



# IMPERIAL AMERICA

Lewis deSoto

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Sculpture by Lewis deSoto

Essay by Nick Stone

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Lewis deSoto

sotolux press



# WHISKY TANGO FOXTROT

On my first trip to see Lewis deSoto's Imperial America in person, I turned the corner of a gallery wall to find the sculpture literally aimed at me. Of course, one can walk around the Imperial and take it in from all angles – but one's first experience of the work is as its target, a deer in the headlights. Approaching the piece, one senses imminent danger, both from the capacity of this oversized vehicle to mow one down and, of course, from the lethal potential energy of its cargo.

Then there is the shine. "It's the ultimate chrome-mobile," my companion whispered appreciatively as we approached the Imperial. The work's interaction with light is key to its visual impact. Every surface except for the tires (and the missile) gleams sumptuously; even the interior upholstery glitters, thanks to gold and silver threads. Chrome spans nearly every curve and face of the car, turning the entire object into a two ton mirror. The car reflects its surroundings to such an extent that one feels as though the car's environment is contained, even possessed by its surface; an inherent power is evident even in its capacity to visually swallow the world around it.

In fact, there is so much chrome and so many decorative accoutrements on the car that it is easy to ignore the replica of a Redstone nuclear missile sitting atop it. The car is all aesthetics: any auto enthusiast will quickly point out that, like most luxury cars of its age, the Imperial's styling and detail are paramount, vastly outweighing any performance or safety considerations. None of its pointed, finlike, streamlined details actually make this lumbering lug more aerodynamic: they are nothing more than visual cues. Ironically, the matte, workman-like missile is totally absent of aesthetics (except for an inverted N-shape in black which echoes the lines of the Imperial to such a degree that it seems impossible that it could be a coincidence): it is, quite literally, all impact. The missile, if we forget for a moment that it is only a replica, possesses a potential energy that the car, rendered sluggish by its own immense weight, can only project.



## THE MAN WHO DRIVES THE IMPERIAL



*He sees the future taking shape*

Some men have the vision to look beyond immediate boundaries, and to foresee new developments. And so, what others will do tomorrow, these leaders are doing today.

This year, in the field of fine motor cars, it is men like these who are setting the trend to Imperial. For, in every sense, the Imperial for 1956 has about it "the new look of leadership."


More and more you will notice the regal crown, emblem of the Imperial, in parts of town where fine cars naturally congregate. More and more you will catch a glimpse of Imperial's distinguished gun-sight tail lights out on the open highway.

The 1956 Imperial will be produced in limited numbers. It is for the man

who steadfastly refuses to accept the commonplace. For Imperial's look of fine breeding, its rich and tastefully chosen appointments, its superb engineering and elegant lines truly reflect the owner it serves.

The preference for the Imperial is not taking place overnight. Many men are not fully aware of it. But the trend is here. That is why we suggest that today, you look twice in the fine car field. The Imperial for 1956 is awaiting your inspection now at your Chrysler and Imperial dealer's.

### IMPERIAL FOR 1956

 *finest expression of The Forward Look*



This act of projection, this element, is crucial to both the Imperial and to the republic for which it stands. The car's power is ultimately diminished by its very size – much like the U.S. military apparatus, perhaps. Certainly, this paradox is characteristic of the American automobile industry, which has never put a premium on fuel efficiency or performance. Put simply, American cars have always been about power. One need look no further than the latter decades of the twentieth century when in a struggle to compete with sporty, efficient, and durable imports from Japan, the U.S. auto industry was rescued by the "light truck" division – ie, SUVs and minivans. These oversized vehicles were not engineering marvels; on the contrary, they were often slow and heavy, with a tendency to roll over. But aesthetically, they were muscular and brutish, giving an overall impression of that most devalued buzzword of our times: security. For an artist like deSoto, who sees a kachina doll in the form of an electric tower, there must be a certain appealing magic – a perverse art – to the chicanery of these massive creations that continue to exude a feeling of safety, strength, and power even as Consumer Reports indicates that they are gas-guzzling death traps.

