

# Environments

## THE CITY, THE SUBURBS, AND AUTO TERRAINS

By the end of the 1960s, the United States had become a nation of drivers with an estimated one in seven Americans directly or indirectly employed by the auto industry. With the widespread adoption of the car beginning in the 1920s, a network of roads and highways developed, culminating in the passage of the 1956 Federal Highway Act. The government’s authorization of the construction of an extensive interstate highway system that linked cities, suburbs, small towns, and rural farm regions from coast to coast not only greatly transformed the physical landscape, but also the spatial, economic, and social organization of American life. This continuous network of roads and the resulting car-altered landscape generated new themes for artists that focus on automotive culture’s reshaping of our everyday life and its habits and rituals.

## THE CITY

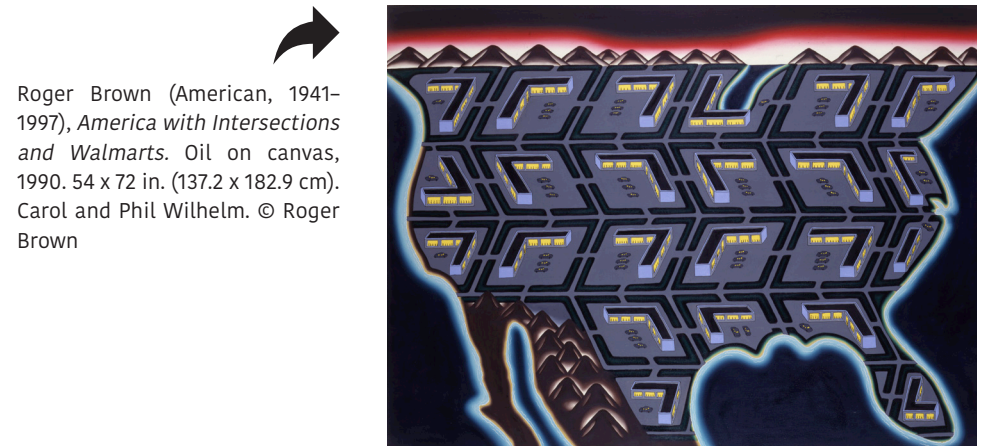
Many artists were drawn to how urban communities negotiated the proliferation of the automobile, which brought about an increasingly congested and accelerated way of life. Streets that once catered primarily to the pedestrian were redesigned to accommodate the flow of traffic, forcing drivers and pedestrians alike to stay alert, thereby transforming their experience of the city. Helen Levitt’s whimsical photo highlights the rapid disappearance of the urban street as a safe public space for children to play.



Helen Levitt (American, 1913–2009), *New York City (Spider Girl)*. Chromogenic color print, 1980. 12 1/4 x 18 in. (31.1 x 45.7 cm). Toledo Museum of Art. © The Estate of Helen Levitt

## THE SUBURBS

Coinciding with the expanded highway system and the postwar economic boom of the 1950s, the evolution of the suburbs radically altered the visual and physical character of the American landscape and became the thematic focus for several artists. By 1960, one-third of the nation (most of them white) lived in suburban communities. Roger Brown’s painting *America with Intersections and Walmarts* humorously critiques suburban culture’s extensive reach.



Roger Brown (American, 1941–1997), *America with Intersections and Walmarts*. Oil on canvas, 1990. 54 x 72 in. (137.2 x 182.9 cm). Carol and Phil Wilhelm. © Roger Brown



Edward Burtynsky (Canadian, born 1955), *Oxford Tire Pile #8*. Chromogenic color print, 1999. 27 x 34 in. (68.6 x 86.4 cm). Toledo Museum of Art. © Edward Burtynsky, courtesy Metivier Gallery, Toronto / Weinstein Hammons Gallery, Minneapolis

## AUTO TERRAINS

Informed by the rise of environmental awareness in the last few decades, artists have increasingly interrogated the legacy of car culture’s impact on the landscape. These artists concentrate on often overlooked human-altered geographical spaces devoid of human presence. Edward Burtynsky acknowledges the automobile’s double-edged contribution to modern history as “giving us a certain freedom and changing our world dramatically.” Providing a gripping aerial view of two massive mountains of tires, he powerfully conveys the adverse environmental consequences of this freedom.



