



CONQUEST

Sculpture by Lewis deSoto

C O N Q U E S T

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Essay by Nick Stone

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TRANSMISSION FROM THE DETERRITORIALIZED ZONE

Art is magic delivered from the lie of being truth. – Theodor Adorno

Automobiles are great suits of armor into which we strap ourselves: powerful and luxurious exoskeletons whose reserves of horsepower blast us across distances. They explode and contract space, on an individual scale, as the locomotive did for previous generations. We are moved by such machines, transported through space in a process similar to the vehicular transportation of language. In poetry, language is at its most combustible, its most moving. Where the locomotive was an epic, a mythopoetic giant, automobiles are poems: powerful, personal, compact clusters of interacting forms.

Lewis deSoto is a composer of just this sort of poetry. One cannot simply call him a writer because text and language are but one ingredient of his poetics. deSoto's *Conquest* is a prime example. Of course, he calls it sculpture: in a film about the work, the artist reflects on its origins, noting previous installation works in which he "created a hot-rod of [a] space," customizing and amping up aspects of a given site to "make it perform better." This idea led him to the *Conquest*: "I'm hot-rod-riding the notion of sculpture," he says, "so why not go back to the hot rod and start from there?" For deSoto, metaphor is most explosive when taken literally: rather than making a hot-rod of the space, why not make an actual hot-rod?



Lewis deSoto, CONQUEST, 2004, customized automobile.
Installation view, the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, Ridgefield, CT, 2006

This playful approach to language is a key aspect of deSoto's work. He hot-roads language itself by daring its various possibilities to co-exist – and in no fewer than three dimensions. deSoto takes the multiplicity of ideas and objects to which a single name or word has been affixed and, not content to see them as a series of abstract choices available to the mind, collides them together in a gloriously real amalgam. De Soto: conquistador and luxury automobile -- why not both at the same time? Not in the mind or on the page but in the showroom, in the driveway, out on the road, where you can feel and smell and hear the glittering shine, the exhaust, the mechanical purr and rumble of it even as your mind is processing its web of contradictory associations.

They are powerful associations: the name “De Soto,” the lynchpin of the piece, is charged with historical and personal voltage. Hernando de Soto's 16th century incursion in the New World was a cruel, swashbuckling journey which -- not coincidentally -- laid the cartographic groundwork for many of America's major highways even as it laid waste to North America's native populations via disease and slaughter. Hernando de Soto was an early believer in what would later be called Manifest Destiny. Most of the land in the United States is titled in reference to a property grid similar to the one deSoto planned and measured out in leagues of 5,000 paces each – the odometer of the 16th century. His conquest of the land and





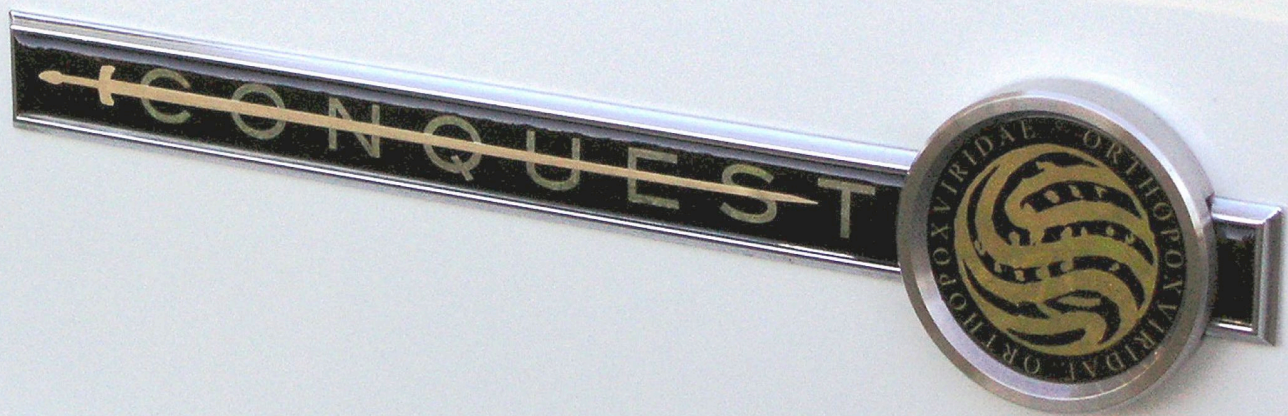
Left: Painting by William H. Powell, "Discovery of the Mississippi," 1847
Above: Engraving of the expedition to La Florida by Johann Theodor de Bry, 1591

