

# THE BELIEVER

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## 18 TEMPORARY CONTEMPORARY TATTOOS

(Including—look closely!—four visible on this page)

by **RAYMOND PETTIBON,**  
**MARCEL DZAMA, RON REGÉ JR.,**  
**WALTON FORD, & MANY OTHERS**

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## VERITABLE HUMAN DUMPLINGS

Why do people love mock marriages between dwarfs,  
stuffed kittens, and other tiny, cute entities?

by **RACHEL POLIQUIN**

NOV./DEC. 2007 ★ \$10

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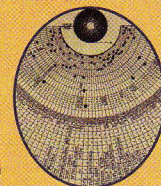


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## LIZ COHEN

[VISUAL ARTIST/CAR MECHANIC/MODEL]

"I JUST REALIZED THAT WORLD WAR II IS A LANDMARK  
MOMENT IN THE HISTORY OF LOWRIDING."

The border crossings Liz Cohen performs in her work:

*Bikini Model—Mechanic*

*Body Shop—Art Studio*

*Feminist—Postfeminist*

*Panama Canal—Phoenix, Arizona*

*Trabant—El Camino*

**T**hree years ago, San Francisco artist Liz Cohen picked up everything and moved to Phoenix, Arizona, to live with her mother. She did it so she could work full-time building a car: a lowrider so complicated that even the owner of the shop she works in says he wouldn't attempt it. And she started with no skills at all and, she says, no mechanical talent.

Now, her "Trabantomino" is almost finished. It's an East German Trabant 601 Deluxe that transforms, through hydraulics and over the course of about fifteen seconds, into a Chevy El Camino—meaning that it changes from one failed-utopian car, representing socialism, into another, representing the American determination to have it all.

But it isn't the car itself that's the work of art, it's the process and the performance of making the car. For an exhibi-

tion at the Stockholm gallery Färgfabriken in 2005, the artist spent three months working on the car and her body simultaneously. The gallery built her a body shop and a gym, and hired her a personal trainer. At the end, Cohen choreographed a bikini photograph shoot. The public was invited to watch it all as part of a series of events called the Gender Turntable.

Because Cohen is breaking into a male subculture, the gender issues in her work are the most obvious. But others are equally important, and arguably more profound. She also purposely violates the first rule of documentary: do not get involved. Cohen, now thirty-four, began her artistic career as a documentarian. She first took a photography class in high school, after her father, a surgeon and an amateur photographer, died in a car accident that left her feeling particularly close to his 1968 Nikon.

After graduating from Tufts University, Cohen set off to



when I was a kid on the freeway in Phoenix.

I also had taken a nighttime automotive maintenance class at City College in San Francisco because I wanted to learn to do basic things on my old little car. For a summer I apprenticed at a place called Discount Brake and Clutch in San Francisco, where I did brakes on Sundays. I don't know why I had the curiosity; I just had the curiosity, so I followed it.

BLVR: Was the car project part of grad school?

LC: No, but at the end of grad school I had the idea for it—not that it was going to be a transformer, but I wanted to make an El Camino lowrider. And then I had the idea of the transformer when I got a grant. I got a residency to go to Germany and I wanted to start the project and I just thought, Well, this is weird. Why am I going to try to find an El Camino in Germany? I thought, I'm a first-generation kid in the U.S.—my parents are immigrants—and I think a lot of growing up like that has influenced my work. I thought, I'm going to Stuttgart, the town where the Mercedes factory is, so maybe I'll get an old Mercedes station wagon and turn that into an El Camino. I was getting ready to go. I had the *Bikini Carwash* piece at Spanganga in San Francisco, raising money to buy this Mercedes in Stuttgart, in Germany. When I got to Germany, I realized I couldn't afford a Mercedes, even an old one. Then I went on a trip to Berlin and I was in this bar with a couple people and this weird little car [a Trabant] drove by and this guy we were with said, "Do you know what that car is?" and he started telling me about it, and I thought, Oh my god, that is the car. They were so cheap, people were getting rid of them. Lucky for me, I found one for four hundred dollars.

