

Light, Speed, Relativity:

A Visit with Jeff Zwart

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Cover: Jeff Zwart throws his 1953 coupe through a sharp turn on a dirt road in Colorado. Katie Zwart photo.

This page: Arthur Conner's beautiful 1953 coupe at the NW Bullsesson in Washington. John Hearn photo.



Light, Speed,
Relativity:
A visit with

Jeff Zwart



Jeff and a few of his Porsches inside his Southern California photo studio. Below: With Mom and the family's new 356C circa 1964.

Story and photos
by Sean Cridland

With eight wins on Pike's Peak, his name has become synonymous with speed and danger. His rallying skills have taken him across Siberia and Mongolia and from Panama to Alaska. He's been known to circuit race from time to time at places like Daytona and Road Atlanta. And if his racing skills weren't enough, most Porsche aficionados will remember the "Family Tree" commercial he directed for the debut of the Porsche Panamera, which included everything from a Gmiind coupe to a Carrera GT, through the various race and street cars of the 1960s to '90s and into the 2000s. People who see him at Cars and Coffee or club events all say the same thing: he's approachable and enthusiastic. One thing is for sure. Jeff Zwart has a passion for Porsches... all of them.

His dad was a mechanical engineer with a love for cars, although for Jeff that passion didn't exist for him early on. The Zwart family cars were mostly Volkswagens. But around 1962 his dad bought a pre-owned 1957 356A coupe, which didn't incite much interest from young Jeff either. That all changed in the spring of 1964 when the senior Zwart brought home his first dealer-fresh new car, a Slate Gray 356C. For Jeff's birthday that year, they would be taking a family trip to the Indianapolis 500. Though AJ Foyt won that year, the rear-engine revolution had already hit and European and American sports car drivers started to show their talents, changing the face of the event forever. For young Zwart, the thrill of the event, the mass euphoria of nearly 300,000 spectators, the color and the spectacle inspired him. Something changed in the nine-year-old that would guide his decisions for the rest of life. Cars were cool. Racing was cool. Porsches were cool!

As Zwart tells it, he went through the usual fantasies of wanting to be a fireman or an astronaut before settling into the "realistic" goal of becoming a veterinarian, taking all the necessary courses in college to train for

that noble profession. He'd even gotten himself a veterinarian assistant's job in Europe while in college, which might have looked great on his resume when he applied for his first real job. Except... he could never get that racing thing out of his head. Like many of us in the field of automotive journalism, he noticed early on that if you weren't mechanically inclined or independently wealthy, the next best way to get close to racing is to do photography. On Friday afternoons, after his veterinarian chores were finished, he was usually on a train to a race track to take photos. Large events or small, he didn't care, often finding himself at Clermont-Ferrand, LeMans, Spa Francorchamps, Zandvoort, Nurburgring, or Hochenheim.

Eventually the vet school went by the wayside and he trained for a degree in photography from the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena. Though many of his art-school peers aspired to work in the fashion world (to take photos of girls!) or to do industrial studio work, Zwart often found himself the oddball. Virtually all his projects were about cars. If the assignment was how to use lipstick in a shoot, Zwart applied lipstick to a car. If it was composition and landscape, his shots incorporated cars. He quickly became known as the "car guy" by his fellow students and his professors.

Eventually, he was able to parlay his interest in Porsches into some connections in the publishing world. One summer in Europe, on the rare off weekend when there was no racing, he was snooping around at the Porsche factory, just looking for anything interesting to shoot. One group of his photos caught the attention of *Road & Track* editors Joe Ruzs and Bill Motta. That was the "in" he needed. Over the course of his career, his still photog-



