

ARTFORUM

Nicolai Howalt

BRUCE SILVERSTEIN

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Nicolai Howalt's 2009 photographic series "Car Crash Studies" is shockingly vivid and startlingly poetic. His images of cars wrecked in severe accidents, many presumably fatal, examine the horror of high-speed collision from a variety of perspectives. Close-ups of dented and scratched sheet metal are initially disorienting—the photographs' large formats and tight crops make it impossible to identify which part of the car is on display. Jagged scratches, shiny reflections, and crude crumples rhythmically punctuate saturated metallic hues in these unnervingly aestheticized abstractions.

Other works in the series take another step back from the wreckage and revel in the details—some gruesome, others poignant—of crash aftermath. Numerous smashed windshields, mostly shot from the viewpoint of the ill-fated driver, are sobering yet seductively voyeuristic. Although the cars are (thankfully) unpeopled, Howalt tactfully points to telltale remnants of those who suffered each crash. In *Car Crash Studies, Interior #1*, 2009, a bloodied clump of long brown hair dangles from the epicenter of the windshield's cobweb of cracks. Other chilling, though less grisly, remains include a pack of cigarettes stashed next to the steering wheel, a set of keys still hanging in the ignition, a Christmas-tree-shaped air freshener, and a single black hiking boot. Howalt's photographs of airbags, presented as a graphic grid of twelve exploded white billows, is perhaps a nod to Warhol's multiples (not to mention his famous "Death and Disaster" series, 1962–63).

In their great diversity of presentation and perspective, Howalt's images are at once morbidly exhilarating and astonishingly beautiful. The multiple vantage points included in "Car Crash Studies" inform one another and underscore the myriad ways in which violent acts, particularly car crashes, are undeniably fascinating. As the saying goes, you just can't look away.

— Mara Hoberman



Nicolai Howalt, *Car Crash Studies, Untitled #1*, 2009, color photograph, 71 x 86 1/2".