Gordon Parks (American, 1912–2006), *Untitled, Miami, Florida*. Gelatin-silver print, 1966; exhibition print, 2019. 16 x 20 in. (40.6 x 50.8 cm). Courtesy of and copyright The Gordon Parks Foundation, Pleasantville, New York.

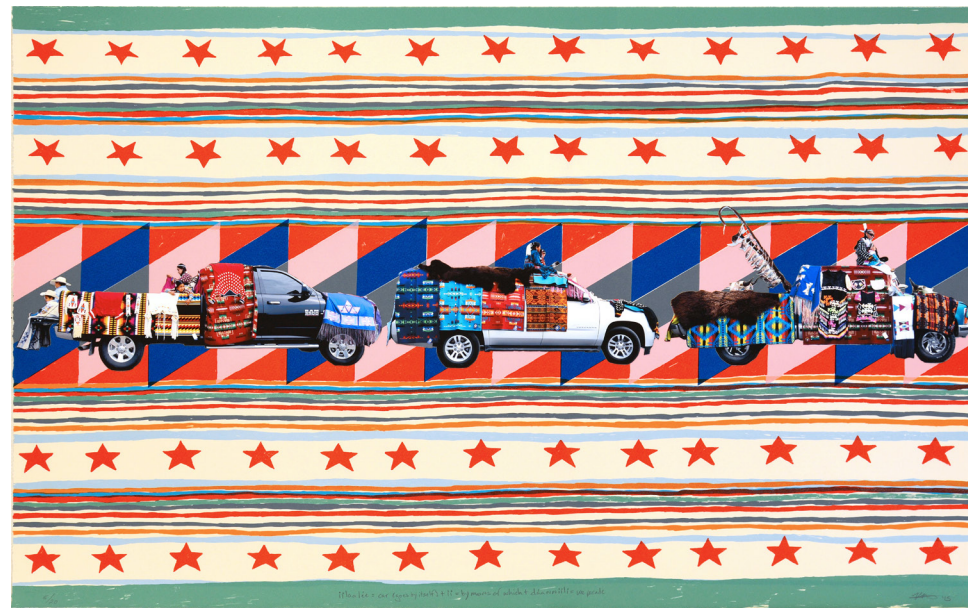
# Car Therapy

Over the course of the 20th century, the automobile has not only transformed our external environment, but also been used as a means of self-expression and as a signifier of social and cultural values. This section surveys car culture’s therapeutic ability to produce a sense of psychological wellbeing and the experience of belonging. Artists have long explored the automobile as a fetishistic object commonly associated with masculine markers of success and social status—sexual prowess, power, and wealth. Some artists (particularly women) have subverted this stereotypical relationship of the car to masculinity and male agency.

Artists have also been intrigued by the car’s ability to generate various kinds of social spaces that signify different identities and values. Frequently these spaces crystalize around gendered locations and activities, including male-centric auto showrooms, the factory assembly line, and the act of driving itself. By contrast, portrayals of auto imagery as an extension of the domestic sphere allude to relaxation, intimacy, comfort, and leisure-time courtship rituals.

## CAR THERAPY (CONTINUED)

Finally, many artists of color have investigated how some groups have incorporated performative components of car culture into their celebrations to convey a sense of belonging and pride in their cultural heritage and traditions. Wendy Red Star’s collage print calls attention to her Apsáalooke (Crow) Nation’s deep-rooted cultural traditions. The image commemorates the Crow Fair parade and festivities, an annual event held since 1904 that features trucks customized with parade regalia, including handmade beadwork, shawls, and blankets, a tradition originating from Crow horse culture and subsequently passed down through reservation life to include present-day car culture.



Wendy Red Star (American, Crow Nation, born 1981), *iilaalée = car (goes by itself) + ii = by means of which + dáanníili = we parade*. Color lithograph with chine-collé archival pigment ink photographs, 2015–16. 24 x 38 in. (60.9 x 96.5 cm). Toledo Museum of Art. © Wendy Red Star

# Don't Miss...

## GALLERY 4 (at the end of *Life is a Highway*) McClelland Barclay and Automobile Advertising Paintings from the Stephen D. and Julie F. Taylor Family Foundation

A selection of original paintings for advertisements made between 1922 and 1931 for Detroit-based automobile coachmaker Fisher Body Company.

