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August 19, 2010, 10:15 am

The Trabantimino: The Art of Building a Trabant Lowrider

By [TAMARA WARREN](#)



Tamara Warren for The New York Times Liz Cohen, an artist in Detroit, is building an El Camino out of a Trabant.

For Liz Cohen, a Detroit photographer and performance artist, immersion in a project is essential to her art. For one early photo series, she spent four years documenting the world of transgendered sex workers in Panama.

More recently, she has found herself absorbed into the world of automobiles.

In 2002, she began building a lowrider out of a 1987 Trabant and a 1973 Chevrolet El Camino. The Trabantimino, as she calls it, has since been an ongoing work of art — part sculptural installation and part functional custom-build. It has been an eight-year immersion into the heart of American car culture in which [Ms. Cohen's own self-transformation](#) has played a significant role.

“I wanted to design a project in which I could participate in the culture,” she said.

Ms. Cohen bought the Trabant, the maligned East German car, during a trip to Berlin in 2002. She drove it to Stuttgart and toyed with the idea of using a kit to make it into a custom convertible. Then she decided she wanted to cut the back out, but the idea continued to grow.

“A lot of things changed over time with what I was going to do,” she said.

She shipped the Trabant to Oakland, Calif., and set up her first studio in a lowrider shop there. When it closed, she moved her operation to Elwood Body Works in Scottsdale, Ariz., in 2004. She organized a car show and became more engrossed in the Southwest aftermarket culture. It was there she settled on her ultimate vision: to make a true lowrider out of her Trabant.

Ms. Cohen’s pairing of the Trabant, the only car within reach of many people in the former East Germany, with the 1973 El Camino lowrider offers a juxtaposition of American immigrant cultures that makes for a curious mechanical tale of East meets West.

In 2008, Ms. Cohen accepted a photography teaching position at the [Cranbrook Academy of Art](#) and moved her base to the Detroit area. She met Tom Peters, the [General Motors](#) designer, who steered her to her current studio, [Kustom Creations](#), a bustling custom car shop in Sterling Heights, where she cooks lunch on Mondays in exchange for the use of a large, gridded surface plate. The shop owners have taught her a few tricks of the trade, including the nuances of TIG welding.

When she took on the project, Ms. Cohen wasn’t much of a gearhead, but in the process she’s become a knowledgeable fabricator, with considerable welding skills. “I did 99 percent of the work,” she said. “But I did have a lot of help and guidance.”



She’s in the shop six days a week, covered head to toe in engine funk and grease, working alongside mechanics building racecars. The metal finishing is what is consuming her currently, perfecting her chrome palette with a traditional Trabant hue, a pasty Papyrus Weiss to be applied evenly across the hydraulic parts.

To complete her vision, Ms. Cohen has modified the wheelbase, length and engine, and is working doggedly at Kustom Creations on the finishing touches through the summer. She is scheduled to show the car in a solo exhibition at [Salon 94](#) in October.

She’s quite specific on the building process, using only G.M. and Trabant parts. If she can’t find the right part, she

fabricates it. The result will be a Trabant that extends to the full length of an El Camino with the push of a button.

“I’m really building a car,” she said. “It’s not a G.M. system or a Trabant system. Everything is done in some roundabout, weird way. I want the car to drive well. I don’t want a muffler that’s hanging down over the frame. There’s no manual for this.”

She isn’t using an actual El Camino for the build but rather relying on the car’s dimensions and mechanics as a guide for the ideal lowrider. She built the chassis from a totaled Chevrolet S10 pickup that has same wheelbase as the El Camino.

“I cut off the front end and saved the rear axle,” Ms. Cohen said. She installed wiring in the harness, made a new steering column and dashboard and added hydraulic plumbing, among dozens of modifications she created. “The hardest part is to get the hydraulic parts to work going back and forth and to get all the panels to line up,” she said. “It’s a domino effect — if one thing is really off, it’s all off.”

She added: “My work has always been process-oriented, and that’s where a lot of the meaning comes from. There’s a whole narrative. With all the suspension changes and the mega-chroming, it was a lot of structural work. I need it to look like jewelry. That’s how nice it has to look. No pits, no scratches.”

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1.

MaWa

NYC

August 19th, 2010

1:12 pm

But girls don't know anything about cars!

Looks like some pretty awesome stuff.

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2.

Eric

Maine

August 19th, 2010

1:12 pm

So, is this news because a WOMAN is building a car, or because an ARTIST is building a car?

Is there a reason why it is NOT news when an equally or more capable auto hobbyist does the same thing?

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3.

Eric

Maine

August 19th, 2010

1:13 pm

And another thing...

We aren't told where Ms. Cohen is getting the money to fund this full-time, multi-year project.

As an auto and motorcycle enthusiast with a professional career, I and many others like me would love to know where we can apply for a grant that will allow us to spend years customizing a car, which will be ours to keep, and pay for all of the very expensive supplies and parts we will need in order to do it.

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4.

