

MAKING A MUSCLE

Designer Michael Castiglione gives us an insider's tour of the creation of the Dodge Challenger

BY RICHARD TRUESDELL / PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF CHRYSLER

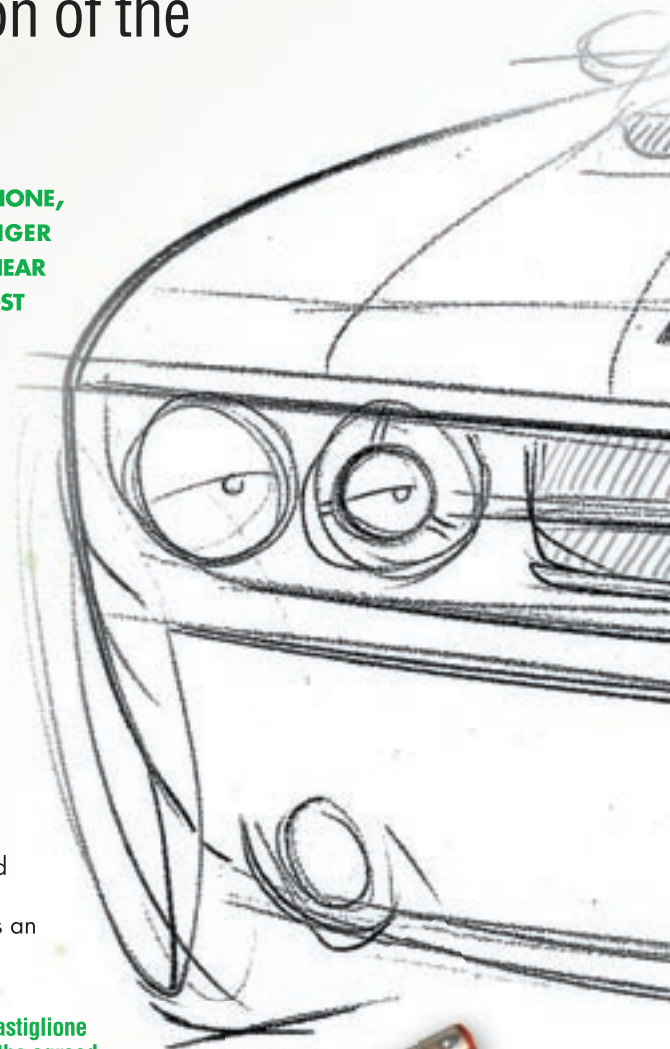
IF ANYONE HAS LIVED A CHARMED LIFE, IT'S MICHAEL CASTIGLIONE, THE EXTERIOR DESIGNER OF THE 2006 DODGE CHALLENGER CONCEPT, COMING THIS SPRING TO A DODGE SHOWROOM NEAR YOU. FOR MODERN MUSCLECAR FANS, IT'S EASILY 2008'S MOST ANTICIPATED LAUNCH.

Mike, or "Casti" as he's known inside the walls of Chrysler's Pacifica Advanced Design Studio north of San Diego, grew up in LaVerne, California, a suburb of Los Angeles. As he says, "I could hear the Pomona Winternationals and World Finals running in Pomona from my high school."

Casti attended Cal Poly Pomona for a while studying engineering before realizing that wasn't his calling, so he transferred to fine art. After two years he discovered Art Center College of Design in Pasadena and blasted through his studies there and got hired by Chrysler in the Advanced Design studio in Detroit upon graduation. After working there for three years he transferred to the Pacifica Advanced Design Center in Carlsbad. A 15-year Chrysler veteran, he's worked on many notable Chrysler concepts including, but not limited to, the 1996 Chrysler Atlantic, the 1998 Plymouth Pronto Spider, the 2000 Dodge MaxxCab and the 2004 Dodge Sling Shot, along with the production version of the 1999 Chrysler 300M and, of course, the 2006 Challenger Concept and the 2008 production version. Mike lives in Southern California with his wife of 10 years Jennie, and their 9-year-old son Tayden.

As the launch of the 2008 Challenger approaches, Mike gave us an insider's look at the development of the car.

"This is my favorite sketch during the design process, (dated March 2005)" Castiglione said. "I was experimenting with different head lamp designs and this was the agreed on direction. This was a quick technique to generate a lot of ideas. It's funny how some of your quickest work can be your best."



