

Provocative Art That Takes the Show on the Road

LEWIS deSOTO needs a roof rack. The specifications are tricky, though. First, it has to fit a 1956 [Chrysler Imperial](#). And then it must securely accommodate a 10.5-foot scale model of a CC-56 Redstone ballistic missile.

But Mr. deSoto, who has done his share of auto modifications, is unfazed. If anything, he seems more concerned with what color to paint it. He's leaning toward [West Point Gray](#). "Something militaristic," he said, calling up on his computer a digital rendering of his proposed weaponized sedan.

"Imperial America" is the third in a series of concept cars developed by Mr. deSoto, an artist who lives in Napa, Calif. But unlike conventional concept cars, which showcase futuristic styling or new technologies, Mr. deSoto's serve as vehicles for exploring subjects from the acts of Spanish conquistadors to the empowerment of Native Americans to the military-industrial complex.

He views the series as an extension of his work as an installation artist, describing the creation of installation art as a process of enhancing the "performance" of an exhibition space. In a 2005 documentary, "The DeSoto Conquest," he said, "Well I'm hot-rodding spaces, I'm hot-rodding the notion of sculpture in various situations. Why not just go back to the hot-rod and start from there?"

His first effort, "Conquest," explored the intersection of personal, cultural and automotive histories. As a youth enchanted by automobiles, Mr. deSoto was playfully teased about his relation to the De Soto cars produced by Chrysler until 1961. As a Native American — he is a member of the Cahuilla tribe — he was intrigued by a vague familial connection to Hernando de Soto, the Spanish explorer who enslaved and exterminated indigenous people in his quest for New World riches.

Using the automotive industry practice of "badge engineering," Mr. deSoto transformed a 1965 Chrysler New Yorker into a car he called the Conquest. He modified the New Yorker emblem, adding a sword and a pox virus — weapons that European invaders used, intentionally and otherwise, to devastating effect.

The artist added hubcaps from a 1966 [Dodge Charger](#) and specially fabricated wheels that pushed the tires outward, giving the car a more aggressive stance. He modified the interior to create an air of "arrogant luxury," adding metallic accents and embellishing the gold vinyl seats with black cloth inserts that shimmer with golden threads. The effect is meticulously deadpan.

Mr. deSoto entered the Conquest in a Chrysler car show in Northern California, presenting it as a faithful recreation of a long-lost prototype. A judge inquired politely about the pox-virus logo, he said. The Conquest took second prize.

Another project, “Cahuilla,” is a reimagined Chevy pickup truck intended to examine the economic empowerment of Native Americans through the legalization of gambling on their sovereign lands. Its tonneau cover bears the image of a craps table decorated with symbols of native culture. In 2006-7, while installed at the [Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum](#) in Ridgefield, Conn., the truck pulsed with hidden LEDs while playing a soundtrack of slot machine tunes and Cahuilla songs.

From native power, he turned his attention to nuclear power. “Imperial America” is a reference to Chrysler’s role in the Manhattan Project — the company’s engineers devised a crucial component used in the enrichment of fissile material — and its subsequent work on a ballistic missile system.

In a way, “Imperial America,” like the CC-56 Redstone, is simply a surface-to-surface warhead delivery vehicle. Mr. deSoto describes it in more poetic terms. “The Imperial,” he said, “is in a sense the foam on the wave that’s crashing down on you. This glittering thing that’s so attractive and beautiful — and at the same time, extremely dangerous.”