Politics aside, given his consistent use of classic cars as symbolic objects, deSoto is also clearly fascinated by a time when cars were designed to be – in their own way – works of art: when their styling aimed at a sort of unironic visual poetry. Cars like the Imperial used cues in a starkly psychological way, cues which seem over the top now that we are complicit with the shaping of our own desires and psychology is no longer the province of specialists. Viewed in a contemporary light, the Imperial appears to be an artifact, a time traveler from a bygone age. Yet the values and ideas which inspired its design and informed its distribution – the glorification of martial power, the chauvinistic patriotism, the rank materialism – are directly responsible for our current plight, as our homes and jobs are washed away in the deluge of a recession fueled by military ambition and bottomless greed.







DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE  
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA



"Now I am Yours!" A hanging tag from the Imperial's radio tuner knob gleefully crows, anthropomorphizing the car in a 1950s font so obviously pre-digital that it feels like a caricature or a nostalgic relic. In this twenty-first century moment of "aspirational" brands, wherein marketing seems to have thoroughly permeated every interaction and predetermined any transaction, this bald-faced investment of a commodity with a pathetic sentient desire to be owned seems humorous and cartoonish. It suggests a simpler time, when we bought things based not on our own aspirations, but on theirs – simply because they sweetly begged us to take them home and love them. But this humor has a bitter aftertaste, as the tag might just as well be hanging from the military-industrial complex itself: Now I am Yours, say the endless wars in the Middle East to generations of young Americans; Now I am Yours, say the debt and recession and bad faith accumulated over decades to a frustrated populace wondering why funds for schools and roads in their own country continue to disappear in faraway deserts.

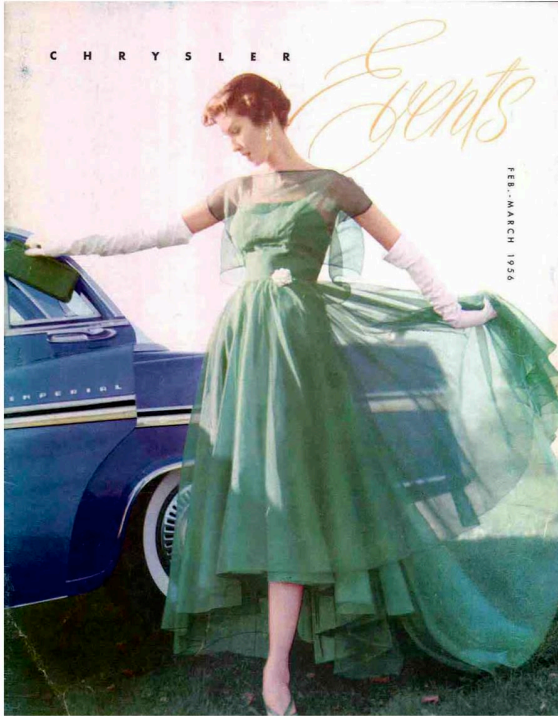
This tension, this immeasurable distance between past and present is at the very heart of deSoto's Imperial. The car feels so dated in its design, so of-its-time, so laughably chromed out and absurdly oversized – and yet here it sits, in the present day, looking as commanding and desirable as ever, with the malice and terror to which its military-inspired details refer looming ever larger. The Imperial also describes the distance between, in deSoto's words, an "idealized notion of eternal beauty" and "the ability to destroy all of civilization within a few hours" -- an infinitesimal distance, then, since the former is wholly subsidized by the latter.





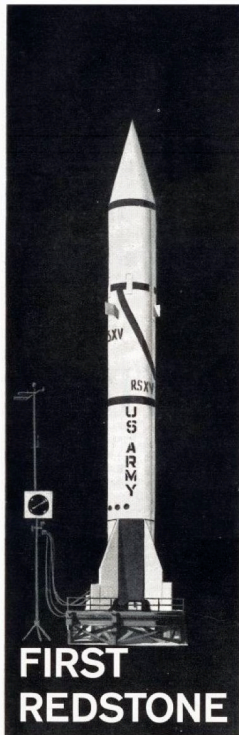




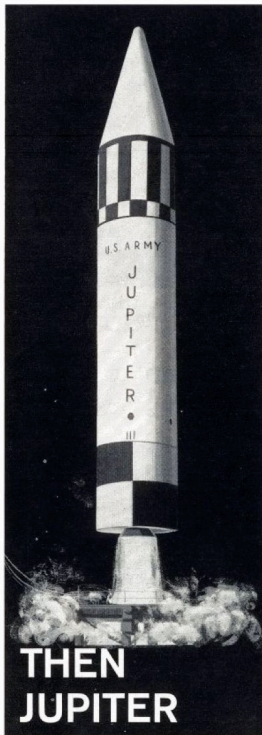


Chloe McCordell's "American Empire" is of gathered silk, tied around the midriff and high under the knees. Color is magnet gold with pink and amber beads.

