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**Liz Cohen**  
*Trainer ("Bodywork")*  
 2006  
 Galerie Laurent Godin, Paris



**Liz Cohen**  
*Bodywork*  
 2006  
 Galerie Laurent Godin, Paris



**Liz Cohen**  
*Air Gun ("Bodywork")*  
 2006  
 Galerie Laurent Godin, Paris



## AUTO-METAMORPHOSIS by Lara Taubman

"Liz Cohen: Bodywork," Sept. 9-Nov. 4, 2006, at Galerie Laurent Godin, 5 rue du Grenier Saint Lazare, 75003 Paris, France

In the color photograph *Trainer* (2006), the Phoenix-based artist Liz Cohen (b. 1973) is seen sitting on a large workout ball, holding a 20 lb. chrome-plated weight in her right hand, flexing her bicep. She wears strappy red high heels and a black rubber unitard cut low, padded in the breasts, and her legs are spread wide. With her heavy makeup, hair extensions and confrontational stare into the camera, she projects a "take no prisoners" attitude that is part pinup, part dominatrix.

To the left stands a muscular, sweaty man, wearing tight black shorts and no shirt, his head cropped out of the photo -- presumably, he is the trainer of the photo title. Behind them both is the body of a ramshackle automobile with no windshield, its dull green paint flat and lifeless, its body cut open to show the drive shaft and rear suspension. Is this a gym, or a garage, or some kind of fantasy dungeon? In any case, it's the netherworld of soft porn.

The automobile, as it happens, is a Trabant, that East German version of the Volkswagen, both pathetic and comical, an emblem of the failures of collectivism. The car is midway through an arduous metamorphosis (in the style of "Monster Garage," the Discovery Channel cable show that specializes in such transformations). Cohn is in the middle of the process of creating a true mutant vehicle, literally transforming a Trabant into a Chevrolet El Camino, an American production vehicle that is not without its own bizarre qualities -- it was a small pick-up truck styled as a high-performance sedan, a hybrid vehicle itself.

Doing all the work herself, Cohen has ripped out the Trabant's original two-stroke motor and replaced it with the more powerful El Camino engine. She is also outfitting her vehicle with innovative hydraulics, so that the car can expand and contract, becoming longer and shorter. As she pimps her ride, Cohen is teaching herself automobile customizing under the tutelage of master mechanic Bill Cherry. This year, the two traveled from their native Arizona to work on the project at the Fargfabriken museum in Stockholm, where the artist had a residency. The former "paint factory" has been converted into







**Liz Cohen**  
*The Gender Turntable,*  
*Fargfabriken ("Bodywork")*  
 2005  
 Galerie Laurent Godin, Paris



Liz Cohen at work on  
 "Bodywork" as shown in her  
 new book from Onestar



Liz Cohen's Trabant arrives in  
 the U.S. to become an El  
 Camino



**Liz Cohen**  
*Grinder ("Bodywork")*  
 2006  
 Galerie Laurent Godin, Paris

one of the most adventurous art museums in the world.

Cohen's convoluted, now three-year-old quest is all about metamorphosis. The project involves not only the transformation of one kind of car into another, but the transformation of Cohen herself, an academic with an MFA who works as a lecturer and instructor, into both a flamboyant bikini model and a hands-on mechanic and automobile designer. For the project, Cohen is crossing class lines in a kind of willed downward mobility, and conflating gender divisions, as she masters both male and female roles within a distinctly working class subculture.

Eventually, Cohen says, she plans to travel to car shows and pose with her Trabant el Camino as a show model. At present, while the mechanical part of the project remains uncompleted, the human part, the cosmetic part, has clearly been achieved. That aspect of Cohen's art project is as unremarkable as it is of abiding interest, for the transformation of an everyday woman into a siren, of an ugly duckling into a swan, is a familiar theme.

For Cohen, though, the transformation goes more ways than one. In another photograph, titled *The Gender Turntable*, the nicely appointed academic has entered the blue-collar garage. Casually asexual, the artist stands by her car, wearing jeans, sneakers and baseball cap, looking exactly like the tomboy mechanic that she now is (though a viewer can be forgiven for imparting to her a certain folkish, Bob Dylan-style charisma).

The theme of self-creation is an American standard, of course, and in "Liz Cohen: Bodywork" it dovetails with essential ideas of artistic creativity as well as with thornier themes of female identity in the modern world, an identity that can be both intensely gendered and gender neutral. It's a complex equation that is rarely articulated quite so clearly.

Cohen's exhibition at the Galerie Godin -- the space opened about a year ago in the Marais, one of Paris' prime art neighborhoods, exhibiting artists such as Wang Du and Claude Closky -- includes nine photographs. The show also includes an interview done by artist Helena Keefe with Don Barselloti, owner of Elwood Body Works in Scottsdale, where Cohen has been working on her auto. Barselloti wryly notes that Cohen's project is the first to take the science of car mechanics quite to this level of innovation.

Cohen's progress at Elwood Body Works is documented in a new book from Onestar press in Paris, designed by Cohen herself to resemble a scrapbook of black-and-white photos, recording the Trabant's travels from Europe to Phoenix, and Cohen's wrench-spinning in the mechanic shop, gutting the vehicle and building it back up.

Though Cohen's sweetie-pie persona is regressive, it's not without its post-feminist aspects, in which female sexuality is directly correlated to power. The photograph *Grinder* (2005), for instance, shows the artist posing with the car, holding a heavy industrial grinder

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between her legs in a Rust Belt version of the vagina dentata.

An old Chinese parable notes that three women in the kitchen makes for too many arguments. In Cohen's "Bodyworks" project, the proverbial catfight rages in her own imagination as to who will reign. Needless to say, identity is in flux. Undoubtedly, this work will change several more times before these stories are told once and for all.

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