

American Psyche

2004. Acrylic on canvas, 48x60"

by
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How much has the American public been manipulated? The best symbol to answer that question is the Sport Utility Vehicle.

The vehicle costs more than an average car; gets less miles per gallon of gasoline; pollutes the air more; is less safe than a passenger car; is more likely to roll over during a simple swerve maneuver; and forces the United States to rely more heavily on imported oil. Yet Americans buy them up - the bigger and more expensive the better.

Why has a society become so easily sold on a product that is the opposite of everything that Americans claim to care about: safety, the environment, and dependence on foreign oil?

Has this phenomenon been the result of a saturation campaign designed to reach into the American psyche for purely profitable reasons? After all, automobile companies make more money from the sale of SUVs because the vehicles do not require the same safety standards as passenger cars.

Was the manipulation campaign merely perpetuation of the myth and fantasy of the rugged individual roughing it in nature - driving over rocks and dirt roads, conquering a frontier, seeking adventure?

Isn't the reality quite different? The majority of people who own SUVs live in the city and suburbs, and drive their SUVs to go to work and to go shopping.

Perhaps, this is all a reflection of a society trapped in a period of self-doubt, living in a world where there is no actual frontier - only ever-crowded suburbs carved from pristine land, destroying natural environments and wildlife - so people can drive their SUV to work and to the local mall.

What would Sigmund Freud say? That the SUV for men is the symbol that they are still men: rugged individuals conquering the world in an adventure where big and brawn still solves the problems in their lives and the problems of the world - think less, react more, be American. On the flip side, maybe women like the SUV because it is a symbol that they are as capable as men - part of their conquering adventure.

Perhaps further, the culmination of all these myths and fantasies might explain why America was so easily manipulated into and sold on the idea of preemptive war - attacking and occupying Iraq. Curiously enough, Iraq was the only country sitting atop the world's second largest oil reserve.

Even more interesting, is that all this comes at a time when the automobile manufacturers have built their largest and most manly SUVs, resulting in vehicles like the Hummer - a former military vehicle re-designed for domestic use.

This might also explain why Americans think George W. Bush is a good guy, a nice fellow, a rugged cowboy - he often rides around in an SUV (and drives a truck on his ranch).

Would Sigmund Freud conclude that is why Californians were sold on, and elected, a bad actor to be governor of the state - he drives a Hummer?

Has America's fantasy at last reached a climax?