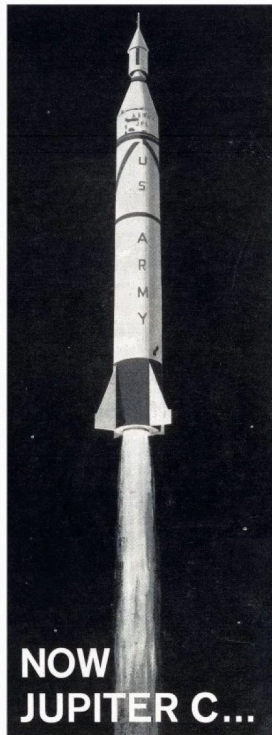




**FIRST  
REDSTONE**



**THEN  
JUPITER**



**NOW  
JUPITER C...**

**Jupiter C . . . another in the Army family of  
missiles . . . launches first U. S. satellite moon**

America's mighty missile program takes a giant step into outer space as Jupiter C puts America's first satellite into orbit.

And once again, the world is shown that inventiveness and productivity thrive best in the climate of freedom.

To help preserve this, Chrysler Corporation is producing a family of missiles in cooperation with The Army Ballistic Missile Agency

and many fine sub-contractors: *Redstone*—largest ballistic missile in full industrial production and *Jupiter*—built to travel 1500 miles at supersonic speeds . . . now in production.

The Redstone served as the vital first stage in the history-making launching of the mighty Army Jupiter C.

Chrysler Corporation recognizes this great achievement by the Army and warmly congrat-

ulates all those concerned with the successful launching of the free world's first artificial moon, "Explorer".

With advanced concepts in research, engineering, and in production, Chrysler Corporation seeks constantly to serve better the nation and the public. This is *The Forward Look* of Chrysler Corporation—builders of *Plymouth, Dodge, DeSoto, Chrysler, Imperial and Redstone and Jupiter.*

**THE FORWARD LOOK  CHRYSLER CORPORATION**  
**PLYMOUTH • DODGE • DESOTO • CHRYSLER • IMPERIAL**



It is a master stroke on deSoto's part that in tandem with these connoted, abstract distances, physical distance was the very *raison d'être* for both the objects which he has married in this work. After all, the car is a vehicle for transport, an invention that turned week-long journeys into day trips, reducing miles to minutes; meanwhile, the intercontinental missile reduced the distance between the United States and the USSR, not to mention the distance between life and death, to the mere push of a button.

deSoto's *Imperial* also demonstrates the tension inherent to 'found object' sculpture: namely, the push and pull between an object's origins and the meaning imbued by an artist's appropriation or alteration. Put another way, the object will always have two authors: the artist and the object's own history. deSoto has placed touches in the work to remind us of the *Imperial's* associations with the military-industrial complex, from subtle details like the eagle and nuclear symbol on its interior carpets to unmistakable flourishes like the enormous missile replica bolted to the roof. These touches inscribe the work with a set of symbols, an iconography developed by the artist; but the car is also a historical object, and it is fascinating how its associations with the military industrial complex surpass symbolism: its DOD security clearance sticker, for example, is not an artistic decision but is instead due to the fact that this very car once belonged to a member of the Department of Defense who worked for the Strategic Air Command. That the car is at once a commentary on history and a piece of history itself yields a powerful and even disorienting experience for the viewer, as the boundary between art and life vanishes and the difference between the monumental and the mundane becomes imperceptible.

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE  
REGISTERED VEHICLE  
**NMN 249**  
DD FORM 2220, 1 NOV 79 (ACCOUNTABLE)

**MARCH AFB**







Conquest is a theme to which deSoto's artwork continually returns. His mixed Native and Spanish ancestry no doubt factors into this fascination: his status as a living hybrid of the conqueror and the conquered has informed the development of a unique perspective on the historical exploits of imperialism, from the Crusades to Operation Enduring Freedom. The Imperial, with its synthesis of the familiar, quotidian automobile form and a specialized weapon far removed from the typical civilian American's daily life, underscores the extent to which our lives are inextricably tangled up in the war machine apparatus. After all, even as his concerns about the burgeoning military industrial complex grew, Dwight Eisenhower (himself a 1956 Imperial owner) used the supposed need for military evacuation as an argument to push the funding of large interstate highway projects, thereby promoting American car culture and drastically, permanently altering both the physical and psychological landscape of this country. deSoto's Imperial suggests that even our apparently sovereign movements in the civilian world are often as guided as a missile.