BLVR: The Trabant became a metaphor.

LC: *Trabant* means companion. And I think to me both cars [the Trabant and the El Camino] are utopian; they represent in a very strong way certain national values. The Trabant is East German. It began to be built after World War II. The idea was that everybody would have access to cars that were cheap to manufacture and easy to fix.

The engine has something like seven moving parts in it and it's a two-stroke engine, like a motorcycle or lawn mower. The irony was, if you weren't connected, you had to be on a waiting list for, like, ten years just because of the bureaucracy. But it was supposed to be the people's car. In the beginning, the walls of the car were made out of a material that mixed the fibers from old wool military uniforms with resin.

BLVR: Did you get one of those?

LC: No, mine's a 1987. Its walls are paper waste and resin.

BLVR: Are Trabants still made?

LC: No. They stopped making them a year after the wall came down. And it had its failures. You had to wait, the car is really slow, and the walls were really not that structurally sound.

And then the El Camino is this other failed utopian vehicle. It's about American values of, like, "Go for it, you can have it all": you can have the comfort of a sedan, the utility of a truck, and the speed of a muscle car, all in one package. Well, there's a reason why the El Camino didn't work. You can't fit your whole family in it like a sedan. It doesn't have the utility of a truck—I think in the early El Caminos, you could add air in the suspension and put a heavier load in the flatbed, but if you put a full truckload in there, you'd crack the frame. So you can't have everything in one package. You have to give some stuff up.

BLVR: How did you first go into a garage and say, "I want to do this thing"? How do normal lowriders start?

LC: There are so many different ways. It's a huge subculture. There are people with a lot of money who just take their cars to shops and just pay somebody else to do it. And then there are people who are in car clubs and they help each other and do car washes on the weekends to raise money, and everyone pitches in and helps out. Other people are loners doing it in their garage.

Elwood Body Works isn't a lowrider shop, it's just



shoot photographs in Panama, documenting transgendered sex workers near where her grandmother lived. As she became closer to her Panamanian subjects, they dressed her up, and she slowly transformed into a documentarian-performer.

She dreamed up the *Trabantino* during an artist residency at the Akademie Schloss Solitude in Stuttgart, Germany in 2002, and she remains stationed at Elwood Body Works in Phoenix, where she works under the tutelage of master mechanic Bill Cherry. In a group show in January at the Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art, Cohen will exhibit the finished car, plus photography, video, and ephemera, and in conjunction, she'll organize a public lowrider show called *Radical Mod*. Her next goal is to get the car into car magazines, and to get herself onto the magazine covers as the model representing the car, a scenario unheard of in lowriding.

I first met Cohen in Miami in 2006. Our discussions continued over the phone over several months. —Jen Graves

## I. THE EL CAMINO IS A FAILED UTOPIAN VEHICLE.

THE BELIEVER: How exactly did documentary become performance for you?

LIZ COHEN: I was really interested in journalism and investigative reporting. I didn't want to be a journalist, but I was interested in that way of working. So I was photographing a group of transgendered sex workers in Panama City. I wanted to look at the relationship between the U.S. and Latin America, and I thought Panama would be a great place to do it. So I started photographing on the military bases there, but they were boring—the dynamics going on weren't really that apparent. So I started driving along the Canal Zone at night, and that's when I met this group of sex workers, and a lot of their clientele were U.S. servicemen, so that became interesting to me. I kept going back, and I was interested in the bodily journey of going from male to female. I was also drawing a metaphor of Panama's history and this state of being between the Americas. This relationship to the United States reminded me a lot of the sex work. Their life started to become this parallel between the U.S. and Panama.