its people would be echoed three hundred years later by the near-complete dominion of the same territory by the automobile.

In a brilliant historical overlap, De Soto was the name chosen for a division of Chrysler Corporation from 1929 through 1961. Given the name and asked to free associate, the majority of Americans in Lewis deSoto's lifetime would most likely identify the automobile, rather than the conquistador. The artist was continually asked as a youth whether he was related to the auto manufacturer. In fact, he is descended both from the indigenous Cahuilla tribe of Southern California and, distantly, from Hernando de Soto himself. deSoto (the artist) is himself a hybrid being, part of a constellation of extraordinary linguistic and historical connections.

Conquest is inseparable from the various and conflicting ancestral roots of both the artist and his country of origin. It is a work of Pop art that has more in common with Gilles Deleuze's conception of a minor literature and with contemporary trends in Japanese art than with Warhol or Johns. This Pop art is what Midori Matsui calls a hybridistic artistic expression, a negotiation of conflicting cultural influences through the critical use of forms and language. deSoto's creation of his own "badge" of car

echoes modern Pop artist Takashi Murakami's insistence on a fundamental parallel between Walt Disney and Marcel Duchamp, the monarch of the unabashedly commercial and the crown prince of the avant-garde, as creators and purveyors of their own name brands. deSoto and Murakami both make "art products," indifferent to the snobbish and imaginary separation between showroom and gallery, commodity fetish and work of art. Theirs is a Deleuzian expression of deterritorialization, which R.W. Cook neatly sums up as "a process of fictionalization, contiguity and bifurcation, similar to deconstruction, that is characterized by discarding neither/or dialectics and synthesis in favor of 'disjunctive syntheses' using the conjunction 'and' to make connections." The proud, celebratory text affixed to the window of a new vehicle, championing its benefits as if to inspire genuflection, is reterritorialized with a parallel text: the "Requirement," that 'window sticker' of Christianity, heralding its supremacy and commanding submission, borne by the conquistadors. The decorative "badging" of the vehicle reveals stylized representations of the sword and the pox virus, avatars of death and disease which are both confrontational and, by their handsome formal qualities, seductive. This is characteristic of deSoto's poetics: they enchant the eye, seize the gut, and subtly bombard the mind.



The artist describes Conquest as a diamond with multiple facets, a “pleasurecraft,” a “great observation-machine,” and emphasizes its movement through various contexts – car show, parking lot, showroom, gallery, documentary, driveway, the open road – as an important part of the work. This network of shifting situations and the concurrent fluctuations in the identity of the vehicle are important to an understanding of deSoto’s Pop art. The work is as slippery and synthetic as history itself: it shifts gears, gliding in and out of various roles, blurring ideas together like a landscape seen from a swiftly moving car. As his counterfeit “pleasurecraft” moves stealthily across space and time, we are reminded of the shifting and multifaceted nature of our own relationships to commodities, to colonial power, and to the blurry, fictionalized vista of history itself.

