

DeLorean:
Progress Report

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exhibition by Sean Lynch

Kevin Kavanagh Gallery, Dublin

7 -29 January 2010

Nine colour photographs, each 59.7 x 44.5cm

Four colour photographs, each 122 x 91.5cm

Three stainless steel body panels of a DMC-12 car, each handmade

Section of a wooden template used to construct a DMC-12 door panel

John DeLorean was arrested on 19 October, 1982 for alleged possession of \$16 million dollars of cocaine at the Sheraton Le Reina hotel close to Los Angeles airport. While cleared of all charges by 1984 after DeLorean was judged a victim of FBI entrapment, the incident meant the effective end of his fledgling sportscar factory in Dunmurry, outside Belfast. With substantial financial investment from the British Government, and individuals such as Sammy Davis Jr. and Johnny Carson, DeLorean had designed a new car, built a factory and employed over 2600 workers, producing the DMC-12 model. Technical flaws during car production, poor sales in the United States and an upcoming criminal trial all contributed to bankruptcy and closure of the factory after less than two years of operation. Despite such obstacles, the car was considered valuable for its unusual design incorporating gull wing doors and a stainless steel body, later becoming a popular icon of the 1980s, functioning as a time machine in the movie *Back To The Future*. Today, many enthusiasts worldwide maintain and drive the vehicle.

The incidents and events around DeLorean's enterprise and demise attracted an amount of media attention and were well known. He appeared in magazines such as *Playboy*, *Time* and *People*, frequently portrayed as the maverick entrepreneur. Of many publications about his life and business, one might note that *The Sunday Times* published a book for its readers containing the entire FBI surveillance transcripts of his cocaine entrapment. Cinema Verité director D.A. Pennebaker's 1981 documentary film *DeLorean* detailed moments from the boardroom to the factory floor. DeLorean died in 2005, and recently it was announced that an upcoming movie based on his life was to be produced, 'It's almost like an updated *Citizen Kane* story of the great American entrepreneurial hero and how it all went wrong.'¹

To further an understanding of this legacy, research was undertaken on rumours regarding the last chapter of DeLorean's venture. I took a particular interest in understanding how the actual production of the car

wound down. As per usual with bankruptcy, a public auction took place in Dunmurry in May 1984 where the entire inventory of the factory was sold off. Much of this material was exported to the United States. Läßple, a subsidiary company in Carlow, were responsible for making the stainless steel panels that form the exterior body of the car, before transporting them to Dunmurry for final assembly.² They decided to recover some of their losses as a result of DeLorean's bankruptcy, and sold all the tools and panels that were used in their contracted work. Scrap dealers arrived with trucks in Carlow and cleared away a two-acre site full of stainless steel panels and massive sections of cast iron tooling, which were used to stamp out the panels for the car and essentially functioned as the shape givers to the DMC-12.³

After numerous phonecalls and visits to scrap dealers throughout the island, I was surprised that despite the volume of material their businesses deal with, many remembered the DeLorean material. Large metal sections, some weighing up to twenty-five tonnes, passed through their yards. They in turn exported the metal to furnaces around Europe, where it was melted down and recycled, to begin use in another place or circumstance, as another structure or function. I encountered an unverified rumour claiming some body panels were reused in the Carlow area to construct pig troughs on a local farm. At Galway Metal in Oranmore I saw a large door on a workshop, constructed from stainless steel sheets once destined to become part of a DeLorean. At Haulbowline Industries, a scrap yard outside Cork City, I heard that twelve large pieces of the tooling were purchased by a company called Emerald Fisheries, who took them by boat to Kilkieran Bay in County Galway sometime in 1984. There, in an inlet off the Atlantic Ocean, they sunk the tooling to the bottom of the seabed, using them as anchors to hold in place fish cages for salmon farming.⁴

A series of photographs produced in 2009 document sites involved in this chain of handling. These images detail the contemporary condition

of factories once involved in the production and assembly of the car in Carlow and Belfast, sites of scrapyards that collected and handled the leftover material, and the boat and fish farm that transported and adopted the remaining metal tooling into anchors at the bottom of the sea. The order of the images and accompanying captions seek and suggest evidence of a DeLorean heritage in these places. In this sense, the proverbial 'needle in the haystack' is an appropriate consideration; when viewing the photographs it becomes apparent each site has since been shaped by other, more dominant economic realities. These changes have eroded any obvious DeLorean association. Both portrayed factories now have a different function, yet their austere facades reveal little in regards to what might be produced there, a scrap yard in Dublin's docklands is now a building site, and a fish farm lies fallow as a result of European Union regulations that have stifled growth in the industry. As a result, the sequence itself acts as a provisional model, an attempt to represent an interlinked economy long disappeared.

