

## Modern Conquest: Art, history collide at Palm Springs Art Museum

A 1965 DeSoto Conquest with Florida plates stands alone, its waxed body gleaming under the spotlight, looking like it's waiting for a driver.

For a car that never existed, it's a striking presence in the James and Jackie Lee Houston Atrium at the Palm Springs Art Museum. The re-imagined Chrysler New Yorker is the centerpiece of "Ransom: An Art Installation by Lewis deSoto," a multi-layered exhibit on display through Dec. 31.

DeSoto, 56, created the "faux-riginal" as a way to visually tell the story of how the Spanish conquered the indigenous peoples of the Americas.

"I've loved cars since I was a little kid," said the artist, standing next to the exhibit. "I was a kid during the last couple of years that DeSotos were built by Chrysler. Because of my name, I sort of identified with them."

For "Ransom," he started with the story of Hernando de Soto, who along with fellow conquistador Francisco Pizarro, subdued the Incas of Peru in the 16th century. But instead of glorifying the great conqueror, the installation depicts overwhelming destruction, using the symbology of the car's emblems and badges, including portraits of de Soto.

The nameplates on the front grill and trunk are obvious. "It's my name, but it's also his name," deSoto pointed out. Other images, he added, "are less obvious."

"De Soto was introduced to the Incas riding a white horse," he recalled. Like Americans who are intrinsically tied to their vehicles, "there was a lot of discussion whether the horse and rider comprised parts of the same being."

The Conquest's name badge features a sword thrust through the letters, representing Spanish technology. The swirl emblem is a pox virus, a symbol of the diseases brought over by Europeans that decimated the native populations.

Using an original window sticker, deSoto filled in codes for the vehicle's various amenities. The fine print at the bottom is El Requerimiento (The Spanish Requirement of 1513), which acknowledged the king of Spain as the instrument of the Catholic Church in the New World.

"Remember what they say about reading the fine print," said deSoto. "This was their waiver of liability; it absolved the sins that the soldiers would commit in carrying out the king's orders."

### 'Old World into the New World'

The second portion of the installation stretches across the open space in the Marilyn and Bruce Throckmorton Gallery. To show the Mesoamerican perspective, deSoto was given access to the

museum's pre-Columbian collection.

Encased in acrylic, clay figures are juxtaposed with photos of young children on television screens. Viewed from the telescopes, across the museum, "It's like looking into the past across the gulf of time," deSoto said.

"I wanted to engage the viewer in the notion of witnessing what happened with living eyes, and at the same time looking from the Old World into the New World across the gulf of the ocean."

For the third and final part of the installation, deSoto designed a "ransom room," (El Cuarto del Rescate).

A chalk line indicates how high the Spanish required the Incas fill the room with gold and silver to ransom their imprisoned emperor, Atahualpa. There's also a video of teen docents reading El Requerimiento in both Spanish and English.

"It's interesting watching them, because like me, most of the kids have both Indian and European DNA," said deSoto.

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