I'd been photographing one of them for several

years and she asked me if she could dress me up, and she dressed me up, and I hung out on the street with her dressed in the way she dresses. I kind of consider that my first performance. It was probably two years into it. I mean, they had asked me before, but there were two I really became close with. One was named Linette and the other was Liza Minnelli, and Linette had wanted to dress me up really early on, saying, "You look like a Barbie, why don't you let me show it?" And I just thought it was funny. And then there was one trip when my sister was around and I thought, OK, why am I acting like this? This is so lame, I should just try it, and so I had my sister photograph while Linette transformed me and then we went and hung out on the street together.

From that experience and the interviews I had done, I did a series of performances in San Francisco: I would take the persona of a combination of all the people I had met and I would do performances based on them and based on things I had read about the history of Panama. In a way, that worked. It really did lead into the car project.

But I hit a wall with that transformation, where I realized we were becoming friends, and there was an effort to bring me more into that group—but there was no way I could be a legitimate part of that group. I wasn't biologically male, and I'm not going on a journey from M to F, and I'm not a sex worker and I don't want to be a sex worker. And I wanted to design a project where I could become a part of what I was curious about. It had to be something where I could really become a legitimate member, and I wanted it to be something where I was a really unlikely member so I could earn my cred and earn my membership. That led to the car.

BLVR: Why a car?

LC: I had a curiosity around cars and car shows. It was a long time ago, but I do have this childhood memory of this coach I had who had a banana yellow El Camino, who taught me to walk on my hands. For some reason I have this vivid memory of the banana yellow El Camino, and I have a memory of seeing a lowrider once





Liz Cohen. LEFT: *Air Gun*, 2005, courtesy of Galerie Laurent Godin (Paris). RIGHT: *Hood*, 2006, courtesy of Galerie Laurent Godin (Paris).

a regular collision-repair shop that does frame-up restoration. They do beautiful work. I basically made a list of, like, sixty shops in the Phoenix area that had the word *custom* in them anywhere, like in their ad in the yellow pages. And I think they were about the fortieth shop I visited. I had this little photo album, I had my story, and I knew I was asking for a lot: I needed a shop that would take this kind of project on, would let me be the person building it, lend me the tools, and not charge me for being there. It was kind of... I went into Elwood Body Works and Don Barsellotti, the owner, he was cracking up. I showed him the little photo album and he was like, "Are you serious?" And I sat down in the shop and his son was there, Scott, and he said, "Should we let her do it?" and Scott came over and he looked at the album and he said, "Yeah," and they said, "OK, show up in two weeks with the car."

BLVR: So when you started building the car, you thought it would take how long?

LC: I thought it would take six months to a year.

BLVR: And when do you think it'll be done?

LC: What I'm hoping for is to be done at the end of this

year. I mean, the car drives now. I turned over the engine. I finished the driveshaft, which was a year and a half in the making. The driveshaft is the biggest design challenge of the car, because the whole car gets six feet longer—

BLVR: When it goes from being a Trabant to an El Camino?

LC: Yeah. Three of those feet are between the wheels, and since I changed the car from being a front-wheel drive when it was a Trabant to being a rear-wheel drive like an El Camino, it has a driveshaft, which, you know, transfers the energy from the transmission to the rear wheels, makes the wheels turn. So that has to get longer.

That space between the rear axle and the transmission is very small now because of how small the Trabant is, so the driveshaft has to telescope four times. And the driveshaft has to be very balanced, it has to run very smoothly for the car to get speed so it's not vibrating all over the place. It took me a really long time to engineer how to make that. I talked to a lot of different people, I had to go to a lot of machine shops, and, finally, a year and a half later, I have a beautiful, beautiful spline telescoping-four-times driveshaft.



BLVR: What is the word you said before *telescoping*?

LC: *Spline*. S as in spider, p as in Paul, l as in...

BLVR: Spline? What is that?

LC: It's ridged. It has teeth, like a gear, but it's superlong. Teeth that go down the full length of it. So it's a spline shaft.

BLVR: Did you know any of these words before?

LC: No, I didn't.

BLVR: So you've learned another language.

