

Nunes, João Paulo. "Anthony James: Car Crash," *MUSEMAGAZINE.IT*. 2011.



Image: "KΘ", 2008 Photography Joshua White

Unexpected as it may seem, the art works made of a crashed car and tree trunks in glass cases illuminated by bright neon lights by artist Anthony James are exceedingly replete with celebratory connotations of human life and optimistic emotions. If these objects (with their quasi ready-made quality) have been perceived by audiences and critics as devoid of life, on closer viewing they are clearly imbued with uplifting notions of individual and social renewal and betterment. João Paulo Nunes met Anthony James to discuss, amongst other things, the role that art occupies in society and find out what lies ahead for this talented artist. Born in England in 1974, Anthony James studied Fine Art at Central St. Martins College of Art and Design in London, graduating with honours in 1998. His work, influenced by minimalism, pop, and surrealism, has been known for his pluralistic studio practice which combines sculpture, painting, and performance. Most of his career was developed in the United States, and he has exhibited across the country, from New York City, down to West Palm Beach and Miami in Florida, and across to Santa Monica and Los Angeles in California. Internationally, his work has been shown in public and private collections and at the prestigious Art Basel exhibition in Switzerland. He now lives and works in New York and Los Angeles. The decision to share his time between the main

cities of the East and West Coast of the US after studying in London allowed James to explore enriching creative and business avenues. As a European outsider, observing how New York artists strongly define themselves in opposition to Los Angeles artists and vice-versa, generated interesting thoughts about the North-American art world. “While I went to school in London, I was educated by New York. I was hugely influenced by Donald Judd, and Minimalism has always been my foundation. But there are L.A. artists, such as Charles Ray, Mike Kelley, and Paul McCarthy for whom I have a great respect. It has been interesting to note the way that an international audience has conceptualized the L.A./New York dynamic. I recently participated in an art show in Milan that focused on the work coming out of L.A. now. The curator Andrew Berardini, who himself is from L.A., touched upon this concept of space that is uniquely American. Between L.A. and New York, he said, there is ‘2,782 miles of space’. Moving across the country, into that kind of expanse, inevitable plays into the work.” Owing to his reputedly hectic social life during his first few years on the New York art scene, James garnered a reputation as a ‘party boy’ amongst those who believe that artists should be creative beings isolated from society. However, James reconciles these contrasting views easily and intelligently not only in his work but in the way he defines his own creative process: “I really feel, with my work especially, that the concept of the solitary creative artist is somewhat of a myth. Making a visual experience is as much about participation in a culture as about craft. Fashion, news media, advertising, and film are all part of my work, all sources that I draw from. I am fascinated by the notion of the spectacle and the sensational and at times I adopt some of those techniques in my work, particularly in the alienating effects of the two-way mirrors and the illusion of space produced.” The two-way mirror effect that James refers to was notoriously used in his 2008 large-scale piece ‘KKΘ’ (kalos thanatos, Greek for “beautiful death”), the work that caught the attention of critics and gallerists and cemented his position as a leading contemporary artist. The focal point of the show, a real crashed and charred Ferrari framed by birch tree trunks inside a neon-lit case, has generated numerous reviews in art publications that speculated about the piece’s meaning. James later explained that the car was his and that it had been bought when he was 30 years old after having coveted a Ferrari since he was a child. One day, he decided to turn the car into art by taking it to a birch forest in Kingston, New York, dousing it in gasoline and setting it on fire. According to James, this hedonistic act of destroying something with very materialistic connotations also mirrored the period in his life between 2001 and 2006 that

witnessed dramatic tragedies, such as the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the crash of the stock market. The destroyed glossy surfaces of the ultimate object of desire that was James's black Ferrari 355 Spider captivated audiences and critics who drew parallels with the work of Jeff Koons, Damien Hirst and, more importantly, with David Cronenberg's 1996 film 'Crash', based on the 1970 novel by JG Ballard. However, most interpretations failed to understand that, whereas Ballard's motivations to write the novel (a follow-up to an exhibition created to investigate the unconscious links between sex and the car crash) stemmed from the analysis of individual desire, James's work also revealed a concern with ambition and materialism that was laden with an optimistic feeling of societal catharsis. "There are many valid ways of experiencing the piece and I want my audience to react with their own experience. I like thinking about artist Tony Smith's anecdote of the empty New Jersey Turnpike in relation to Ballard's motorways that, to him, are charged with sex and energy. Both Smith and Ballard are talking about the equation of a vehicle transporting the body through space, but Smith sees this as sharing fundamental similarities with materialist, minimalist art and Ballard focuses on the disruptive, latent potential for violence and destruction that underscore the situation. The shared scenarios generate two very different but valid interpretations. I am interested in the ways these two interpretations are interrelated; while my work has a lot to do with individual desire, it doesn't end there. Sex, death, status, money – concepts integral to the Ferrari piece – are intensely personal and individual, yet wield a lot of power on a societal level. In some ways, I aim to threaten the viewer a little bit with showing them a space that seems endless – bigger than their body, bigger than even their own desire can fill. Maybe this is where you begin to get past the individual and move towards speaking about desire and experience on a cultural scale." The fact that the crashed car was surrounded by birch trees contributed to a further emotional involvement with the piece as the trees could be interpreted as representing not just the end but also the beginning of life. According to James, the birch trees in 'KΘ' were used to symbolise sacrifice in the same way that the ancient Greeks used a birch forest as a temple for the sacrifices to Venus. The association of birch with negation of life was further explored in 2010, when the new examples of birch tree works that James produced for Patrick Painter's gallery in Santa Monica were described by the promoters as being "permanently sealed in mirrored tombs" in order to present an image of "idealized destruction". If this interpretation would suggest that sacrifice is equated with death and suffering, it is worth noting that, in most world mythologies, the birch tree is

associated with femininity, fertility, purification, and renewal of life. When questioned about these markedly different connotations, James evokes Pierre-Félix Guattari's process of regenerating the subject through rupturing the senses. "Many artists before me have said that creation is born out of chaos; a work of art should both come out of a restructuring and have some sort of destructive (and reconstructive) effect. The materials that I end up using in my work, such as the birch trees or the Ferrari, already come with heavy cultural and personal symbolism; sometimes bringing the symbols together is jarring, upsetting their connotations a little. To me, to think that art can still perform some kind of cultural destruction would be an uplifting notion." In a way, James's recent work embodies an intelligent reinterpretation of the Vorticist and Futurist artistic ideas established a century ago, insofar as speed, technology, trains, cars and the industrial city symbolised the triumph of technological development over the human condition. However, and as proclaimed by Marinetti in the 'Futurist Manifesto', art should also reject the past and celebrate speed, machinery, strength, youth, industry and modernity in order to revitalize the nation and its culture. In both Marinetti's unabashed claim that a motor car is more beautiful than the 2nd century BC marble sculpture of the Greek goddess Nike of Samothrace, and in the symbolism of James's 'KΘ', it is undeniable that art is an affirmative force that allows the possibility of individual and societal betterment. With his last pieces having secured James a reputable position in the art world, many people have been eagerly waiting for his new creative developments and artistic expressions. When asked what is on his horizon, James humorously invokes his Futuristic influences of mechanical speed and reveals that, as far as his career goes, the sky is ultimately the limit: "Right now I'm driving 200 miles an hour down an empty motorway, waiting for a single oncoming car. But as for the art, I'm currently planning a piece with a MiG airplane."