## GALLERY 18 Car Culture in Toledo

Explore this gallery to connect with the themes of *Life is a Highway: Art and American Car Culture*. Here you’ll find opportunities to play and to reflect on how art and car culture combine in Toledo.



# Life is a Highway: ART & AMERICAN CAR CULTURE

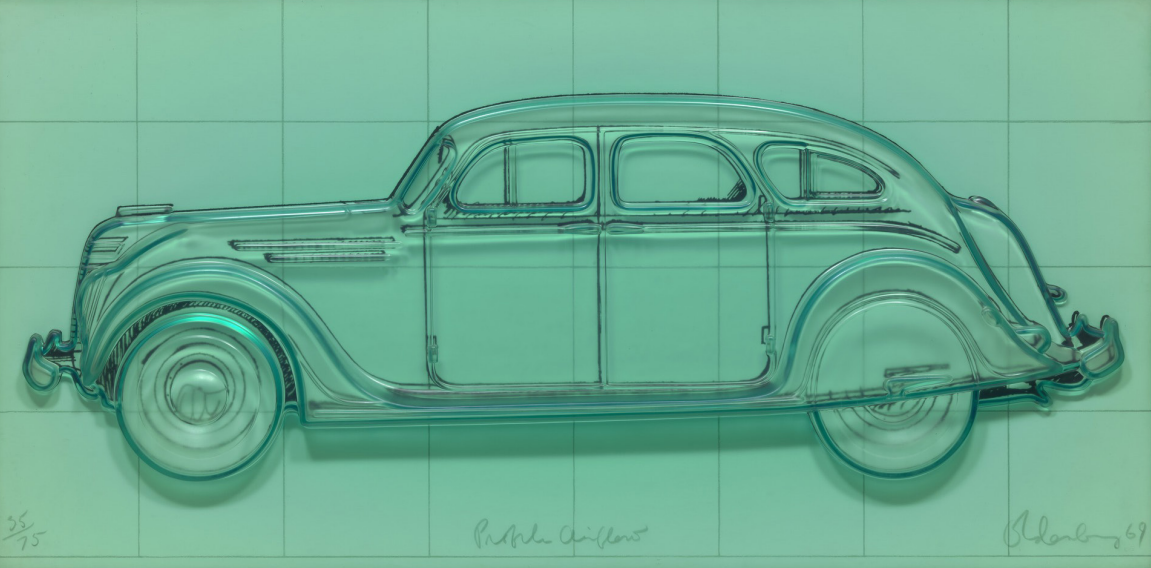
June 15–Sept. 15, 2019



## EXHIBITION GUIDE





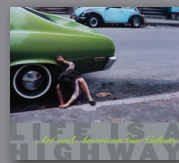


Claes Oldenburg (American, born Sweden, 1929), *Profile Airflow*. Cast polyurethane relief over two-color lithograph, 1969. 33 1/4 x 65 1/2 x 3 3/4 in. (84.5 x 166.4 x 9.5 cm). Collection of the Flint Institute of Arts, Flint, Michigan; Museum purchase © 1969 Claes Oldenburg

**LIFE IS A HIGHWAY: ART AND AMERICAN CAR CULTURE** celebrates the rich inventiveness and wide variety of artistic approaches inspired by the automobile as an evolving symbol of American identity. The exhibition presents car culture's deeply entwined relationship with American society through more than 150 works that span the 20th century.

The exhibition charts three phenomena that artists have pursued within American car culture's relatively brief history. Initially embraced as a symbol of technological progress, by the 1920s the automobile had become closely attached to notions of labor and community values that were deeply rooted in the Midwestern manufacturing regions that gave rise to the auto industry, an association that intrigued many artists. After World War II, the car kindled an explosion of visual imagery that drew upon it as an icon of postwar middle-class prosperity, freedom, and individualism to invoke a sense of personal and cultural identity. As the century advanced, artists' attention migrated to how the forces of automotive culture altered city life, contributed to suburban sprawl, and indelibly transformed the American landscape.

The diverse perspectives presented by the artists in this wide-ranging exhibition highlight the central role the car has played in American life and offer both a celebration and a critique of its history.