LC: Yeah, for sure. And I've learned how to build things. I weld. I can solve construction problems, and I know all the systems of the car. I've basically built a car from the ground up. I can't do diagnosis for repairs. Everybody thinks if their car breaks down, they can just call me and I'm going to know what to do with it. That's not what I've learned how to do yet—to build them a car might be better.

BLVR: What color will it be?

LC: A combination of stock Trabant and stock El Camino colors. I want to do painting in the lowrider mural-painting tradition, with a story, because the story of this car and of building it is so much a part of the piece that I want a way to expose that narrative on the car. I'm planning to do a wraparound mural that includes all the people involved, plus those histories of the cars, like Erich Honecker, one of the last leaders of East Germany—I would maybe paint that person so that you would know it's him, but the face would be Bill Cherry's, my mentor. I just realized that World War II is a landmark moment in the history of lowriding and the history, of course, of East Germany: people worked building the airplanes in World War II and were exposed to hydraulics, and the early lowriders all used aircraft hydraulics. Now we order kits.

**II. "IN THE CAR SHOW, THERE ARE REALLY THREE KINDS OF PEOPLE: THERE ARE THE CAR OWNERS, THE CAR BUILDERS, AND THE MODELS THAT REPRESENT THE CARS. I WANT TO BE ALL THREE."**

BLVR: In any of the shops you went into, were there other women working?

LC: I mean, Elwood Body Works has a woman that works in the office.

BLVR: But you weren't looking for women-owned shops or anything like that: your whole goal was to stick out.

LC: Yeah. The gender thing is obvious, and then there's a whole bunch of other things that make me an unusual member of this group too. My parents are professionals, they don't get their hands dirty. Or kind of—my father was a surgeon, and my mom is a counselor at community college—so I don't have a background in making things, building things, being around tools.

If you go to a lowrider show, you'll see all kinds of people. But if you want to go for the stereotype, I'm not a Chicana, I'm a Latina, but I'm not of Mexican descent. I didn't grow up in a barrio—I mean, this is really playing on stereotypes—but, you know, I could go on and on. I'm not big, I'm really small. I'm not particularly coordinated, I mean, the guy that's my mentor always says, "Asking you to build a car is like asking me to build a computer." I get it done, but I might take a little longer than someone who's easy with their hands. There's a reason why I gravitated toward the media arts.

BLVR: Do you feel like you're becoming a member of this new community, like you're in the process of really immigrating?

LC: Yeah. For example, my relationship with the shop has changed. I've been there three years. I'm friends with some of those guys now, and then just the way I manage myself around tools and the work area, and, you know, I think a lot of people respect what I'm doing.



a conversation-starter."

LC: I think all the judgments and kneejerk reactions are a part of it, a part of people having to revisit assumptions they make about people, about what they think is ethical or moral or appropriate.

In Sweden, on opening night, there was a performance. I introduced Bill, and then we went to operate the car—it was really funny, we had practiced all day—and I pushed the buttons and nothing happened. In front of all these people. So we were frantically looking around the car and it was a wire that had pulled out of a contact. So Bill screwed it back together.

That show was sponsored with EU money and money from these two institutes from Sweden. One is a center for working life, like equality in the workplace, and the other is another governmental organization that happens to deal with workers' rights. The woman from one of the organizations was furious that there was this guy with me and that he had to fix something, and what did this mean for the project?!

BLVR: Did you talk to her?

LC: She watched me work one day for, like, six hours. She just sat in back, and then she came up to me at the end and was like, "I know you don't want to be in those photographs." I was like, "I orchestrated those photographs!"

BLVR: When was the first time you played around with a sexy persona?

LC: You know, when I was dressed up in Panama, that was pretty racy. And then when I did those performances in San Francisco for the Panama stuff, it wasn't a bikini, but it was this little lace dress, a translucent lace dress.

BLVR: When I first saw your photographs, people told me, "You have to see her in person, because she is so different from those." And the contrast *was* striking between this Amazon sex model and this makeup-less artist. When you change costumes, does your behavior change, too?

