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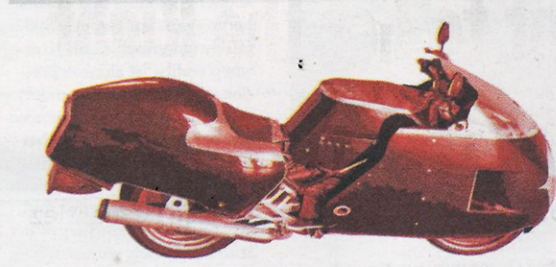
November 2019

## CULTURE Arts, Events, and Diversions

### EXHIBITIONS



JANIS HASHE



Take a two-wheeled ride at the RAC exhibition Countersteer. That's an original Harley from 1909, by the way.

## Born To Be Wild

Countersteer's motorcycles celebrate rebellious artistry By Janis Hashe

“Captain America,” arguably the world’s most famous motorcycle, was all over the media again with the recent death of Peter Fonda. In fact, two motorcycles were custom-created for Fonda’s character, Wyatt, in the iconic film *Easy Rider* by African-American chopper designers Cliff Vaughns and Ben Hardy, with some input from Fonda himself. The image of Fonda astride the bike, hair fanning out behind him, became a talisman for a generation’s attempts to smash boundaries.

The Richmond Art Center is celebrating the motorcycle as a symbol for personal freedom and philosophies

in *Countersteer: Custom Motorcycles as Self-Expression*, an exhibition running through Nov. 22. Featuring 14 customized motorcycles and a variety of photographs, posters, sculptures, and even a quilt, the show revs up the viewer’s imagination — whether you own a Harley or not.

Guest co-creator Danny Aarons doesn’t own a Harley. His taste runs to ‘60s-’70s Italian Ducatis, of which he has, he said, “several.” When another member of the art center board proposed a show on motorcycles, he was intrigued. Then, when fellow board member and former chief curator of art at the Oakland Museum of California, Philip Linhares,

agreed to co-curate, he knew they were on to something. Linhares had curated a highly successful 2007 show on hot rods at the OMCA, and was a “de facto expert,” said Aarons.

Together, they began reaching out to dealers, designers, and collectors, and eventually assembled a remarkable group of bikes and items that Aarons believes will appeal to both gallery-lovers and “gearheads.” The exhibition was put together in a remarkably short time, only six months, with some contributors riding their contributions directly to the RAC.

Walking through the show, Linhares points first to the fully restored 1909 Harley, rescued from its career as an engine in

a Sebastopol cider mill. It’s an ideal example to show the evolution of bicycle to “motorbike,” he explained. A Bonneville Salts Flats racer, modified from a Suzuki, stands nearby, built by the owner in his garage, and capable of doing a terrifying 181 mph, with the rider lying flat on his back.

Next are two seriously steampunky bikes, named “Acme” and “Maytag” — “Maytag” actually including a motor from the appliance makers. They share a spirit with a bike Aarons describes as a “witty, subtle art piece,” built from scratch as a “rideable parts-bin special by a group of artists, just to see if they could.”

Highlights of the show for

serious motorcycle buffs include the Ducati 750 “Monster,” a huge, sleek chrome, aluminum, and steel masterpiece by Jimmy Kilroy, master metal shaper at Oakland’s Moal Coachbuilders. The curving Art Deco lines belie the machine’s immense potential power. Gearheads will also salivate over the first chopper built by the East Bay’s legendary Arlen Ness. Linhares described how the bike, named “Untouchable,” was continually modified over 14 years. Arlen Ness died in March, but his son, Cory, carries on his work, and is represented in the exhibition by a customized S&S bike, “Double Engine Bagger,” that Linhares hazarded may have cost \$150,000 to create.

*Countersteer*’s bike-related pieces are also captivating. Three small folk-art sculptures of motorcycles, from places as far afield as Cuba and Vietnam, are parked together in one case. A two-part piece by Sebastopol’s “junk art” sculptor Patrick Amiot humorously salutes the love of motorcycles. Vintage posters of motorcycles are also a highlight.

A quilt made of Harley T-shirts collected from around the world by now-retired Vallejo Harley-Davidson dealer Thom McIlhatton festoons one wall. But it’s another group from McIlhatton’s collection that truly amazes: three tiny, intricately detailed motorcycles that at first appear to be made from clay, but are actually formed from toilet paper and paste by a prison inmate. Nothing else is known about their provenance, Linhares said, yet they endure as a testament to the unquenchable creative spirit.

“The intriguing part for me has been to think about the uniforms we wear everyday. Our vehicles are an integral part of that,” said Aarons. He’d like to think that some of the kids he’s seen custom-building their mopeds for zipping around city streets will come to the show, and be inspired by the inventive spirit that preceded them.

“*Countersteer: Custom Motorcycles as Self-Expression*,” runs through Nov. 22, free, closed Sunday and Monday, Richmond Art Center, 2540 Barrett Ave., Richmond, 510-620-6722, RichmondArtCenter.org. ☎