



CULTURE

ARTSY RIDER

A new exhibit examines the art of the motorcycle.

BY BARBARA TRAININ BLANK

Rodney Firestone has loved motorcycles ever since he was a child. But it's only recently that he's expanded his vision of them.

They're no longer just a way to get around but are, well, works of art.

Firestone isn't a "formal" collector of motorcycles. At the moment, he has a "mere" six of them. Since his father owned bikes, Firestone started riding them when he was 7 or 8.

"But my real interest began when I was 12, when my older brother asked me to pick up his friend's BSA 441 Victor (British motorcycle), which had gotten a flat tire," Firestone said.

Aside from rescuing a disabled cycle, he reacted in a strong and unexpected way.

"The bike, with its yellow and polished aluminum fuel tank with red letters, mesmerized me," he said.

After returning home from being stationed in Great Britain as a sailor, Firestone bought a Victor 441 of his own.

"Forty-five years and 40-plus motorcycles later, I am still captivated by them," he said.

So captivated that Firestone, president of the former Firestone Motors in Lemoyne, suggested to the Susquehanna Art Museum that it host an exhibit linking motorcycles and fine art.

The museum accepted his suggestion. The result is an exhibit entitled "Art in Balance: Motorcycles and Fine Art," which opens this month.



Bill Scott, *Cherry Tree (detail)*, 2011, oil on canvas, on loan courtesy of the Woodmere Art Museum

So, how did Firestone come to see bikes as art?

It was by attending "The Art of the Motorcycle" exhibit at New York's Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in 1998—an exhibition that, according to SAM Executive Director Alice Anne Schwab, went down in museum lore because of the huge crowds it drew and its resulting profitability.

It also inspired Firestone—and the current exhibit.

"Ever since then, I've wanted to help others see scooters as more than a mode of transportation," Firestone said. "I see motorcycle design as both artistic and functional."

The Guggenheim exhibit featured 114 motorcycles known for their historic importance or design excellence. The SAM exhibit will be on a smaller scale.

The cycles to be featured include the Indian 1946 Chief (USA); Honda 1962 "Baby Dream" CA95 (Japan); Ducati 1969 Mark III Desmo 350 (Italy); Harley-Davidson XLCR 1997 "Café Racer" (USA); Yamaha 1994 RD350 "Kenny Roberts Special" (Japan); and BSA 2000 Gold SR (UK).

At deadline time, the museum was still wavering between two 1960s-era BMWs from Germany.

Artwork on view in the exhibit will include signature pieces from such noted artists Andy Warhol, Louise Bourgeois, John Baldessari, Agnes Denes and Sol LeWitt, Schwab said.

"We are an art museum, not a motorcycle museum obviously, and this exhibition gives us an opportunity to enjoy works of fine art, mostly contemporary and abstract, from collections," said Schwab. "We will be borrowing works from Bucknell University's Samek Art Gallery, the Woodmere Museum of Art and local art collectors."

So, how is the museum linking the worlds of art and motorcycles?

"We're looking at a number factors, some of which may resonate fairly easily and obviously with the viewer, others of which may not," she said. "Personally, I think that's part of the fun."

The museum is building pedestals so each motorcycle will be displayed as a work of art.

"That said," Schwab pointed out, "these are still running motorcycles, which will be ridden after the exhibition ends."

The exhibition gala will take place on Saturday, June 3, followed by members' preview event on June 6. Admission to the museum will be free on the third Friday of the month through September as part of 3rd in the Burg.

"The exhibition is not a definitive motorcycle show," Schwab said. "Rather, it is one that will exhibit an array of bikes from different makers and countries of origin, each with the very distinctive characteristics that accentuate the bike's design. We've selected the motorcycles for their design features, color, country (maker) of origin and historical sense." **B**

"Art in Balance: Motorcycles and Fine Art" runs June 7 to Sept. 17 at the Susquehanna Art Museum, 1401 N. 3rd St., Harrisburg. For more information, call 717-233-8668 or visit www.sqart.org.

Page 44: Elaine Kurtz, *Alluvial Series #2 (detail)*, 1994, sand, mica, acrylic, on loan courtesy of Woodmere Art Museum

Left: 1977 Harley-Davidson XLCR Café Racer, on loan courtesy of Rod Firestone. Photo: Waxman Photography

