Concrete-Covered 1957 Cadillac Makes Art Historians Lose Their Marbles

Created in 1970 as a piece of performance art, the 16-ton slab undergoes $500,000 restoration in Chicago; ‘The car of cars’

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CHICAGO—Any 1957 Cadillac that has been sitting in a grassy yard on the South Side of Chicago for 40 years will have a few issues—rust, rotted tires, faded paint, a missing muffler.


Christine Mehring, an art historian who oversees the public art catalog at the University of Chicago, which had inherited the concrete Cadillac, stumbled upon it in 2011. Where some may have seen an abandoned, inoperable, cracking, moss-covered mass of foolishness, Ms. Mehring saw greatness.

“People are surprised at how beautiful concrete can look,” she said.

Something about the size, shape, and quintessential American-ness of Cadillacs, which have been celebrated in song by everyone from Chuck Berry and Bruce Springsteen to the Clash, seems to inspire artists.

No artist, however, had ever caked one in concrete until only the wheels were visible. As Ms. Mehring quickly discovered, nobody had the slightest idea how to give it a tune up.

The piece, which is called “Concrete Traffic,” was made in 1970 when the contemporary art museum commissioned Mr. Vostell, a German artist, to stage a “happening” near its building—a work of performance art. According to museum records, Mr. Vostell spent $89 for the Caddy, took it to a mostly empty parking lot and, together with a group of artisans, smoothed cement over the contours of the car until it became a 16-ton slab on wheels.

After the performance, the museum couldn’t pay for the parking fees the car accrued so it donated the car to the University of Chicago, where it ended up in a yard, deteriorating and forgotten. Mr. Vostell died in 1998.

Ms. Mehring’s quest attracted academics, art restorers, classic-car experts, and even structural engineers who set out to bring it back to life, or at least make it presentable for public display.

Stephen Murphy, the general manager of Chicago Vintage Motor Carriage, was hired to work on the car’s undercarriage. “Restoration and conservation is what we do, but I’d never done a project like this,” he said.

To raise the car and work on the underside, the team knew that standard lifts and hydraulic jacks wouldn’t be sufficient. They used a crane to lay the car on two, six-foot-tall steel stands.

The bottom of the car showed signs of corrosion—there were pieces of the exhaust pipe missing, and a few pieces of the two mufflers had been lost. Other than that, the Caddy was in remarkably good shape. Although the wheels don’t move, it still sports the tires that were on it when the concrete was poured in 1970.

Next came a series of artistic judgments that tied the restorers up for months. Should they keep the dilapidated mufflers or replace them? And what should they do about the rust?

Christian Scheidemann, a restorer of art pieces made out of difficult-to-work-with mediums, such as elephant dung and chocolate, flew from New York to Chicago several times with an eye toward helping the team restore “the identity of the work,” and to “make it authentic again,” he said.

“There’s a whole underlife” to the car, he said. “The muffler, the axle—we went really deep into the details.”

The pieces weren’t at risk of falling off and the car didn’t actually need to run. So they didn’t replace any components.

After discussing whether rust was “an important part of the life of the car,” according to Ms. Mehring, the restorers removed “only the flakiest and loosest of the metal corrosion.
byproducts,” Mr. Murphy said.

Repairing the concrete was another matter. First, experts removed the moss and patched spots of the concrete. To make the patched sections look more uniform, they tracked down one of the original concrete pourers, now living in Arizona.

When the sand from the original quarry appeared “too blue and gray,” a concrete expert, Amanda Trienens, washed the sand in a bath of acid and threw in some rusty metal chisels to warm the color to match the weathered 46-year-old sculpture.

Then there was the question of where the restored Caddy should be parked. After the team settled on a parking garage on the University of Chicago campus, three structural engineers were hired to make sure the garage floor could bear its weight.

In the end, Ms. Mehring spent so much time on the project that some colleagues started jokingly calling her the Crazy Car Lady. She estimates the total cost of the project, including pro bono labor from experts, was $500,000, which is at least $300,000 more than it would have cost to fully restore a typical abandoned 1957 Cadillac, according to Mr. Murphy.

Late last month, organizers arranged for a procession to take the car, on a flatbed truck, from its original location near the Museum of Contemporary Art downtown through the city. Four actual Cadillacs and a cement mixer truck served as escorts.

Missy Rogers, deputy director of a suburban Chicago Cadillac appreciation group, showed up in her gossamer blue 1985 Brougham Coupe, which isn’t covered in concrete, to participate in the procession. The opportunity to see a Cadillac like this “isn’t going to come around again anytime soon,” she said. “I couldn’t say no.”
As the car wound its way through downtown Chicago en route to its new home, it drew stares and perplexed looks from passersby, who shot video with their phones. “The car of cars!” exclaimed Hannah Higgins, an art historian at the University of Illinois at Chicago who consulted on the project.

As the procession rolled by, a group presented a work of Fluxus art—the same performance-art style practiced by Mr. Vostell. The piece was called Danger Music No. 17, the entire score of which was: “Scream! Scream! Scream! Scream! Scream! Scream!”

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