuity are the initial impulses which drive the artist’s practice. These same conditions are extended to us, his audience, in experiencing Steven Laurie’s pieces in time.

Olexander Wlasenko
Curator



Above: *Wild Thing*, 2005

Below: *Grass-Ripping/
Grave Diggin' Machine*, 2008



Biography

Steven Laurie was born in the city of Oshawa and was raised in the neighboring town of Whitby, Ontario. He graduated in 2002 from the Ontario College of Art and Design with honors in the disciplines of sculpture/ installation, receiving the Seiji Award for Public Installation/Social Sculpture and the George A. Reid Award for Proficiency in Sculpture and Installation. In 2005, Laurie completed his graduate degree in visual art at the University of Western Ontario in London, Ontario. His solo exhibition *Give'r*, premiered at Jack Shainman Gallery in New York, New York in 2006. He is a 2007 recipient of a Canada Council for the Arts Project Assistance Grant, as well as a grant from the Toronto Arts Council in the same year. Most recently he has received an Ontario Arts Council, Emerging Artist Grant (2008). The artist presently lives and maintains his studio practice in Toronto, Ontario.

List of Works:

Boom Tube, 2005
Handheld Rubber Burner, 2005
Stationary Rubber Burner, 2005
Stationary Revving Machine, 2005
Wild Thing, 2005
Ape Hanger Rumbler, 2007
Grass-Ripping/Grave Diggin' Machine, 2008
Possi-Track Burnout Machine, 2008