ECAR



Mustang 3.05



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1 Early work on the Concept dated March 29, 2005. “This was right after the first milling,” Castiglione said. “The model was way too ‘boardy’ at this time. Tony Newman is cutting out the whole sill to make room to pull it under more like the original ‘70.” **2** “The picture here was taken on April 1, 2005,” Castiglione said. “We use the mirror to sketch model one side of the car and quickly see what it looks like balanced. In the mirror you can see the plum crazy ‘70 convertible we had in the studio during the entire development. Also,

in the shot is Rick’s silver ‘73. He is a clay modeler at Pacifica. He is a Mopar freak and also owns a ‘69 Charger. He brought this Challenger back from the dead... At this time we were trying to get the front proportions right. We were constantly struggling with getting that grille to lead the car like the original, however we needed correct modern bumper coverage. The wheel was a shot at bringing back the old rally wheel. No matter how many versions we did I thought it was always looking too “luxury” wheel-like and not as aggressive

as a five-spoke. Plus Chip did one that totally nailed a modern version of the old rally. I thought this an opportunity to do a completely modern aggressive wheel.” **3** From April 7, 2005, shot during the design process. “This is in our Pacifica courtyard,” Castiglione said. “I was experimenting with some literal bumper shapes in the rear. I’m glad we didn’t do this.” **4** “This was taken on February 14, 2005,” Castiglione said. “This was the very first milling of the computer model I created in Alias. This was before we

MCE: Mike, what emotions are you experiencing with the production introduction of the 2008 Dodge Challenger now so near?

CASTI: *It’s very exciting! I was blown away with how much the No. 2 car drew at auction (\$175,407.07 – Ed.).*

MCE: While the exact process of how a concept car is conceived is often shrouded in mystery, what can you share on how the design process for the Challenger Concept started and what it was about your early sketches that allowed for it to be chosen as the winner of the in-house design competition?

CASTI: *The bizarre thing is that it finished last of three 3/8 scale themes that were done back in August of 2004. Being a musclecar freak my gut was always telling me that this thing should have a strong heritage-based image. The other two themes were more of a modern sports car interpretation. I think they eventually came back to my model based on input on the Charger. That vehicle did a*

great job of taking a modern approach to a musclecar. With Challenger we had an opportunity to create something closer to the original spirit.

MCE: From your perspective as a designer, what one word would you use to characterize the design of the original Challenger?

CASTI: *Aggressive!*

MCE: In reality, what design cues from the original Challenger do you feel that it was essential to incorporate into your design?

CASTI: *There were a lot of signature characteristics of the ‘70 Challenger. The most identifiable line on the original was the high thrust line that kicked up over the rear quarter. That had to be in our modern version. Also, the basically simple body, wide air sucking grille, tucked-under sill, distinct hood, and mechanical gas cap.*

MCE: Once your design was selected, how did it evolve from your early sketches to the next stage? How much did you look

at examples of the previous generation Challenger?

CASTI: *We borrowed a buddy’s Plum Crazy ‘70 that sat in the studio during the entire full-size clay development. What I struggled with most was capturing the original ‘70 theme on a totally different package. The old one is very low and cab rearward and our modern package has a much taller seating position with a central upper.*

MCE: In this part of the process — I would suspect that this was early in 2005 — in the back of your mind, did you think the concept had production potential, and if so, what restrictions and challenges did this have on the way the design evolved?

CASTI: *I thought it had production potential but I highly doubted it would make the cut. It seemed like such an uphill battle just to get the concept going. However, we wanted to be sure that if the green light was given for production the car could translate with very minor tweaks.*

MCE: With only one rear-wheel-drive architecture to work with, how did you go about translating your initial concept design to work with the existing LX platform?

CASTI: *We knew that if this thing had any type of future it would have to utilize the LX platform. And why not, it’s a great RWD*

This was the earliest sketch of this series,” Castiglione said. It’s from January 2004. “I’m just getting into the project so it was wide open as far as which package we would be using. This was a ‘Mopar’ theme sketch. This was my favorite early sketch that influenced the scale model a bit.”





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decided to pull the sill in and you can see the body side section is too busy like the original section. The white paper you see pinned on the side rear is showing the bumper coverage that I completely missed. oopsy! At that time I was experimenting with covering the bumper with a secondary form but it also got too busy and we were able to solve it with a much cleaner rear section. You can also notice clay colored paper and black tape that we use in design reviews to visualize quick changes.”

platform with a killer Hemi power plant. We were allowed to shorten the wheelbase four inches but that was about it. The LX windshield must be about a foot farther forward than the original Challenger, so getting the proportion to look correct was tough.

MCE: As you know, even though the design has been very well received by most critics, some say that it is too slavishly retro. How do you address these critics that feel you could have gone off in a more modern direction?

CASTI: As a Mopar enthusiast, I just tried to create what I would want to drive and I'm amazed at the cord it seems to have struck. The Challenger had a fairly short run (1970-1974) with no major generational changes. So it seemed obvious to me that if we were going to call it Challenger it should feel like one.

MCE: Because the exterior and interior of the Challenger work together in such harmony, at what point in the design process did Alan Barrington come into the project and as the design evolved, how closely did the two of you work together?

CASTI: Alan and I have a great relationship. We've been teamed up on projects before. His approach to the interior was similar to mine on the exterior. He looked at the signature lines and design details of the '70 and reinterpreted it in a modern way. He did a killer job!