LC: The stuff with *Canal* was really a masquerade, a dress-up. It had a relationship with theater, like doing monologues. And this is different. When I did *Bikini Carwash*, I was wearing a bikini, and I had a look, but I was just me. It's the same with this project, the whole *Bodywork* project. When I'm in a bikini and I'm directing the photographs, I have a look and I might use my body in ways that I've studied in the magazines, but that's probably how it is for a lot of people doing modeling at car shows. I'm living it, I'm not pretending it, which is what I was doing with *Canal*. It's a different kind of performance. It's less of a constructed persona, because I'm really trying to become a part of it.

BLVR: Do you have any anxiety about the bikini model photographs?

LC: The content of them is more accessible to the car guys than to art-world people—they don't look anything like the photographs you see in the car magazines. So for the guys in the shop, they don't look like pinups at all. The lighting is documentary. The car's not done. If the first read is like, "OK, what the fuck is this?" then if you sit down and think about it for a second, it changes, and that might be a good process to go through.

BLVR: Does it feel in your everyday interactions like you've joined a sexist subculture?

LC: It's like there are some people that talk the right talk but they don't have the right walk, and there's some people that don't say the right words about things and might not be totally PC. I think that's been a big lesson for me at the shop. At the shop, everyone didn't go to Tufts and get their liberal arts education, you know, they don't say "woman" all the time, people say things in a really un-PC way. But it's a really diverse workplace, even sexual-orientation-wise.

BLVR: You've been living this car for three years. Do you ever get tired and just want to work on something else?



There's an interview with Don Barsellotti, the owner of the shop, where he talks about what I'm doing with the car, and he says, "I've been in cars for thirty years and I wouldn't even attempt to do what she's doing." So it's not just that it's crazy that I'm building this car, it's a crazy car to build, period. And I think that's the part of the project that gets lost a lot because people get so wrapped up in the gender part of it, they don't realize this car would be crazy even for a guy to build.

BLVR: You were at Färgfabriken for three months as the exhibition component of a whole series of events called The Gender Turntable. They totally transformed the gallery for you.

LC: They built me a body shop and they built me a gym inside the exhibition space. I think Jan [Aman, director of Färgfabriken] really understood some things about the piece. It's a piece all the way through, not just when the car is done. It has audiences all along the way. Even the shop is a very important audience during the construction. So I had a personal trainer, this guy named Christer, who would come three times a week and I'd work out in the exhibition space, and then I would also work on the car, so that's what people would see when they would come to the show.

Then we did a big bikini shoot, and the space was open that day. People could come and look in and see how the whole shoot is constructed, because it's very constructed. These photo shoots, they're funny in a way. There's, like, a lot of stuffing, and a lot of makeup. When you get ready for the car shows, it's different, because you can't construct every single second, you know, the way you do an image, but yeah—that was the exhibition: me working on the car, me working on my body, and preparing for this moment of the bikini photograph with the car.

BLVR: Is it important to you that people know that you do the labor?

LC: Yeah. I've had people ask me if I want to join their lowrider clubs, but I don't want to join one until I finish the car, because it's important to me that I be the one

that builds the car. I don't want to work on it with a group of people, because I just know that I'm on a learning curve. I mean, at this point I have a lot of skills, I probably have more skills than some people building cars in their garages do, because of all the metal fabrication I've had to do, but it's important to me that people don't doubt that I built the car, and I think there's a big risk of that.

Part of the thing is, I had seen on this lowrider forum, *layitlow.com*, there was some discussion about women joining car clubs. I remember this one woman joining a club and it said she didn't build her car, her boyfriend did, and these guys were criticizing that, and I remember thinking, These guys are such dicks. Half of these guys took their cars to shops to be built. I realized I'm going to have to prove it. Like, if a guy were to say, "I worked on the car," people are going to be like, "Yeah, you worked on the car," but I knew I was going to have to have evidence. I shoot video every day.

