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style

Arts

Classic movie car chase scenes recreated in surreal mid-flight photos

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Written by Jacopo Prisco, CNN

Muscle cars from the 1960s and 1970s take to the skies in Matthew Porter's new book "The Heights," a collection of 25 images presented as hypothetical freeze frames from movie car chases.

Each photograph is carefully crafted, both in the studio -- where Porter hangs toy cars on a string -- and in the streets of cities like San Francisco, Los Angeles and New York, where he looks for the perfect hill at sunset.

The result is an exhilarating illusion that riffs on movie aesthetics and the American car, while steering away from straightforward interpretation.

Below, Porter describes the process of capturing the cars -- from working with toy models to photographing streets at sunset.

CNN: So what cars do you use for your images?

Matthew Porter: They're model cars. They're die-cast models, essentially adult collectors toys. They're heavy and detailed and about 8 to 10 inches long.

And what's your technique?

I hang them on a string in the studio and photograph them with artificial lights, to mimic the light in the background. So I'll tend to make the backgrounds first -- the landscapes -- then pick the one that I like and, in the studio, try to match that lighting on the car. It's a multi-step process. Part of it is straight photography, out in the world. And the other part is in the studio, with artificial light and then Photoshop.



"Airport Road" (2009) Credit: © Matthew Porter

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How long does each photograph take to complete?

At this point I've been doing it for so long that it really depends. It is a labor-intensive process. I need to go to the city and choose an appropriate location and wait for the light that I like, then develop the film and digitally manipulate or correct the landscape. And then photograph the model car and stitch it all together. So I can't say how long it takes to make one, but if all that could be done contiguously, then maybe it would be a few days.

How do you select the cars?

It's a pretty simple process. There are a couple of websites that I like, and I try to pick the cars that are from within a certain time period. I then look at the colors, the design, the horsepower, all of it. So it's a lot of simply practical decisions like that. And I certainly have my favorites, but I don't want to just put the same Mustang in every picture.

All pictures are taken at sunset and in a way that sometimes masks the details of the car. Is that intentional?

Just aesthetically. I prefer the backlit sunset look. A lot of the earlier ones (in the series) have blue skies and the details certainly are visible -- every now and then I make one of those. But just aesthetically I have developed this preference for the stark contrast of twilight hour. It's really an aesthetic decision, I'm not trying to obscure the make of the car, I just love the graphic quality of a late afternoon sunset.

How did the project start out?

In the beginning, I only thought I would make one. Then, in the mid-2000s, there was a wave of remakes released in theaters of 1970s and 1980s movies, especially car-based (ones).

I was actually not a fan of "The Dukes of Hazzard" when I was a kid, but I did appreciate the spectacle. I was interested in artists that use techniques like appropriation, and there was also something happening in photography where a lot of artists were trying to make pictures of things that were difficult to get access to. And I thought: these cars are like UFOs, they're like dinosaurs. It's hard to imagine that they existed in the same timeline.

I wasn't thinking a whole lot about how these cars figured into a larger political conversation, what their real historical significance was. I was interested in that a little bit, but I wanted to make something that had spectacle, a romantic image, or a film still, something from a movie that doesn't serve to forward the plot, but is the thing that you most vividly remember. So I made one and then, you know, it was as if I were a musician who wrote a minor hit that everybody wants to hear. So I kind of made peace with it and decided to really promote it as a project.



"Metro Center" (2018) Credit: © Matthew Porter

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How has the project evolved since its inception?

I was initially interested in photographing cars from the 1960s and 1970s, and then the political situation just changed a lot in the States. I can't say it's fun to spend a lot of time at car shows these days.

Those cars tend to speak to a certain kind of masculinity -- they're automotive design gone berserk. I enjoy the absurdity of them. So I was a little bit of an enthusiast for a while, but then I think my enthusiasm waned, because it's just hard to have conversations with the people who own them. Invariably the conversation would steer (toward) how things were better 20 years ago, or how internal combustion engines are better, or how electric cars just suck.

I don't want to do something that just feels like a celebration of American muscle cars. It's an art project. I want it to be about photography and about image making.

Matthew Porter's "[The Heights](#)," published by Aperture, is available now.



"Billy Goat Hill" (2018) Credit: © Matthew Porter