MCE: Because the development process for concepts is so compressed, try to give us a timeline for how quickly the design evolved from you being declared the winner of the design competition to when the final design was locked-in and sent off to Metal Crafters for fabrication?

CASTI: The scale models were finished in August of 2004. When the other two themes were chosen we did a quick full-size clay and that was sent back to Chrysler Technical Center. After that it seemed like the project was dead. Then in February of 2005 Trevor (Creed, Chrysler Senior Vice President of Design — Ed). made the decision to do it as a concept car with something more like my theme. Keep in mind that up to this point it wasn't a "Challenger" it was just a sort of "Mopar" project. So we were taking influence from all of the cool Mopars like Cuda, Road Runner, GTX, etc. So in February of 2005 we started with a clean sheet of paper

and we handed a finished full-size clay off to Metal Crafters in mid-May 2005.

MCE: In November 2005, when the first spy shots of the Challenger Concept appeared on the Internet and in the buff books, were you surprised at all at the immediate attention that it generated? Or was this what you expected?

CASTI: I didn't know what to expect, but after the Detroit Auto Show it was a total validation. This was one of those times where my gut was right. From the beginning of this project I felt the weight of wanting to make the true Mopar enthusiasts proud.

MCE: Obviously given their concept introduction at the same time, and given that you are a Camaro enthusiast as well, how do you see the Camaro and Challenger arriving in the marketplace within six months of each other?



Challenger concept with T/A-style stripe.



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5 “In bare carbon fiber it looked so cool!” Castiglione said. “That’s when we decided to leave the carbon fiber exposed in some areas [of the concept] instead of painting out the dark graphics.” **6** Challenger Concept at Metalcrafters on October 14, 2005. “Notice how far back the side mirror is,” Castiglione said. “This was to make the hood look longer. It was a trick I noticed on the original Challenger.

CASTI: I think competition is healthy and both products will be better because of it. I’m anxious to see what happens. I was able to get my hands on a ‘67 Camaro RS a couple years ago that I’m doing a pro-tour mod to. It’s been my dream car since I was a kid growing up near the Pomona Raceway.

MCE: We were together last year when the Challenger Concept made an appearance last May (2006) at the legendary Donut Derelicts and Crystal Cove events in Orange County, California. What thoughts went through your mind when as you observed people’s reactions to the car?

CASTI: That was so cool! Hearing people’s reaction and seeing it in context with other muscle cars and hot rods was a really unique opportunity and was a validation for me because the car just looked right there. The stance rocked!

MCE: Your son was with you at the time. As a father, tell us how your son reacted to all the attention that the Challenger garnered? This may sound like an obvious question, but do you think he was proud of what his “old man” had accomplished?

CASTI: He has told me he’s proud of me and words can’t describe how that feels coming from your 9-year-old. Tayden and I do everything together. He’s becoming a complete car freak. The other day, while driving somewhere, I said “Tayden check out that new GTO” and he said “That looks like a Vauxhall.” He’s always asking me when the next car show is. I can’t wait till the day when he can out sketch me.

MCE: How did you feel when the official announcement was made green-lighting the Challenger for production? Did you have any further involvement in the design as it moved from the concept stage to production? Or at this point is it all in the hands of engineers whose job it is to translate your concept vision to production reality?

CASTI: It was a great feeling and yes,

I did have some early involvement in the production car. Trevor came up with a great strategy of having me take the initial shot at scaling the car to the production platform (in the computer) and he flew me out to Detroit for a week to work with the production design team. I was able to communicate the concept inspiration and all of the design paths that we took that did or didn’t work. From there, the design team led by Brian Nielander and Jeff Gale did a great job!

MCE: At Cars and Coffee this summer, you said something to the effect that “if you liked the concept, you’ll be very happy with the way the production car turned out” so I’m assuming that you’ve had at least some input on the car’s transition to series production and what was improved moving from concept to production?

CASTI: Without being specific, some of the details are handled better on the production car and there are a few additional details that enhance it. Like me, Jeff and Brian are very passionate designers and they fought for some cool stuff.

MCE: Of all the design elements of the Challenger Concept, which is your favorite, the one thing that puts the biggest smile on your face when you stand back and look at the car from 10 feet away?

CASTI: I’m so glad we kept that signature high thrust line that kicks up over the rear wheels. I just love the cleanliness of the body side and proportions. When you edit a design down that purely every line has to be just right.

MCE: I’m assuming that you’ll get either an early production fast feedback car or are already on a list to get an early production version of the Challenger for yourself. Tell me what color will it be (if you order a car for yourself) and what would be the first road trip you would take in the car with your wife and son if you could drive it from any point A to point B anywhere in the world?

CASTI: Hopefully I can land an early production version. My wife really wants a black one and I can’t argue with that! I’d like to just cruise north up the coast. ■



RICHARD TRUESEL PHOTO

Challenger designer Michael Castiglione and son Tayden with the Challenger concept at a California car show.