

John Salt

4 May – 17 July 2011

Ikon presents the first retrospective of paintings by John Salt (b. Birmingham, 1937), tracing the impressive development of his work from the late 1960s to the present day. Almost from the first, Salt has dedicated his practice to portrayals of American cars, his photorealist style conveying a profound grasp of Western (capitalist) culture and an insight into the nature of value and desire.

John Salt was the first artist to exhibit at Ikon when it opened in 1965. Raised in Birmingham, a city of car manufacturing, his father owned a repair garage and his grandfather in turn had been a sign writer, painting the stripes on the bodies of cars. At this time, following his years at the Birmingham School of Art and the Slade School of Fine Art in London, Salt was making abstracted collages on canvas. Two years later he was offered a scholarship to the Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore and it was here that Salt's interest in cars became defining.

His early car paintings were reproductions of the slick desirable images found in Buick sales brochures, magazines selling the American Dream. His work was a spray-painted response to the printed photos: *Bride* (1969) is typical in this vein, depicting front seats, with steering wheel, dashboard and interior upholstery seen through the frame of an open door.

Soon after moving to New York City in 1969, Salt became fascinated by wrecked cars dumped under the approach to the Brooklyn Bridge. Instead of promising a future of happy motoring, the photographs he took were snapshots of obsolescence, the other side of the capitalist dream. The progression in Salt's artistic career became dramatic and rapid, moving from the anticipated pleasure of promotional imagery to the jolting violence of wreckage. The artist stands back, literally, showing us more of his subject and its circumstances. There is traumatised bodywork, broken windows and seats that are now absolutely uninviting. *Demolished Vehicle (STP with trash)* (1971), for example, is the result of an impact that would easily demolish a human being.

As Salt's images became more complex, he began to use an airbrush with finely cut stencils that resulted in a very intricate, unpainterly surface. With such a style, impersonal but yet distinctly his, Salt took his place amongst American Photorealists, featuring in group shows with others including Chuck Close, Richard Estes, Robert Bechtle and Ralph Goings, all over the world.

By the mid-70s, the pictorial space of his work had opened up even more, often to accommodate landscape and a quieter mood. Now we see cars discarded, left to fend for themselves. They are usually symptomatic of a marginalised lifestyle, a world of shacks and trailer homes, locations far from the affluent metropolis. *Purple Impala* (1973) is an early example, the car foiled by the white geometry of the trailer behind, the ground of gravel and weeds and an old bathtub. The overall effect is jarring, especially in an American landscape, which, like cars, is prone to idealisation in the popular imagination.

Salt returned to the UK in the late 1970s, settling near Ludlow in Shropshire. His cars (still American) are now usually parked but functioning, alienated in a way that is not unlike the figures in paintings by Edward Hopper. The *Catskill Cadillac* (1994-96) waits outside an austere building in freezing, snowy weather. It's a life that's more real in its ordinariness, one that we recognise as being closer to that lived by most of us.

A publication proposed to accompany this exhibition will include images of exhibited works and a text by Dieter Roelstraete.

Ends.

Note to Editors:

1. Ikon is open Tuesday – Sunday and Bank Holiday Mondays, 11am - 6pm. Admission is free.
2. A selection of images is shown below
3. Ikon Gallery is a registered charity and receives core funding from Arts Council England and Birmingham City Council and Arts Council West Midlands. Ikon Gallery Limited trading as Ikon. Registered address: 1 Oozells Square, Birmingham B1 2HS.
4. For more information, high-res images and to arrange an interview with the curator please contact Helen Stallard on 0774 033 9604 or email h.stallard@ikon-gallery.co.uk

IKON

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Ikon Gallery is a registered charity no. 528892



John Salt
Falcon Patchwork Surface (1971)
Oil on canvas
117 x 163cm
Courtesy Plus One Gallery



John Salt
Pontiac with tree trunk (1973)
Oil on canvas
107 x 152cm
Courtesy Mr and Mrs W Jaeger, New York.



John Salt
Catskill Cadillac (1994-6)
Casein on linen
113 x 170cm
Courtesy Tellenbach Collection



John Salt
Chevy and garage doors (1999)
Casein on linen
109 x 165cm
Courtesy Tellenbach Collection