Nick Stone

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DESOTO



FINAL ASSEMBLY POINT
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1

VEHICLE IDENT #

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"On behalf of the King and the Queen, subjugators of barbarous peoples, we, their servants, notify and make known to you as best we are able, that GOD, Our Lord, living and eternal, created the heavens and the earth, and a man and a woman, of whom you and we and all other people of the world were, and are, the descendants. . . . Because of the great numbers of people who have come from the union of these two in the five thousand years which have run their course since the world was created, it became necessary that some should go in one direction and others should go in another. Thus they became divided into many kingdoms and many provinces, since they could not all remain or sustain themselves in one place. . . . Of all these people, GOD, Our Lord, chose one, who was called Saint Peter, to be the lord and the one who was to be superior to all the other people of the world, whom all should obey. He was to be the head of the entire human race, where ever men might exist. . . . GOD gave him the world for his kingdom and jurisdiction. . . . GOD also permitted him to be and establish himself in any other part of the world to judge and govern all peoples, whether Christian, Moser, Jew, Gentiles, or those of any other sects and beliefs that there might be. He was called the POPE. . . . One of the last Popes who succeeded Saint Peter. . . . as Lord of the Earth gave these islands and mainlands of the Ocean Sea to the said King and Queen and to their successors. . . . with everything that there is in them, as is set forth in certain documents which were drawn up regarding this donation in the manner described, which you may see if you so desire. . . . In consequence, . . . Their Highnesses are Kings and Lords of these islands and mainlands by virtue of said

donation. Certain other isles and almost all peoples to whom this summons have been read have accepted Their Highnesses as such Kings and Lords, and have served, and serve them as their subjects as they should, and must do, with good will and without offering any resistance. . . . You are constrained and obliged to do the same as they. . . . Consequently, as we best may, we beseech and demand that you understand fully this that we have said to you and ponder it, so that you may understand and deliberate upon it for a just and fair period and that you accept the Church and Superior Organization of the whole world and recognize the Supreme Pontiff, called the Pope, and that to his name, you acknowledge the King and Queen. . . . as lords and superior authorities of these islands and mainlands by virtue of the said donation. . . . If you do not do this, however, or resort maliciously to delay, we warn you that, with the aid of God, we will enter your land against you with force and will make war in every place and by every means we can and are able, and we will then subject you to the yoke and authority of the Church and Their Highnesses. We will take you and your wives and children and make them slaves, and as such we will sell them, and will dispose of you and them as Their Highnesses order. And well take your property and will do to you all the harm and evil we can, as is done to vessels who will not obey their lord or who do not wish to accord him, or who resist and defy him. We assure that the death and harm which you will receive thereby will be your own blame, and not that of Their Highnesses, nor ours, nor the gentlemen who come with us.



Lewis deSoto, 2005, CONQUEST installed at San Francisco Civic Center for HIGH FIVE, five temporary public artworks, customized automobile and texts.



CONQUEST next to the "Early Days" section of the Pioneer Monument in the San Francisco Civic Center for "High Five," temporary public art projects, 2005. This section of the monument depicts the subjugation of a Native man by a Spanish soldier and a Catholic priest.



INTRODUCTION / REQUIREMENTS

•On behalf of the King and the Queen, subjugators of barbarous peoples, we, their servants, notify and make known to you as best we are able, that GOD, Our Lord, living and eternal, created the heavens and the earth, and a man and a woman, of whom you and we and all other people of the world were, and are, the descendants. . . Because of the great numbers of people who have come from the union of these two in the five thousand years which have run their course since the world was created, it became necessary that some should go in one direction and others should go in another. Thus they became divided into many kingdoms and many provinces, since they could not all remain or sustain themselves in one place.. • Of all these people, GOD, Our Lord, chose one, who was called Saint Peter, to be the lord and the one who was to be superior to all the other people of the world, whom all should obey. He was to be the head of the entire human race, where ever men might exist. . . GOD gave him the world for his kingdom and jurisdiction. . .GOD also permitted him to be and establish himself in any other part of the world to judge and govern all peoples, whether Christian, Moors, Jew, Gentiles, or those of any other sects and beliefs that there might be. He was called the POPE. • One of the last Popes who succeeded Saint Peter . . . , as Lord of the Earth gave these islands and mainlands of the Ocean Sea to the said King and Queen and to their successors. . . with everything that there is in them, as is set forth in certain documents which were drawn up regarding this donation in the manner described, which you may see if you so desire. • In consequence, Their Highnesses are Kings and Lords of these islands and mainland by virtue of said donation. Certain other isles and almost all peoples to whom this summons have

