

Art Car-maraderie

Art car maven Rebecca Bass talks to [George Wood](#) about living life in the artistic fast lane, encouraging children to grab their own opportunities to shine and sticking stuff on cars

Sunday 12 May 2013



All photographs provided by Rebecca Bass

A giant metallic chicken driving across the streets is apparently not such an uncommon sight for the citizens of Houston, Texas. Every year, the city plays host to the Houston Art Car Parade, a celebratory display of hundreds of quirky clunkers serving as art on wheels. Working around these events is art teacher and art car maven Rebecca Bass, who has brought this tradition to schools and their communities over the past 22 years by planning, designing and working with students on these mammoth, vehicular projects.

Having been brought up on prim and proper streets of the UK, I had never seen or even heard of an art car before. Rebecca's explanation was quite simple: "It's really a mobile piece of either sculpture or art. It's a way to take art out of the galleries and the museums and display your art 24/7 when you drive one." Art cars are dynamic, pieces of "mobile art", but more importantly, they're relatable. "People who would normally not appreciate art, they can relate too, especially here in Texas. We love our cars - I mean, we *love* our cars, and so it's a great way to bring your art to somebody."

The origins of the art car scene that became so well-received in Texas can be traced years and years back - "probably since cars were invented, people were altering them" - but as community-based projects, it all started in the 80s. Rebecca spoke of a warehouse at the University of Houston dedicated to graduate students on the more experimental side of art, which is now known as the Lawndale Art Center. "It was lawless. We had no rules. It was this period of time that was just a little bit on the wild side." Famous artists today such as James Surls and John Alexander were Rebecca's professors. "There was a show that was curated at Lawndale called Collision. It had some cars altered, and it was just wild, almost war inside.

“Every year it's something different. I remember every kid, I remember everything that we've done.”

“That kinda’ started the whole thing, we just ran with it. Because here in Texas you have to pry our fingers off our cars. We love our cars. You have an old beat-up car, and you’ve got to do something to it, so you paint it or glue some things on it, or you make a social statement with your vehicle. This just grew and grew and grew until now where we have 300 cars that come from all over the world to this parade. Back then, nobody would have thought to paint their car, but as a group of artists we sorta’ did.”



How the whole movement developed over the years was researched by directors Carlton Ahrens and Ford Gunter, who followed Rebecca and her class’s preparations for the Houston Art Car Parade in *Art Car: The Movie*. But to cut a long story short, art cars flourished from their offbeat origins into something entwined into the camaraderie of Houston’s community spirit, and especially through its love of and need for cars. “Maybe in other cities, public art might be a sculpture on a street corner, but we take it off the street corner and we put it on a car and drive it around... We have public transportation but it sucks here, it’s not like any other city. You have to have a car.” It certainly helps that the police officers seem to turn a blind eye to art cars – “I think it’s too many tickets, so they just look the other way!”

So today it’s not just the artists who make art cars. In fact, “most car artists aren’t trained artists. Most car artists didn’t get a degree in art somewhere, they’re just somebody that likes glue shit on their car. They used to call it outsider art, they called it visionary art, but it’s just a way for the untrained artist to express themselves.”

If the art car movement brought art from the street corner onto the street, then Rebecca brought art cars from the street and into the schools. Back in 1990 when Rebecca started teaching art car class, the parades were still low-key affairs – “maybe 15 cars” is a meagre number compared to the hundreds of cars that exhibit in parades today. Teaching a middle school at the time, Rebecca felt her students could turn the art car into a classroom project. With a nod from the principal and a \$100 Volkswagen, their first project was underway. “They had a blast. And when they ran the parade... I taught at a 100% Hispanic school with real poverty-stricken kiddos, and so I put them in this parade, and they felt like they were bigger than life. Everybody’s saying, “Well how did you do this? How did you do that?” And it just changed them. I’m still in contact with a couple of those students I had that very first year. They’re 45 year-old people now with grown kids!”

From there, the projects snowballed. In 1996, Rebecca started working with high school students, teaching her art car class in the Houston Independent School District with 5 other classes. Getting students engaged while simultaneously appealing to their car interests and sticking with a theme; her last art car was based on the band Earth, Wind & Fire. Interestingly, Rebecca chooses the students who are a part of her class.

“It’s an audition, but I tend to pick kiddos that aren’t in band, they’re not in a sport, they’re not cheerleaders, they’re not this and not that, and they’re looking for their little spot to shine... I don’t look for these kids, they come and audition for me and sometimes it’s a friend of a friend – like “I know this one girl and she really wants to do this”. When you’re in high school or in middle school, you’re looking for a place. You’re just this lump, you don’t really know what you’re doing, most kids don’t... It’s the type of kid. They need a place to be cool, and this is a great place to be cool.”

