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The Roving Art Piece: Axle Contemporary, Itinerant Gallery

An Interview with Matthew Chase-Daniel and Jerry Wellman by Melanie McWhorter

Axle Contemporary is a mobile exhibition space that was founded in 2010 by artists Jerry Wellman and Matthew Chase-Daniel. The exhibition space was formally a Hostess Twinkie delivery van and the choice of transportation for an Elvis impersonator and now Chase-Daniel and Wellman have outfitted this 1970s aluminum stepvan with a 10 × 6 foot interior hanging space for the purpose of exhibition and sale of works of two- and three-dimensional art. So far, the van has graced the streets of Santa Fe and a few of the local towns with its presence and, in a very short time, has gained much attention because of its shiny exterior, the quality of work and the novelty of idea. In this interview, Wellman and Chase-Daniel answer a few questions about their new venture for Finite Foto. For more info about Axle Contemporary or the artists they represent, visit their website.



Axle Contemporary van photographed by Matthew Chase-Daniel

**Melanie McWhorter:** How did you choose the artists whom you have shown? Are you representing their work as traditional gallery would do?

**Axle Contemporary:** Our shows are for the most part thematically driven. The first show was largely realized through the coincidental abstract working experiments in ink that we had both been exploring independently, unknown to each other. We titled the show *Transmissions*, in part due to the working methods we shared. The works were unexpected and to a large degree unedited transmissions directed and resolved through the process of putting ink on paper.

Choosing the artists comes about in different ways. Some are people we know whose work we think could work in our space. Others are artists whose work we appreciate, but don't know personally. We track them down and ask them if they'd be

interested. Others have been recommended to us. Still others have approached us, either in person or through our website. Representation varies: Some work we keep in our flatfile over a long period of time, other comes and goes for an exhibition. Some of the artists we exhibit are represented by other galleries. In these cases we always hope to sell the work from our exhibit and also to recommend that our clients visit the other gallery to get a deeper experience of that artist's work. We are not representing artists in a traditional manner. We do not require exclusivity, nor do we require any stylistic adherence from the artist. We respect a creative and experimental approach to art making and the diverse directions that may take. In fact we encourage it.



*Winter* by Meridel Rubenstein from the exhibition *Evocations of Reverence*

**MM:** Like most galleries, when artists become aware of your existence which has happened in the short time since your founding, they want to have their work shown. Do you take submissions for the Axle Contemporary exhibitions?

**AC:** We have an email link on our website where we accept submissions via emailed jpgs or weblinks. We look at all work. When we view an artist's work we may see it as having potential for a show we have already begun to curate. On the other hand, the work may suggest to us a show we had only vaguely thought of, if at all. It is beginning to look like we need several more months in a year to accommodate all our ideas. We try to mix it up with established artists and emerging artists together. We think that works for everybody. All work is by New Mexico-based artists, 22" x 30" or less, and able to be hung unframed with magnets on our walls.



*Alhambra 1* by Matthew Chase-Daniel from upcoming exhibition *Reprocessed: Photographs in the Physical World*



*Morning Procession* by Marion Wasserman from exhibition *Moving Stills*

**MM:** What was the motivation for the itinerant gallery? Were you inspired by another project?

**AC:** Matthew had his eyes on a classic 2-ton flatbed with a bonnet hood. Jerry had a little travel trailer, sitting idle in his driveway. We got to talking about creating a mobile gallery, and instead of moving onto more conventional pursuits we stuck with this unusual idea and made it happen. A little online shopping and a beautiful all aluminum stepvan put out her siren call and we found her difficult to resist.

Along the way we were inspired by taco trucks, enchilada carts and rag merchants, hippie school bus conversions from the 1970s, Haitian taptap buses, Snap-on tool vendors, and more. We wanted it to be remarkable looking without being funky; Curious on the outside, elegant on the inside; small, yet spacious and airy, Mad Max meets Leo Castelli.

**MM:** Why not look for a more traditional location? What do you see as the major benefits and drawbacks for your traveling "white cube"?

**AC:** We weren't looking to run a gallery, but rather interested in creating a work of art. It just happens to have taken form as a commercial gallery. So a traditional location was never even considered. Axle Contemporary is a gallery, but it's also a work of performance art, a happening, an art installation, or a kinetic sculpture. The mobility allows us to bring art to people who wouldn't venture into a traditional gallery. No one feels compelled to stay for more than a couple of minutes. We have 2 doors so it's easy to get in and easy to get out. People can feel intimidated by a big fancy space. We also have a flexibility that

allows us to participate easily in different contexts. In the three months since we've opened, we've taken the gallery to a youth music and art festival in Espanola, high schools in Santa Fe, an environmental awareness workshop, and a Dia de los Muertos parade in Albuquerque. For that we need only a few hours and gas money. Both a benefit and a drawback to our mobile gallery is that we don't have power steering or an automatic transmission. The benefit is an occasional burst of exercise, the drawback that we arrive at work perspiring in the summertime. We are also the only gallery in Santa Fe that needs to change the oil every 3,000 miles and make sure our tires are properly inflated.

