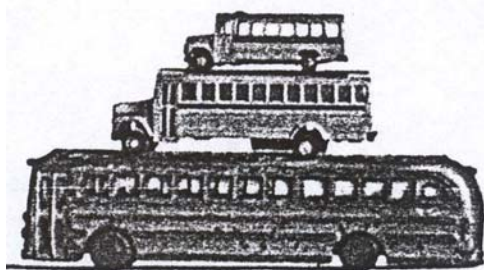
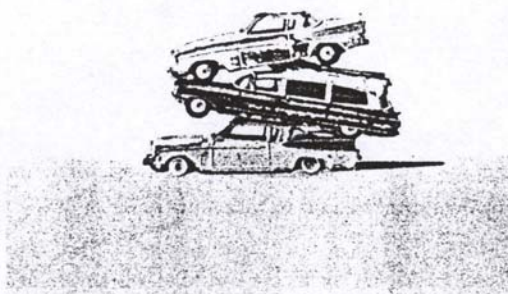


JEREMY DICKINSON
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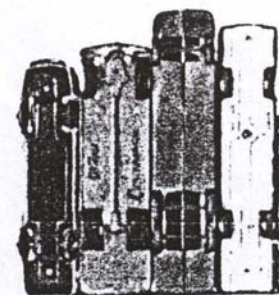
JEREMY DICKINSON; ANGLES • SANTA MONICA, CALIFORNIA



Jeremy Dickinson, SCHOOLBUSES 1



Jeremy Dickinson, JUNKYARD STACK NO 5



Jeremy Dickinson, BUS CHAS

When I was a boy, I owned a fleet of cars and trucks. I had sporty coupes, station wagons, sedans, dump trucks, cement mixers, a couple of buses, and some ambulances. None of these vehicles used gasoline. In fact, they had no engines. They were Matchbox and Hot Wheels cars, fueled by my imagination which powered these miniature vehicles across my bedroom floor to make-believe city streets, country roads, highways, and construction sites.

On real streets, the real cars and trucks fascinated me, but they were big, so they also scared me. In the safety of my bedroom, my little replicas helped me create a scaled-down world that I could control. I played with them for hours. While looking at Jeremy Dickinson's show, I wondered if my Hot Wheels and Matchbox collection was still in my parents' basement where I had last seen it many years ago. Dickinson knows where his toy cars are: in his studio serving as models for his paintings.

The vast majority of works in the exhibition were small canvases (no larger than 16" x 22") depicting the fleet of cars, trucks, and buses that Dickinson amassed as a child and has since added to as an adult. SCHOOLBUSES 1 is typical of these paintings. Three buses stacked one atop the other rest in the middle of an off-white horizontal field. The stack casts a small shadow to

its left. Dickinson shows all the buses' minute details, including the chipped paint that, if he was like me as a boy, resulted from numerous traffic accidents staged in his room.

This careful observation underscores Dickinson's clinical approach to his subjects. In *SCHOOLBUSES 1* and other paintings, he presents the vehicles in profile in an empty, antiseptically white space. All that varies from one of these paintings to another is the shape and color of the vehicles depicted. The artist seems to ask us to examine his toys and note their physical similarities and differences, like lepidopterists comparing the shapes and colors of butterflies pinned to paper. However, my examination quickly expanded beyond an inventory of visible characteristics to an evaluation of personalities. Recalling the victories of buses in the bedroom smash-up derbies of my childhood, I saw not only yellow rectangles on black wheels when I looked at *SCHOOLBUSES 1*, but I also recognized ferocious machines hungry for cars to run over.

I suspect many people who owned Matchbox and Hot Wheels cars as kids also projected personality traits onto their toys and therefore might react like I did to *SCHOOLBUSES 1*. Or other Dickinson paintings might stir up their childhood memories. For example, someone whose ambulance was the fastest car in his collection might feel a bit of pity looking at *JUNKYARD STACK NO 5*. To that viewer, the painting's run-down ambulance piled between two jalopies might seem a down-on-its-luck has-been, desperate to recapture its past glory.

Dickinson himself probably assigned personalities to his toy cars as a boy. But he has elected not to convey any of those characteristics in his works. By staying detached from his subjects, Dickinson allows viewers to conjure up their own stories for each work. Moreover, in some paintings, simple formal devices invite viewers to create plots for the images. In *JUNKYARD STACK NO 5* and other works, an unmodulated, gray ground forms a horizon with a blank, off-white sky. The bright light and the shadow cast by the pile indicate that this empty space is a stage upon which something is about to happen. It is left up to the viewer to deduce the nature of the upcoming event.

In *SCHOOLBUSES*, something dramatic has already happened: a bus has been turned upside down. But we can only see the rear third of it; the artist has cropped out the other part, thereby prompting us to wonder how the bus ended up in that position. The name of this painting, generic like most of Dickinson's other titles, offers no help. We are looking at a make-believe world, and we have to tap into our own imaginations to make any sense of it.

As if to remind viewers that his cars, trucks, and buses are not road-worthy vehicles but instead are toys designed for kids' imaginations, Dickinson included in the exhibition paintings such as *BUS CHASSIS* and *MB1-75 (TAXI CAB #1)*. In these works the artist seems to have stood his vehicles on their tail ends in order to show their undercarriages. Unlike real cabs and buses, these toys have no mufflers, gas tanks, or steering systems. Their undersides consist at most of two axles, a metal plate bearing the embossed name of the toy's manufacturer, and a painted "J" for Jeremy. Like Toto pulling back the curtain at the end of *The Wizard of Oz*, Dickinson has lifted up his cars to reveal that they are only illusions.

How viewers respond to Jeremy Dickinson's paintings depends upon how much they revelled in the illusions of Matchbox, Hot Wheels or similar toy cars when they were young. I saw this show with both a male friend who had many toy cars as a kid and with my wife who had none. My wife admired Dickinson's technical ability but eventually opted to sit in our real Toyota while my friend and I stayed and talked at length about the paintings.

I understood my wife's tepid response when I viewed Dickinson's paintings of real shipping containers in an adjoining gallery. These works are about the same size as the car/truck/bus paintings, and in each a single container sits in the middle of a blank, off-white field. For a few moments, these paintings held my attention as I marveled at the idea of making 10-inch paintings of 20-foot-long subjects. But these containers are not toys, and I have no history with them. I quickly walked back into the other gallery and returned in my mind to the make-believe streets on my boyhood bedroom floor.

John Judge
Chicago, Illinois
1998