



Cool Cars, High Art: The Rise of Kustom Kulture

John DeWitt

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Along with the Harley-Davidson motorcycle, hot rods and custom cars are powerful symbols of resistance, rebellion, and the high-octane lifestyle. Since the 1950s, these flashy restyled automobiles have occupied a unique place in American popular mythology.

Cool Cars, High Art: The Rise of Kustom Kulture checks out this particularly male subculture with an up-close look at customized car art and the artists who create it. Through amazing technical mastery, coupled with a uniquely American imagination, these motorheads transform mass-produced products of industry into unique hand-crafted pieces of art called "rods" and "customs."

This first full-length study to focus on the practice of hot rodding and car customizing argues not only that this "kustom kulture" deserves consideration as a source of legitimate art forms but also that the rise of American car customizing reflects the attitudes and ideas of the teen culture that emerged in the 1950s. While tracing the evolution of styles, this book examines specific cars and the progression of car culture through the 1990s.

Cool Cars, High Art: The Rise of Kustom Kulture argues moreover that in this car art the theories of modernism meld with popular culture. In their beauty, in the sophistication of their designs, and in their formal play, these transformed, re-imagined cars parallel the ideas, techniques, and achievement of high-art modernists. And as high art progresses into postmodernism, so too does customized car culture.

Despite the longevity and the magnitude of Kustom Kulture, this far-reaching contribution to American art has largely been ignored by mainstream critics. While postulating the cause of this anomaly, this book questions what is meant by art and how preconceived notions of gender, race, and class often prevent the recognition of creativity in places where imagination is not anticipated.

John F. DeWitt, an associate professor of English and the acting director of the liberal arts program at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia, is the author of several books of poetry. He has been published in *The New American Review* and *New Geography of American Poets*.

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