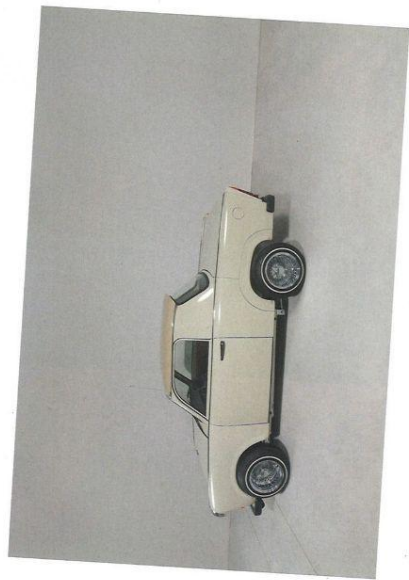


Liz Cohen, *Trabantino* (2002–10)

Eight years ago Liz Cohen (b. 1973, Phoenix, AZ) began work on *Trabantino*, an East German Trabant that physically reconfigures itself via hydraulics into a Chevy El Camino in about fifteen seconds. Over the years, as Cohen shaped and reshaped the car, she crafted her own artistic identity and life, a story that has been told but that warrants retelling briefly to set the stage for contextualizing *Trabantino* into the arc of contemporary artistic practice.

The idea of creating a lowrider took root not long after Cohen earned her MFA in photography from California College of the Arts (then California College of Arts and Crafts). Cohen launched the project in 2002 during a residency at Akademie Schloss Solitude in Stuttgart, Germany, the country where the Trabant ("fellow traveler" or "companion") was designed in the 1950s and manufactured until 1991. The Trabant represents a clear East German identity utility, practicality, economy) in the same way that the El Camino represents an American one (comfort, speed, color, flash). Cohen and, with virtually no experience in auto body or engine work, she began its transformation took a leap the following year when Cohen moved back to her hometown of Phoenix. She convinced Don Barsellotti, owner of Elwood Body Works, to provide her, free of charge, a bay in which to work. There she apprenticed with mechanic Bill Cherry, who lent her his tools and took her under his wing. In 2005 Cohen engaged in a three-month-long performative exhibition at the gallery Fargfabriken in Stockholm, where she reconfigured the exhibition space as her gym and mechanic shop. There she worked with a personal trainer to recondition her own body to be weightlifter strong and supermodel elegant, and for part of that time also worked with Cherry, who traveled to Stockholm, to recondition the car. All of this and the culminating photoshoot were open to the public.

Liz Cohen, *Trabantino*, 2002–10, transformer car: 56 x 112 x 66 inches (Trabant position), 64 x 226 x 166 inches (El Camino position); courtesy the artist and Salm 94, New York



these "lowrider" works feature hydraulics, moving and dancing to the point that they are extreme and ridiculous. A Mexican adopting and adapting an important symbol of Chicano culture, Ortiz Torres positions himself in today's technologically connected world where ethnic identity and its expression is only one component of a complex construction of self. Like Ortiz Torres' apparatuses, *Trabantino* is mechanical, and reinvention is part of its point. But Cohen invests her own time and sweat, whereas Ortiz Torres' sources other talent to achieve his vision. *Trabantino*'s engine and upholstery shine, reminding us that its execution required sustained effort, education and time, and foregrounding labor, value and a sort of preciousness.¹

Ultimately, action and result are on equal footing as the car morphs from small to large and from European to American; performance becomes crafted object and photographer becomes model and vice versa. The American dream is as much about the open road as it is about entrepreneurship and social mobility. The past is left behind when rubber meets asphalt, the driver-as-protagonist absorbed by the expanse of the land, her former self distanced with each passing mile. In this sense, the transformed *Trabantino* facilitates the transformation of its operator. It is a process work that results in a complex machine that literally and metaphorically transports its drivers, viewers and maker.

Cohen speaks of empathy and self-determination and what it means to be an outsider who eventually earns entry into an exclusive group. The artist is academically trained and a professor, but she found a certain level of acceptance in the male-dominated arena of the mechanic shop, an environment that typically views academic training with a certain degree of skepticism. *Trabantino*, a mirror of its maker, was exhibited in a provisional manifestation at Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art (2007).

and then this past fall debuted in its final iteration in the newly renovated gallery of Salon 94 in New York City. It is also featured in the January 2010 issue of *Automobile* magazine, testament to its acceptance by visitors to a contemporary art exhibit as well as attendees of an automobile trade show. Have the twin met prior to this?

Trabantino is the little engine that could. It challenges and encourages us to be greater than we ever dreamed of being, and to believe in our own ability to change and develop. As its compact, beige Communist people's car body expands to become a long and strong El Camino, it exudes a faith in people to reach the unreachable. In the words of Cohen, "I am interested in this idea that people can be multifaceted and... have integrity and have a unified self, but not be pigeonholed." The artist not only espouses this position, she lives it. *Trabantino* is proof.

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1. Jen Graves, "Liz Cohen: Visual Artist/Car Mechanic/Model," *The Believer* (Nov./Dec. 2007), 84. For a bibliography of recent publications about Cohen, see <http://www.cranbrookart.edu/Pages/PhotographyDept.html>.
2. In late August 2010 Cohen was grappling with the fact that the car would not fit through the door of Salon 94 and was considering disassembling it and exhibiting it in parts on pedestals.
3. Author conversation with Cohen, August 27, 2010.