

**ON TOOLS AND BIKINIS OR,
THE VOYAGE OF LIZ COHEN
introduced by her gallerist
Fabienne Stephan**

Liz Cohen once documented the lives of transgender prostitutes in the Panama Canal area. She now heads the photography department at Cranbrook Academy of Art and works next door, at Kustom Creation, a Detroit bodyshop, on the Trabaininino...

"I started thinking an interesting way for me to push my documentary practice would be to become part of what I was looking at. I started to think about things I'm just not supposed to be a part of and how I could become a part of it during the process of photographing it. I keyed in on building a car and becoming a lowrider". Many artists have ventured into the car building world, but Liz has fully entered it since 2003, when she found a Trabain in Berlin and decided to learn how to morph it into another discontinued car, an El Camino. The car of the people vs. the car of the cowboy... the mini, practical, cheap family car vs. the ultimate 'gay' car... turned into a muscle car in an improbable low rider mash up, jumping hydraulics included. Liz has installed a V8 motor into the tiny East German car, placed Dual acting hydraulics in the chassis, as well as added a four times telescopic drive shaft stretching the Trabain into the length of an El Camino - and the car runs well.

To introduce Liz's work, I picked 2 series of photographs, one taken at the beginning of this 7 year project and another shot last summer. The car will be finished in August 2010 before which Liz plans to do at least one more shoot.

The 5 P's (Paper Planning Presents Poor Performance) 2005. This series of 150 photographs were shot at Edwood Bodyworks in Arizona, where Liz started working on the car. Her mentor, Bill Cherry, let her use all the tools from his toolbox, the collection of objects amassed throughout his life as a mechanic. Bill Cherry, when Liz met him, was on the verge of retiring and had amassed 30 years worth of tools. When she left Arizona to move to Detroit she wanted to honor Bill's practice as a car body man and took pictures of his tools in a style reminiscent of Walker Evans' *Rescues of the Common Tool* (shot for *Fortune* magazine in 1955, with Robert Frank helping for the lighting). While she only realized the similarities between her photographs and Evans's project later, Liz loved the connec-

tion and it became another way to document both her process as an apprentice bodyworker and the Trabaininino project as a whole. They trace a moment in the project, marking what she's learnt, used or touched. For me, the tools represent the key to Liz's project. As she gave herself the goal of becoming a legitimate part of the car bodywork community, she had to earn her 'creds' by practicing and the tools represent the route to her transformation toward being a skilled mechanic. She likes the image of a journeyman, a worker that had to go through a journey of experiences to become an experienced tradesperson. And the series of pin-up photographs she has taken of herself in the various places she worked on the car mirror this process - we see Liz change as the project advances.

Zwickau Routine 2009 is the latest in a series of photographs using the trope of the pin-up bikini models, self-portraits engaging with the car and its surroundings. In 2009, Liz shot herself as a coy, bikini car show model, and then as a 'chick' in an Arizona bodyshop. In *Zwickau Routine*, she poses in seventies style pin-up gear at the old Trabain factory in Zwickau, Germany. It is said that "3 million cars were produced by 30,000 workers in 30 years". And now it is empty, much like the Ford and GM factories in Detroit where Liz lives. She wondered how to photograph herself in the birthplace of the car she had been transforming for 6 years. She thought of Tina Modotti's still lifes of the tools of the Revolution and images she had seen as a child of Nadia Comaneci at the Olympics. It was important for her to have the tools present in the shape of a hammer and sickle, a metaphor for the years and experiences she had just gone through and she chose to pose in the style of the still images she found of Comaneci competing at the Olympics, where West and East competed during the Cold War. She didn't work on the car at the Trabain factory, yet she felt like entering this space and documenting the way it looks now, though she had trouble finding it in Zwickau, as people seemed to have forgotten the address of the factory. Soon she will shoot at a Chevrolet factory in Detroit.

Right from the series Zwickau Routine, 2010. Black Execution. Next spread top Yellow Inward Turn, bottom Yellow Push Up Arch. Page 34 and 35 from the series Paper Planning Presents Poor Performance, 2007. Page 36 and 37 from the series Zwickau Routine, 2010. Top Red Cosack, bottom White Options. All images © the artist, courtesy Salon 94, New York.

