

## Di Rosa Preserve shows cars as art

Matt Villano

Friday, July 11, 2008



Serious car enthusiasts might describe their vehicles as highly detailed works of art. The same could be said for two vehicles in a soon-to-be-closed exhibition at the Gatehouse Gallery at Napa's di Rosa Preserve: Art & Nature.

"Lewis deSoto: Tales of Power," the brainchild of Napa artist deSoto, showcases two thematically customized and fully operational vehicles as sculptures. It closes Saturday.

The two vehicles comment on how power has affected native peoples throughout history. Museum curator Michael Schwager says that, while the message is timeless, the pieces represent a stark departure from the usual kind of art the facility displays.

"This is a different kind of show for us," he says. "We usually have more traditional pieces of art - paintings, mixed-media type of stuff. We've never done an exhibition with just two vehicles."

The first vehicle is all about the name deSoto. The artist tricked out a 1965 Chrysler New Yorker to look like a Chrysler DeSoto, a model manufactured from 1929 until 1961. The artist added subtle touches to invoke yet another de Soto - the Spanish conquistador Hernando de Soto (who is no relation), who terrorized the native people of North and South America nearly 500 years ago.

Fittingly, the piece is titled "Conquest."

This name - "CNQST," actually - is on the front license plate. The logo has a spear going through the name "Conquest" and incorporates the circular symbol of the smallpox germ, which the Spaniard de Soto is believed to have brought with him to the New World.

The artist has painted the car's interior gold to represent the mineral that the Spanish came looking for. He also re-created a window sticker and advertising pamphlet from the 1960s that include the English translation of a diatribe the conquistador read to the Incas before slaughtering them.

The second piece, titled "Cahuilla," evokes the more recent history of the Cahuilla people in Southern California.

The artist customized a 1981 GMC pickup truck to represent the tribe's fight for economic power; a 1980 police raid on the Cahuilla Cabazon band's Desert Oasis Casino is largely viewed as one of the precursors that led to California voters passing the proposition that legalized Indian gambling.

As with "Conquest," certain details make "Cahuilla" powerful. Under the truck's carriage, neon lights flash like those on a slot machine. The vehicle's logo features the number 777 and a symbol from the tribe's creation myth.

Inside the truck, deSoto used upholstery modeled after the weblike pattern on the back of a \$100 bill. He also put together a haunting soundtrack that combines traditional Cahuilla chants with ambient noise from the Cahuilla Casino in Anza (Riverside County).

Perhaps the most impressive aspect of "Cahuilla" is a tapestry draped over the truck's bed. The fabric, made by Magnolia Press in Oakland, juxtaposes Cahuilla symbols such as a snake, an eagle and a fox with the betting squares of a craps table.

The di Rosa has built a wooden platform so visitors can admire the tapestry from above. To further enhance the experience, the museum also has set up a mini theater where guests can view two videos about deSoto and his work.

Additionally, the exhibition offers information about deSoto's next project, a piece titled "Imperial America" that will comment on Cold War-era militarism by topping a 1956 Chrysler Imperial with a facsimile of a Redstone rocket from the same year. This piece, along with "Conquest" and "Cahuilla," eventually will complete the "Tales of Power" series.

DeSoto said he hopes the works raise awareness about everyday objects as art and about how some of these objects can stand for more than what they really are.

"I am very interested in people starting to recognize that the world is a collection of metaphors, aesthetic and otherwise, and that these metaphors in some sense create the world they experience," he said. "Maybe (the pieces) will inspire people to think about the origins or originations of consumer products in their lives and try to see the mystery in them."

**Lewis deSoto: Tales of Power:** 9:30 a.m.-3 p.m. Tues.-Fri. Through Saturday. Free. Gatehouse Gallery, the di Rosa Preserve: Art & Nature, 5200 Carneros Highway 121, Napa. (707) 226-5991, [www.dirosapreserve.org](http://www.dirosapreserve.org).

*Matt Villano is a freelance writer. E-mail him at [pinkletters@sfgchronicle.com](mailto:pinkletters@sfgchronicle.com).*

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2008/07/11/PKP111IP8L.DTL>