

### by James Harithas

The history of the privately owned vehicle is fundamental to this century. The art car is a revolutionary extension of this history and is in the process of transforming the automobile into a potent new personal symbol.

An art car is a motor-driven vehicle which a car artist alters in such a way as to suit his own aesthetic. In other words, the artist either adds or subtracts materials of his own choosing to or from the factory model or he may renovate an earlier model to revive a beauty and style that once was. The result is a vehicle which conveys new meaning through design, mechanical or structural changes, renovation, and/or the addition of new images, symbols or collage elements.

The content and meaning of these changes vary with each art car and may express either political, social, personal or purely decorative objectives. All art cars are subversive and have in common the transformation of the vehicle from a factory-made commodity into a personal statement or expression.

The art car is revolutionary in the sense that it reclaims the vehicle for the individual and proclaims an independence and diversity which is in sharp contrast to the increasingly conventional and impersonal automobiles and trucks which are currently being produced.

More often than not, the art car has an earthiness, a witty or exotic appearance which the new computer designed factory models lack. On one level, art cars can be seen as a popular movement engaged in rescuing the automobile from corporate uniformity. In so doing, art cars are reviving the sense of individuality which is in decline in our society. On another level, the art car represents the degree to which minorities, subcultures and modern artists continue to influence the cultural life of the United States.

The art car phenomenon is recent, appearing roughly in the last fifteen years. However, the impulse to decorate one's automobile or truck stretches back in time and crosses continents. Consider the vehicles in the Philippines, Cuba, Mexico or Pakistan whose colorful decoration often invokes the protection of the Virgin or the gods.

The art car concept in the United States is fundamentally secular, although religious subject matter is sometimes used, and derives a significant part of its inspiration from hot-rods, racers, classics, Jesus buses, low-riders and hippie vans.

The low-rider and the hippie van provides the art car with its most inspiring precedents. Each in its own way was one of the first to express a revived sense of individuality and to create vehicles which are metaphors of political and economic dissent.

The low-rider is a Mexican-American innovation which not only communicates a sense of pride in Mexican culture but also exhibits the astonishing mechanical skills of the owners. Engines

powerfully reconstructed and hydraulic innovations are engineering feats which, along with their spectacularly painted images, transform each of these vehicles into something more than a popular artifact. In other words, low-riders communicate the cultural vitality of the barrio and at the same time, express personal ingenuity and artistry. They symbolize the transformation of the car owner into an artist/warrior for his people.

Hippie vans were much in evidence during the 1960s and early 1970s. They were garish but courageous expressions of dissent which exposed the car owners to real dangers on the highway from police and rednecks. The hippie van is characterized by its graffiti approach to decoration, its use of peace and anti-war symbols and its independent spirit. As such, its influence on the art car is readily apparent.

Another major influence on the art car is the modern tradition in art. Modern art in its end-of-the-century manifestation, so-called postmodern art, is distinguished by its accessibility to artists and non artists alike. It is an art which emphasizes personal expression and a choice of imagery or subject matter selected from popular culture. The postmodern is also an approach in which considerations of style and high art are minimized in favor of anti-art, gender, ethnicity, kitsch, popular or recycled commercial or historical imagery. It may be enough to say that the art cars illustrated in this book reflect the variety of styles of late modernism, even though the majority of the artists are unschooled in art.

The art car artist is pioneering a new image of the automobile, an image which in its diversity reflects fundamental changes in popular consciousness, changes based on the desire for greater independence and individual rights.

Ever since early 20th century innovations in production-line manufacturing made it widely accessible, the automobile has become an intrinsic part of everyday life. On a practical level, it has become an indispensable extension of the home and the work place.

From its origins to roughly 1975, American automobiles dominated the world market. Each brand had its own symbolism, for example, a Caddie or a Lincoln represented power and wealth, a Chevy or a Ford, rugged individualism.

Car owners identified with their vehicles to the extent that they often fell in love with them and the love which was felt was more than one of possession or status. Automobiles were extensions of our sense of self. The freedom which the automobile represented then was not simply practical or one of convenience, but also involved democratic ideas of upward mobility and freedom of movement.

Today car owners feel differently about their vehicles and personal freedom is more of a myth or an ideology than it was. Most accept that the automobile is little more than a necessity in a society which has become increasingly conformist and seems bent on the accumulation of wealth irrespective of ecological, social and personal destruction. The reputation of the automobile has been tarnished and its status as an icon diminished. The space ship has replaced the automobile as our primary symbol of mobility and national strength and for most people, driving an automobile is no longer the adventure and the deep source of pride that it

once was. The automobile has become implicated in the decline of air quality in our cities because of its dependence on fossil fuels. Accidents, smog, gridlock, DWI laws, car payments, car insurance and the cost of gasoline and repairs have weakened our sense of freedom of the open road. In addition, we now have little propriety interest in American-made vehicles with the good reason that they no longer reflect who we are.

The art car movement is part of the growing attempt to renew our commitment to ourselves by reducing the control that the government and the corporations have over us. At the same time, it is on the cutting edge of a significant change in popular consciousness because it implies a transfer of power to the individual.

Get into the left lane and aim high, but keep one eye on the rear view mirror for the black and whites. Art cars are a grass roots movement. Change your vehicle, improve it, personalize it and make your own statement with it so that you can once again become one with it. Art cars are an expression of your freedom and above all, of the God-given American right to be yourself and flaunt it on the highways and byways of America.

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