



Devised by the French race car driver Hervé Poulain, the BMW Art Car project has produced models from 18 artists since its inception. Top to bottom, from left: the work

of Alexander Calder, 1975; Esther Mahlangu, 1991; Jeff Koons, 2010; Frank Stella, 1976; David Hockney, 1995; Ken Done, 1989; Roy Lichtenstein, 1977; Sandro Chia, 1992;

Ernst Fuchs, 1982; Matazo Kayama, 1990; Michael Nelson Tjakamarra, 1989; A.R. Penck, 1991; César Manrique, 1990; Andy Warhol, 1979; Robert Rauschenberg, 1986





Story **Simon Grant**

THE CAR IS THE CANVAS

When you ask an internationally renowned artist to take care of the paintwork on your car, anything goes, as the BMW Art Car series shows



Several years ago the artist Ed Ruscha gave one of his legendary illustrated lectures in London. On this occasion his theme was simple: “my favorite works that have influenced me.” After dutifully paying homage to past art masters, he went into a deadpan celebration of gearshifts from 1950s American cars. Lovingly photographed images of the gearshifts appeared on the screen behind him. Here was the globe-shaped stick from a Ford; here the tubular style found in a Chevy. Ruscha made it clear he “strongly identified” with the Ford.

For modern American artists like Ruscha (who spent many hours on Route 66 as a child), the car is an integral part of the cultural landscape. His earliest photographic projects had titles like *Thirtyfour Parking Lots* and *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*. For some artists the car had even more significance. The sculptor Ed Keinholz (1927-1994) loved his brown 1940 Packard so much that he was buried in it, sitting wedged in the front seat along with a bottle of 1931 Chianti and a deck of cards, and accompanied by the ashes of his dog, Smash, on the back seat. For an artist known for his extravagant, politically savage installations, this was arguably Keinholz’s finest work.

Of course many artists from around the world have featured cars in some way, from Salvador Dalí to Richard Hamilton to Jeremy Deller, but we have to look farther back to find the first artist who fell in love with the machine. In 1909 the dynamic young Italian poet Filippo Tommaso Marinetti drove into a ditch while trying to avoid two cyclists. The experience was an epiphany, and it inspired him to launch the *Futurist Manifesto* in which he declared, “The splendor of the world has been enriched by a new beauty: the beauty of speed. A roaring car is... more beautiful than the *Winged Victory of Samothrace*.” For the feisty Futurists, the car epitomized a new freedom, and they embraced it in their work.

Artists in many media have understood the power of the car as a symbol of human expression. William Faulkner declared that the “automobile has become our national sex symbol,” while the French philosopher Roland Barthes, writing in 1957, regarded cars, and the Citroën in particular, as “the equivalent of the great Gothic cathedrals.” In the 1940s, the Russian-born constructivist Naum Gabo must have shared

these aesthetics when he designed a sleek, modern vehicle for the British carmaker Jowett. It featured a kidney-shaped steering wheel, Perspex windshield, and nylon upholstery, but sadly never made it into production.

Gabo would have made a brilliant candidate for the BMW Art Car project launched in 1975 by the French race car driver and auctioneer Hervé Poulain. Wishing to merge his passion for art and cars, Poulain asked his friend, the artist Alexander Calder, to create a design for the exterior of his BMW 3.0 CSL series (which would go on to win the European Touring Car Championship every year from 1975 to 1979). Calder came up with a boldly colored design that shared the characteristics of his large sculptures. It was one of his last projects, but in fact he was the first in a line of 18 contemporary artists, including David Hockney, Andy Warhol, Olafur Eliasson, Jenny Holzer, Matazo Kayama, and, most recently, Jeff Koons, to create designs for the BMW Art Car series. Some designs have been flamboyant, some strange, some beautiful, and some, it has to be said, have been (in my opinion) terrible.

A year later Poulain asked another artist, the painter Frank Stella, to create a design for the 3.0 CSL. It was a good choice – at least on paper. Stella was well known for his bright, DayGlo canvases, but – to some surprise – he came up with a cool black-and-white grid design based on graph paper. Despite its sedate appearance, it was a hit with the press, standing out in the black-and-white newspaper photographs. The following two years saw two more grand



Above right: Alexander Calder (left) at his atelier with Hervé Poulain; Calder, in 1975, with his BMW, the first to be commissioned for the Art Car project. Right: Roy Lichtenstein working on his model in 1977. “The painted lines symbolize the road the car has to follow,” he said. Opposite page: a detail of Jeff Koons’ 2010 BMW, the 17th, and most recent, in the series (an 18th “project,” in 2009, was a conceptual canvas by Robin Rhode rather than a car)







