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The 1965 Buick Riviera "She-Devil," above, is one of 23 vehicles on display at the Petersen Automotive Museum in an exhibit that celebrates the lowrider culture. At right, "Orgullo Mexicano," a 1979 Chevrolet Monte Carlo, features modifications to nearly every aspect of the car, including swivel seats and extensive gold plating.

preview >

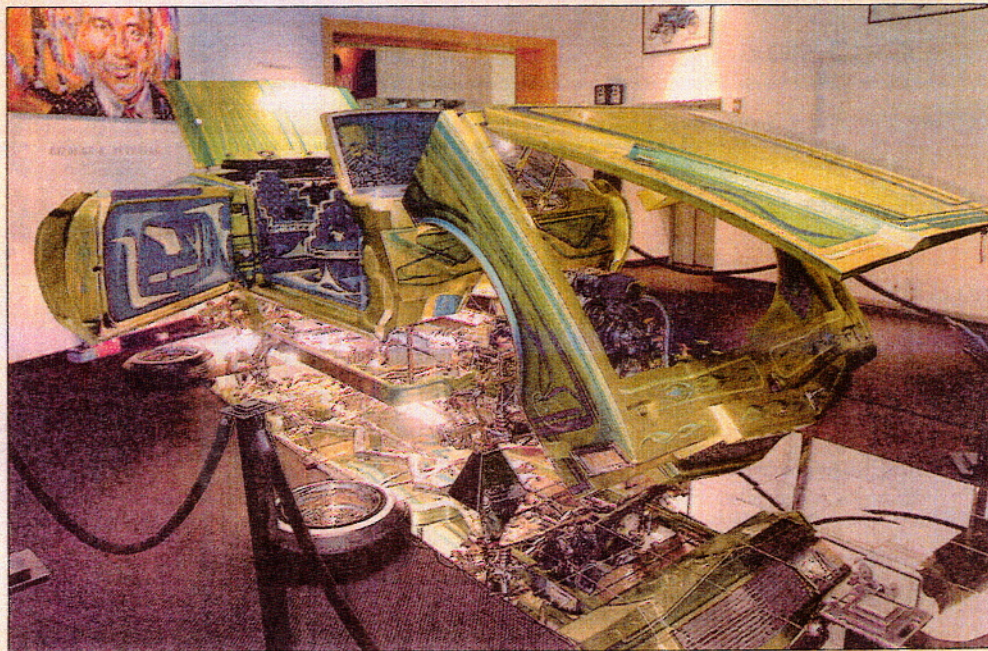
LA VIDA LOWRIDER: CRUISING THE CITY OF ANGELS

> When: 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Tuesdays through Sundays until June 8.

Where: Petersen Automotive Museum, 6060 Wilshire Blvd., Los Angeles.

Admission: \$10, \$5 for students and seniors, \$3 for children 5-12, free for children under 5.

Information: (323) 930-2277 or www.petersen.org.



PHOTOS BY ROBERT CASILLAS > LA.COM

LOWRIDING IN L.A.:

'PASSION, CORAZÓN AND RESPECT'



Award-winning lowrider designer Joe Ray says he spent five years and at least \$25,000 transforming his 1971 Buick Riviera, "Dressed to Kill," complete with ghostly images and a coffin.



Musician Ry Cooder's 1953 Chevrolet pickup truck, "El Chavez Ravine," is literally a work of art, featuring bumper-to-bumper murals by artist Vincent Valdez that chronicle changes in the barrio.

BY JIM FARMER > LA.COM

“It’s not a car. It’s metal sculpture,” observes Richard Messer, director of the Petersen Automotive Museum, as he stands in awe before the emerald and gold magnificence of “Orgullo Mexicano” — a 1978 Chevrolet Monte Carlo that’s been transformed into a contemporary lowrider classic by Chino and Lolo Vega.

