

M+B

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Hot Wheels in Hot Pursuit of Artifice

By David Segal
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MATTHEW PORTER is shopping online for a vintage muscle car, and not just any car will do. He is tempted by a '66 [Dodge Charger](#) but isn't crazy about its glossy white paint job. A '72 Plymouth Road Runner would appeal, but it's tricked out for racing, with "43" painted on its roof and Pepsi decals all over. The '70 Plymouth Superbird? It lacks the steroidal contours he craves. He passes on a couple of convertibles and then discovers a '67 [Ford Mustang Shelby GT 500](#).

"Yeah, this is the first thing I see that I'd seriously consider," he says. "I have a few Mustangs, but I don't have a Shelby. They're special because Shelby was a designer and a racecar driver, and he helped engineer this car for Ford. This is kind of exciting."

If Mr. Porter buys the Shelby, he knows exactly what he'll do with it: photograph it in midair, soaring so dangerously high that it will look doomed to a chassis-bending wreck. Happily, he will not need a driver to pull off this stunt. He won't even need gas. Like all the vehicles photographed for what this artist calls his flying car series, the Shelby is a 1:18 scale model, about 11 inches long, purchased from a Web site, [DiecastMusclecars.com](#).

The miniatures arrive in Mr. Porter's Brooklyn studio, a cluttered space in an old building between the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway and the Navy Yard. The cars are dangled like marionettes from a mechanical arm, carefully lighted and shot, then digitally fused to an image of a streetscape that Mr. Porter has photographed with a large-format camera. When vehicle and backdrop are seamlessly

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melded, he has devised a classic image from '60s- and '70s-era TV and cinema — an airborne hunk of Detroit steel, but a hunk that looks hazardously aloft.

To anyone unfamiliar with Mr. Porter's technique, the photographs delight and then mystify. How'd he catapult a car like that? And who paid the driver's medical bills? Then comes the realization that the car is sailing impossibly high, and that the tableau must be fabricated. At which point delight returns, along with wonder: If this isn't real, how did it happen?

"Honestly, some of it came from watching the closing of the remake of '[Starsky & Hutch](#),' " Mr. Porter said on a recent afternoon in his studio. "They do one of those jumps over the crest of a hill, and it froze, and the lens flared over the hood. And I thought, that's the picture I'd like to make, but I don't have the budget or the resources to actually stage it."

Mr. Porter printed his first flying car a year after the movie came out, in 2005, and the images have been so popular that he has made about two a year since — 14 so far, most in editions of five. They sell out immediately, and his galleries, Invisible-Exports in Manhattan and M+B in Los Angeles, keep a waiting list for new releases. One of his photographs, "110 Junction," is in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's exhibition "After Photoshop: Manipulated Photography in the Digital Age."

"I think of it as a companion to Yves Klein's '[Leap Into the Void](#),' " said Mia Fineman, an assistant curator in the Met's photographs department. She was referring to a photograph Klein took of himself jumping off a building, seemingly on the verge of a skull fracture. Actually he had arranged men beneath him holding an outstretched tarp to break his fall, which he erased from the final image. Klein's "Void" can be seen across the hall from "[110 Junction](#)" in the show "Faking It: Manipulated Photography Before Photoshop."

" 'Leap' and Porter's flying cars have a similar sense of freedom and risk, defying gravity through the artifice of photographic manipulation," said Ms. Fineman, who organized the two shows. "Both artists are engaging the viewer to see how much they can get you to suspend disbelief. Both are interested in that tension between what the eye sees and what the mind knows."

Mr. Porter, 37, is lean and soft-spoken, with a contemplative manner and neatly trimmed beard that would fit right in in a faculty lounge. He grew up in Bellefonte, Pa., the grandson of Eliot Porter, a 20th-century nature photographer who was a friend of Ansel Adams and Georgia O'Keeffe. Matthew was a high school sophomore when his grandfather died, and his interest in photography did not blossom until later. The two never really talked shop. When Mr. Porter attended art school — at 29, he enrolled in an M.F.A. program offered by Bard College through the International Center of Photography — he didn't tell anyone about this familial link.

"I kept it a secret because 'nature photographer' had pejorative connotations," he said.

He was drawn to flying cars for reasons more complicated than nostalgia or the allure of retro style.

"What I like about muscle cars is how absurd they are," he said, holding a model of a 1970 [Oldsmobile Cutlass SX](#), which he was considering for a new image. "They feel like they were designed by a committee. They are the camels of the road. Nothing that heavy or wide, with that much hood in front of you, should go so fast."

They are also flashy and obnoxiously thirsty when it comes to gas, he added. At the same time, he said, he loves their "macho aggressiveness" and regards them as the laudably populist reaction of American automakers to European manufacturers, which priced their speedsters beyond the reach of the average consumer.

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"Americans were thumbing their nose at European snobbery, which said you need to be from a certain class to own a sports car," he said.

Mr. Porter has pulled off similar digital feats of this-can't-be in other series, including one in which the airship [Hindenburg appears to be hovering](#) over landscapes of the American West. But he is not wedded to any theme, and lately he has created photographs inspired by Georges Braque still lifes. No other project, though, has found an audience as smitten as the one awaiting the next flying car, and Mr. Porter is a bit uneasy about that. He feels at times like a rock musician who wrote a hit a few years ago and now has to keep playing it.

"I can't tell you the number of times I've heard, 'Oh, you're the flying car guy,' " he said. "But it's fine. I'm comfortable with that. I stand behind these works."

They help finance his other projects, he is quick to note. And while the learning curve for the series has flattened out, he still delights in the craft required to compose the photographs.

The process starts with what he calls "location scouting for a movie you're not going to make," he said. Usually he sets up his tripod and 4-inch-by-5-inch format Wista camera at daybreak, when traffic is minimal. One of his early vistas was a San Francisco street that Steve McQueen had raced over in "Bullitt," a 1968 movie with one of cinema's great car chases. He has also found spots in Los Angeles and New York.

The series didn't sell at first, partly because Mr. Porter wasn't represented by a gallery and was asking \$2,000 a photo. But an assortment of Web sites — some focused on photography, others on stuff that just looks cool — started showcasing his work. Benjamin Trigano, the founder of M+B, discovered the series through a friend and contacted Mr. Porter, inviting him to join the gallery's roster.

Mr. Porter became part of M+B by 2008, and interest in the series took off the next year, for reasons that he can't fully explain. He has never mounted a flying car show, and he has never received much publicity. But now, when Mr. Trigano receives a new flying car edition, he sends five e-mails to people on the waiting list, and the images are gone, selling for \$8,000 to \$10,000 apiece. Unlike a lot of manipulated images, the flying cars seem more interesting the more you know about how they are made. Initially they come across as fantastically kinetic and loud; the implied soundtrack is the roar of a V-8 engine, the squeal of burned rubber and Foghat's "Slow Ride." But these images are made in stillness and something close to silence, on empty streets, with tiny, motionless cars suspended by thread. The part of the process with the highest decibel level may be the conversations that Mr. Porter has with the guy who answers the phone at DiecastMusclecars.

Usually, Mr. Porter asks lots of questions.

"I ask him what the tire tread is like, how detailed the grille is, are the windshield wipers one piece?" he said. "You want as many separate, distinct pieces as possible, so when you blow the car up, you can't tell it's from a mold."

The DiecastMusclecars owner once asked, "What's with all the questions?" But Mr. Porter didn't tell him how he uses the cars, or that an image of one them — a footlong 1970 Plymouth GTX — is now flying at the Met.