

Chopped Chromed Customized

“Customization is more precisely committed to having a pragmatic effect on reality”
—Rubén Ortiz Torres, 1999, *Art Issues*

As a New Mexico native, lowriders have always been a part of my cultural and visual reality. I took for granted the profusion of gleaming cars, impossibly low to the ground, and radiant with vivid, high-shine paint jobs. Dancing to the distinctive beat of enormous speakers, the vehicles levitated not only through the reverberations of full-bodied bass sound, but also via souped-up hydraulics, lifting and lowering at every stoplight.

I recall staring at the impossibly small, stylized chain steering wheels, shiny and spinning hubcaps, and intricate murals covering the cars' hoods with icons as varied as *la Virgen de Guadalupe*, Elvis Presley, and shrines in tender memorial to deceased family members. I somehow understood these cars to be the beautiful yet ordinary objects of an “other” culture, never considering that they could (and did) contribute to a broader contemporary art dialogue.

Years later, on returning to New Mexico after living abroad, lowriders re-captured my attention as I began to consider their significance as objects of art. Glossy, unique, and painstakingly detailed, lowriders undeniably fit my definition of “fine art.” An homage to the culture from which they emerge, each car is “a masterful, and often resourceful, fusion of technical dexterity, artistic skill, and aesthetic vision” (Smith, 148). These cars are chopped, chromed, and customized with a careful eye and an appreciation for thorough and elaborate majesty.

Customization is an ongoing creative endeavor. It is a wholly original expression of both the car owner and the customizer. It is a “mixing and matching [of] various car parts, often from differing car models, as well as blending the skills of various individuals.... Customizing demands constant reconfiguration of the car’s detail and design” (Padilla, 17). The customization process is a collaborative artistic endeavor which transforms the commonplace into a work of art.

Made from accessible resources within a state of relentless reinvention and flux, lowriders are the result of imagination, raw material, and a discriminatingly honed aesthetic; “the tender devotion lavished on what would be otherwise the throwaways of consumer car culture.... Instead of being crushed and forgotten, these cars will forever live in a glitzy state of perpetual recycling” (Neil, 2000).

The exhibition *Chopped, Chromed, Customized* explores the art of customization within the lowrider tradition and the mutability of the mediums employed in its process. The customization of the car, and of the works of art in this show, are “spectacles of taste and style that are transformed, modified, and disported as they migrate through and across various cultural networks” (Chavoya, 145). The five artists in this exhibition, Liz Cohen, Luis Jiménez, Rubén Ortiz Torres, Alex Harris, and Carol Sarkisian, are individually celebrated as contemporary artists in the West and Southwest. Together, they combine several unique cultural and artistic perspectives on the notion of art in within the context of this exhibition. Each effectively customizes his/her own practice and process in order to interact with, react to, and explore a unique and extraordinary tradition.

In life-size photographs, Alex Harris places the viewer in the backseat of classic lowriders, looking out though the front window onto distinctively New Mexican landscapes and sites. Harris’s work gives a specific point of view of the lowrider from its most intimate setting—the backseat of the prized vehicle. These works do not impose an outsider’s point of view; rather they offer an unmediated interior perspective.

With the focus and dedication of an expert car customizer, Carol Sarkisian’s miniature lowriders are embellished, ornamented, and outfitted with Swarovski crystals, found objects, and gold leaf. Sarkisian’s process reflects the precision, lavish detail, and intricate aesthetic choices of the lowrider. “Her small

sculptures reflect a compelling view of modern forms of transportation rendered in sparkling detail” (Traugott, 53). Her passionate concern for the consistency of the whole reveals the same interface of dexterity, application, and artistic skill used by car customizers on Chevy Impalas, Mercury Montegos, and Lincoln Continentals.

