

# COLLECTOR DAILY

Adam Bartos @Gitterman

By [Richard B. Woodward](#) / In [Galleries](#) / April 21, 2014

**JTF (just the facts):** A total of 12 large scale color photographs, displayed unmatted in white welded-aluminum frames, and hung against white walls in the foyer and main room of the gallery. All of the works are pigment prints, made in 2011 and 2012. The images are printed with a white border and measure 30×20 without frames, roughly 44×34 with frames. The prints are available in editions of 3.

**Comments/Context:** Adam Bartos likes to photograph things the future has sped past and left by the side of the road. His subjects may once have been products of modernist euphoria, such as the neglected, paint-chipped buildings at the United Nations or the debilitated Russian space program after the fall of communism. Or they may be places that were bypassed by progress or steady flows of money. Real estate speculators could eventually develop the villages and towns he has lately explored along the shores of Long Island, should the Hamptons implode from overbuilding. But that probably won't happen in the lifetimes of anyone living in the ranch homes and fishing shacks in his photographs.

In none of these projects has Bartos fetishized the present or the past. His images aren't designed to trigger waves of nostalgia. Obsolescence is in his eyes a fact as irrefutable as gravity. When he himself became a victim, forced by the digital revolution to rethink his training as an artist, he put together a book about darkrooms of his colleagues that was funny, not lachrymose. The enlargers, chemical bottles, negative holders, electric cords, trays and safety lights were treated with proper respect, as tools for making wonder. But his pictures did not let you forget that these places that may once have been magical are now full of dead, eccentric, outmoded, if still entirely functional, junk. The burial sermon expressed appropriate sympathy but not grief.

In his latest series, he has again photographed a marginalized activity and an antiquated technology: dirt-track racing with super-stock cars on rural New York, Florida, and New Mexico speedways. This is not a popular sport that television networks vie to broadcast. The glamour and thrills are primitive and derive mainly from doing something utterly useless to society and dangerous to oneself.

As is typical with Bartos, we never see the participants. Human presence in most of his photographs is seen indirectly, through objects that have been worn down by handling and normal use. In this case, they're beat up racing cars. His camera uses flash to peer into their interiors—under the hood and down into the well near the pedals—as if performing an operation on a cadaver or probing for evidence at a crime scene. The frames anatomize the machines into

their components. There are images of tires, carburetors, a brake pedal, a thinly padded vinyl seat, a steering wheel, a safety belt, and a numerical insignia.

As abstract as these compositions can be, this is the antithesis of car advertising. Instead of gleaming metal, Bartos shows us grime and dust; instead of sleek shapes, clunky engine blocks; instead of exotic alloys or carbon fiber, we are back in the iron age.

Grays and blacks dominate the palette of these dark pictures. When colors emerge—red on the floorboards, violet on part of the exhaust manifold, blue on a driver’s helmet or tire pressure hose—they’re battered, industrial paint that has been so badly chafed it almost looks delicately hand-applied.

I would like to know what the racers think about what Bartos has done. By focusing so intently on the isolated parts of the cars, not the drivers, and by maintaining such a downbeat, crepuscular mood, he has failed to capture the joy that is the basis for this form of daredevilry. Stock-car racing by amateurs is deeply America. The customized paint jobs that California enthusiasts gave their wheels in the 1950s helped to foster a strain of Pop Art. Tom Wolfe’s 1965 profile in *Esquire* of stock-car champion Junior Johnson, the exuberant former whiskey runner, gave us the phrase “good ol’ boy” and was an early example of New Journalism.

Bartos has followed these trails back to their rural origins while avoiding the anecdotal clichés of photojournalism. Like his mentors Atget and Evans, he photographs without sentimentality how the past has been gradually eroded, destroyed, repaired, and piled up into the jumble of the present. With each project, more than 25 years of them by now, the career of work Bartos is constructing out of time’s ruins appears sturdier. He is one of many artists of his generation who deserves a mid-career retrospective so that we can judge more critically where he stands.

**Collector’s POV:** The prints in this show are priced at \$8500 each. Bartos’ work has only been intermittently available in the secondary markets in recent years, so gallery retail remains the best option for those collectors interested in following up.