

CLASSIC DRIVER



Exploring the shape of the automobile with French artist Stéphane Dufour

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The California-based French artist Stéphane Dufour's pure-form sculptures of legendary cars such as the Porsche 917 and the Lamborghini Miura are designed to evoke the abstract sensations of speed and beauty we all feel when we see them in real life. Rémi Dargegen visited his Los Angeles studio...

Stéphane Dufour cannot remember exactly whether the first thing he drew when he was six years old was a car or a motorbike, but he says it definitely had an engine. And that's hardly surprising given his family owned an automotive body shop and his father enjoyed nothing more than a spirited drive in his Alfa Romeo Giulia.



The memories of the latter in particular are understandably vivid for Dufour, who relocated from France to sunny California in 2015. “My dad used to drive pretty fast and I was always sliding around in the back seats,” he recalls as we tour the unassuming Los Angeles studio where his evocative sculptures are brought to life. “Everything was blurry when I looked out of the window but experiencing the movement of that car and the sound of the engine echoing in the valleys was the first time I properly connected with these powerful creatures.”

Exotic cars were not commonplace in the rural pocket of western France where Dufour grew up in the 1970s, but the times he was exposed to them occurred largely in the workshop where both his father and grandfather worked. “I spent most of my childhood around cars that were waiting to be restored and painted and I remember some beautiful cars passing through the garage, including a Porsche 911 Carrera RSR.”





Naturally, his curiosity was piqued, and he did as any budding petrolhead would in the days before the Internet: spent all his pocket money on car magazines and began to sketch the exotica inside. He also spent even more time in the workshop, carefully observing his father and sanding or polishing car bodies whenever he was allowed. "I felt very peaceful while doing that and I think such intimacy with cars was probably where my sculpting roots started."

With so many Porsche 911s passing through the workshop, Dufour's attention was inevitably swayed by the classic German sports car. So, when the time came finally to buy a car for himself, he bought himself a VW Beetle, a car he refers to as the 'grandma' of the 911. It was around this time, while he was studying at art school in Limoges, that he realised he could combine his two greatest passions and potentially forge a career drawing the very cars that had made such an impression on him as a child.



It was all systems go and, using pencil and charcoal to begin with, Dufour drew and drew, mostly

Beetles and old American cars at first, focusing on realistically capturing the chrome reflections and the curves. Without Instagram and Shopify, he had to spread the word the hard way, by touring around countless events in France and beyond. "I displayed my work at so many events, from major race meetings like the 24 Hours of Le Mans to small national art gatherings.

But I made lots of good connections with journalists and editors and that's how I landed many articles in magazines way before the mass adoption of the Internet." Indeed, the effort paid off. Later, Porsche even acknowledged him as a certified brand artist, allowing him to legally reproduce its greatest cars in myriad forms around the world .



After many years spent working solely on paper and canvas, moving from hyperrealism to a more 1960s Pop Art style, Dufour yearned to sculpt and involve himself more physically with his art. And so, in the mid-2000s, his signature sculptures of famous racing cars, which reenvision them in their purest forms and scream speed and fundamental beauty, were conceived. "This abstract form of expression has always been on my mind and I thought this would prove a great marriage between the minimalist aesthetic and the solid form," he explains.

The conceptualisation process was long, but once the vision was clear, it was a simple case of practice makes perfect. Fittingly, his very first sculpture was of a Porsche 356A and he's since hand-crafted a plethora of legendary cars ranging from the Ferrari 250 Testa Rossa and Lamborghini Miura to the Bugatti Type 57 and the McLaren F1 GTR 'Longtail', more often than not one-offs commissioned by private owners or companies, though sometimes offered for sale in small batches.



“The most important part of my artistic approach is imagination,” Dufour continues. “When I look at the Porsche 917, I can feel its tremendous speed and I’m spellbound by its elegance. Using my imagination, I transform those abstract sensations into a piece of art, connected with, yet distinguished from, the real car.”

He’s keen to emphasise the challenge each car poses when it comes to this transformation process – these are not replicas, after all, yet they need to be every bit as recognisable as the originals.

“Identifying the fundamental shapes only gets me so far – achieving the perfect form is all in the careful sculpting of the plane and line and manipulating light and shadows. I want to suggest certain aggressiveness and speed using minimal elements.”



Though his bold and brightly coloured resin sculptures have garnered Dufour much recognition and admiration among the automotive community, particularly in his adopted homeland California, he certainly hasn't stopped drawing. "I'm currently working on bringing the minimalism concept from my sculptures into my paintings - there's less detail, but the aim is to create a pure sensation from whatever way the audience perceives it." He's also launched a streetwear label, 8Bolt, that is heavily Porsche-oriented - why aren't we surprised?

Dufour leads us to a larger buck of a Lamborghini Miura and proceeds to gently sand it in preparation for painting. As he sands, entirely at one with the voluminous form in front of him, it's hard not to focus on the impossibly beautiful shape of the Miura, a distilled form of Gandini's timeless design. Forget paperweights or photos of the family - we honestly couldn't think of a better way to decorate our desks.

Photos: Rémi Dargegen for Classic Driver © 2019

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