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For my parents

Martin Roemers

homo mobilis

People | Vehicles | Identity

Lannoo

Frozen speed – identities on wheels

Joes Segal

Over the last hundred years or so, we have come to realise that our existence amounts to less than a tiny speck of dust in an immeasurable universe. But humans have always been inventive in creating their own compensatory mini universes. We shape our private worlds within the confines of our homes, and we cherish ourselves in the self-created bubbles of our families and friends, our clubs, political parties, cities, nations, cultures, religions, and other communities of trust and exchange, safeguarded by mostly artificial and objectively random borders.

One such mini universe that tends to evoke strong feelings is the car. Cowboys are nothing without their horses, and modern people cannot exist without their cars. As German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk puts it: "In modernity the Self can't be conceived without its movement – metaphysically, it is inseparable from its vehicle." In his *Homo Mobilis* series, Martin Roemers shows that the car is not only an extension of the human body but also its reflection. Dogs tend to resemble their owners, and so do cars.

Vehicles of transportation lead a double life: they are both a means of transport and a tool for self-expression. In his earlier series *Metropolis* (2007–2015), Roemers focused on movement, showing traces of cars cruising through the streets and boulevards of megacities in long-exposure photographs. With *Homo Mobilis*, he chooses the opposite perspective: the cars, lorries, vans, tractors, motorbikes and bicycles are shown in complete stillness, brought to life by the people inside, outside or on top of them. By photographing his scenes against the backdrop of a white cloth, these images become icons.

The sacral connotation is meaningful as some people tend to venerate their cars with religious fervour, treating any careless behaviour in their vicinity as sacrilege and a personal affront. According to French essayist and philosopher Roland Barthes, "cars today are almost the exact equivalent of the great Gothic cathedrals […], the supreme creation of an era, conceived with passion by unknown artists, and consumed in image if not in usage by a whole population which appropriates them as purely magical objects". Several world religions have a tradition of car blessings to protect the vehicle and its passengers against accidents. Roemers almost concludes his series with an Indian priest blessing a new Suzuki.

Car magic extends to all the senses. The aesthetic choice between a small and elegant Fiat 500 or a bunker on wheels like the Tesla Cybertruck might speak volumes about the psychological constellation, if not the political preferences, of their buyers. Roemers has telling examples from different cultures, including some richly decorated vans, buses, rickshaws and bicycles from India and Senegal, and the exquisite Chinese minicar with grandmother and child painted in the style of traditional Chinese landscape painting. A car can also make a visual statement, such as the organic farmer sitting in his Dodge painted as an American flag, the Czech car museum director using a Trabant to advertise the museum and its cafeteria, the Afghan carpet seller in India turning his car into a rolling advertisement, or the Indian advocate and climate activist who added a rooftop garden to his car.

Among the other senses, the auditory experience stands out, from the soft gliding sound of electric vehicles to the crackling of loud motors, sawn-off exhaust pipes or supercharged engines, aggressive honking and audio speakers ruthlessly booming into the secluded worlds of other mini cosmos creators. Car smells can vary from the pleasant aroma of the upholstery of a new car to the often less enjoyable propensity of the car to circulate cigarette smoke, perfume or aftershave. That is, of course, unless the perfume imitates the upholstery. American comedian Rita Rudner claimed that in order to attract men, she wears a perfume called New Car Interior. Of course, Roemers' ice cream vans from India and Santa Monica add a whole new dimension to automotive flavours, not to mention the tricycle chicken car from India.

Historically, the car has been associated with toxic masculinity. In the founding manifesto of Italian Futurism (1909), the poet Filippo Tommaso Marinetti evoked a speeding car as the symbol of modernity at a time when the Blitzen-Benz racing car could already reach a speed of over 200 kilometres per hour: "We declare that the splendor of the world has been enriched by a new beauty: the beauty of speed. A racing automobile with its bonnet adorned with great tubes like serpents with explosive breath … a roaring motor car which seems to run on machine-gun fire, is more beautiful than the Victory of Samothrace." For Marinetti and the Futurists, the worship of speed went hand in hand with misogynistic aggression: "We want to glorify war – the only cure for the world – militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of the anarchists, the beautiful ideas which kill, and contempt for woman."

In that sense, it might be no coincidence that the idea of the democratisation of the automobile was high on the agenda of the most anti-democratic politician in modern European history, Adolf Hitler. In 1937, the Nazis produced the Volkswagen ('People's Car' in English) as an affordable commodity for the masses, to be used on the expanding network of motorways (the Autobahn, also known as 'Strassen des Führers', Streets of the Führer) to connect German cities and accommodate smooth military transport in the process. By compressing space and time, the car knit together the National Socialist 'Volksgemeinschaft' (literally: people's community).

In post-war Western Europe and the United States, car ownership quickly became something of a self-proclaimed right, and with the rise of the suburbs, life without a car became close to impossible. Women also became more and more dependent on cars to go shopping and bring children to school or to their leisure activities. Notwithstanding, in car ads and feature films of the period, the vast majority of drivers were men. It was only from the 1960s that car-driving women became more prominent in mass media, but at the same time a concurring trend in advertising started to combine fancy cars with sexualised women, conflating two objects of male desire.

In *Homo Mobilis*, however, men and women seem to have equal car agency. Four self-assured women and a dog from Los Angeles pose inside and in front of a red Chevrolet Impala, a car that's as cool as themselves, and four car sales employees from Senegal are depicted with a woman behind the steering wheel and a man in the back seat. Even in rural North Carolina, it's the woman who decides where the car is heading.

