

133 TECUMSETH STREET
TORONTO ONTARIO M6J 2H2 CANADA 416 554 4112

ALL THE ROAD RAGE

AVENUE
Questions & Artists



North America is the motherland of car culture. Despite that, few Canadians would turn down the chance to take a sledgehammer to a car like there's no octane-fuelled tomorrow. At least, that's what Toronto artist Anitra Hamilton was betting on when she organized her recent work *Beater*, an old sedan made available to the public for hardcore pinata-style whacking on June 27. Children of the internal-combustion engine didn't disappoint: Whether Hamilton's dozens of volunteers were seeking psychic retribution for one too many door dings or environmental revenge for climate-destroying carbon emissions, they came, they smashed and they left smiling widely. What remains, Hamilton explains to Leah Sandals, isn't just a story of violently sculpted scrap metal, but violently powerful human drives.

Q Watching the *Beater* smashing, I felt excited, almost elated, by the collective adrenaline. Yet I also thought, how would I feel if this was some-one's house, or worse? Would I still get caught up in this fervour?

A Well, people really like destroying things. That's what I've learned.

Q This drive to destruct has been underlined in your art before -- like when you converted a defused bomb into a fairground ride. But how does that drive really come through in daily life?

A I try to laugh it off, but when you watch the news, it's all there: contamination of the food we eat, constant wars against each other.

Q And you don't see that destruction as a nasty "by-product" of well-intentioned human endeavour, but rather an inborn urge.

133 TECUMSETH STREET
TORONTO ONTARIO M6J 2H2 CANADA 416 554 4112

A Yes. But I also see beauty. In another work, I was making bombs attractive, covering them meticulously in broken eggshells. People would look at them and say, "They're beautiful," and then catch themselves, because that doesn't sound right when you're talking about a bomb. But that feeling is there; there's that inherent good and evil in everyone.

Q Now, about Beater. What hopes did you have for it?

A My favourite thing about the piece is that it will be going to an auto wreckers on a flatbed, so people on the highway will see it. They'll have no idea how it was made, so they might assume it's a wedding car, and they'll be shaking their heads, thinking, holy, a wedding car crashed.

Q Do you want people to be scared by cars, then?

A Well, some people who were smashing in Beater did it because they hate cars, but I don't feel that way.

Q So the cars are more like vehicles for storytelling, with the opportunity to connect with audiences outside of the art world.

A I show in galleries; I'm not against that. But I did do another car project called Overhaul, where I covered a car with wedding pompoms and left it in a ditch. I like the idea of people driving to and from their cottages and seeing the car over and over again, thinking: "Hey, it's still there, Maybe we should get out and have a look," or "What happened here? Did they stop to have sex?"

Q What's also different about Beater is that it's art you're encouraged to wreck. Most art is behind climate-controlled glass: You can't breathe on it, let alone touch it!

A Yes, it's funny; when the curator of the museum that hosted Beater saw me covering the car with pompoms, he said: "Aw, that's beautiful, we can't wreck that!" But that's partly the point. I also have a gallery in my handbag called the Satchel Gallery. I take paintings out of that bag with my bare hands, and some people get freaked out. They're like, "Uh, don't you need cotton gloves on to do that?"

Q Where do you get the cars from? Do you have friends in the industry?

A No. It's just a cold call -- they ask what my company is and I just tell them I'm an artist. More often than not they get behind it.

Q It's hard to believe that works.

A Yes, it's great. But what I've learned in the process is don't buy a Dodge Spirit. That's what both cars -- from separate sources -- have been. They seem to go to used car dealerships and auto wreckers a lot.

Q I have to ask, do you have a car?

A I'm 45 and I've never had my driver's licence. I do get in cars, though. - Anitra Hamilton's Beater -- or what's left of it -- shows to July 28 at Toronto's Mercer Union. Visit www.mercerunion.org for details.