BLVR: What will you do when the car is finished?

LC: I'm going to compete in car shows. That's a really big part of the project—testing it out in its home space, the space it should be tested out in. I'd like to go to several lowrider shows and compete with the car and see how the car does in the radical section and see how I do, you know, how people feel about me building the car, if I can get the car into the magazines, if I get to represent the car.

Because in the car show, there are really three kinds of people: there are the car owners, the car builders, and the models that represent the cars. I want to be all three. I think I've only seen one lowrider magazine with a guy on the cover, and he was a famous wrestler. So usually the person on the front of the magazine has nothing to do with the construction of the car. I would like to control all aspects of the project and represent the piece and control the representation of me. I want to see if I can make the magazines and be the person that shows off the car.

BLVR: You've called the photographs "a provocation,



LC: Right now I'm really pumped on it, because I drove it around the parking lot and I'm excited about my ideas about the paint job. So right now it's a lot of fun, but sometimes...

One thing I've been thinking about is how embroiled I am in a guys' world right now. They don't treat me like a guy at the shop; they do treat me differently. The son of the owner of the shop, we get along really well, but he's also supersexual. I can hold my own in that. That's one of the reasons I have a sense of humor about it. When they roughhouse each other, Scott will come up to the guys and massage the back of their necks. If you have a sense of humor, you just let him do it, and he'll do that to me, and I'll just grab his ear, but it's different because I'm a woman and they're not. They'll hit each other's asses, and yesterday was the first time that Scott hit my ass, and he was like, "Wow, that's pretty nice," and I was like, "Buns of steel," but it's not the world I'm used to.

BLVR: As the token woman, you get it from both sides.

LC: From the guys, and from that woman in Sweden

who was angry about me getting help from Bill. Ariel Levy's book about the female chauvinist pig has haunted me. Not to be a "girl gone wild." I can't tell you how many people have asked me about that.

For me, I guess being full of life and feeling free to try things is one of the most important things about being an empowered woman—not to be scrutinized for your every move. It's like women being on trial for being sexually mistreated, and then being asked, "What were you wearing?" How do you find your own way without having the ability to try things out and make mistakes and evaluate them and just see how you want to walk through the world?

BLVR: Is lowriding something you'll always be a part of?

LC: Time will tell. I'm not going to build another car after this. A lot of people that build cars—it's a once-in-a-lifetime thing. It's really expensive, it's really time consuming, and I have other projects I want to do. But I have a real affection for this kind of work now, and that will probably seep into the rest of my work. It's part of who I am now. ★

*Sedaratives, continued from page 16*

do I kick the habit?

Marsha Knesbitt  
Colorado Springs, Colo.

**Dear Marsha,**

*If I had to listen to you make a bunch of tired, unfunny pot jokes and endure endless hours of your yammering about pot and how great it is and how it needs to be legalized and how you can make clothes out of hemp and glaucoma blah blah blah, and then found out you didn't even smoke pot anymore, I would murder you and then kill myself. Don't kick the habit. For both our sakes.*

Paul

**Dear Sedaratives,**

I just moved into a new apartment and my room is right off of the living room. My roommates watch a lot of TV, always after midnight and always very, very loudly. I hate

my new roommates. Should I just move out or sit down with them and try to defuse the situation?

Smiles,  
Greg Klondike  
Dublin, Calif.

**Dear Greg,**

*Ha! Are you talking about calling a "house meeting"? That is rich! Those never work! Never! You will only be left with the cold comfort afforded you by having taken the high road, while your roommates label you an uptight, patronizing old grandma. And they will start eating your organic peanut butter out of the communal fridge like a pack of Doug Prentisses.*

*If you can drive the thirty-six miles from Dublin to San Francisco, there is an awesome roommate situation waiting for you! Greg, you are just what those Moonies need to shake things up! Pack up your earplugs and persecution complex and hit the road!*

Paul ★