

M + B

ARTFORUM

CRITICS' PICK

January 4, 2011

“Bedtime for Bonzo”

Curated by Matthew Porter

M+B Gallery

612 North Almont Drive

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A DeLorean, gull-wing doors ajar, sits on the rack at the mechanic's. Its vintage California license plate insists: NOW. Yet the image (Matthew Brandt's *Aluminum*, 2008—a LightJet print mounted on aluminum, no less) has the unmistakable dull sheen of an already obsolete future.



Curated by artist Matthew Porter, this tightly packed group show takes its name from the didactic 1951 film starring Ronald Reagan. Porter's selections bring to mind another reference point: “Ronald Reagan and the Conceptual Auto Disaster,” a subheading in J. G. Ballard's 1968 pamphlet “Why I Want to Fuck Ronald Reagan.” As it poises the 1980s between midcentury optimism and current malaise, the exhibition has something of Ballard's chilling erotics of catastrophe. The show achieves a kind of fetishized, polished stasis: the DeLoreans in the shop, for one, but also James Welling's black-and-white print of a vehicle being jump-started (*Jump, Averil Park, New York, NY*, 1995) and Andrew Bush's striking photos from 1989 of motorists driving classic cars. These last have long, elegiac titles that make poetry of technical description. In one, an old man “drift[s] northwest at approximately 68 mph,” “somewhere” in California, “one evening in 1989.” The subject is frozen in time, bathed in golden light, yet “drifting” with terrible velocity.

Like Reagan's films, Porter's show has plenty of sententious moments—Moyra Davey's photo of vintage audio equipment (*Receivers*, 2003), Brandt's print of dead bees rendered in bee parts (*Bees of Bees*, 2008), or Matthew Spiegelman's blown-up photogram of a marijuana pipe (*Glass Pipe Transfer 9*, 2007)—as if to say this is the decade(nce) America asked for, and then some. In Mark Wyse's *Untitled Landscape*, 1998, for example, the sprinkler system of a coastal SoCal villa battles a brown hillside for a moat of green lawn. Yet even where the works are blatant, they are also astute, as when Spiegelman photographs portions of the 35-mm filmstrips of trailers for '80s teen flicks *Better Off Dead* and *One Crazy Summer*. Against white backdrops dappled by the shadows of potted plants, the strips suggest the arrested, glossy motion of a Reagan-era adolescence—a past this show and its coldly nostalgic images are still working through.

— Travis Diehl

Photo credit: © Andrew Bush. *Man drifting northwest at approximately 68 mph on U.S. Route 101 somewhere near Camarillo, California, one evening in 1989*, c-print, dimensions variable.