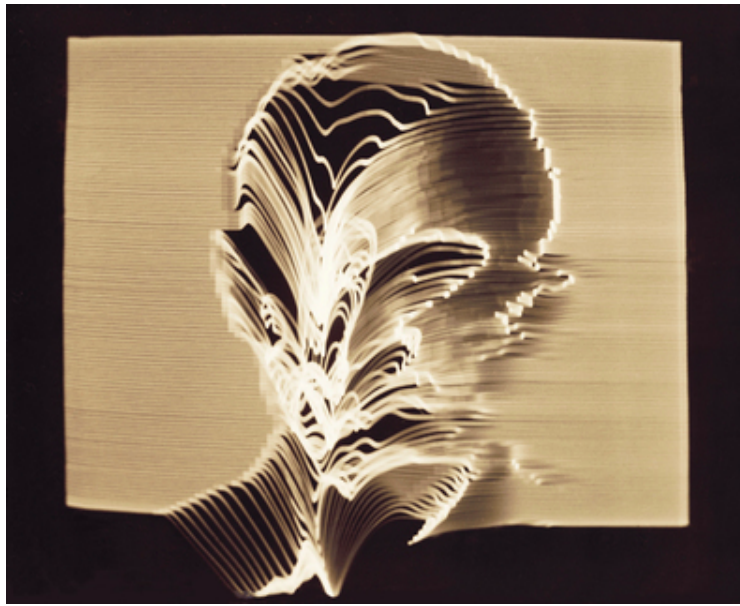
**MM:** Axle Contemporary's hanging system, where work is presented without a frame and simply mounted to the wall with magnets, is unusual for a gallery space where most pieces are presented as finished works, although not always sold that way. How do most people react to the unframed works?

**AC:** We've received a mixed response from viewers, but the artists all appreciate not being faced with expensive framing costs. We try wherever possible to create a situation that works well for the artists. Also, there is an immediacy to unframed work on paper. That rich color is right in front of your nose so you can almost taste it. We prefer to hang work unframed for this reason. Part of our job is to push traditional boundaries and educate people, so we see it as a worthwhile challenge to show all the work this way. We also have relationships with great framers here in Santa Fe. We can easily arrange to have any work framed and shipped.



*Understory Shadows* by Susanna Carlisle from exhibition *Moving Stills*





*Daniel Back* by Woody Vasulka from exhibition *Moving Stills*

**MM:** Do you envision Axle Contemporary being part of a much larger project on art education? What would that project(s) be?

**AC:** We created Axle Contemporary as an art project in itself. We want to promote a new approach to exhibiting art and to provide an example of creative problem solving. Our belief is that through our existence and interaction with the community, and through the outreach projects we undertake, we can inspire others to realize their own potential. There are so many wonderful ways to enhance one's expression and we love to help encourage that.

We support our outreach programs (to schools, youth groups, environmental organizations, etc.) through the sale of compelling works of art, both in the mobile gallery and online at [axleart.com](http://axleart.com).

**MM:** Not that you want to publicize if you are not, but how legitimate is the van as a business? Have you had any issues with parking the van in a certain location, do you always have permission to park or do you use guerilla tactics of park until asked to move?

**AC:** We are fully licensed and insured, and conform to all local, state, and federal laws. We are committed to working with a wide community of governmental, non-profit and commercial organizations. Flaunting the law wouldn't serve our interests. We have been received with great enthusiasm by our community and feel that our success is only possible as a reflection of Santa Fe's willingness to embrace change and innovation in the way we all see the world. The only issue about parking is to make sure we have enough quarters on hand.

**MM:** I imagine the mobility allows for a lot of freedom? How are you establishing your schedule? How many days are week are you showing and is Twitter or Facebook the only location to find the schedule?

**AC:** At first we thought we'd be open for three days a week, but because of our enthusiasm and notoriety this autumn, we've been open almost every day. Now that the weather is cooling down, we will be open a bit less than we have been. This winter we will house several exhibitions of installation art, where an artist will construct work in or on the gallery and we will leave it out for people to experience.

It is all quite flexible and variable, and depends on weather, whims, and other work. Our hours and location are always on both Facebook and Twitter and also on our website's homepage ([axleart.com](http://axleart.com)). We also have developed the website now so that all the work we show is also available to view and purchase online anytime.



Axle Contemporary van photographed by Matthew Chase-Daniel

Finite Foto is a new media collective that investigates and promotes the intersection of photography and culture in the state of New Mexico. We are dedicated to bringing awareness to the global art community about both historical and contemporary photography from all regions of the state.

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