



Montillier



Photo: Ron Kimball

Montillier Automobile is entirely handmade, a one-of-a-kind show car out-performing many, here shown at the San Francisco Palace of Fine Arts

The Art of *Improvisation*

Millions have either seen or possibly have even ridden in their unique art

by *Robert Bellezza*



Monty and Gregg Montillier's talent becomes apparent viewing this recently commissioned entrance gate of stainless steel

The family had migrated from New Jersey to California, like many families during the Depression, "with everything piled high and strapped to a '26 Dodge." This demanding trip set the background for the Montilliers and their early talents as sign and display artists, revealing how their innate abilities for creative work has continued to this day. Vintage automotive restorer, sculptor and craftsman, Monty Montillier, his wife Sylvia, son Gregg and Gregg's fiancé Debby, have settled recently into their current residence and workplace inside the Sierra Foothills. A large 240 acre parcel borders the remote side of the El Dorado National Forest and now serves as the artists' home pallet where they can roam freely and find natural inspiration. Their own need to return to the land and experience the kind of creativity that has shaped their art remains the primary reason for their locating here.

Of their colorful past, Monty recollects racing with his son Gregg over Mt. Hamilton in a Model T Ford endurance race, filming the trip from a tripod mounted on the rear of their veteran car, as they whizzed past the famous observatory. However, the main direction Monty's work took during his early

California years was to the beaches of Santa Cruz, where he was hired on to design and build rides for the famous Boardwalk Amusement Park. He would often take leave of his flourishing automotive restoration business to work there on the design and construction of prototypical park rides that have been enjoyed by millions since. Eventually employed by a company that provided amusement rides to parks all over the country, Monte spent years crafting the carousel horses, bumper cars, mini-trains and tenders, baby airplanes, peeking dinosaurs and innumerable other creations on which a young Californian whirled away a memorable chunk of his childhood. "I never had any formal training for that stuff," says Monty. "We'd just buy the machinery. We would make it work and use it. Creativity comes from makin' stuff as little kids, art is just one of those things that's just in you. If you are creative, you are always looking at ways of doing things."

Monty's unique flair for amusement design came to prominence when he was asked to work on the early construction of Disneyland. His ingenuity found expression creating prototypes for the Matterhorn.



Monty and Gregg managed to build their new workshop together still staying involved with their latest inspirations, including a popcorn wagon recreated from a photo they took back east, then recreated at their shop

“How do you make a bronze airplane fly? By having the ladder there,” exclaims Monty as he points to the strand of bronze with a humorous passenger clinging to the ladder dangling in the air. “Now I could fly the airplane. The other way is to have them crashing - you have to have something touching something.” Indeed, one lifelike bronze depicts the impact of a World War I biplane going down in flames and smoke as dachshunds scurry for cover (see photo).

With son Gregg, Monty recently constructed the large shop that has become the new center of their fruitful life. They also project a plan for the shop to grow into a museum of collectibles to showcase their classic art. Among a vast array of tools assembled in the shop, unique manual shapers made by Monty and Gregg help the pair customize essential features for their prolific works. At the new workshop, Gregg Montillier has recently designed and completed a sixteen-foot ornate entrance gate of stainless steel made to his client’s specifications and readied for installation in the Bay Area. Many hours are spent rendering such a complex piece, heating and bending convoluted, graceful sweeps in stainless made from a simple original sketch in pencil. The gate’s monogram is surrounded by a gilded lattice with uninterrupted flow, with one exception: at the request of the client, a break has been made through the structure to allow for a hinged entry door for a single person. Given the maze of graciously intersecting curves, this door-within-a-door becomes too elaborate to locate on a sketchpad and must be fabricated spontaneously, using constantly changing observations. This talent for uncharted improvisation is a basic hallmark of the Montillier’s approach.

Monty and Gregg have one piece they consider their consummate sculpture, and an exotic way to travel as well. Once valued at one million dollars (to their objections only), this superb automobile is a visual masterpiece reflecting the powers of both Montilliers’ intuition. Shown only at the most prestigious auto shows, such as the Palace of Fine Arts in San Francisco, the brilliance of its design is seldom matched, using the proportions of a sweeping wing line created without a wooden buck, “just hand wheeling, and shaped by eye. There *are no* parts for the car, everything on there is machined. That’s *not* made out of fiberglass. That’s all original. There is *no* chrome problem, everything is stainless steel and 18-gauge cold rolled steel,” explains Monty, while Gregg points to just one of the interesting details, “the headlamps have four pieces welded together, then



The sculpture of the Montilliers is currently exhibited at Chablis Gallery, Placerville

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are ground smooth.” The Montillier Automobile, with over 200-horsepower, sits as low as possible within its custom framework. “It has an XJ-6 block, with our own designed fuel system, the intake manifolds made here, as well as the water manifold - all handmade. We don’t sit on top of the frame,” explains Monty, “we sit in the frame. Most European cars are one story high and they have a two story top on them – and these cars are low all the way. With all the work we were doing in Watsonville, this took four years to complete in our spare moments. We do it a little different than most people, there was only a side



Photo: Chablis Gallery

elevation view of this car, that’s all there was - the rest is all interpretation, as we go.” They pointed to an ‘86 Jag in the shop that had a low to the ground stance, a respected inspiration.

Monty explains, “we were exclusively restoring older vehicles such as this 1915 Mercer and our vintage Cadillac touring car. Hey, the larger the tires the smoother the ride, that’s why these almost come up to your shoulders!”

and as we’ve seen, the larger the imagination, the greater the improvisation! The Montillier shop has a history of endless adaptability to the many challenges of its creative works. This shop seems to me to be a place where time stands still to allow a complete meeting of minds between father and son. Here, the Montilliers’ most inspired imaginings can be caught and manifested in metal, engineered with truth, then soulfully “hand-wheeled and shaped by eye.”