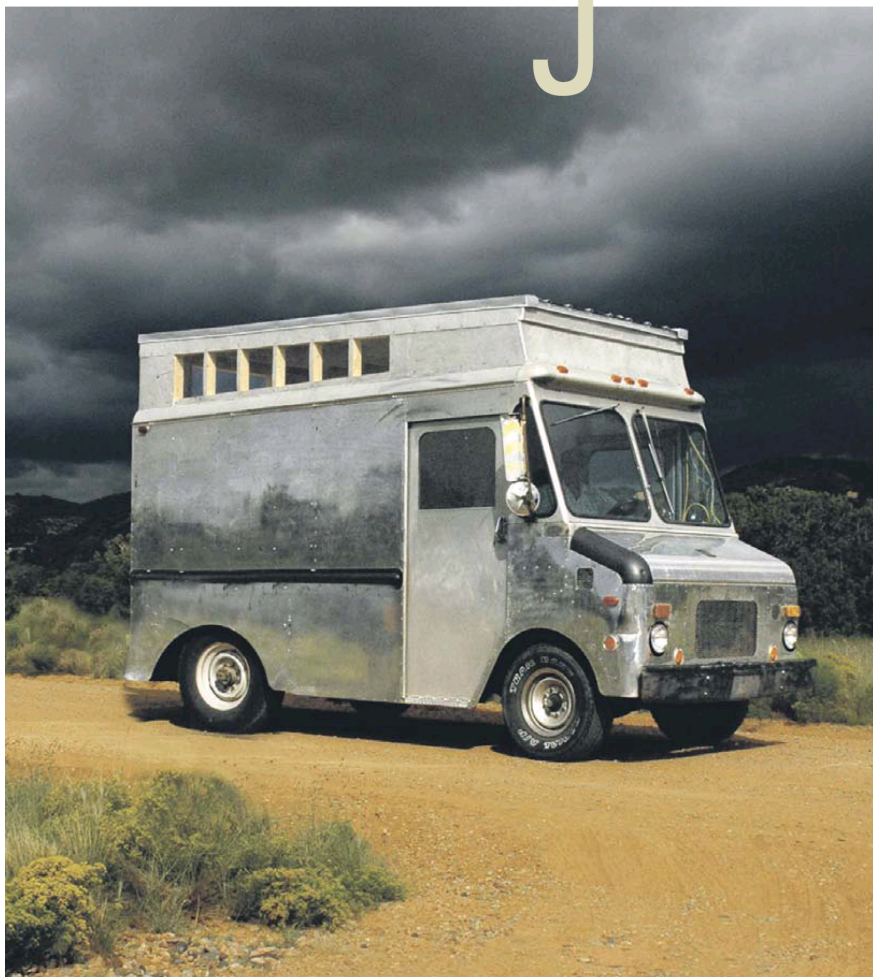
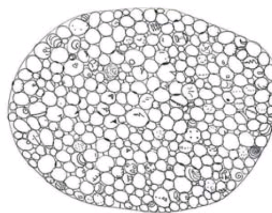


A-van-garde



Curb your aestheticism: Axle Contemporary's mobile gallery (photos by Matthew Chase-Daniel); top right, Chase-Daniel: *Devil's Claw Series #15*, 2010, India ink on paper; right, Jerry Wellman: *Transmission: Foam*, 2010, inkjet print, 20 x 30 inches



"We like to think of this project as a fluid archetype of Hermes, a fleet-footed messenger who presides over trade and merchants while watching over the crossroads," Jerry Wellman told *Pasatiempo* by phone in early September. That's an interesting description for a 40-year-old aluminum-shelled step van that gets about 14 miles to the gallon. But Wellman and project partner Matthew Chase-Daniel look beyond the mechanical limitations of this roving workhorse and find a strong justification for keeping its pistons pumping long into the future.

On Friday, Sept. 10, Axle Contemporary — the pair's mobile gallery — rolls off the drawing board and onto the streets of Santa Fe for its inaugural exhibit. *Transmissions*, as this show is aptly named, includes works on paper by Chase-Daniel, Wellman, Paula Castillo, and Eliza Naranjo Morse.

Artist, filmmaker, and self-described "enthusiasticator" Wellman received his bachelor's degree in fine arts from New Mexico State University, and after building and selling an international hand-painted-tile business and serving as curator of the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art, he returned to New Mexico in the mid 1980s. Massachusetts-born artist Chase-Daniel moved to New Mexico from Paris (where he served as an artist in residence at the Musée Adzak) in 1989. He has exhibited locally at Plan B/Center for Contemporary Arts and Evo Gallery and is represented by Victoria Price Art and Design.

Axle Contemporary emerged from a vision of the two artists, fueled, as it were, by a shared curiosity about the relationship between artists and their studios. At the crossroads of commerce and creativity, they wanted to broaden artists' potential for exposure in Santa Fe and, eventually, throughout the entire state. "Everything regarding Axle has come about in a synchronous fashion," Chase-Daniel said. "The van is a space to exhibit, but it's also a work of art. It suggests ideas and myths about the bureaucracy of art while opening up new avenues to collaborate with galleries and give established and emerging artists a new forum for expression." And all of the work is for sale on the premises — by cash, check, and credit card. Axle will eventually have an online showroom and purchase site as well.

"Some of the artists we are working with are showing in other galleries," Wellman said. "We're determined to show work that wouldn't normally be shown in those spaces. The van is a platform for experimentation."

