



SALON 94

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Liz Cohen's Conceptual Car Takes Top Prize at Real-Life Lowrider Fest



Courtesy of Salon 94

Liz Cohen's "Trabantimino" (2002-10)

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Artist Liz Cohen spent more than eight years crafting her “Trabantimino,” a hybrid vehicle that is part East German compact workhorse Trabant, part Chevy El Camino, and that transforms via hydraulics. An exploration of DIY culture and the playful mixing of identities, the project has been shown — to well-deserved acclaim — at Lower East Side gallery Salon 94 and at the inaugural edition of Frieze New York (2012). Now the one-of-a-kind artwork has won another form of high praise: “First Place” and “Special Recognition” awards at the annual lowrider festival, “Main Street Showdown Supershow,” in Española, New Mexico, the self-proclaimed “lowrider capital of the world.”

“It was a really amazing experience,” Cohen told ARTINFO. “It was so validating to have these lowrider guys tell me the car is off the charts.” The “Trabantimino” won first place in the “Compact Radical” category, which awards a car with seven or more body modifications. The special recognition nod also scored her a check for \$100.

This year marks Cohen’s first foray into actual car competitions — though she says that entering one was always a goal with respect to the “Trabantimino” project. Having started her artistic life as a documentary photographer, exploring issues around group identity, she says actually joining the lowrider community was a logical next step. “I always wanted to do something where I was the least likely member. I knew the final piece was to see if the car and myself were actually legit. There had to be a test, and this was it.”

As part of her larger examination of stereotypes and mixed identities, Cohen’s project with the car also involved a photo series for which she got her own body into buff, model-esque shape and donned a bikini to pose alongside or work on the car, mimicking yet another layer of the lowrider culture — the sexed-up, scantily clad “car girls” who feature prominently in magazine, calendar, and ad imagery. In Española, however, she was just there to show off her automotive handiwork.

What was the experience like? Cohen says she was amazed and gratified at just how receptive the mostly male car crowd in New Mexico was. In fact, she found herself to be something of a celebrity, having put a video of her vehicle in action on YouTube several years ago that found a robust audience among lowrider fans. When she arrived at the staging area early — sans “Trabantimino” — to scope out the scene she says she was almost immediately greeted by a man who called her out by name. When she asked him how he knew who she was, guessing that she must be the only woman in the contest, the man shot back, “We’ve been waiting for you. We know your car!”

This is not the only such competition Cohen has entered lately. She also recently scored a win at another lowrider event in Fresno, California, though she describes the mood there as “more aggressive...more territorial.” (Since the Fresno festival ran out of plaques to award, Cohen says she was told hers would be mailed to her in two weeks time).

Will she be back for more? Cohen says a number of her Española competitors encouraged her to compete in an upcoming national lowrider competition in Las Vegas, though she’s unsure if her teaching commitments will permit (she teaches at the Cranbrook Academy of Art in Detroit). “There was so much going on. I got really good reaction to the lowrider hydraulics, which are the most important part. But I didn’t have murals.” She received a number of design tips from admirers rooting for her to take the project further.

“I don’t know if I want to do that,” the artist says with a laugh. “Do I have to be the best lowrider or can I just be really good? I think getting first place in my category was pretty damn good.”



The award Liz Cohen won for her Liz Cohen's "Trabantino"