The amount of attention paid to every aspect of the car is astounding. There isn’t a single surface — from brake drum to dashboard — that has not come in for some type of artistic addition or modification: whether it’s the streamline reconfiguring of its body, the application of layer upon layer of high-gloss paint and pinstripes, the zany swivel seats, the chromed lightning-bolt exhaust pipes, or the myriad moving parts that have been detailed with engraved gold plating.

“Orgullo Mexicano” is one of 23 remarkably transformed vehicles that make up the exhibit “La Vida Lowrider: Cruising the City of Angels,” on display at the Los Angeles museum through June 8.

This is actually the second exhibit the museum has devoted to lowrider culture. The first, in 2000, celebrated the birth of the movement in the years following World War II, when lowriders began modifying cheap used cars and taking them out to cruise the boulevards of East L.A.

The current exhibit, explains director Leslie Mark Kendall, “speaks to the evolution of lowrider history and how various cultural groups, other than Latinos, have embraced lowriding as a way of expressing themselves in the community.”

The lowrider story begins with the classic “bombs,” Ken-

dall explains — cars from the late 1930s and ‘40s that had the streamlined look of a bomb or torpedo. A prime example, he says, is the sleek gray 1936 Packard named “Mr. Mafioso.”

“It’s not the kind of car that you usually associate with lowriding,” Kendall says. “But the man that modified it, ‘Crazy’ George Luna, has been involved with lowrider culture for years. There’s virtually nothing about the car that’s untouched, though when you look at it, it’s still instantly recognizable as a ‘36 Packard.”

At the other end of the spectrum is “Orgullo Mexicano,” a car that has been so radically altered it seems to have more in common with one of those Japanese transformers than anything that ever came off a Detroit assembly line.

Award-winning lowrider designer Joe Ray is a perfect example of how time-demanding, economically draining and emotionally hazardous the lowrider “hobby” can be. His 1971 Buick Riviera, “Dressed to Kill,” is a gleaming sunset-colored creation reminiscent of Tom Wolfe’s “Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby.”

“I bought the car in ‘74,” says Ray, as he navigates “Dressed to Kill” — with its images of skeletons, ghosts, haunted houses and graveyards — into position for the show.

“I bought it black, put the hydraulics in (that allow the car to ride low, rise to legal limits or, in the most extreme cases, bounce up and down like a pogo stick).

“I removed the vinyl and added an alpha-jeweled rainbow flash roof,” Rays continues. “Then I took that off and painted it completely black with gold candy pearls like a rainbow on it. Then I got bored with that and painted it all solid orange and added the murals. I got bored with that, saved the murals, repainted it again and chromed everything.”

And what did that all cost?

“This one cost me five years, at least \$25,000 and probably my marriage,” he says with a sheepish grin.

While all the cars in the show represent the Los Angeles-inspired phenomenon of car-as-art, there is one example that takes the notion to an entirely different level. Its owner is guitarist and songwriter Ry Cooder, who is an active member of Duke’s Car Club.

“El Chavez Ravine” began life as a 1953 Chevrolet pickup truck, Cooder explains. Now it stands as a bold artistic statement, a muralized ice cream truck with distinctly political overtones. Covered from bumper to bumper with paintings by Chicano artist Vincent Valdez, it chronicles life in the sleepy barrio, the brutal dislocation of the Chavez Ravine residents and the rise of Dodger Stadium, with the view from left field spread out across its hood.

“It took a year and half to modify the vehicle into an ice cream truck,” says Cooder, like a proud father. “Then it took Vincent two years to complete the paintings (which he did Aug. 5).

“A lot of artists would have said, ‘I can’t cope with the curves, I can’t deal with the dimensions.’” Cooder says. “People told us you can’t put oil paint on a car. But Vincent did it. He really pushed the envelope. And what he’s created is a sociopolitical, automotive-artistic statement.”

As observed by guest curator Denise Sandoval, professor of Latino studies at California State University, Northridge, “Lowriding today is a space where it’s not about your race. It’s not about your class. It’s about cars. Lowriding is about passion, corazón (heart) and respect. And Los Angeles is its inspiration.”

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