Lowrider culture is charged not only with the allure of sumptuous materials and a finely honed aesthetic, but also—in car shows and in the pages of lowrider magazines—scantly clad bikini models provocatively posed in, on, and beside the cars. In her *BODYWORK* project, Liz Cohen inserts herself into the lowrider culture as car owner, customizer and bikini model. For over a year she worked in a body shop in Arizona—with no prior knowledge of cars. She learned the tricks of the trade and turned an old East German Trabant into a custom-simulation of an American Chevrolet El Camino.

By incorporating herself into all aspects of lowrider culture, Cohen creates a complicated and multifaceted role, infiltrating that culture on multiple levels and exploring stereotypes inherent to different layers of the community. In her words, “there are lots of kinds of people around cars and lowriders. The car designer is smart. The car builders are strong. The car models are sexy. All of these qualities are appealing. People are dimensional. Why not be all of these things?” (Ryden) Cohen parses entangled notions of legitimacy and belonging, and literally undergoes the customization process as artist while implementing the same process on car, body, and audience. In a recent article in *ARTnews* magazine Cohen stated, “I didn’t invent the image of the bikini model, and it’s here to stay. So I think it’s silly to embark on a crusade to eliminate it. I think it’s smarter to play around with it, to use the cultural snippet to create a space for discussion” (Finkel, 119).

Cohen’s interest in playing with stereotypes and exploring the constant flux of car customization parallels issues addressed in Rubén Ortiz Torres’s multi-media work. Ortiz Torres examines the ambiguities, contradictions, and questions of identity presented when cultures expand beyond their traditional domain. Through video, installation, painting, and sculpture, his work “participates in spectacles of taste and style that are transformed, modified, and distorted as they migrate through and across carious cultural networks” (Chavoya, 171). As Cohen’s work infiltrates notions of culture and belonging, Ortiz Torres both delineates the incongruities inherent to cultural traditions and maps the cartography of cultural transmission and interpretation in various settings and across ethnic boundaries. Ortiz Torres and Cohen are a part of the lowrider discourse but also share the self-awareness and vantage point of being artists. Both are a “part of the game,” but they are aware that “being part of the game means to participate in a social framework, and to recognize the function of that framework’s assumptions while remaining critical to its claims to authority or finality” (Chavoya, 173-4).

During his career, Luis Jiménez saw the lowrider as an iconic art form. His earliest ideas about becoming an artist began with the image of lowriders cruising the streets of Juárez and El Paso. Jimenez viewed these cars as

The ultimate synthesis of painting and sculpture...he recognized the visual language of the Baroque in these magical automobiles, in the way the smooth folds of steel and the hundreds of coats of transparent lacquer caught the light and held it as the cars slipped through the bright streets like liquid color—like Caravaggio meets Bernini, on wheels (Hickey, 69).

Having been both social advocate and searing critic, Jiménez’s work often contains blunt and controversial imagery and content. His work consistently provoked convention through a careful balance of reverence and parody. He once said, “It is not my job to censor myself. An artist’s job is to constantly test the boundaries” (Storey). In creating monumental sculpture of fiberglass with the unmistakable dazzle of the lowrider, Jimenez’s work oozed an alluring and theatrical lushness, with garish colors, showy materials, and startling scale. Ortiz Torres’s description of the lowrider is apt: “appealing and repulsive at the same time, they stand for spicy taste... They are loved and hated by the broader culture, incorporating the contradictions inherent in both power and sex” (Ortiz Torres, “Cathedral on Wheels,” 29).

The process of car customization challenges limitations of the imagination of the customizer, owner, and spectator. All five artists in this exhibition accept this same challenge against the boundaries of medium, artist, and viewer. This process enables the audience to “to position themselves according to ‘self-determined relations to place’ or belonging, given shifting political paradigms and relatively limited or uncertain ‘places’ from which to act” (Chavoya, 174). These “strangely familiar” works of art demonstrate how, “categories such as ‘strange’ and ‘familiar’ are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and often inhabit the same terrain” (Ortiz Torres, brochure, 58). Customization is a continuous endeavor to explore unique expression, to test the limits of acceptance and the imagination, and to transform the everyday and overlooked into prideful, shining, painstaking works of art.

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