

LIZ COHEN

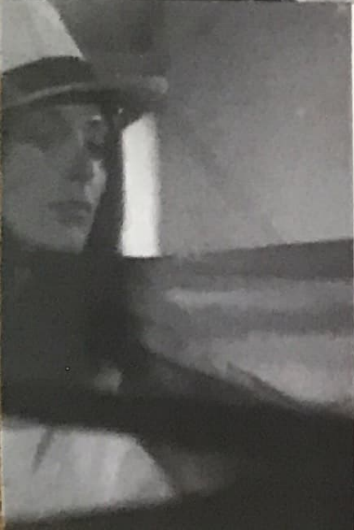
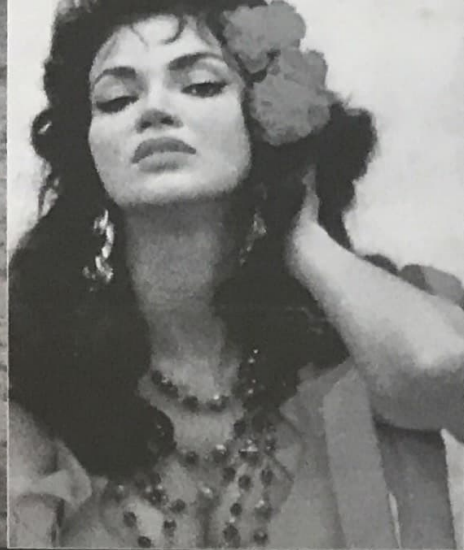
ON THE RIVER ROAD

FROM PRESIDIO TO TERLINGUA

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Liz Cohen', is positioned to the right of the text 'FROM PRESIDIO TO TERLINGUA'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial 'L' and a long, sweeping tail.

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DAVID KLEIN GALLERY



Liz Cohen and the Look of Labor

By Chad Alligood

The medium of photography, from its historical beginnings in the middle of the nineteenth century, betrays an intrinsic and tortuous relationship to physical labor.⁽ⁱ⁾ On the one hand, the camera's mechanical operation requires the work of a human body to produce its output—a mutually dependent relationship that reflects the photograph's intimate connection to the rise of capitalism.⁽ⁱⁱ⁾ But on the other, the camera's apparent objectivity purports to preclude human intervention and bias: we trust the photograph, at least on some level and even in the age of digital manipulation, to provide an image of unmitigated truth untouched by human hands. The photographic paradigm, then, simultaneously needs and abjures the labor of its making. In her latest series of images, photographer Liz Cohen trades on this charged dynamic between photography and labor. Produced on the border between the United States and Mexico, Cohen's photographs mine the complexities of labor and production as they pertain to modern identity. Here, the photographer documents the multiple outputs of her own physical work: a functional low-rider car, a newborn child, a young family, and the photographs themselves. By ostensibly controlling the means of production—that is, by directing and conceiving the photograph, the car, her identity, the family—and enacting her own labor to produce them, Cohen finds creative possibility in the concept of physical work.

This conceit of creative labor—literal “art work”—emerges as a theme that connects this series of images with Cohen's previous projects. That lovingly detailed car, proudly gleaming in the waning Texas sun, constitutes a sculptural feat in its own right forged by the artist's own hands. Cohen has dubbed this car the *Trabantimino*, a word formed, like the hybridized car itself, from the East German Trabant and the Chevrolet El Camino. A project eight years in the making, the *Trabantimino* serves as a document of a series of negotiations and concessions between its two sources. On the one hand, the Trabant represents the late Socialist economy of the former East Germany, while the El Camino emblemizes American high capitalist systems of production. The resultant object, like the lowrider culture to which it pays homage, seems to revel in its flashiness, extending and retracting on its hydraulic haunches—practically grinning through the chrome of its grill. Far from the functional utility promised by its two parents, the *Trabantimino's* engine only travels thirty to forty miles before needing to be refueled, necessitating a second car traveling in caravan with gas canisters at the ready. The labor in the production of this hybrid object, unlike that of socialist East Germany or late Western capitalism, endeavors not towards use-value or maximal efficiency and profit, but rather towards an investigation of the liberating potential inherent to physical work. Guided by mentors in the various cities Cohen has inhabited over the last decade, the artist herself completed the bulk of the work in creating a lowrider from its two disparate entities. ⁽ⁱⁱⁱ⁾

Using the *Trabantimino* in photographs like *On the River Road with Brian and Rafael*, then, enables Cohen to draw structural parallels between the significant and ongoing physical labor of producing such an object and the other labors on display here: maternal, familial, and photographic. But Cohen's photographs also underline the extent to which labor remains a collaborative effort between many human bodies. As in her previous series *Bodywork*, which featured a bikini-clad Cohen posing in auto body shops among the people who work there, the artist here includes her collaborator in the work of her young family: her husband, Brian, who appears in her photographs for the first time. And, of course, such an intensive shoot in the high desert required a crew of seven people above and beyond the efforts of the artist, all collaborating in tandem.^(iv) Still, the artist occupies the foreground of these images, emphasizing the central role of her body in the production of both what's on display and the identity that arises from those visual signs. As critic Roger Marcel Mayou has noted, "The body is not only a means of communication; it is the very realization of the multi-personality, the place where otherness is visible."^(v) For Cohen, this "otherness" occupies a foundational place in her practice. A child of immigrant parents, a peripatetic wanderer, a seeker of subcultures, the artist poses the question to you in these photographs as she did to me in our interview: "What do you do when you're different and you want to return to the center?"^(vi)

The answer proposed by these images is simply this: work. Most historical examples of photographs evidencing labor are associated with documentary photography, from Lewis Hine's images of child labor in American industry, to the Farm Security Administration's Depression-era photographs of the negative effects of farm mechanization, and continuing on to Manuel Rivera-Ortiz's recent images of farm labor in Cuba. Though Cohen began her photographic career in a documentary format, her most recent work departs from these forebears in important ways. Rather than directly focusing on the adverse conditions of labor and production, in these images the photographer uncouples her own labor from the socioeconomic systems that traditionally govern work, thereby harnessing the power of her own physical efforts and channeling it towards creative, life-affirming, life-producing ends. If these photographs appear celebratory, then: they are. These images commemorate the liberating possibility of finding pleasure in one's own work, the exhilaration of allowing a process to emerge under your own hand, and the improbable joy of finding a different kind of center to which you can return.

- (i) This relationship is succinctly explored in Edwards, Steve. "Photography, allegory, and labor." *Art Journal* 55, (Summer 1996): 38-44.
(ii) For more on the connection between the simultaneous rise of capitalism and photography, see Sekula, Allan. "An eternal esthetics of laborious gestures." *Framework* 8, no. 2 (January 1997): 10-17.
(iii) Qtd. in Warren, Tamara, "The Trabantimino: The Art of Building a Trabant Lowrider," *The New York Times* online (August 29, 2010): <http://wheels.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/08/19/the-trabantimino-the-art-of-building-a-trabant-lowrider/>
(iv) Interview with the artist, Oct 4, 2012.
(v) Mayou, Roger Marcel, "Portrait of the Artist as a Work of Art," in Billeter, Erika, ed., *Self-Portrait in the Age of Photography: Photographers Reflecting Their Own Image* (Lausanne: Musée Cantonal des Beaux-Arts, 1986), 18.
(vi) Interview with the artist, Oct 4, 2012.

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