

Metropolis II at LACMA, Los Angeles

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It fills an entire room, spanning 30 x 10 feet. Upon it, over a thousand custom-made toy cars zoom through lanes of plastic track that weave through this constructed metropolis. The faux city is an amalgamation of building types ranging from ancient to post-modern, positioned amidst the freeways. More complex than an architect's model, this kinetic sculpture symbolizes the hopes, dreams, fears and myths of Los Angeles.

In Los Angeles, traffic is a constant subject of inquiry. Every conversation is dotted with questions like: How did you get here? How long did it take? How was the traffic? In Chris Burden's sculpture, *Metropolis II*, eighteen lanes of track cycle through a miniature city. The cars move by a central engine and magnetic pulls, darting at top speeds around hairpin curves, caught in a perpetual cycle of hurry-up-and-wait. After completing a lap, they gather at the bottom of the sculpture filling all eighteen lanes as they are propelled up three ramps in different directions, only to be released again. Without a doubt, the sculpture is a crowd pleaser. It can be viewed straight on or from above on a specially built platform. For most of the week it remains in a dormant state, but on the weekends people eagerly line up at designated times to watch the action unfold.

During operating hours the sculpture comes alive with action as the colorful toy cars race by the architecture oblivious to their surroundings. On lower levels and on a separate track, Burden has included model trains that move at a snail's pace compared to the speeding toy cars. There is no fixed vantage point. To view the entire work it is necessary to walk around the sculpture. One must kneel down and look up and through the work, as well as climb down the ramp to view it from a lower perspective. Observing the work from various angles allows one to compare and contrast building types, colors, locations and materials. One can try to follow the path of a single car as it makes its way through the labyrinth, however, this is a futile endeavor as the cars move too quickly and get lost in the maze.

The modeled buildings and the different types of architectural styles make this work vibrant. Structurally, the sculpture is made from slotted square steel tubing, assembled and bolted together to form a solid base upon which the city can grow. Buildings are fashioned around these supports and are made from brightly painted wooden blocks, glass, tile, mylar and mirrors. Some of the buildings are recognizable and modeled after widely known architectural icons like the Eiffel Tower, while others represent architectural fantasies. That many of the buildings are created from the Eames "House of Cards" is a gesture of acknowledgement to these well known and influential designers. Burden's city culls together myriad building styles, which makes observing it a kind of treasure hunt in which one can guess the source and lineage of influences. Cultural theorists like Jean Baudrillard and Frederick Jameson have spoken about the experience of a city today as a postmodern experience: a pastiche of styles and cultures collectively presenting themselves to the viewer as architecture. In Burden's *Metropolis II*, the present city is made up of everything preceding it. The artist samples from the past and the present while simultaneously looking ahead to the future.

That his sculptures are labor intensive (*Metropolis II* took four years to produce) adds to the sense of desperation they engender. Burden's works tend to make one tense. The creation of room-sized sculptures has been a constant in the

recent history of art—Vladimir Tatlin, Jean Tinguely, Kurt Schwitters come to mind, as do the kinetic installations of contemporary artist Jon Kessler whose mechanized works are more about war, voyeurism and surveillance than cities and urban plight. Both Kessler and Burden are just boys playing with toys. Why toys? Burden has stated, “I think toys are the tools you use to inculcate children into the adult world. They’re really important but they’re given the short shrift.” By using toys, Burden can speak across audiences, making works that are playful and critical simultaneously. For example, *What My Dad Gave Me* (2008) is a sixty-five-foot high skyscraper constructed from a million facsimile Erector Set parts. Like many of his other pieces, it is the ultimate male fantasy, brought to unseemly excess.

Burden takes his time, amasses huge collections of objects and presents them as discreet works of art and room sized installations. *All the Submarines of the United States of America* (1987) consists of 625 miniature-scale submarines, representing those launched since the first one in 1897. *Urban Light* (2008) is permanently installed in an outdoor plaza at LACMA and includes 202 restored cast iron antique street lamps. *Metropolis II* not only has over a thousand custom cars and numerous hand-made buildings, but it is a kinetic work that glorifies the speed of a bustling city.

Most will see Burden’s *Metropolis II* as a celebratory sculpture. Yet, after the initial rush has waned, the work engages with relevant cultural, political, social and environmental issues that include noise pollution, overcrowding and an urban infrastructure that favors growth and industrialization over the well being of its inhabitants. Burden’s metropolis is a city without people. His cars are automated, his buildings empty. The city moves but is not alive. While Burden is not solely an apocalyptic artist (although he did have himself shot in a performance work from 1971), embedded into the spectacle of his works is a lesson about dangers: of war, of light, of speed, of life. While simultaneously celebrating these thrills, his work now goes beyond pure sensationalism and becomes a meaningful metaphor for the artist’s ambivalence toward the technological society dictating our daily lives.

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