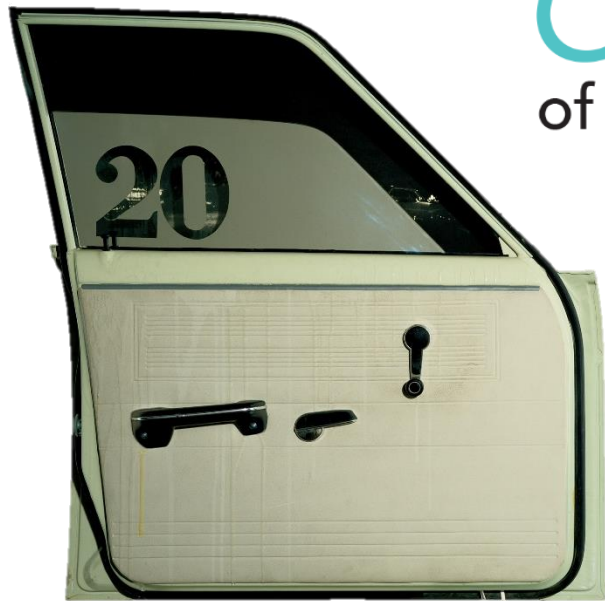


OBJECT  
of the **month**

**May 2021**



**BEGIN TRANSCRIPT**

Hello. I'm Violette-Anne, Museum Guide at the Dayton Art Institute. In this talk, I will be sharing an artwork made in 1971 that still resonates acutely today. Titled *Sawdy*, it was conceptualized by Ed

Kienholz, a socially conscious American artist active in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

At first glance, what do your eyes and mind make of this art piece? We see the interior side of an actual car door, which is fixed to a wall in the gallery, and its window—with the number 20 stenciled on the pane—is rolled halfway down. And while it may seem like an ordinary, utilitarian object, there's much more to this artwork that leads the viewer to a very powerful message.

On close examination, we see that mounted on the outside of the car's window is a shadow box with a lit black-and-white photograph. A night scene, the headlights of 4 cars illuminate a group of 6 people wearing grotesque masks, two of them holding rifles, huddled together around a single figure on the ground. A white woman sitting in a pickup truck, looks on in terror and disgust. It is a photograph of Kienholz's own life-size installation art piece called *Five Car Stud*, which used plaster figures to depict an act of extreme racial violence against an African American man.

Ed Kienholz is known for his large-scale environmental installation tableaux exposing the social and political issues of his time. He conceived this artwork as an action piece, even though it is now static in order to preserve it. In the past, the viewer came upon the car door with its mirrored window rolled up, reflecting the viewer's face, but also offering a glimpse of the photograph through the un-mirrored edition number on the windowpane. The viewer could then choose to roll the window down to have an unobstructed view of the photograph. Once confronted with the violence of racism, they had another choice to make: would they leave the window down and emotionally connect with the scene, or would they roll up the window, activate the door lock, and hurriedly "drive away" by moving on to the next artwork in the gallery?

Let's now take a more detailed look at the rest of the door panel. There are clear resin drops that have dripped down from the lower edge of the window. What do you think these drops represent? We don't know what the artist had in mind about them, but here's a couple of ideas that came to my mind:

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- Could these be tears shed for the tragedy of the scene and the inhumanity of racism?
- Might they represent the blood splatters of so many African Americans maimed or killed as a result of racism?

These personal and interpretive questions—and the “no wrong” answers that engender—are exactly what the artist sought to provoke in the viewer. The artist said, “I mostly think of my work as the spoor of an animal that goes through the forest and makes a thought trail, and the viewer is the hunter who comes and follows the trail. At one point I, as the trail-maker, disappear. The viewer then is confronted with a dilemma of ideas and directions.” End of quote.

I will leave you with yet another question: why might the photograph have been titled *Five Car Stud*? The title seems to draw from the poker game, five card stud. So, it makes me wonder if the four face-up cards of this game are the four cars with their lights on, belonging to the white men whose intentions are out in the open for all to see, and the only face-down card is the unknown reaction of the viewer in the art gallery.

Art has always been a powerful way to discuss important and even challenging issues, and it still does so today. You can access more details about this piece on the DAI “What is a Masterpiece?” webpage and I hope you will take a closer look at *Sawdy* in Gallery 201 of the James F. Dicke Gallery of Contemporary Art next time you visit the DAI. But please, remember to not touch the artwork. Thank you.

## END TRANSCRIPT

Click [here](#) to access the video presentation.

## ARTWORKS FEATURED IN VIDEO\*

Ed Kienholz (American, 1927–1994), *The Portable War Memorial*, 1968, Environment of mixed media and objects, tape recording and Coca-Cola vending machine. Museum Ludwig, Cologne. AKG165123 © AKG-Images

Edward Kienholz (American, 1927–1994), *Five Car Stud*, installation view: “Five Car Stud 1969–1972, Revisited,” 1969–72. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2011–12 © Kienholz

Edward Kienholz (American, 1927–1994), *Five Car Stud 1969–1972, Revisited*, Photography by Tom Vinetz. © Kienholz. Collection of Kawamura Memorial Museum of Art, Sakura, Japan. Courtesy of L.A. Louver, Venice, CA and The Pace Gallery, New York

Portrait of Ed Kienholz, circa 1968. Imagno/Getty

## CONTENT CREDITS\*

[www.rollingstone.com](http://www.rollingstone.com)

[www.nrc.nl](http://www.nrc.nl)

[www.lacma.org](http://www.lacma.org)

[www.newmuseum.org](http://www.newmuseum.org)

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