**FRONT COVER:** John Baeder (American, born 1938), *Stardust Motel* (detail). Oil on canvas, 1977. 58 x 70 in. (147.3 x 177.8 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut, Richard Brown Baker, B.A. 1935, Collection Modern and Contemporary Art, 2008.19.762. © Courtesy of the artist and OK Harris Works of Art, New York, NY

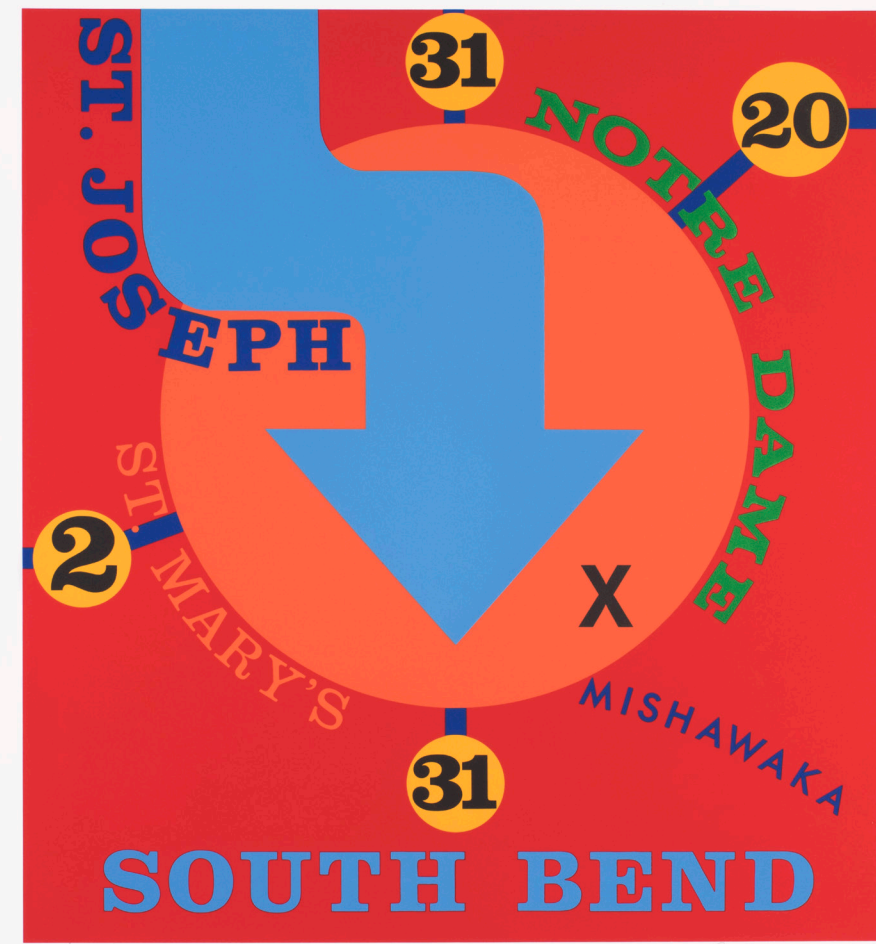
## Emergence OF THE AUTOMOBILE

Since the early 20th century, American artists have recognized the automobile as a symbol of modern change and transformation. In tandem with the arrival of Henry Ford's Model T in 1908 and its democratic vision of mobility, artists initially celebrated the car as an optimistic representation of the larger technological revolution occurring in the United States.

With the rise of the "machine aesthetic" in the 1920s and '30s, which found beauty in the mechanical and the industrial, the automobile became increasingly assimilated into art and culture. Some artists celebrated the individual automobile as a beautiful machine created from a combination of parts, while others turned for inspiration to the Midwestern auto factories as a national symbol of America's productivity and material prosperity.

However, the car took on less-positive associations during the Great Depression (1929-1939), when some artists used it as a motif to highlight the precarious situation of the American worker.

Charles Sheeler (American, 1883-1965), *Classic Landscape*. Oil on canvas, 1931. 28 11/16 x 35 7/8 in. Collection of Barney A. Ebsworth, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 2000.39.2. © Charles Sheeler



Robert Indiana (American, 1928-2018), *South Bend*. Color lithograph, 1978. 30 x 27 15/16 in. Toledo Museum of Art. © 2019 Morgan Art Foundation Ltd. / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

## ON THE Road

The post-World War II economic boom of the 1950s and the middle-class prosperity that gave rise to the growth of consumer culture re-established the automobile as an essential feature of American life after the hardships of the Great Depression. As the country's fortunes improved, the car's symbolic associations shifted to align with the mood of the nation, signifying a spirit of optimism. Combined with this new prosperity and the social mobility that made automobile transportation a necessity, auto companies pursued aggressive advertising campaigns that led to the car becoming a primary emblem of status and social position.