Dave Engelman

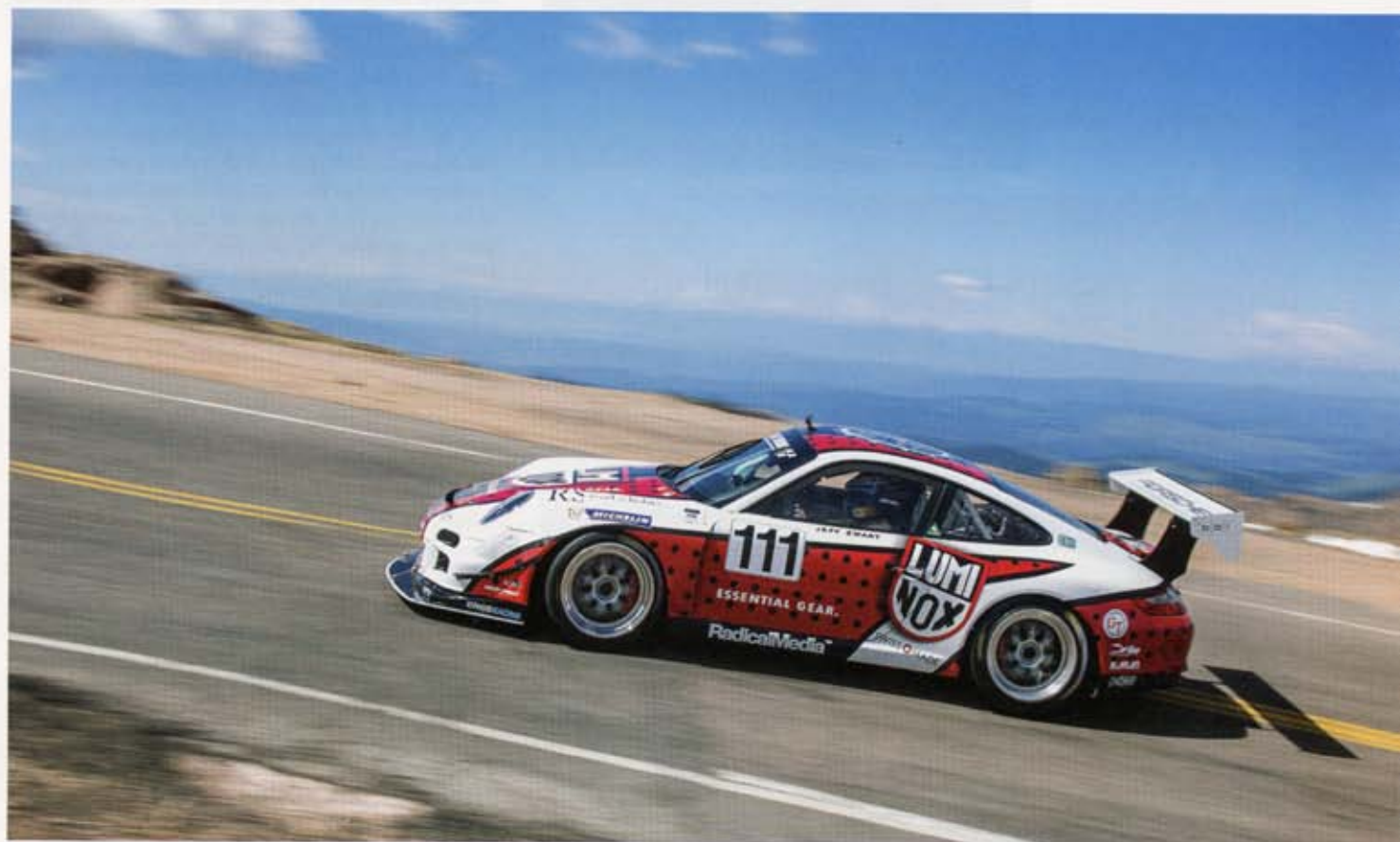
A 964 Carrera 4 GT lightweight with a special drive train was Zwart's weapon in rallying.

raphy took him on great adventures at race and test tracks, deserted highways, and exotic locations around the world. He was often seen hanging out of Cobra helicopters getting shots of missiles firing at night or on powerful cigarette-racer boats busting through big surf at crazy rates of speed. He shot Porsches, Ferraris, Lamborghinis, BMWs and just about everything else that went fast. His client list included Marlboro and Winston when tobacco companies were spending fortunes in racing. In 1989, his success and exploits as a still photographer eventually led the magazine *American Photographer* to call him "Jeff Zwart, the High Performance Photographer." Ironically, it was the beginning of the end for his still photography. Within a month he'd received offers from three different companies to direct television commercials.