There is also a sheer absurdity, an element of incredulous humor, in deSoto's sculpture that reflects not just the hellish insanity of war in general but the particularly absurd nature of the contemporary quagmire of Afghanistan. In Bob Woodward's *Obama's Wars*, the president's military and national security advisors frequently invoke a venerable military expression with a caustically poetic ring of its own: "Whiskey Tango Foxtrot," the meaning of which will become obvious if one considers only the first letter of each word. Throughout the course of Obama's first two years in office, as top Pentagon officials repeatedly presented the president with bogus "options" in Afghanistan – all of which were variations on a perpetual, mind-numbingly expensive war with no end in sight – each of Obama's skeptical and even angry reactions are described by the author's military sources as a "Whiskey Tango Foxtrot moment." Nonetheless, Woodward notes, "it was evident that Whiskey Tango Foxtrot was never going to stop the Pentagon and its generals." deSoto's Imperial visually renders this Whiskey Tango Foxtrot aspect of the contemporary American war machine in all its glittering, reactionary glory, using a car from a bygone era to underscore the extent to which the strategies of the American military are still dangerously mired in the past. Indeed, in its frenzy for conquest, the machine seems prepared to mow down even those it is supposed to protect.

Nick Stone



**THE FORWARD LOOK '56 wraps up the**

Millions of Americans have now had a close look at the five all-new cars of the FORWARD LOOK '56—Plymouth, Dodge, De Soto, Chrysler and Imperial.

Their judgment tells them—and their hearts echo it—here are cars that must be wonderful to drive, to ride in, to be seen in!

Take a good look yourself! Compare these cars with any new cars on the road today . . . compare them from any standpoint you can think of . . . compare them in any price class you choose. Whether you want a 4-door

hardtop, a sedan, a station wagon or a convertible, you will find more for your money in the FORWARD LOOK '56.

What catches your eye first is THE FLIGHT-SWEEP—the finished new note in car design this year. From jutting headlight to crisply upswart tail, this simple clean line may seem a mere trim detail—yet it creates an almost wedge-shape silhouette—like that of a jet plane—conveying power and motion! This is design that borrows from tomorrow!

Take a look at the people driving these cars, many of whom have switched

**idea of go in one clean front-to-back sweep!**

from cars of other makes. Their faces tell you they know they couldn't have made a better choice—for looks, for performance, for safety.

See how they select their automatic driving range—they just press a button of the new Pushbutton PowerFlux! See how they get up and go—with new engines that are the finest on the road today; more powerful for safer driving, more economical, too. See how smoothly they ride—with an all-new comforter in a class by itself. See how easily they stop—the new *Autoball* braking system—no without equal for sureness and ease of operation. See how

effortlessly they steer—Chrysler Corporation's unique Safety-Track Power Steering works all the time, not part of the time.

And you'll see new safety iron—see that FORWARD LOOK '56 brings you the best made bodies and frames—see a Lifeguard door latch that are the safest you can have around you—Safety Seat Belts, if you wish.

Visit your dealer now. Test drive one of these cars. It will open your eyes to a new kind of driving pleasure that will make you proud of the car—and proud of yourself.

**PLYMOUTH • DODGE • DE SOTO • CHRYSLER • IMPERIAL**

**CHRYSLER CORPORATION**

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# LEWIS DESOTO

[www.lewisdesoto.net](http://www.lewisdesoto.net)

MFA 1981 Claremont Graduate University, 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, City of New York

## One Person Exhibitions (selected)

Palm Springs Art Museum, 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, Lewisburg, 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)

Nobel Museum, Stockholm, Sweden, Hillside Terrace Galleries, Tokyo, Japan, Aldrich Contemporary Museum of Art; Ridgefield, CT, 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:

San José Museum of Art, San José, CA, Crocker Art Museum, Sacramento, CA, Bank of America, San Francisco, CA, diRosa Collection, Napa, CA; California Museum of Photography, Riverside; Des Moines Art Center, Des Moines, IA; Center for Creative Photography, Tuscon, 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;

Represented by Brian Gross Fine Art, San Francisco, California

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