



Liz Cohen's solo exhibitions and performances include BODYWORK at Färgfabriken, Stockholm, Sweden; Magically Yours at the Manolo Garcia Gallery in San Francisco and the Akademie Schloss Solitude, Stuttgart, Germany; Bikini Carwash at Modern Culture, New York and Spanganga, San Francisco; and La Avenida Cuatro de Julio/Fourth of July Avenue, a street performance, Panama City, Panama. Her grants and awards include an award from Artadia: The Fund for Art and Dialogue, a fellowship from the The Photography Institute and residencies at the Akademie Schloss Solitude and The MacDowell Colony. She has taught at the California College of the Arts and other San Francisco Bay Area institutions. She received an MFA in Photography from the California College of Arts and Crafts and also studied at The School of The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. She currently lives and works in Phoenix, AZ.

Liz Cohen

BODYWORK

Visual > Installation | Photography | Public Art | Sculpture | Products & Consumerism |
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In *BODYWORK*, her ongoing conceptual project, Liz Cohen attempts two simultaneous feats of transformation. One is the remaking of a Trabant—an inexpensive, utilitarian car widely used in East Germany before the fall of the Berlin Wall—into a flashy, customized Chevrolet El Camino like the ones showcased on the low-rider car show circuit. The other transformation is more intimate: Cohen, the steel-welding, hydraulic-rigging multidisciplinary artist, takes on the persona of a bikini model. Her dual acts explore the pliability and complexity of identity, within the specific framework of group membership. “I’m interested in the way we have the possibility or the need to shift into different groups to be a part of something and to be accepted,” she says.

Cohen grew up in the sprawling urban environment of Phoenix, where long drives are essential to everyday life. The *BODYWORK* project began while the artist was completing a residency in 2002 in Stuttgart, Germany, home to Mercedes-Benz factories. She first encountered the clunky, no-frills Trabant on a trip to Berlin. She purchased a used 1987 model for 400 Euros, intent on transfiguring the automobile into an El Camino—an often-fetishized American muscle car that, like the Trabant, was envisioned by its designers as a utopian vehicle. The El Camino is considered half-car and half-truck, and is intended to be both practical and comfortable.

Cohen has been working full-time with Elwood Bodyworks in Scottsdale, Arizona. She does all of her custom car work herself, alongside an all-male team of long-time auto mechanics—an important conceptual aspect of *BODYWORK*, as the situation places her in a traditionally masculine world in which she must collaborate and negotiate unexpected situations. She’s spent more than 2,000 hours altering the Trabant so that it can morph from a small sedan into a longer El Camino and back again. Cohen will not only repaint it and complete other

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All images: *BODYWORK*, 2005–2006

cosmetic detailing, but is also working on fabricating an extending chassis and a new suspension. To date, she’s replaced the engine and added hydraulic equipment to power the extensions and to allow the vehicle to perform the up-and-down movements typical of a low-rider. In addition, she regularly photographs herself in bikinis, with hairstyle and make-up inspired by the bikini models who appear at low-rider events.

Thanks to her Creative Capital grant, Cohen is formulating an installation that will feature not only the Trabant/El Camino but a music video and tabloid newspaper documenting the project. Elements of *BODYWORK* were featured in a solo show at Färgfabriken in Stockholm (November 24, 2005–February 5, 2006) and will be in a group exhibition, *Chopped, Chromed, and Customized*, at the Center for Contemporary Art, Santa Fe (Spring 2007).

BODYWORK is influenced, Cohen notes, by a wide range of cultural references, including Marcel Duchamp’s gender-bending alter ego Rose Selavy and the 1961 book, *Black Like Me*, by John Howard Griffin, which recounts the Caucasian author’s experience while masquerading as an African American man. Cohen’s exploration of group membership is complex, pushing the notion that only one facet of one’s character can be temporarily adapted or disguised as another. As she says of *BODYWORK*, “I’m the car’s builder, the vehicle’s owner, and the bikini model who will show it off. There’s usually a disconnect between all three, yet I’m embodying them all.” *

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In September 2006, Liz Cohen is scheduled for a solo exhibition at Galerie Laurent Godin in Paris, France.