Work in the future could continue to document and articulate more places and objects that are linked to this industrial saga. For example, it might be useful to visit the location of metal recycling plants or steel mills operational in the 1980s throughout Europe, with DeLorean in mind. It might also be relevant to consider other tangents that might be evoked by each photograph. When looking at an image of Rogerson's Quay in Dublin, former site of the Hammond Lane scrap yard, one might wonder whether its owners, the music band U2, will ever have the opportunity to build their proposed skyscraper at the location; their scheme might fade away as easily as the history of DeLorean on the site. The Severn Princess, the boat that dropped the tooling into the Atlantic, once functioned as a ferry across the Severn. A web of context here could include Bob Dylan. He was photographed in the rain, with his sunglasses on, waiting for the Princess to arrive and take him across the river from England to Wales in May 1966.⁵ Through understanding what one 'wants' in an image, these seemingly accessible anecdotes might be the histories

of most relevance when looking at images of the Severn Princess or Rogerson's Quay. This openness to overtures of historical moment suggest a kind of futility in the process of arriving at these scenes too late, trying to find out what might have once occurred there. It asserts that any construction of history is a flexible form, nothing more than a guessing game about places and events.

Layers of time and circumstance are more visually apparent in a collection of photographs that detail the current location of the DeLorean tooling. A series of reconnaissance dives were performed around the Kilkieran Bay in July 2009. Of a reported twelve presses, three can still be seen above the surface of the seabed. These structures weigh between four and six tonnes, and are situated at distances of eighteen and twenty two metres beneath the water's surface. Seaweed, crabs, starfish and a lobster all inhabit the area in and around the tooling.⁶ The photographs of this underwater scene, taken by industrial deep sea divers, hold visual puns of sorts. In considering these discarded objects, taken from one scenario and made useful and meaningful in another, occasional shapes appear that seem somewhat similar to the shape of the DMC-12, but now with crustaceans as the passengers. They appear inside cavities and underneath the straight lines of the tooling profiles.⁷ As a hybrid between industry and environment, these images might be considered an evocation of the picturesque: a place of nature shaped by the action of man.⁸

The chase and study of the relative materiality of the past and its image today can often result in unusual or somewhat absurd situations. An initial plan at the outset of this search was to find and recover the tooling, and create one more DeLorean car from their shapes. Some negotiations, a barge with a crane, and a day's work would pull the tooling to the surface. But at what cost? A lobster's home and ecosystem is destroyed in the process, along with the burden of investing into and re-activating the entire chain of handling and economy. Rather than shaping such a revival, the tooling might be left there, as a premature ruin of a manufacturing process

that was ultimately never concluded, but never completely eliminated either. Here, a makeshift proposal to work in the shadows of this history might be of worth, rather than unscrambling all that has already occurred. In Enniscorthy, County Wexford, Neil McKenzie recently moved into a vacant industrial unit at the edge of the town. Using traditional handforming metalwork techniques, he has set about making a wooden mould in the shape of a DeLorean car and forming out of stainless steel grade 304 a bootleg version of the exterior body panels. Crimping, wheeling, welding and hammering out the shapes, his work has been labour intensive, producing by hand what was once made through industrial means by the tooling now in Kilkieran Bay. This transposition points towards a kind of contingency in putting elements of this history to work, literally, in a speculative form. Will this version of the DMC-12 be entirely remade? How can art 're-enact' an entrepreneurial act such as DeLorean's? And what forms of objecthood can be established through the transmission of historical and economic knowledge?

In the coming year, further investigations into associated sites of production and dissemination in regards to this history will occur, along with the continued fabrication of the car's exterior panels. This document will be revised accordingly, as further information, circumstance and points of view come to light.

Sean Lynch

Footnotes

1 *Variety Magazine*, 8 June 2009.

2 It is worth noting the ethos behind using stainless steel. The American automobile industry, of which DeLorean had been a part of during a long tenure with General Motors, had long been accused of “planned obsolescence.” This effectively meant that each car was designed to be replaced in a few years with a newer model. An idea to produce a car with a material that would never rust meant, in DeLorean's eyes, the DMC-12 could last forever.

3 While official records are now lost, thirty to forty dies were sold as scrap for around £80-90,000. At the British Steel Corporation plant in Sheffield, an estimated 3,000 tonnes of material was melted down. Source: former Läßple employee Michael O'Leary in an unpublished interview with John Dore, 2008.

4 Kilkieran Bay, located north of Galway Bay, has a large area of open water, many islands and rocky inlets. It has pristine waters, deeper than average water depths and protection from prevailing winds and currents. Emerald Fisheries set up several fish farms in the area in the 1980s, and imported from Japan a new kind of fish farm structure called the Bridgestone Cage. These cages are seven-sided, 50 metres across and could accommodate up to 100,000 fish in relatively low stocking densities. They required a heavy anchoring system to keep them in place.

5 Dylan was on the start of his controversial 1966 UK tour, when he started playing electrical guitar to the horror of folk music audiences. Martin Scorsese's film *No Direction Home* about Dylan's life used the photograph as its' promotional image. Shortly after he passed through, the Severn Bridge was opened and replaced the ferry service.