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Rebecca describes her teaching role as more of a “coach” than an artist; building an art car is just as much a life skills project as it is about unleashing creative talent. “They’re learning how to get along with people, they’re learning how to be in a group and either be sometimes a leader or sometimes a follower. It’s a huge learning tool.” With a 4 month deadline, Rebecca and her class are working against the clock for completion. It becomes a deeply personal experience: “I work after school with them, and on the weekends, like 8 or 9 hours on Saturday and Sunday, and on the spring break. So you really become involved in their lives for a short period of time.”



Make no mistake, art car classes are nothing like what you would remember of lessons back at school. Classroom dynamics are thrown out the window, and replaced with loud music, a relaxed environment and few rules – all remarkably similar to how Rebecca described her time as a graduate back at Lawndale. But there’s a sense that Rebecca also does everything to make the students’ project their own: “First thing I do is I put a fence around wherever we are, and then I put a tarps so we’re in there and nobody can see what we’re doing. You have to make it a club – it’s their club, with their own rules.”

The art cars that Rebecca and her classes have worked on seem to vary wildly, but if there’s one consistent feature across every project, it’s the size. “They’re all huge. They’re all an undertaking. When I got to about 1998, they really got complicated and sculptural.” Rebecca finds it hard to pick a favourite project, but meeting musician George Clinton was certainly memorable after basing one particular art car on the song Atomic Dog. “I’m sitting on the last day of school, and we have our little teacher meeting, and the school secretary runs down the hallway and says “Miss Bass! Miss Bass! George Clinton’s on the phone!” and I was like “Yeah, right.” And he was! He wanted to meet the kids, and he flew in and he signed the nose cone. I really love that car because of that – *George Clinton signed the nose cone.*”

Perhaps the most important part of each project is the art car parade, which is what everything culminates to. Ensuring that the media is involved is vital. “It’s really important that they get that recognition because it’s lifelong – that little 10 minutes or whatever that they were on TV they will remember until they die. If it’s a lower income school, here’s a kid that never in his life thought he’d be in the newspaper or in the news, and here he is on the news being interviewed! They will feel they were so important for a moment, and we all need to feel important. We do.”

Finally, the students have the chance to show off their stuff. There’s no time to relax though, and I was quite shocked by Rebecca’s determined response when I asked whether the students take part in the parades or not. “They have to do every damn thing that they’re supposed to do, everything! Their lives stop for 5 days, because I am showing them off. That’s it. They do everything!” I wondered whether this was all a bit too rigorous for kids who have just spent 4 months working on such a project, but then I realised: for kids who have difficult personal lives and family backgrounds, or aren’t so skilled in academics or sports, this really is their time to shine. Rebecca simply doesn’t want to take anything away

from that. "There'll be 10, maybe 12 of them that really put in a gazillion hours, and they will show up for everything. And it's theirs, not mine. I was just the coach."



As for the parades themselves, Rebecca talks about the "intoxicating" and "infectious" atmosphere, as well as the sheer creativity of certain art cars. "The stuff that people come up with just cracks me up. When I first saw the big giant chicken and it was dropping eggs... Oh my god, you just die laughing." Orange Show's Houston Art Car Parade is both the biggest and the oldest, and every year "there's something hysterical". Consequently, art cars in Houston have become somewhat commonplace; Rebecca notes that there are definitely fewer "squealers" in people's reactions to art cars today. Unfortunately, with the mentality that countries like the UK have on cars and car inspections, there's less of a platform for art cars abroad. However, Rebecca still sees a future for this weird and wonderful art form. "I think art cars are here to stay. I do. It's lovely to have somebody paint up their car, put political stuff on their car, it's kinda' fun, and I like diversity. I really love it."

Rebecca herself is retired, but with all her enthusiasm for the subject, I can't see her dropping out of the art car community any time soon. As for her career, it's clear from how she talks and the annual reunions she mentions that every student she's worked with has left an impression on her, and likewise on them. "Every year it's something different. I remember every kid, I remember everything that we've done. They're all these incredible human beings that I've had the honour to share some time with, and it's great. I don't really have a favourite."



2 comments

Ford

12 May '13 at 8:34 pm

Hi George,

Very cool article on a very cool person. And thanks for the mention of our film! If you guys embed links, would you mind embedding <http://www.artcarmovie.com> in the story? Maybe we'll get some new viewers in the UK !

Cheers,

Ford

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Clipping Path, Clipping Path Service

22 May '13 at 9:43 am

Simple and very functional thanks

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