In 2015 Zwart returned to Pike's Peak and won the Time Attack 1 class in a 911 GT3 Cup Turbo. You can see a youtube video of the run at <http://tinyurl.com/ouhdhtf>



Courtesy Jeff Zwart





Dogs are important to Jeff; his Bernese Mountain Dog "Jezzebel" accompanies him to many races and events. Here they enjoy the recent Dana Point Concours.



Below: "Sport" passed away in 2010 but was immortalized in a 356 Registry poster with this shot from the Bonneville salt flats. As seen on the cover of this issue, Jeff's 1953 coupe gets to wag its tail a lot.

While it might seem a difficult transition to go from stills to film or video, Zwart says that in his mind's eye, he'd been working in film for years - only with the wrong camera. He eventually realized that he needed longer than 1/125ths of a second to fulfill his vision. Though he still had clients and assignments to fulfill, he hired another photographer to finish those out. Within a few months he'd sold off his studio and moved entirely into film, never looking back.

Only then, did he make the leap into racing through rallying. At first as an outlet, a hobby. Eventually, he decided to try Pike's Peak and did well. It wasn't long before he realized that more of his success was built on that single event than the entire rest of his rallying year. One win, then two and before long Zwart was known as the guy who raced Porsches on Pike's Peak and won. Early on it was with rally-based cars. Eventually Porsche started feeding him a car here and there with special pieces designed for the mountain. Turbochargers, brakes, cooling. In 2010 - when the road was still mostly gravel - he won with a GT3 Cup car. For 2011, he drove a mostly streetable GT2 from Los Angeles to Colorado Springs, raced it and then drove it home. He missed the 2012 event for professional reasons (he was filming that series of Cadillac commercials that took him around the globe). But for 2013 he returned with the car many consider the best 911-based race car ever. He combined the handling of a GT3 Cup with the turbocharged power of a GT2 RS, though specially modified. Some people claim that it has somewhere north of 900hp, though Zwart doesn't say much about it. That year he got mired in a June snowstorm and had to let off. In 2014, he dominated practice, but was hit with a fuel-pump issue in the race, missing his eighth win by only one second to fellow Porsche driver and Pike's Peak rookie Vincent Beltoise. For 2014, he finally got the runs he deserved, setting a class record of 9:46.23 up the 12.5 mile, 156 turn course and taking win number eight. Spectacular.

And for all that, we're as likely to see stories about him driving his 1953 pre-A, with studded snow-tires from Los Angeles, via San Francisco and Donner Pass, across the Bonneville Salt Flats, through all kinds of weather - sun, snow, fog, and sleet - to Colorado. What - many of us have asked - makes him want to drive that car all that way?

This turns out to be the question that reveals more of Jeff Zwart than any retelling of his exploits on Pike's Peak or in Siberia. It's a question that leads to a discussion of light, of speed, and relativity.

As an only child, Zwart learned to play by himself and eventually to work independently. For a photographer, that meant learning how best to use natural light to ones advantage, whether it was through shading, reflecting, or bending the light. Not having that extra set of hands meant he would sharpen his perceptual skills to lessen the workload and maximize the effect of the light on his subjects. He claims that was a huge advantage when he eventually had photographic assistants and then even more so when he had a film crew of forty to sixty people. Rather than relying on his production people, he could already imagine what the perfect shot angle would entail and what tools would be necessary to get the desired effect. It wasn't just a matter of personal pride, it also meant making hugely expensive shoots more efficient. Consider that a car commercial shot on location requires several camera operators,

Along with the full-size Porsches he owns, Jeff Zwart keeps a shelf of scale models - one of every car he has owned or raced.

A video of his rally cars and the development of Porsches for off-road racing, culminating in his Pike's Peak runs is at tinyurl.com/pdcbu3j



sound people, stunt drivers, perhaps a helicopter or two or three, safety people, security, and the expenses add up fast! Zwart prides himself on never having to shoot a day over schedule in his twenty-eight year career. That's a record that requires great efficiency, but also an understanding of precisely what he wants and what it will take to achieve it. As he says, "In photography and film work, the

Zwart won a Motor Press Guild Award for Outstanding Photography with the shot below entitled "Back Story" from *Porsche Panorama*.