been read have accepted Their Highnesses as such Kings and Lords, and have served, and serve them as their subjects as they should, and must, do, with good will and without offering any resistance . . . You are constrained and obliged to do the same as they. • Consequently, as we best may, we beseech and demand that you understand fully this that we have said to you and ponder it, so that you may understand and deliberate upon it for a just and fair period and that you accept the Church and Superior Organization of the whole world and recognize the Supreme Pontiff, called the Pope, and that in his name, you acknowledge the King and Queen . . . , as lords and superior authorities of these islands and mainlands by virtue of the said donation. . . • If you do not do this, however, or resort maliciously to delay, we warn you that, with the aid of God, we will enter your land against you with force and will make war in every place and by every means we can and are able, and we will then subject you to the yoke and authority of the Church and Their Highnesses. We will take you and your wives and children and make them slaves, and as such we will sell them, and will dispose of you and them as Their Highnesses order. And we will take your property and will do to you all the harm and evil we can, as is done to vassals who will not obey their lord or who do not wish to accept him, or who resist and defy him. We avow that the deaths and harm which you will receive thereby will be your own blame, and not that of Their Highnesses, nor ours, nor the gentlemen who come with us.

Read by Hernado de Soto to Native Peoples of the New World 1514

DESOTO DIVISION / CHRYSLER MOTORS CORPORATION / DETROIT MICHIGAN

Lewis deSoto

MFA 1981 Claremont Graduate School, Claremont, CA
BA 1978 University of California, Riverside

Professor of Art, San Francisco State University, 1988 to present

Public Art Commissions: City of San Francisco, City of San José, CA, City of Phoenix, AZ, University of Texas, San Antonio, City of Oakland, CA., Borough of the Bronx, New York City

One Person Exhibitions (selected)

ArtOMI International, Ghent, NY., San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art, San Jose, CA., Brian Gross Fine Art, San Francisco, CA; Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, CA; Columbus Museum of Art, Columbus, OH; Harn Museum of Art, Gainesville, FL; Samek Art Center at Bucknell University, Louisburg, PA; Bill Maynes Gallery, New York, NY; Worcester Museum of Art, Worcester, MA; List Visual Art Center at MIT, Cambridge, MA; Metronòm, Barcelona, Spain; Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, MI; Des Moines Art Center, Des Moines, IA; Center for Contemporary Art, Santa Fe, NM; Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden; Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, New York, NY; Artists Space, New York, NY; Matrix Gallery at the University Art Museum, Berkeley, CA; Headlands Center for the Arts, Sausalito, CA

Group Exhibitions (selected)

Aldrich Contemporary Museum of Art; Ridgefield, CT; Rubin Museum of Art, New York, NY; Fowler Museum at UCLA, Los Angeles, CA; Art OMI Sculpture Park, Ghent, NY; Wave Hill, Bronx, NY; Henry Art Gallery, Seattle, WA; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA; San José Museum of Art, San José, CA; Museo Contemporáneo de Arte, Mexico City, Mexico; New Langton Arts, San Francisco, CA; Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebaek, Denmark; Museu D'Art Contemporani, Barcelona, Spain; Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C.; Fundação de Serralves, Oporto, Portugal; DeYoung Museum, San Francisco, CA; Denver Art Museum, Denver, CO; The New Museum, New York, NY; Camerawork, Ltd., London, U.K.; Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, WA; John Michael Kohler Arts Center, Sheboygan; WI

Collections:

Bank of America, San Francisco, CA; diRosa Preserve, Napa, CA; California Museum of Photography, Riverside; Des Moines Art Center, Des Moines, IA; Center for Creative Photography, Tucson, AZ; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA; Microsoft Corporation, Bellevue, WA; Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, CA; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA; Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY; Neuberger Berman, New York, NY; University Art Museum, Berkeley, CA; Weisman Museum at Pepperdine University, Malibu, CA

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