

## COLLECTING

## Alternative Cars Indeed: A Parade for Whatever Moves You

By RALPH BLUMENTHAL

HOUSTON

If you had a yellow 1977 Ferrari 308 GTB, would you have your second grader dip her hand in purple paint and leave her palm prints beside the proud emblem of the prancing stallion? You would if your name was Alan Leach and you had entered your treasure in the world's oldest and largest parade of art cars.

Every spring since 1988, this oil town of great fortunes built on the internal combustion engine has gone counterculture with a zany tribute to the automobile as anything but transportation. "Our message is that everyone is an artist and we should celebrate the artist in everyone," said Allen Hill, spokesman for the spectacle, officially called the Everyone's Art Car Parade. The gathering was sponsored by the Orange Show Center for Visionary Art, a folk-art conflation of mazes and towers created from 1956 to 1980 by a postman, Jefferson Davis McKissack, in honor of his favorite fruit. (Don't even ask about John Milkovich's Beer Can House.)

The art cars, 266 of them this year — cars and trucks and cycles and carts remade as dragons and puppies and flying saucers and sloganeering billboards and Prozac-sprinkled muffins — lined up for viewing on Allen Parkway, along a major green belt to downtown, and then chug off on a two-hour loop past some 200,000 cheering picnickers and other celebrators.

The spectacle has caught on elsewhere, with art car events now staged in California and at least half a dozen other states. The common inspiration, organizers say, is to take one of America's most symbolic objects and, in the process of altering it, send a Zenlike message.

"Being from the Gulf Coast of Texas, you understand paint is only temporary — eventually everything will rust and fall apart," said Mr. Leach, 48, an out-of-work contractor who happily explained that "all my Ferraris are paid for." (He has another 308 GTB.) He belonged, he said, to that school of Ferrari owners subscribing to the philosophy of "use it or lose it, instead of letting it rot in the garage."

For this year's parade, "Big Al" Bartell, a fifth-grade teacher from Trinity, Tex., brought Versatile, a 1971 Buick Centurion completely sheathed in mosaic tiles inspired by a crockery-covered pub he saw in Ireland. Mr. Bartell said that a police officer who once gave him a speeding ticket was flummoxed when listing the car's color. He finally put down "tile."

While Mr. Bartell's girlfriend drove Versatile in last weekend's parade, he piloted Hell Sent, a black, evil-looking 1948 Studebaker that had been chopped — its roof cut down — and lowered.

"It's art primarily for the purpose of pleasing people, not to hang in a museum," Mr. Bartell said. Hell Sent won first prize and \$250 in the Daily Drive category and it also won second in the Low Rider category.

Yes, some art car owners do drive their extravagant creations year-round, even to the grocery store. Mr. Bartell said that when calculating travel anywhere, he had to factor in extra time to respond to gawkers. But some motorists, principally owners of Mercedes-Benz and Lexus models, were "no-lookers," he said, adding: "They want to believe everything is going towards norm. When they see something that deviates, it upsets them."

The big winner was an art class at S. P. Waltrip High



Above, the Student Driver car took its lumps at the annual Houston art car parade. Right, "You want ketchup with that?" If you drive the Condiment Car, no one will need to ask.



Above, a tribute to the funk musician George Clinton. Below, the Fruitmobile.



Above, the Yarn Car was well dressed; left, "Phantoms" conjured nightmares. Below, the Electric Muffins were done in good taste.



School in Houston, under the direction of Rebecca Bass. The students spent four months remaking a Volvo into a celestial battleship of funkadelic pipes and mirrors honoring the musician George Clinton of the P-Funk All-Stars. For its car Atomic Dog — One Nation Under Groove, the class collected the Mayor's Cup Grand Trophy and \$1,500. Brandi Hammond daubed her 1971 Volkswagen, Fusion of Contradiction, with slogans including, "What if the hokey-pokey is what it's all about?"

The show was nonjuried, which meant that just about anything went (as long as it was family friendly and not unsafe at any speed). Student Driver was a rolling disaster: a wreck carrying a sheared-off telephone pole, a traffic cone and a battered bicycle — with a bundle dragging from the tailpipe. There was an homage to Christo — an orange Toyota truck sheathed in shrink-wrap, an orange "gate" protruding from its cargo bed; a Condiment Car covered with packets of, well, condiments; a Yarn Car in psychedelic waves of blue appliquéd yarn; a Phantoms car with gargoyles leaping out of the grille and fenders; and a Fruitmobile that would have shamed Carmen Miranda.

Also, Brian Rodgers, 26, who works in a Houston auto body shop, rode in his 1958 Impala convertible with a big sign, "Lindsey Will You Marry Me?" (Watching as he passed, a stunned Lindsey Fitzpatrick said yes, and climbed into the passenger seat.)

There were political messages galore. M Peach Bush, a peach-themed truck by Shelly Buschar, 45, a midwife who carried peaches tucked into her décolletage, took second place in the Political Statement category. Mark Fleming, a 72-year-old veteran of the Korean and Vietnam Wars, drove an immense flag-flying Ford pickup studded with warplanes and military slogans called Texas Freedom Fighter. "What burns me up," he said, "is the American flag goes by and people don't get up — they sit on their rump."

And then there were the art cars that defied categorization. Rex Rosenberg, 59, a clinical psychologist from Great Bend, Kan., arrived with the Chewbaru, a '95 Subaru Legacy covered with dentures and plaster tooth impressions. "I found a 75-pound box of recycled dentures on eBay," he explained. And his message was? "Just whatever people see in it," he said.

## Bumper-to-Snout Traffic

Here are some other art car celebrations or events where such cars will be featured:

**SEATTLE** Art Car Blowout; June 17-18; [www.seattleartcars.org](http://www.seattleartcars.org)

**BERWYN, ILL.** Cartopia; June 23-24; [www.berwyncartopia.com](http://www.berwyncartopia.com)

**MINNEAPOLIS** Art Car Parade Weekend; July 21-22; [www.artcarparade.com](http://www.artcarparade.com)

**LOUISVILLE, KY.** Kentucky Art Car Weekend; Aug. 4-5; [www.kentuckyartcarweekend.com](http://www.kentuckyartcarweekend.com)

**SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA** ArtCar Fest, various locations; Sept. 14-17; [www.artcarfest.com](http://www.artcarfest.com)

**BLACK ROCK DESERT, NEV.** Burning Man Festival; Aug. 28-Sept. 4; [www.burningman.com](http://www.burningman.com)