

DUNCAN CAMPBELL MAKE IT NEW JOHN

Review by Sophie Landres
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Stainless steel body panels, aluminum V6 engine, leather interior, and gull-wing doors that lift like an eagle taking flight, the ill-fated DeLorean DMC-12 achieves a mythological presence in *Make it new John*, Duncan Campbell's recent film and corresponding installation at Artists Space. The ascent and ultimate failure of the iconic 1980s sports car is set against Northern Ireland's fight for independence, America's foray into deregulatory policy, and an embroiling global car culture. With all too familiar allusions to corporate corruption, human folly, and social injustice, *Make it new John* portrays the American myth of mobility as a fundamentally Greek tragedy.

While the true story surrounding the DMC-12 needs no dramatic embellishment, Campbell reassembles the narrative around its most prescient details. He deftly navigates between the car's cultural significance, its volatile public reception, and the consequences it had on individual lives.

Detroit-bred and debonair, John DeLorean was an engineering trailblazer who left a lucrative position at General Motors during the 1973 oil crisis, determined to design the car of the future. Enticed by British government grants, he established the DeLorean Motor Company (DMC) outside of Belfast, Northern Ireland, drawing a ready work force from Catholic as well as Protestant neighborhoods. The car and its maker so convincingly embodied boundless freedom and success that the factory's very presence promised to bring a similar temper to the impoverished, disenfranchised, and deeply divided region.

Fortune did not smile on this ambitious venture and by the time production began in 1981,

the DMC had lost what DeLorean portentously referred to as the “illusion of credibility in the marketplace.” Hype quickly metastasized into scandal. Desperately attempting to keep the company afloat, DeLorean made a series of increasingly criminal executive decisions. In October of 1982, he was arrested for trafficking \$24 million worth of cocaine into the United States. Two months later, production stopped on the DMC-12. Only 9,200 cars had rolled off the line.

Make it new John commemorates the labor that goes into product production and in doing so, addresses the calculated effort expended in maintaining a product’s allure. In the front gallery room, DMC letterhead, sales reports, and magazine advertisements sit in vitrines or hang alongside images of legendary Irish Republican activists and replicas of anti-DMC protest signs. Bulletins promoting Northern Ireland as a friendly place to relocate American businesses, for example, juxtapose stoic mug shots of hunger strikers dying in Her Majesty’s Prison Maze. Pitting political slogans against marketing campaigns, the installation presents two contrasting definitions of freedom.

Rather than representing American individualism, meritocracy, and free enterprise, the DeLorean is exposed as an ostentatious distraction from an oppressive social system. Its contradictions do not end there. Ironically, the very features that gave the DMC-12 its futuristic appearance also made it an undesirably slow sports car. Form negating function, the more it was idealized, the more paradoxical it became.

The 51-minute film, *Make it new John* (2009) laces archival stock footage with staged reenactments so that, like the DeLorean’s role as the time machine in *Back to the Future*, Campbell can extend and sometimes confuse the historical narrative. With montages depicting DeLorean’s rags-to-riches biography leading into images from the 1970s oil embargo and interview outtakes alluding to current industry misconduct, the film creates parallels between Detroit and Belfast, Reaganomics and the recent bank and auto bailouts.

The film reaches its climax when DMC workers occupy the factory to protest massive layoffs. “DeLorean Dream Workers Nightmare” reads one of the signs brandished during the sit-in and recreated in the exhibition’s front room installation. Just as the “DeLorean Dream” comes crashing down, Campbell abandons stock footage for an imagined encounter with trade union members, shot on 16mm film. Part pseudo-*cinéma vérité*, part reality television, the scripted dialogue allows Campbell to explore the saga’s deeper questions: Can class solidarity transcend

sectarian violence? Was DeLorean a crook or the victim of an uncompromising system? Does freedom have parameters? One by one, characters leave the scene until the camera is trained on a solitary, elderly worker. Probed by an off-camera interviewer, the worker gruffly expresses his existential uncertainty and resignation to life's disappointments.

In the end, the corrupted dreamer and the hapless laborer are equally at the mercy of an unsympathetic higher power. Through an unforeseen reversal of fortune, they both lose control over their destinies. Exploring the pathos of these two heroic figures establishes what Aristotle described as *hamartia*, the element of human vulnerability that evokes catharsis in a tragedy. Rather than vilifying DeLorean, Campbell casts him in dueling mythological roles. Initially, DeLorean is Daedalus, the brilliant Athenian who engineered wings to escape imprisonment. "As long as we build a quality product," he naively urges, "the sky is the limit." But he is also Icarus, the son of Daedalus, who could not understand that freedom came with caveats and, ignoring his father's heeding, famously flew too high. For John DeLorean, as for Icarus, the sky's limit was closer than he thought.

Displaying fabricated political posters and authentic car-fetish ephemera with a film that strays from historic accuracy, Campbell contrasts the representation of freedom with its very real necessity. Through hindsight and reconstructed memory, he brings us back to an ancient moral that the DMC-12 sped past. Self-determination, independence, and autonomy: those are basic freedoms that DeLorean could not design, not in a car, not for Belfast, not even for himself.

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