Jeff's 1953 coupe is not exactly a daily driver but certainly gets used a lot in all weather - both on the road and as a frequent subject for gorgeous still photos around his Colorado home.

A great video entitled "The Porsche from the Winter of 53" can be seen at <http://tinyurl.com/nkn3ysf>



light is finite. When the sun goes down the day is done, the light is gone. There is no second chance." He notes that his racing is no different. "There are no second chances on Pike's Peak. You come to the line prepared, focused, with no distractions. All your resources are reserved for the next ten minutes of your life. It's finite and definitive, just like the sun setting on a film crew."

As with his perceptual skills with light, Zwart mentions during our interview his "understanding of speed." Just what is that? He says, "When I look at a road, I can tell you the line, the dynamics that will take place on the car, how the camber needs to be set, what moment in that corner will be the best angle so that we're not pushing to little or a little too far. When I'm taking a photo, I'm thinking of what it would feel like to drive the road... and subliminally when I'm driving the road I have an intuitive understanding of how what I'm doing would look like in a photo or in a film. It doesn't mean I adapt my race runs for the camera, because race runs are ultimately focused on time and results. But I know what they look like and I adapt that vision to how I film cars in commercials."

It sounds almost as if both camera and race work are out-of-body experiences for him, being able to be both the observer and the observed at once. Maybe that's the case, though we shift subjects to relate that experience back to his love for 356s.

Zwart is not constrained by common perceptions of speed tied to a number on a tach, a dyno, a speedometer or a stopwatch. His passion for the older cars comes from a subtle sympathy for relative speed, history, and purpose. Perhaps many of us are constrained by our lack of historical memory of the times when 356s were successfully doing battle on the race-track against cars with a hundred or maybe two hundred more horsepower on tap. Zwart, however, is acutely aware of their place in time. He's intimately connected to the feeling of the 356 as an underdog; the little car that could... and did.

He looks at the cars from the perspective of a 40,000 mile a year driver, much of it done in rental cars. When he has a choice, he wants to be entertained while he's driving.

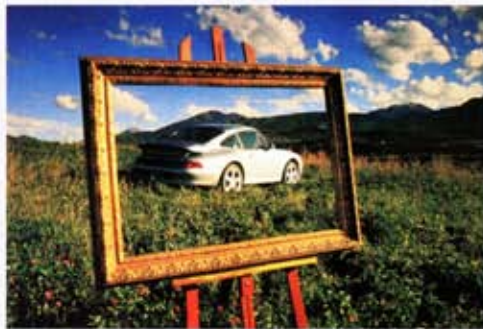


When he gets home he drives his own cars, most of which are Porsches and include his 914 rally car, a 906, and his Pike's Peak cars. His daily driver – a year-old Macan – already has 35,000 miles on it alone.

But he still harkens back to that family trip in May of 1964. He has a 1964 356C, much like his dad's. Zwart describes it as tight, refined, with disc brakes the furthest development of a 356. He loves it. Despite everyone warning him against a pre-A, he wanted to go a step further. He needed to experience one of those early cars that chased every groove in the pavement, with steering so vague you have to wiggle the wheel to make sure it's still connected, an engine that requires you to think before changing lanes. He wanted to experience turning into a corner and waiting for the car to take a set. He remembers people saying "Oh, you don't want a pre-A." But that's exactly what he wanted.

It's an issue of relativity. Zwart says 356s are some of the best cars for "settling into time" because during the course of their development, they took big jumps in power, braking, and handling. He likes experiencing each of those periods as they were, not modified or diluted in any way. As he puts it, "There is a purity to the 356. It was an underpowered car, made to go as fast as it could against the wind. And the decisions they made to develop that car affect everything that we as Porsche lovers drive today. The handling, brakes, the way the engines were built, the market they sought, the way the company was built... all of it contributed to what Porsches are today. All those things, plus it made an amazing race car along the way and still does. Better traction, better aerodynamics, better handling, better efficiencies. And I get to experience all those things, even when I drive my pre-A. That's what it's about for me. I seek those different experiences."

