



Artifacts | The Amazing Collapsible Family Muscle Car

CULTURE

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Liz Cohen's Trabantimino, extended, at Salon 94.

Bikini-clad babes have been fixtures of auto shows since the “Mad Men” era, when cars became objects of desire for a predominantly male audience. Women like cars too, of course, and they go for the stylish ones even more. But they aren’t known for tinkering under the hood.

Enter the petite Liz Cohen, a 37-year-old artist and photographer who has spent much of the last eight years in body shops across the country, building a custom hybrid like no other – with her own hands. In the process she also became her own best model for the Champagne and pale green product. Her collapsible Trabantimino, currently on display at the **Salon 94** Gallery on the Bowery, is not just a cute set of wheels. It’s a prime candidate for a James Bond movie.

The car is part Trabant, the VW of Soviet East Germany, as extinct now as the Berlin Wall. Its other half derives from a 1973 Chevy El Camino, the sporty two-seater that was part muscle car and part flatbed pickup. By flipping switches on the Trabantimino’s center console, a driver can extend the car’s squat body to the length



of an El Camino. Flip another set of switches and the rear wheels rise to a height that would make a lowrider proud. Another pair elevates the car's snub nose to a level that would hide any road in front of it.

Working these controls is a little like riding a mechanical bronco, but they make the car more fun than driving it might be. Unless, that is, you have very long arms and shotgun legs. When I tried it, my arms could barely reach the small steering wheel, while my knees were in my face. But when the car violently jerked up and down and then stretched as if waking from a long sleep, I felt like a giddy child on a thrill ride.

In order to fit the car's hydraulics and powerful V-8 engine into its schizoid body, Cohen had to foreshorten the interior and forgo such amenities as a back seat and leg room. That's all right; it's an artwork, and it's beautiful. It also has comfortable leather bucket seats and is absolutely road-worthy. Frankly, I didn't want to leave it, even if I did have to jump to reach the ground.



Courtesy of Liz Cohen and Salon 94 "Yellow Push-up Arch," 2010 by Liz Cohen.

The idea began in Panama a decade ago, when Cohen was taken up by a group of sex workers there and began to explore the boundaries of membership in groups where she didn't belong. Car fanatics and pinup girls were two of them. She bought the Trabant in 2002 on a trip to Berlin, and donned a bikini to pose with it in front of its assembly plant, already a ruin with no hint that 30,000 people had built three million cars there over 30 years' time. With a two-cylinder engine and no frills (only the "deluxe" model had chrome and a two-tone paint job), it was "the people's car," a



utopian family vehicle with plastic body parts that was affordable to everyone, and, Cohen thought, would make a perfect mate to the equally all-in-one El Camino.

Though it was probably insane to try and combine the two, she took the Trabant to a lowrider custom body shop in Oakland, Calif., where she insinuated herself into its culture and started its transformation. But it was in Scottsdale, Ariz., where she had a four-year teaching gig, that the car really began to take shape. She apprenticed herself to Bill Cherry, a master mechanic who gave her the key to his toolbox and left for a two-week vacation. The rest of the shop's crew spent it sniggering while she stripped the car by her lonesome, unaware that there were power tools to make the job easier. Ultimately, as has happened with many women who step into a man's world, she became the best mechanic in the shop, save for Cherry.

As a thank-you note to him, she made a suite of 150 small black-and-white portraits of the hand tools he had collected over 30 years. They include a stethoscope and a dental pick, and are now on display in the gallery with the car and are also collected in a book, "The 5 P's: Proper Planning Prevents Poor Performance." It has another, high-heeled bikini portrait of Cohen on its cover. In this and several others, taken at each stage of the car's development (on view at the gallery's annex in Freeman's Alley), she adopted poses based on those of the Cold War-era Olympian Nadia Comenici, though the Olympic gymnast never looked quite as fetching.

It was sheer coincidence that brought Cohen to Detroit three years ago to head up the photography department of the [Cranbrook Academy of Art](#), not far from the Kustom Creations Bodyshop, where she finished the car just a few weeks ago. Now she's on the cover of [Automobile Magazine](#), the insider journal for car fanatics. "That's pretty legit!" she said, plugging the car into a gallery socket – and no doubt searching for a new club that would rather not have her as a member.

Liz Cohen will demonstrate her Trabantimino from 2 to 6 p.m. on Saturday, Oct. 30, at Salon 94, 243 Bowery, where the car remains on view through Nov. 11. The show continues in the gallery's annex around the corner at 1 Freeman's Alley.