American artists take on the project. Roy Lichtenstein put cheery speed lines on a BMW 320i (Group 5 Race Version), and, using a cheap paintbrush, Andy Warhol slapped a vibrant abstract on the fabulous BMW M1 (in part produced with Lamborghini). Lichtenstein's car was very popular with the public, despite coming ninth at Le Mans in 1977, while Warhol's car was remarkable for being the first one to be painted entirely by the artist himself (rather than with the help of assistants). The pop art icon was delighted with his bold creation, explaining, "I have tried to give a vivid depiction of speed. If a car is really fast, all contours and colors will become blurred."

It would have been dull if BMW had stuck solely to American artists, but thankfully it looked further afield. In 1989 the Australian artist Michael Nelson Tjakamarra (born around 1949) was invited to create a design for a BMW M3. By that time Tjakamarra had achieved international recognition for his "dreaming" paintings and artworks for public spaces in Australia. His paintings were about memory linked to the landscape, and he painted the car in his signature style, starting with a spiral motif on the rooftop (representing a kangaroo's tail) and working outward with lines and dots to create a three-dimensional dreaming landscape – on wheels.

Similarly successful was the work of the first woman to be asked: the South African artist Esther Mahlangu (born in 1935), who painted the 525i in 1991. Mahlangu, a member of the South Ndebele people, grew up on a farm in the Transvaal. Her mother and grandmother taught her the traditional wall-painting techniques that the Ndebele used to paint their homes in vibrant primary colors and geometric shapes. She used these skills for her striking abstract patterns on the car – thick black horizontal, vertical, and slanting lines interspersed with yellow, pink, green, and blue blocks. Mahlangu later said that she had accepted the commission as it "was like painting a wall."

Since Mahlangu, many other artists have transformed the car – from painter Matazo Kayama's exquisite airbrushed design inspired by Japanese landscapes to Jenny Holzer's punchy, ironic messages emblazoned on the bodywork, including "Protect me from what I want" and the irresistible line, "The unattainable is invariably attractive."

The most impressive project to date, however, is a car that will never move. In fact, the design by the ever inventive Danish artist Olafur Eliasson could

From top: Andy Warhol painting his car in 1979 – it came second in Le Mans that same year; the Australian artist Michael Nelson Tjakamarra used aboriginal methods and motifs in his work. Right: David Hockney in 1995. He painted a stylized version of the interior – including a driver and dog – on the outside of the car; Esther Mahlangu was the first woman to take part in the project with her 1991 BMW, inspired by traditional Ndebele art





**TJAKAMARRA PAINTED
THE CAR IN HIS SIGNATURE
STYLE TO CREATE A THREE-
DIMENSIONAL DREAMING
LANDSCAPE - ON WHEELS**

LACK OF CHARISMA CAN BE FATAL



hardly be called a car; it's more a sculpture with attitude. He started with the BMW H2R, a futuristic race car adapted to run on liquid hydrogen, and transformed it into an ice sculpture. The piece was made in a special cooling unit within the architecture and design galleries of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Removing the shell of the car, he replaced it with a translucent skin made from steel mesh and panels. This was then sprayed with 530 gallons of water that slowly turned into ice.

What was the artist trying to say? As Henry Urbach, one of the project's curators said, seeing his work was "encountering something you have never seen before that is magical. At the same time it is a serious and trenchant critique that leaves the beholder with plenty to think about." True enough, and in many ways Eliasson's project has been the most thought-provoking of the Art Car series. It relates to those aspects that Marinetti and Gabo loved about the car – speed, aerodynamics, and organic beauty – yet also raises serious questions about how we live with such machines in our world. Eliasson spent many hours deep in BMW's laboratories, so other innovative artists could surely benefit from collaborative research. Eliasson's project suggests a thrilling new direction for using cars to make art.✦

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Left: Jenny Holzer creates art in public places such as on billboards and bumper stickers and described the race car as her ideal medium. "Protect me from what I want," is one of six short slogans she painted on the 1999 BMW. This page: in 1989 Ken Done adorned his car with abstract parrots and parrot fish, indigenous wildlife from his native Australia, as "both are beautiful and move at fantastic speed" (top). This 1982 model by Ernst Fuchs was designed as a purely artistic endeavor and was never used for racing (right). In 2007 Olafur Eliasson stripped down a prototype car and encased it in steel mesh and ice with the aim of provoking discussion on the environmental issues facing the automobile industry (below)