6 The rest of the tooling was not visible in July 2009, but remains onsite underneath the seabed. It is likely that winter storms from the Atlantic might expose their surfaces from time to time. Each press has a chain linking it to the fish cage at the surface. Visible tooling has provided shelter and an attachment surface for a variety of plants and animals. A lobster (*Homarus gamarus*) has made his home in a casting cavity. He is nocturnal, and typically seeks a sheltered hideout as a permanent home. Similarly, many common edible crabs (*Cancer pagurus*) can be seen, along with swimming crabs (*Liocarcinus puber*) and green crabs (*Carcinus*

maenas). Extensive and varied beds of red calcareous algae (known locally as 'coral') are present, along with other forms of seaweed. Sea-cucumber (*Neopentactyla mixta*) is also plentiful. Dives and site synopsis were completed by John & Mark Costello. Further work needs to be completed to identify which body parts were manufactured from the visible tooling (i.e., door panels, front or rear fenders). This is a difficult task with the overgrowth on each press, while Läßle's headquarters in Heilbronn, Germany no longer hold any records related to their work in Carlow for DeLorean.

7 In a precedent to this scene, a television advertisement produced for the car in 1981 featured a DMC-12 beside the ocean. As its gull wing doors opened upwards, the car slowly dissolves into an image of a seagull flying in the sky.

8 This underwater scene does not simply serve as an allegory of the catastrophe and fallout of the DeLorean venture, instead it is unmediated evidence of it. Much heated discussion revolved around the status of the metal tooling. DeLorean claimed they were scrapped as part of continuing opposition from the British Conservative Government of Margaret Thatcher, who opposed continued government funding for his car company in war-torn Northern Ireland. After his acquittal, he wrote: "We have recently learned that when it looked like DMC might come out of bankruptcy and rise from the ashes, the British government ordered the twelve million dollars' worth of body dies destroyed, dies essential for manufacturing the DeLorean motor car... The destruction of tooling of a car out of production less than ten years is against the law in most Western Countries. When the British government instructed the firm holding the DMC body dies to destroy them, the company refused on the basis that such a malicious act violated their country's laws. Our understanding is that only after the British Government supplied them with a letter freeing them from any legal liability did they finally comply... Why is the British government doing this to me?" Source: John Z. DeLorean with Ted Schwarz, *DeLorean*, 1985, p.338. The scrap dealers of Ireland had a different opinion. Michael Byron, a general manager of Hammond Lane Metal Company, said "Anybody could have bought them from us if they had made an offer... They (the dies) were a bloody nuisance," "Good Christ, not at all... I could have started the DeLorean Motor Company here if I was foolish enough," said Paddy Walsh, owner of the Galway Metal Company. Source: *Detroit Free Press*, 20 October 1985.

Image Captions:

1

The Montupet factory, Dunmurry, Belfast

Former location of the DeLorean Motor Company and site of production of the DMC-12 model between 1981-2.

Former site of the Lapple factory, Carlow

Opened in 1974, the company fabricated body parts for cars, including stainless steel sections for the DMC-12's body. Operations terminated here in 2007 due to high labour costs.

2

After bankruptcy of the DeLorean Motor Company, Lapple initiated the disposal of all tooling and body panels used in their contracted work.

Material was dispersed to several scrap yards in 1984.

Galway Metal Company, Oranmore, Galway

Since 1969, scrap metal has been processed onsite and primarily exported. Tooling and panels were most likely sent to Spain or Portugal to be recycled.

Former site of the Hammond Lane Metal Company, Dublin

A scrap yard functioned at Rogerson's Quay between 1980-96, before the company relocated. Material from Lapple was exported to Sheffield and Kent to be melted down.

Haulbowline Industries, Passage West, Cork

Established in 1935 at the Victoria Dry Dock, the company now exports non-ferrous metals and animal feed.

3

The Severn Princess, Chepstow

Operated as a car ferry between 1959-66. The subsequent opening of the Severn Bridge made the boat obsolete and it was later sold to fisherman in the west of Ireland. Sometime in 1984 the boat collected twelve pieces of DeLorean tooling, large metal sections used to stamp out the shape of the car, from Haulbowline Industries in Cork and transported them to Galway. Found wrecked and abandoned, committed preservationists returned the boat to Chepstow in 1999, where it now awaits restoration.

Former site of Emerald Fisheries

A commercial fish farm, operated in Kilkieran Bay, Galway from 1984-2001. The company reused the heavy cast iron, attaching chains and sinking them into the seabed as anchors to hold in place a large fish cage on the surface. The farm can be seen out to sea on the left of the panoramic photograph. It is now abandoned.

4

Of twelve tooling presses present, three remain visible above the surface of the seabed. Two can be found 18 metres below the water surface at 53.29938N & 9.76344W. Another is visible 22 metres to the north at 53.30130N & 9.76483W. The remainder have sunk down into soft mud over the last twenty five years. Gushes into the bay from the Atlantic Ocean have kept silt at a minimum, and an ecosystem has grown around, over and under the metal. Seaweed forms a kind of patina over its surface while several species of crabs and a lobster now reside in various casting cavities and hollow spaces of the tooling.

