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Geneva 2011: A Designer's View

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Our design guru Chris Hrabalek, never a man to mince his words, takes a highly personal look at the best and worst of the Geneva Show...

Unlike any Geneva Motor Show in living memory, this year's automotive equivalent to the Oscars was packed with new concepts and production debuts, as if the world is in the middle of an economic boom - but the number of real highlights was small. The award for the most vulgar show car must surely go to the new Saab Phoenix. I don't know what went wrong there, but it demonstrates that every designer can have a bad day. I thought Scandinavian design is all about minimalism, clarity and logic; so why add more visual decoration than your average Christmas tree?



What I really liked was Aston Martin's model strategy - or shall we call it model line-up chutzpah - with the new Virage. Re-issuing the DB9 with the lights of the Rapide and calling it a new model is one step better, even, than what Lotus management got away with in Paris last year. Speaking of Hethel's finest, the lack of anything new from them, except yet another Elise edition, makes one suspect that Lotus fired all its bullets at the first target, and has now run out of ammunition.



Unfortunately, the Ferrari FF was not half as exciting as the previously released press images suggested. An enormous wheelbase and massive vehicle proportions made one realise just how much press pics are tweaked these days. Continuing with the Italians, the Alfa Romeo 4C was an even greater disappointment. After last year's stunning 2uettottanta concept by Pininfarina, one wonders why Alfa wants to pursue a mediocre re-interpretation of an Artega GT with themes and details that look less spectacular than the five-year-old Diva concept - a car that was styled by Sbarro, for heaven's sake.



One of the highlights of the show was the new Lamborghini Aventador LP700-4, the styling of which swept past other supercars - even the new Pagani Huayra or Gumpert Tornante - overtaking them in the fast lane while showing a finger. Influences from the Reventón are obvious, but the drama and visual quality sets a new benchmark that will be difficult for the independents to rival.



Hats off also to Bertone for its Jaguar B99 concept. While last year's Pandion concept was a confident statement that Bertone is back in business, it is arguably easier to create a concept car on exaggerated proportions than it is to create one that could, theoretically, make it into the showroom. The B99 is elegant and refined – simply stunning, really – and quotes a Jaguar feel from the past that I am certain would receive a warm welcome; Jaguar's own XKR-S debut didn't even come close.



Next to the BMW Vision ConnectedDrive with its mesmerising negative rear-end, the highlight of the show, however, was the new small MINI Rocketman. What a fantastic statement to follow the appointment of new Design Director Anders Warming, with a 3+1 seating layout that's a great solution for urban mobility (as Toyota has previously demonstrated). The transparent Union Jack roof and front light treatment gives a pleasant visual outlook to a progressive MINI future. My personal recommendation: tone down the visual drama by 5% and brand it 'TINI' – and it will sell like hot cakes.

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