

Dan Dowd's *By Your Side* series

by [Aaron Rosen](#) in the [June 2026](#) issue

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All images courtesy of the artist

We all remember our first cars; they can take on an almost sacred role in our personal mythologies. They are the relics of important milestones, from first loves to formative road trips. But their physical remains usually end up unceremoniously dumped in junkyards, where metal parts might be pilfered for materials, while plastic and leather parts are destined for landfills.

Against these indignities, Maine artist Dan Dowd brings a gentle, almost priestly reverence to the earthly remains of his cars. A lifelong automobile enthusiast, Dowd worked at a Saab dealership in college and has driven the Swedish brand exclusively for 35 years.

In his artist statement, Dowd observes that when he was coming of age as a queer man, the unique, stylish visual identity of the Saab echoed his own self-conception as someone who was “not part of the masses.” The title of this body of work, *By Your Side*, refers both to the companionship offered by the cars themselves and the experience of riding in them alongside friends and partners. In an era in which it could be dangerous for queer folks to be themselves in public, vehicles served as portable safe spaces, at the threshold between public and private.

Through pieces composed of car interiors, Dowd opens up this world—and his inner self. Befitting this intimacy, his sculptural interventions are subtle, delicate, even organic. The eclectic colors and fabrics he introduces into the Saab side panels mostly reflect the classic Saab 900s he cherishes. These panels suggest a traditional artistic form: the polyptych, or multi-paneled altarpiece.

In a recent video work Dowd offers a scene of the resurrection of the (auto) body. It shows the crushing of a car at a scrapyard, backward and upside-down in black and white. These inversions conjure an unexpected, spiritual quality. Instead of spearing the vehicle, the forklift now gently probes its undercarriage, as if delicately embalming it according to some ancient funereal rite. In lieu of the jarring sounds of crunching metal, this resurrection is blessedly silent. At times the car almost floats, tenderly hovering as if preparing to ascend. Even in destruction or obsolescence, there is a promise of renewal down the road.