



SALON 94

**The New York Times**

August 19, 2010, 10:15 AM

## **The Trabantimino: The Art of Building a Trabant Lowrider**

By [TAMARA WARREN](#)



Tamara Warren for The New York TimesLiz 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.



S A L O N 9 4

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.



S A L O N 9 4

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."