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WHAT TO SEE IN NEW YORK ART GALLERIES THIS WEEK: ROBERT GROSVENOR

by Roberta Smith



Robert Grosvenor's vehicle-vessels at Karma. Credit... Courtesy of the artist and Karma, NY, and Paula Cooper Gallery

Robert Grosvenor is the lone wolf of sculpture. In the late 1960s he was almost a Minimalist, but was disqualified by a growing penchant for working with rough materials, scrappy found objects and his own hands. Since then his career has unfolded in singular surprises.

The latest is a show of three large, remarkable objects set in a row at Karma gallery in the East Village. Clearly, two of them were once cars. What they have become is less evident: sculpture, yes, but also, zombies, masks, mysteriously inhabited yet empty vessels, assiduously reworked. Above all, they are things to look at and pore over, inside and out, considering what was there at the start and what was added or subtracted. One, possibly an early Volkswagen Beetle, is from the front a smooth and featureless unpainted shell. It's an undulant relic, almost bronze, with an unsettling resemblance to the quasi-nosed Voldemort from the "Harry Potter" movies. At the back the surface turns matte gray and militaristic, evoking the possible Beetle's Nazi past, and a large mocking fin has been added.

A second sculpture, which suggests a Studebaker Lark, is stripped and seamless, but with protruding edges. It has been coated in lemon yellow so thick that it denies metal, conjuring carved painted wood or glazed ceramic. You may notice that the smaller vehicle slightly squeezed between these two divas is relatively intact and even has license plates. But with canvas seats and a lustrous wooden floor, it is so eccentric and unfamiliar that it also sustains extended study. It is a French Solyto, a three-wheel vehicle bred from motorcycles for deliveries and camping. It's not quite a car, but it may be a ready-made.