

# THE CRITICAL STATE OF VISUAL ART IN NEW YORK Reviewny.com

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## Steve Mumford

Paintings

Postmasters Gallery through June 17

By Joel Silverstein

**I**t should be stated at the outset that Steve Mumford is an artist/critic who has written for this august publication. Declarations and disclosures aside, I am now free to discuss his current exhibition. Mumford is an accomplished and knowing writer about art and his intellectual predilections inform his work. In the past few years he exhibited with Tricia Collins' Grand Salon. These works were very specific and fine-tuned; cross-sections of cars in extreme close-up. Sometimes they were piled on top of each other, or highlighted in museum-like silhouette. In smaller paintings, details like the metal scrim of the make and model signatures were isolated and cropped. Initially Mumford's enterprise began showing the mark of the brush at play in opposition to the photographic imagery. Imagine Manet and David Park painting a car together.

But eventually over the course of two or three exhibitions the cars became more iconic, Pop arty and smoothed out to the point of glassiness. The artist even curated an exhibition at La MaMa Gallery about American landscape in the age after Warhol where his own work figured prominently. These paintings did seem to owe Warhol a great deal, at least intellectually. They were polished, neutralized and off register participating in the landscape of ideas that Warhol helped to create. The thing was, I felt there was another artist, the idiosyncratic Steve Mumford with the kooky little brush marks that was being suppressed.

The current exhibition at postmasters is a welcome revelation. Mumford has totally switched formats and he has found a way to place his cars within a wider expansive landscape, one where both his painterly and intellectual pursuits can commingle and grow. Long a fan of museum dioramas and paintings of J. Perry Wilson, a prominent artist during the 20s and 30s at the Museum of Natural History, Mumford has landed squarely into what can be called Postmodern history painting. The term Postmodern is often bandied about, meaning many things to many people. The kind of work to which I am referring has a specific line of development practiced by Mark Tansey, Alexis Rockman, Mark Innerst and Julie Heffernan among others, from the early-to-mid 1980s until the present. A Nineteenth Century space is set up using the flourish and bravado of the sublime as it relates to traditional landscape, but is caught within quotations or swathed in irony. Sections of the painting, or even the entire image is lifted from high art sources and masterworks, like Rockman's use of Frederick Church's *Heart of the Andes, 1859*, for his own work, *Evolution, 1986*. Elsewhere documentary sources, archival photographs or illustrations are transformed by interpretive context. Tansey's use of *National Geographic*