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*"THE BEST ART IN THE WORLD"
JULY 2023*

Peter Dayton at ArtHamptons

MENU



Peter Dayton
Bad Girl #5 "Chrissie"
2008
Oil, acrylic and paper on birch panel with resin
96" x 36"

MENU

The first thing you saw this July when you walked into the vast air-conditioned hangar of the ArtHamptons festival in East Hampton, New York, was the artist Peter Dayton's customized Volkswagen Touareg. There it was, the black SUV turned into a surfmobile with fake wood paneling like the "woodies" of old, emblazoned with Dayton's name in the form of a vintage logo, parked at a showroom angle with a guard cum sales rep standing beside it in case you tried to touch the paint, which you could not help but want to do. You thought maybe there might be a raffle later in the evening, perhaps officiated by someone like Billy Baldwin accompanied by a VW girl in a white bikini. It was the Hamptons. The first thing you noticed about ArtHamptons itself was the line of cars jostling to get in to the grounds: mint luxury vehicles at a standstill while their drivers decided whether to pay for the VIP valet parking or to just make the sad turn into the farm fields and walk. They were looking for a parking space so they could pretend to look at art while looking for a glass of wine in a huge air-conditioned hangar. It's not that Peter Dayton's Touareg was mocking these people—the Touareg was not that dumb. The Touareg was simply not a Mercedes, not a Lexus. It was a Jan and Dean song from a thousand years ago, or rather it was a half-remembered TV commercial featuring that Jan and Dean song from a thousand years ago, a song whose title you didn't know and in any case never thought about, though the commercial itself had always made you happy. Beyond the Touareg was a half-mile span of every kind of art, much of it name-brand—you had your Irving Penns, you had your Andy Warhols, you may even have had your Leroy Neimans. "Welcome," the Touareg said. Many people, seeing the car, were confused by its intentions.

Dayton began his career by making huge blowups of seed packet illustrations, those Burpee flower pictures that look nice when they're five inches high but then suddenly look sublime and psychedelic when they're five feet tall and on a wall. These Xeroxed images had some of the static mystery of album cover art, which made sense given that Dayton's first career was with the pioneering Boston punk band La Peste. One day Dayton walked into a gallery that had not yet opened, that was still a construction site—the carpenter had just done some shelving and there was a lot of leftover wood.

Dayton took it home and put it in his studio. Eventually it occurred to him how to use it.

“I’d been hitting the wall with the flower pieces,” he said. Flowers and flower seed catalogues were familiar to the people who collected Dayton’s work. They were also familiar with surfing and surfboards, a longtime passion of Dayton’s.

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Peter Dayton
Hobie #38 "Island in the Sun"
2008
Oil, acrylic and paper decal on birch panel with resin
96" x 36"

A series of vintage surfboard paintings ensued. It began when Dayton put a “stringer” in the middle of one of these salvaged shelves (a stringer in a surfboard is a band of wood that runs down the center to give it strength). Dayton had hit on a simple trompe l’oeil device using masking tape to mark off straight lines, painting them in, then pulling the tape to suddenly produce “wood inlays.” Pretty quickly he realized that the period of the original surfboards he had in mind was also the period in which

highrow artists in New York and L.A. were inventing minimalism. He happened to go to a Barnett Newman show at the Met, and it occurred to him that one of the zip paintings could easily be incorporated into a logo. He could make a “Barnett Newman” surfboard, based on a Newman design and “signed” with Newman’s “trademark.” From there, he decided to turn several art “heroes”—Newman, Kenneth Noland, Frank Stella—into “surfer heroes.” “Surfboard makers were doing the same kind of art without realizing it,” Dayton says. He mentions the “finish fetish” artists of the 60s in California, whose admiration for surfboard and hot rod art brought a new sex appeal to austere New York-style minimalism. (His Touareg brings to mind Kenneth Anger’s 1965 film “Kustom Kar Kommandos,” a celebration of L.A. teenagers buffing and polishing their rides.) Before long, Dayton had made a series of paintings that echoed the L.A. artist John McCracken’s 1960s minimalist planks but with a twenty-first century sense of irreverent, anti-hierarchical humor.

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Peter Dayton
Noland #12 "Draggin' Wagon"
2008
Oil, acrylic and paper decal on birch panel with resin
96" x 36"

MENU



Like all pop art, Dayton's both mocks and embraces its own commodification. In his case, the passion lies on the surface. To make the surfboard paintings, he uses a single, careful pour of epoxy resin. If a stray hair gets in, it's there for good. Dayton wears a paper suit and a mask—it cracks him up, the idea of himself getting so intense that he wears a suit and a mask. He sands down the epoxy to 500 grit, then he has some pros at an auto body shop bring it to 1,000 grit—"superanal"—then they clearcoat it with a

UV enamel, then sand it again, then polish it. “It’s amazing how seductive that surface is,” Dayton rhapsodizes.

For the Touareg “woodie,” he spent an hour photographing plywood at a lumberyard—it turned out that the best-looking plywood grain was the cheapest, the least subtle. So there’s your irony. Not only is the wood fake, but it’s a fake of the cheap stuff. The car gleamed there at the entrance to ArtHamptons like a guilty pleasure.



ZACHARY LAZAR

Zachary Lazar is the author of three books, most recently the novel *Sway* and the memoir *Evening’s Empire: The Story of My Father’s Murder*. He is the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship and the Hodder Fellowship at Princeton University. His writing has appeared in the *New York Times Magazine*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *Newsday*, *BOMB* and other places. He teaches creative writing at Tulane University.

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