Charlie D

Lake Charles, La

August 19th, 2010

1:13 pm

This looks like a perfect answer to city, and especially Houston, Texas conditions. Short wheel base so it can park anywhere and expand it longer and higher as size counts in Houston driving. I will be interested to see what the solution to an open frame in back becomes.

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[5.](#)

nee breslin

new mexico

August 19th, 2010

1:13 pm

I cannot wait to see the finished piece. I see some beautiful cars where I am in Northern New Mexico. People spend every spare dollar on their lowriders, kids spend time and money on lowrider bicycles, it's very intense. The result is spectacular sometimes. The maintenance alone is a burden of love.

I am anxious to see Cohen's masterpiece!

[Recommend](#) Recommended by 0 Readers

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[6.](#)

scottj31

nowheresville IL

August 19th, 2010

1:13 pm

this is awesome. thank you

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[7.](#)

shaman

usa

August 19th, 2010

1:14 pm

gee, i could care less. the trabant was a yugo-type dog and the el camino was a classic low-rider that was designed to serve two functions but was a poor truck and an equally poor car. so joining these is now a work of 'art' - well, if a cross in a bottle of urine is art then i guess it could be. by the way, my neighbor's dog just left a work of 'art' on my front lawn.

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[8.](#)

[Zino](#)

Free Union, Virginia

August 19th, 2010

2:06 pm

Now THIS is ART!

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[9.](#)

James

Northern Nevada

August 19th, 2010

2:06 pm

"...she spent four years documenting the world of transgendered sex workers in Panama."

Humm... Given that Panama's population is about 3.2 million, just how many transgendered sex workers can there be? Inquiring minds want to know!

[Recommend](#) Recommended by 0 Readers

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[10.](#)

VEH

Metro Detroit

August 19th, 2010

2:07 pm

PLEASE tell me we will see you on Woodward! Can you park in front of Cranbrook so we know where to look?

Naysayers...it's summer, so she's probably not teaching much, hence the time to work on the...car? (this is a true "crossover"!)

And show me someone else who is working on a Trabant/El Camino mashup. From the art world, no mechanical background. It is interesting, male or female.Lose the sour grapes already.

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[11.](#)

[Umaguma](#)

Philly

August 19th, 2010

7:32 pm

She spent 4 yrs documenting the sex trade transgenders in Panama ?! 4 yrs ? oh MAN. I'm afraid I'm with Eric on this. As a gear head I've done restorations, it cost MONEY , man. Is this woman independantly wealthy or does she have a grant? I wish I could get a grant for MY projects. Geez. who paid to ship the thing from germany? and where is it in the pic? That engine she's standing next to? Thats a huge big-block and has nothin' to do with a Trabant / elCamino clone ! That things bigger than HER ! Something maybe wrong with this story, but if true best of luck to her and i can't wait to see the end result.

[Recommend](#) Recommended by 2 Readers

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[12.](#)

[Mr Davidson](#)

Pittsburgh Pa

August 20th, 2010

1:08 pm

I don't think ,long strange trip ,even applies.

[Recommend](#) Recommended by 0 Readers

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[13.](#)

KimCap

Maine

August 25th, 2010

9:10 pm

Why question why a person does what they do if it's not hurting anyone? She's doing something fun and constructive and quite probably with her own money. It sounds like a lot of work and research. This is America, it's her pursuit of happiness. Get over it. Be happy for her. Good luck.

[Recommend](#) Recommended by 0 Readers

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14.

Noah Vale

Brooklyn, NY

September 5th, 2010

9:49 am

Listen, if she shows her work in the same gallery as Wang Du, it's high time we started to take her seriously.

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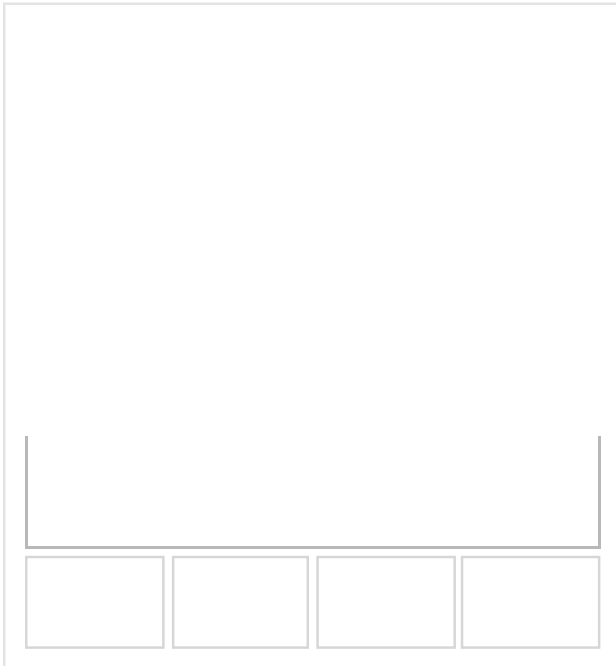
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