

Salvatore Scarpitta (b. 1919, New York City; d. 2007, New York City) was an artist, filmmaker, World War II “monuments man,” and race-car driver and team owner. The Brooklyn-born son of a Sicilian father and Russo-Polish mother, Scarpitta established his artistic reputation in Rome before returning to the United States to join art dealer Leo Castelli’s legendary gallery in 1959. As an artist and racing enthusiast, Scarpitta was inspired by the speed, design, and performance of automobiles. Solo exhibitions include *Salvatore Scarpitta: Traveler*, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C. (2014–15); *Galleria Civica D’Arte Moderna e Contemporanea*, Turin, Italy (2012–13); *Salvatore Scarpitta-Outlaw Art at Racing Speeds*, Art Car Museum, Houston (2001); *Salvatore Scarpitta 1956–1964*, Luxembourg & Dyan (2016); and *Salvatore Scarpitta: Trajectory*, Marianne Boesky Gallery (2011). His work has been featured in numerous group exhibitions including *Piston Head: Artists Engage the Automobile*, Venus Over Manhattan, Miami Beach; *Over, Under, Next: Experiments in Mixed Media, 1913–Present*, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.; and *Destroy the Picture: Painting the Void, 1949–1962*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. Scarpitta’s work is in numerous international private and public collections including the Museum of Modern Art, New York; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.; and Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Moderna, Rome. After graduating from Hollywood High School, Scarpitta studied at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Rome.

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Salvatore Scarpitta: Racing Cars is organized for the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis by Lisa Melandri, Executive Director.

Related Programs

Special Event

DRIVE: 2018 CAM Gala

Saturday, February 24, 6:00 pm

Lisa Melandri on Scarpitta: Total Art

Thursday, March 1, 6:00 pm

Feast Your Eyes: Parigi

Tuesday, March 20, Tour 6:30 pm / Dinner 7:00 pm

Hot Rod + Car Club Meetup

Friday, April 6, 3:00–9:00 pm

Special Event

Art Up Late: Faster

Friday, April 13, 9:00 pm–midnight



Untitled, 1988. India ink and tempera on paper. Private collection.
© Stella Alba Cartaino.

Salvatore Scarpitta Racing Cars



Travis Race Car (Sal Gambler Special), 1985. Race car. Collection of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC, gift of Stella Alba Cartaino and Gregory O’Neill, 2014.

Salvatore Scarpitta: Racing Cars reexamines a seminal figure in postwar American art through his racing-themed artwork, chronicling the artist’s remarkable trajectory from object-maker to performance artist. Salvatore Scarpitta (1919–2007) worked on the fringes of many art movements—from Abstract Expressionism to Pop art—while not fitting into any one, and even bristling at suggestions that he did. With the inclusion of works on paper, collage, sculpture, video, and installation, many from private collections in Italy and never-before seen in the U.S., the exhibition provides a critical reassessment of an American original, a pioneer, risk-taker, innovator, and beloved teacher and mentor to future generations of artists.

Scarpitta led a remarkable life. Born in New York City to immigrant parents, Scarpitta’s formative years were spent in southern California, where his family moved when he was still an infant. As an adolescent he frequented dirt-track racing speedways, where he absorbed his early racing knowledge from such legends as Frank Lockhart, Ernie Triplett, and Wilbur

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Shaw—all future Indianapolis 500 champions. Following high school, Scarpitta traveled to Sicily, his father’s ancestral home, in 1936. He remained in Italy over the next two decades, studying art in Rome and experiencing his first success as an artist.

After the war, Scarpitta became known for his determination to break the boundaries of painting, especially in his series of bandaged canvases, symbolic of the postwar period of recovery and healing in Europe. In 1958, the artist was approached by Leo Castelli and encouraged to return to the U.S. Scarpitta embraced a new freedom in the American arts landscape, and eventually found his way back to his early obsession, race cars.



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American Made

Scarpitta's first explorations into “art” cars were facsimiles of early twentieth-century racing vehicles, and possess a spirit of nostalgia, a determination for exact replication, as well as a passion for the dirt-track—capturing the wonder of a hot powerful machine at rest following grueling laps around the speedway.