Road & Track's masthead carried the name Jeffrey R. Zwart under Contributing Photographers for several years in the 1980s and '90s. During that time his images brought a fresh look to a magazine that had been slowly but surely evolving since its postwar beginning in 1947. We have to believe his eye contributed much to that development. Here are a few Porsche selections from those years, when he shot a wide variety of makes and models, some in unusual but interesting places. Zwart was in good company; also on the R&T masthead then were well known lensmen such as Jesse Alexander, John Lamm and Bill Warner. **GM**



From that experience, it was only a matter of time before Zwart returned to the beginning, the genesis of all things Porsche: the Gmünd series. It happened when he was directing the Family Tree commercial. They used one for the opening. Even now he remembers that car coming through the lens, seeing it on his monitor and revealing itself as both primal and elegant, an expression of genuine Porsche automotive ingenuity. "Those skinny little tires, that hand-beaten aluminum body, and the purity of the beginning it represented. It was that moment when I realized that I'd like to find one someday." After some two years of looking he found his, and it would even be more special than he'd imagined.

"When it came into my world, it was everything I thought it would be. It's a car that's so easy to walk by, but once you get close to it it's hard to get away from... It's just fascinating, so primitive, yet still setting the tone for what Porsche would become. Think about it: taking a 25 hp engine from a Beetle and figuring a way for it to have 29 hp. And to make it go as fast as it could... that shape was so important. Today it seems so small, but for the time, it was a step forward that led to so many other steps forward. To experience that car in a modern setting is really great. The balance, the feedback, the experience; that there is no wind buffeting because the shape is so clean."

For Jeff Zwart, it's that purity of experience that makes driving a Gmünd or a 1953 Pre-A as much fun as it is to drive a fire-breathing, 900 hp, GT3 turbo race car at 150 mph on Pike's Peak. All things considered, it comes down to one thing: the relativity of speed. **GM**

More next page

From still to video



From still to video

A famous Gmünd coupe, the ex-Otto Mathé car, was featured in the opening sequence of the film "Porsche Family Tree", introducing the new Panamera in 2007 and directed by Jeff Zwart. It inspired Zwart to find a Gmünd of his own.

A Porsche enthusiast will not notice there is no spoken word in the first third of the sixty second commercial; the sound track consists of revving engines and subtle background music. Almost every type of Porsche is shown at speed, including several 356s, and the final scene is an aerial shot of 50 cars in branching tracks across the desert. See the video at <http://tinyurl.com/o9xerkj>. **GM**



Another video documents the making of the film: "3 days, 162 crew members, 4 cameras, 36,000 feet of asphalt, 2 insane helicopter pilots, 50 legendary Porsche Sports cars, 22 precision drivers, 16,000 feet of film, 1 historic family reunion - to welcome our newest sibling." See it at tinyurl.com/pd53zgy

Zwart in print

David Bull Publishing has produced three titles of Zwart's work. In a unique process, Zwart created a mobile, controlled-lighting studio at the race tracks where cars and drivers were competing. He shot the cars, along with details and several drivers. Each title is hardcover with slipcase. While some regular editions are sold out, special editions are available from David Bull.

Porsche Rennsport
The Definitive Photographic Record of Porsche Racing Sports Cars, 1949-2004.

During Rennsport Reunion II at Daytona Jeff constructed a temporary studio to photograph more than 125 cars. Every model type from every decade is represented, from the first Porsche built in 1948 (356-001) through the 2004 GT3 RSR.

Each chapter is introduced by a factory driver from that period, which includes Herbert Linge, Dan Gurney, Brian Redman, Derek Bell, Hurley Haywood, and Sascha Maassen.



Porsche 917 X 17
The Cars and Drivers in Studio.

Zwart follows up his award-winning book, Porsche Rennsport, with exquisitely rendered images of 17 of the most beautiful and historic 917s. Using dramatic angles and controlled lighting, Zwart shot the cars and their drivers at Rennsport III.

Three Points of Contact is a dramatic series of portraits revealing how the world's greatest drivers use their eyes, hands, and feet to control their cars. Created at The Race of Champions, Paris and London with top drivers from F1 and other series.