Axle Contemporary's Sept. 10 opening is synchronized with the opening reception for Castillo's exhibit of welded-steel sculptures at William Siegal Gallery in the Railyard (540 S. Guadalupe St., 820-3300). The mobile gallery will be near William Siegal, Wellman said, "possibly parked near the entrance or around the corner." The van is licensed by the city of Santa Fe as a mobile vendor vehicle

and fits snugly at metered curbside parking. The van will roam the city after the opening reception; to keep in touch with Axle Contemporary's location and to find out about upcoming events and exhibitions, see the gallery's website (www.axleart.com) or its Facebook or Twitter page.

The mobile gallery will look at home among the contemporary architectural aesthetics of the Railyard. The step van's shiny metal exterior, with its raised roof and exposed beams, hints at a taco truck (a source of inspiration for the artists) with an Airstream-trailer makeover. Its 18-foot length and 7.5-foot height encase approximately 60 square feet of exhibition space. It fits three adults comfortably, and plans are in the works to expand the gallery beyond the interior. In addition to hung exhibits, "we plan on mounting around two installation exhibits per year," Chase-Daniel said. "That will allow us to utilize the outside of the van and, when it's possible, to attach a removable portale or awning to the passenger-side roof."

Chase-Daniel and Wellman devised a clever system for exhibiting two-dimensional artwork in the small space. The walls of the van's hull section are lined with paint mixed with metal filings, which allows unframed work to be hung with magnets. A built-in flat-file cabinet above the driver's seat contains horizontal racks that house zippered portfolios, which can hold multiple works as large as 25-by-30 inches. A 14-foot-long, 12-inch-deep bookshelf and a drop-leaf table add additional exhibition real estate.

Every gallery space has a back story, and Axle Contemporary's is fitting for a city still trying to strike a balance between architectural innovation and historical-design tradition. Chase-Daniel and Wellman initially set their sights on a 25-foot-long International Harvester flatbed truck; for practical reasons (parking, navigating Santa Fe's narrow streets) they scrapped the idea and did what any sensible, budding mobile-gallery owners would do. They went to Craigslist. And they found "the one." It has a name, but they're keeping that to themselves out of respect for the previous owners.

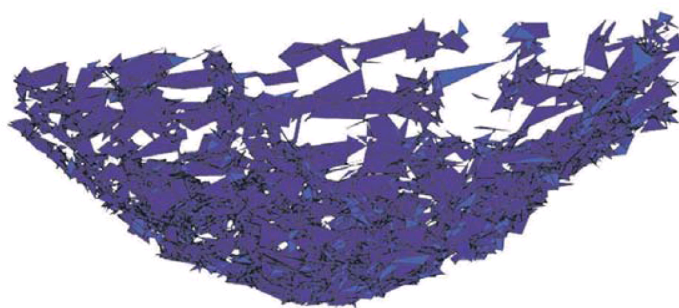
"That van was well used," Wellman said. "We love it, and we have to arm wrestle sometimes to determine who gets to drive." The pair bought the van from a Colorado Springs man whose son used it for a telephone repair business. Handyman Dave Hodges, an ex-Air Force investigator who reportedly handled security detail for various appearances by three U.S. presidents, previously owned the vehicle. (Hodges was also a successful Elvis impersonator who appeared on the television show *Magnum P.I.* while stationed in Hawaii.) And, in a fitting nod to commerce — although Hermes might scratch his head — the van was used to deliver Hostess Twinkies in the 1970s.

The mission of Axle Contemporary goes beyond its current role as a roving art space. While Wellman and Chase-Daniel are dedicated to presenting serious and engaging work by established and emerging artists, they see an opportunity to expand the van's role to include educational and outreach opportunities for communities with limited exposure to art. Axle holds the potential to shift ownership of art back to the streets — to the people, according to Chase-Daniel. Much like San Francisco's mobile ArtVan SF (www.artvansf.com), but with much less intended subversion, Axle aims to empower people to find creative solutions to their problems. The van is Wellman and Chase-Daniel's gas-powered embodiment of that hope. They would like to see Axle rolling up to hospitals, high schools, colleges, senior centers, and rural communities throughout New Mexico — not only to expose people to art, but to bring the artwork found in these destinations back to Santa Fe for the purposes of hands-on cultural exchange. They've also looked into the possibility of adding on-board art activities to their roaming repertoire. In other words, they'd like to make the transmission of art a wide and accessible two-way street.

"We may have to find some form of sponsorship to make that happen," Wellman said. "We have no plans to make this a nonprofit project. It is a full-fledged business, but the model is certainly



Interior of Axle Contemporary; below, Paula Castillo: *World on the Surface of It*, inkjet print, 15 x 31 inches



unique." Interest and support are already coming in from local businesses, and the two are talking about forthcoming exhibits with architects, video artists, and Hispanic and Native artists who create traditional-looking work using nontraditional means.

It isn't lost on Chase-Daniel and Wellman that exposure and forming strong connections with the general public are key to survival, especially when most people are used to eating meals and viewing artwork in a venue that doesn't require an oil change every 3,000 miles. ◀

details

- ▼ *Transmissions*, works on paper by Paula Castillo, Matthew Chase-Daniel, Eliza Naranjo Morse, and Jerry Wellman
- ▼ Opens 4 p.m. till dark Friday, Sept. 10; exhibit through Oct. 15 at various Santa Fe locations
- ▼ Axle Contemporary, initially parked outside William Siegal Gallery, 540 S. Guadalupe St.; for other locations see www.axleart.com, www.facebook.com/axlecontemporary, or www.twitter.com/axleart, or call 670-7012 or 670-5854