

# APPETITE FOR DISSOLUTION: THE PHOTOGRAPHS OF ALEX CYRESZKO AND FRANCESCA ROSA

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'Everyone has done something to mess up their car at least once', writes Stephanie A. Smith in *10 Ways to Ruin your Car*.<sup>1</sup>

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*Open your doors without looking. This is a sure-fire way of eventually getting your doors scratched up really bad. If parallel parking, this is a really good way to get your door knocked off.*

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For the last decade two Australian artists – Alex Cyreszko and Francesca Rosa – have separately set out to document as many abandoned and ruined cars as possible. Rosa chose to explore rural Queensland while Cyreszko focussed on the back streets of Sydney.

Their individual projects culminate in two seemingly endless series of images that are at once absurdly comical and darkly tragic. We see cars subjected to all manner of humiliations: vandalised, buried under foliage, stripped of parts and left to rot. In one image we observe a Datsun Stanza crushed beneath a blue plastic whale, and in another we see a Holden ute perched precariously on a tree stump. Together their works form a poignant essay on material decay. They highlight the rampant waste of western culture, while also revealing its melancholic beauty.

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*You could enter your car in a demolition derby. You will have to replace your current gas tank with a two gallon tank that sits in your back seat so you don't run the risk of exploding. This will make your car fit for the junkyard in no time.*

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Their works undermine our faith in rational progress by suggesting that meaning can be located in disorder, and questions the notion that value derives from function. As the cars undergo decline they emerge as specimens that attest to the failure of progress. Both Rosa and Cyreszko, in their respective series *Car Bodies* (2006-

2009) and *Abandoned Cars* (2000-present), challenge us to find beauty within these scenes of ruin and decay. While we may be immediately affronted by the images as eyesores – things to avoid in the real world – it does not take us long to recognise the hypnotic allure of the cars as presented to us by each artist.

The incursion of decay arouses sensations of longing, loss and nostalgia. We imagine a life once led by these deformed vehicles, in which they were loved and cherished. We are led to speculate on their apparent pathways to demise. As acute barometers of societal status cars convey a sense of who we are and where we are going (both literally and metaphorically). To then see them so cruelly brutalised and abandoned only accentuates their tragedy; not merely abandoned by their owners they are now cast into a world entirely devoid of humans. This is a world in which once magnificent machines now lie dormant, castrated and maimed.

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*Parking your car in a lake has been a favourite of people who want to get rid of their car for years. This will short circuit the wiring in your car, make it rust faster, and completely and totally mess up your upholstery.*

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We are torn between a delight in material destruction and heartbreak over a slow dissolution. If ever these cars once lived, their lives have now surely departed. Their twisted, rotting hulks recall the shells shed by insects, their inhabitants having outgrown the incarcerating veneers. They attest to the impermanence of life – of the savagery of time upon iron and steel, no less than organic forms. As the cars languish in mute entropy, we come to appreciate our own fleeting existence, canonised by these vacant vessels whose metals might have lasted centuries, but are now rotting away within a fraction of that time.

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*A really good way to turn your car into scrap metal is to park it on a downward facing slope at the edge of a cliff. But don't forget to leave your parking brake off! This will cause your car to roll down and fall over the cliff. The higher the cliff, the better, as a higher fall results in more damage.*

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In each artist's series we witness vehicular ruination *en masse*. There is a sense of endlessness within these photo essays and we become aware of the compulsion of each artist to obsessively document every possible specimen within their own specific domains. Each artist carefully frames their views with a scientific detachment and presents their finds as forensic records. There is no interference or attempt to beautify their subjects. Their works discharge an emotionless aura which belies the extraordinary pathos of the imagery. There is a knowing awareness of the immense range of emotions the cars excite – from humour to sadness – and their inherent failure to survive the evolution of style and machinery. Francesca Rosa writes:

*Car Bodies explores the aesthetics of decay, emphasizing it as an expression of memory, loss and time. The photographic archive is presented as a type of last testament to the momentary nature of these ruins. Although each car is now visually preserved, the inevitability of technological obsolescence is symbolic.*<sup>2</sup>

Alex Cyreszko writes with a similar sentiment:

*The Abandoned Car Series is a photographic project documenting cars that act like wrecks of time in suburban space. The entropic process of these ruins works on many levels of disorder present in the landscape ... The*

*cars represent the opportunity to create a picture of diversity and disorder in the landscape rather than stifle it.*<sup>3</sup>

The transition from objects of desire to objects of repulsion governs these artists' approaches to their subjects. Cyreszko's unsavoury back streets and Rosa's fetid overgrowth (in the wake of Cyclone Larry) become arenas for aesthetic contemplation where the boundaries between low brow and high art become blurred.

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*Of course, you could always drive your car right into a tree. You might get hurt in the process, but your car will be totalled!*

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So while the passing of people is met with ceremony and mourning, these expired artefacts are cast carelessly aside and strewn through the landscape. Their remains are picked at by 'vultures' and eventually reclaimed by nature. Once things of shiny, luminous magnificence, they are now dissolving testaments to the fickleness of humans. Saturated with the stench of mildew and metallic rot, they nevertheless infer a profound beauty in their decline. We may detect a touching humility here; a sense of resignation but also of quiet nobility as nothingness takes hold. While the cars may be eyesores to some, their cumulative plenitude and plaintive plea to our sympathies ensures an endless appeal to many others.

Simon Gregg  
Curator

#### NOTES

- 1 Stephanie A. Smith, 10 Ways to Ruin Your Car, [http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/219060/10\\_ways\\_to\\_ruin\\_your\\_car.html?cat=60](http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/219060/10_ways_to_ruin_your_car.html?cat=60), accessed 24 February 2010
- 2 Francesca Rosa, email to author 16 February 2010
- 3 Alex Cyreszko, email to author 19 May 2010