Open-wheel dirt-track racing is a distinctly American phenomenon. Scarpitta returned to the States at a time of postwar America's rise as a world power and as an economic and cultural juggernaut. Other Castelli artists, such notable figures as Jasper Johns, Roy Lichtenstein, Claes Oldenburg, Robert Rauschenberg, and Andy Warhol, explored the nation's new-found vigor and vulgarity through their art, both as celebration and as critique. By building race cars as sculptures, Scarpitta claimed the automobile as his own personal subject. It was not only the most treasured American commodity, but the symbol of a new-found freedom of motion, power, and speed that were emblematic of postwar American character.

Scarpitta's cars were made without Pop art ironies, and expressed the artist's particular sense of populism. Dirt-track race cars, as the writer Jeff MacGregor describes them, are “perfectly American, blunt instruments of horsepower and recklessness turning circles in places like Mechanicsburg and Terre Haute and Merced.” Scarpitta would say with pride how “These tracks run straight through the backyards of America.”



Scarpitta in his racing car, New York, 1965. Photo: Hans Namuth. Courtesy Luigi Sansone.

What's in a Name

Scarpitta would pay homage to drivers (Rajo Jack), manufacturers (Cragar and Trevis are makers of tires and car parts), and the action of racing itself (railduster) in the naming of his works. He often added his own name as well, inserting himself literally and metaphorically into his art (*Sal's Red Hauler Special*, *Sal Cragar*, *S.A.L. Haist – Railduster Spl.*). In the collage *Autoritratto con auto da corsa*, Scarpitta created a dreamy self-portrait, including himself in a fantastic historical narrative as a legendary race-car driver—a vision he formed long before he actually takes to the track. In these early racing-themed works, Scarpitta is already beginning to erase delineations between art and life.



Sal's Red Hauler Special, 1966–67. Race car. Collection of Fondazione Alma and Alberto Montrasio, courtesy Montrasio Arte. © Stella Alba Cartaino.



Scarpitta in his studio-garage with the driver Greg O'Neill, Baltimore, 1986. Courtesy Luigi Sansone.

Pop to Performance

“There are racers who like the dirt and there are racers who like the high banks, made out of asphalt or cement,” Scarpitta observed. “It's just like the art world: there are those who run the dirt and there are those who run the high banks. The high banks are cleaner but the dirt is more truthful...”

Scarpitta was an artist deeply concerned about truth, the real. He found those things in material, in dirt, and in metal. He found them in speed and motion. “The dirt is fascinating,” Scarpitta said, “especially if the wet clay is warm enough to become human.” “The heart of racing is dynamism,” MacGregor writes. “Life. Death. Motion. Tension. Sensation.”

As Scarpitta pushed the boundaries of the canvas, so too he pushed the boundaries of the “art” car. By the mid-1980s he was constructing race cars that were fully functional. He assembled a team of mechanics and drivers to race them on the Sprint Cup circuit, with Castelli serving as racing sponsor. Rather than the familiar corporate logos of cigarette or alcohol sponsors, Scarpitta's cars came emblazoned with “Castelli Gallery,” or just the word “Art.” (Scarpitta later acknowledged that the functioning cars deserved the Pop designation—a label he resisted previously—because of these gaudy decals.) All the cars were No. 59, signifying the year Scarpitta returned to the U.S. and joined Castelli.

By building cars and racing them, Scarpitta—always the pioneer, always the innovator—took his practice into the realm of performance, with the objects themselves becoming artifacts of those performances. As with all of his work, Scarpitta pushed to extremes—he would break a painting, so too he would break his cars, wreck them and then remake them. Or he would



Autoritratto con auto da corsa (Auto Collage), 1966. Tempera and collage on cardboard. Courtesy Amy Wolf Fine Art, New York. © Stella Alba Cartaino.

take a car part and recontextualize it as sculpture. His work was modular, one became another, or changed from studio to racetrack to gallery—art on the move to the next transformation. The cars truly were vehicles, both as objects and as metaphors.

Scarpitta merged his art and his life. In so doing, he merged disparate cultures—the Hagerstown speedway and Castelli's Manhattan gallery. He made art in real time—dynamic and dangerous, in motion and at rest. He achieved a total art—one without boundaries.



The driver McKee on the Legion Ascot track, Los Angeles, 1929. Courtesy Luigi Sansone.



Incident at Castelli, 1987. Installation of eight black-and-white photographs, one color photograph, and car scrap. Collection of Claudio Guenzani, Courtesy Studio Guenzani, Milan. Photo © 1987 Joan Bankemper. © Stella Alba Cartaino.