



## Desert Rider exhibition at Phoenix Art Museum explores the influence of car culture on Hispanic and Native artists working in the Southwest

Phoenix Art Museum has a new exhibition exploring the relationships among transportation, landscape and identity in our desert region. *Desert Rider* features a diverse display of large-scale installations, prints, sculptures and other media by Hispanic and Native artists including Cara Romero, Douglas Miles, Margarita Cabrera, Liz Cohen, Justin Favela and others, each drawing inspiration from custom car, lowrider and skateboarding cultures of the Southwest. Curated by contemporary art curator Gilbert Vicario, *Desert Rider* features the world premiere of multiple works commissioned specifically for the exhibition.

The genesis of these cultures is rooted in the post-war 1950s, an era that mythologized our dependence on and fascination with the automobile. The exhibition emphasizes a connection between contemporary art and the counterculture developments of the 1960s, noting that the lowrider phenomenon occurred simultaneously with this period of civil protest, as images of customized vehicles roaring through the wide open landscapes of the American Southwest captured notions of freedom, liberty, rebellion and nonconformity. Cars became statements of defiance, as Mexican-American artisans rejected the mainstream automotive aesthetic, adorning their cars with cultural, religious, Nahua and Mayan symbols painted on the hoods of vibrantly colored low-riding vehicles. Today, the lowrider remains a symbol of individ-

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Left page: Installation view of *Desert Rider*, 2022, Phoenix Art Museum, courtesy of Phoenix Art Museum. Photos: Airi Katsuta.

- Exhibition logo inset.
- Betsabée Romero, *Columna interminable (Endless Column)*, 2015. Rubber tire and gold leaf. Collection of Phoenix Art Museum, Gift of Friends of Mexican Art in honor of its 50th Anniversary, with additional generous support from Maria DeLongy, Greta Mock, Jacqueline and Paul Schulz, Kathren and Fritz Thomas, Kotzie Wheeler and Greta Woods.
- Justin Favela, *Gypsy Rose Piñata (II)*, 2022. Found objects, cardboard, styrofoam, paper and glue.

This page, top to bottom:

- Justin Favela, *Seven Magic Tires*, 2019. Tires, paint and glue. Courtesy of Phoenix Art Museum. Photo: Airi Katsuta.
- Liz Cohen, *Stories Better Told by Others*, 2018. Color inkjet print with hand painted lettering. Courtesy of Phoenix Art Museum. Photo: Airi Katsuta.
- Carlotta Boettcher, *Cars in the New Mexico Landscape—50s Chevy with Tree* (from the *Cars in the New Mexico Landscape* collection), 1996-1998. Color photography, digital print on Dibond. Collection of the artist. © Carlotta Boettcher.



uality, cultural identity, resistance and pride—reflecting the effort of youth to take hold of the American Dream in their own ways.

One of artist Justin Favela's works, created specifically for the exhibition, is a full-scale lowrider "piñata" crafted from cardboard, tissue paper and other materials. Another of his works, *Seven Magic Tires*—brightly painted tires, stacked in varying heights—was inspired by painted tires he had seen at a Las Vegas car shop, and is a satirized take on Swiss-born artist Ugo Rondinone's *Seven Magic Mountains*, located outside that city.

Featured artist José Villalobos evokes personal family history through work commissioned for the exhibition, in which he flamboyantly embellishes saddles using techniques and accessories typically found on lowriders, such as chain link steering wheels and brightly colored lacquers.

The exhibition also explores the influence of movement, motion, and the ubiquity of car culture and its appearance in contemporary art, with symbols of transportation and movement "to interrogate concepts of masculinity and femininity" by Liz Cohen, Sam Fresquez and Carlotta Boettcher; "notions of migration and mobility" by Betsabé Romero; and works by Cara Romero and Laurie Steelink that explore "how self-described 'Indianness' negotiates traditional Indigenous values with contemporary life."

Complementing the exhibition, Museum librarian Jesse Alexander Lopez is curating a new installation drawn from the library archives, along with new acquisitions. Featuring books, magazines and other ephemera, this examines the links between Chicano lowrider culture, its Mexican and ancient Latin American roots, and the philosophy of the *mestizaje* worldview. On view in both the south extension of Steele Gallery and the Museum's Ballinger Interactive Gallery (nicknamed the BIG Little Library), this highlights prominent lowrider publications from the 1970s through today, books on the culture of the Aztecs and the aftermath of conquest, prison love letters and handmade cards, and a special look at the popularity of lowrider culture in Japan.

*Desert Rider* is a special engagement through September 18, 2022 in Steele Gallery at Phoenix Art Museum, made possible through the Arizona Office of Tourism and Men's Arts Council, with additional support from the Museum's Circles of Support and Museum members. Admission is free for members, for children ages 5 and under, and for veterans and active-duty military and their families. There are also reduced admission voluntary donation times on Wednesdays from 3-9 pm and on the first Friday of each month from 3-9 pm.

For details, visit [phxart.org](http://phxart.org). ■



Top to bottom:  
 • José Villalobos, *QueeRiders*, 2022. Mixed media. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Airi Katsuta.  
 • Margarita Cabrera, *Agua que no has de beber dejala correr (Water That You Should Not Drink, Let It Run)*, 2006-2022. Vinyl and thread with model parts. Collection of the artist and courtesy of Tally Dunn Gallery, Dallas, Texas.  
 • Douglas Miles, *You're Skating on Native Land*, 2022. Apache skateboards, vinyl. Courtesy of the artist.  
 • Liz Cohen, *Trabantimino*, 2002-2010. Modified Trabant, GM parts, hydraulics. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Airi Katsuta.