Almost contemporaneous with this widespread advertising, artists began depicting the car as an expression of American vernacular culture. Often co-opting the techniques and subject matter of commercial advertising, these artists used the newly-invented visual language of roadside architecture, billboards, signage, and the experience of driving itself as formal and thematic sources to reflect and comment on the social, cultural, and economic transformations occurring in postwar society.

## THE GREEN BOOK

Though postwar American prosperity had ushered in rising rates of car ownership among African Americans, extended journeys on the open road remained both physically and psychologically fraught for black motorists. Founded by black postal worker Victor Hugo Green, *The Negro Motorist Green Book* (published from 1936 to 1966-67) listed state by state the restaurants, hotels, and other services that welcomed African Americans (as well as Jewish travelers) during the period of Jim Crow laws and racial segregation.

More recently, Jonathan Calm's photographic essay *Journey Through the South: Green Book* (2016-17) takes him on his own road trip through the American South, traveling from Tallahassee, Florida to Ferguson, Missouri to document the remnants of the "safe places" listed in the *Green Book*, including the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee, where Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated.

Jonathan Calm (American, born 1971), *Journey Through the South: Green Book (Lorraine Motel I)*. Archival pigment print, 2016. 12 x 12 in. (30.5 x 30.5 cm). Rena Bransten Gallery, San Francisco. © Jonathan Calm



## EXHIBITION PROGRAM Highlights

**JUNE 15 • AUG. 24 • SEPT. 14**

**Car Shows at TMA**

noon-3 p.m. | TMA Grounds

View unique vehicles, enjoy live music, and participate in kid-friendly art making experiences. June 15: Cars & Coffee (luxury cars); August 24: American Classic Cars; September 14: Art & Modified Cars.

**JUNE 20**

**Masters Series: Chip Lord**

6 p.m. | Peristyle

As a member of the alternative art collective Ant Farm (1968-1978), media artist Chip Lord produced car-related video art and the *Cadillac Ranch* roadside sculpture in Amarillo, Texas.

**JUNE 21**

**Art House Film: Video Screening with Chip Lord**

7 p.m. | Little Theater

Ant Farm co-founder and video art pioneer Chip Lord introduces this evening of videos by the Ant Farm collective as well as his own solo work.

**JUNE 22**

**Exhibition Tour: Robin Reisenfeld**

2 p.m. | Meet in Libbey Court

Exhibition curator Robin Reisenfeld leads a tour of *Life Is a Highway: Art and American Car Culture*. Requires a ticket to the exhibition. Space is limited; please arrive early.

**JULY 13**

**TMA Community Block Party**

6-10 p.m. | TMA Grounds

Celebrate summer with thousands of partygoers and enjoy entertainment, food, music, and a Jeep car show during the Museum's sixth-annual block party.

**JUNE 27-SEPT. 7**

**Film Series: Find One in Every Car: On the Road in American Movies**

7 p.m. (Thursdays) & 2 p.m. (Saturdays) | Little Theater

\$5 members, \$7 non-members, \$4 students & military

This film series explores the impact and central role of the car in American culture.

**AUG. 23**

**Film in the Great Outdoors: American Graffiti**

9:15 p.m. | Parking Lot 3

In 1973, four years before *Star Wars* stormed American theaters, George Lucas released *American Graffiti*, his nostalgic love letter to small-town America.

**SEPT. 5**

**Masters Series: Jonathan Calm and Alvin Hall, *The Green Book Project***

6 p.m. | Peristyle

Join journalist Alvin Hall and artist Jonathan Calm for a discussion of their 2016 BBC Radio 4 documentary *The Green Book*, about the guide published between 1936 and 1967 to help black travelers find welcoming businesses during an era of virulent racism and segregation.

**SEPT. 14**

**Lecture: Matthew Donahue, *The Art Car in Popular Culture & Experience***

10:30 a.m. | Little Theater

Bowling Green State University professor Dr. Matthew Donahue examines the history of the art car, from the 1950s to today.

For more details and more events, visit [toledomuseum.org](http://toledomuseum.org).

\*All events are FREE, unless otherwise noted