Roemers depicts cars and other vehicles in a variety of uses, from means of transport to status symbols, places of commerce (see for instance the beautiful open sewing studio car from India) or living quarters. In 2025, many of the estimated 29,000 unhoused people in 'car city' Los Angeles use their cars as mini apartments. Roemers portrays a Mexican immigrant, an expressionist artist, a musician and a retired construction worker as car dwellers, a reminder of the combination of astronomical rent prices and a minimalist social security and pension network, and the fact that the city attracts many more creatives than it offers opportunities to engage in a subsidised creative career. Note that the musician and the retired construction worker are sharing their humble abode with one or more pets.

Homo Mobilis covers car cultures from different parts of the world, showing both the cultural specificity and the commonalities that all of us humans share. In communist countries like the Soviet Union and Cuba, where everyone was supposedly equal, car ownership was nevertheless a clear indication of status and social standing. Wait times for unpretentious cars like the Lada in the Soviet Union, the Škoda in Czechoslovakia, the Dacia in Romania or the Trabant in East Germany could rise to over ten years; the more elegant ones like the Volga or ZIS-101 were only affordable for high-up party, military and secret service members, cosmonauts, film stars and sports heroes. As the quality of Soviet Bloc cars was usually below par, the art of car maintenance was held in high esteem, as is still the case in Cuba and many countries of the Global South.

In *Car Cultures* (Routledge, 2001), a volume of essays edited by Daniel Miller, anthropological field researchers analyse different uses of the car in different cultures. For instance, Diana Young describes in her contribution how Aboriginal Australians, instead of rejecting the automobile as a modernist intrusion, have integrated the car into many of their spiritual rituals. According to Da niel Miller, people in Trinidad are more often identified by the car parked outside their house than by their house number. And Jojada Verrips and Birgit Meyer describe how in Ghana, where many people depend on their cars for their income due to the lack of a functioning public transport system, car mechanics are often venerated for their spiritual as well as technical proficiency, based on their ability to miraculously resurrect a vehicle that seemed beyond repair. Roemers has a couple of photographs of Senegalese taxi drivers in their rickety cars that you sense will keep rolling until an ill-fated passenger sinks through the rusty bottom.

Italian film director Federico Fellini famously included the act of film-making in several of his feature films, creating a Brechtian effect of 'breaking the fourth wall', consciously disrupting the illusionary world of theatre and cinema. Roemers does the same, where he takes a step back and shows his set-up in context, so that the Shanghai couple out shopping emerge against the backdrop of a construction site, and the Indian ice cream vendor seems to be parked in a lush garden. These context images disrupt the association with stillness and instead show these frozen moments as part of a larger reality. The other aspect that somewhat contradicts the iconic character of the photographs are the people. Whereas the saints of icon paintings are frozen in a state of eternal timelessness, Roemers' car people are very much alive, dynamically (in one case even acrobatically) interacting with their vehicles as integral parts of their mini universes, creating their own realities.

Joes Segal is Chief Curator and Director of Programming at the Wende Museum, Los Angeles, happy resident of car city Los Angeles without a driver's license.

The dream and the nightmare

Bas van Putten

Looking at the bicycles, donkeys and carts, wagons, mopeds, scooters, tuk-tuks, cars, campervans and lorries in Martin Roemers' photographs, we see transport making its evolutionary journey from non-motorised pedalling and pulling to the highest attainable form: the car. But no matter the stage of that journey, we see people standing solemnly beside their vehicle. Something is at stake. The magic of speed, the lure of escape, the inextinguishable mythology of the vehicle as a symbol of freedom and independence. We see the owners posing with their possession. Walmart cashier Susan and retired quality manager Leon with their blue Corvette, Ukrainian entrepreneur Vyacheslav in his yellow one, restaurant manager Rick in front of his classic Cadillac, the four young lads on their powerful motorcycles. Of course, they're just possessions – and yet they are so much more. The images are bursting with a self-made pride. Never expected, but obtained.

This is how the mobile human dreamt of climbing the ladder, fighting and saving all the way. From simple to complex, from poverty to prestige. From bicycle to moped, from moped to motorbike, from tuk-tuk to car, from Beetle to Cadillac. That dream, even if it never comes true, is as universal as the double portraits Roemers has made of vehicles and drivers all over the world. They reveal the never fully clear relationship to ownership between the extremes of pride in what has been acquired and the tragic or tragi-comic acceptance of eternal lack.

On their own, the human and the car have nothing to disclose. But these images reveal a great deal about humanity and our history. Aside from technological progress, Roemers' photos also represent the social evolution from dependent to independent and the economic one from poor to rich. And that's not because some of the images were shot in poor countries. Even in the richest countries in the world, this evolution took time – and, as Roemers saw in the big American cities, can just as easily backtrack to poverty. For ordinary Westerners in a demolished Europe right after the Second World War, the car was out of reach. The road to prosperity was a bumpy one. In the 1940s, fathers had mopeds; ten years later scooters or motorbikes. In the 1950s, young couples went to France on scooters. In Germany, of all places, manufacturers from Heinkel to BMW built bubble cars for the less well-off – primitive three- or four-wheelers that were somewhere between a motorbike and a car. It was only after 1960 that the 'ordinary' European middle class were financially ready for their own car. The top of the ladder had been reached, and rising prosperity finally allowed hard-working citizens to shine a little. They responded to this call, initially with trepidation, but later with increasing exuberance. The effects can be vividly seen on high-end boulevards from Monaco to Beverly Hills.

With a shock of recognition, this evolution is something we see repeating itself throughout Roemers' work. As a Dutchman I witnessed it much earlier. Born in 1965, I caught the tail end of what cars meant to the adults of my childhood, when they were still largely out of reach for the general public and mainstream cars looked relatively humble. In an amateur film made by my parents, who recorded their extremely virtuous lives with a narrow film camera in the 1960s, I see my grandparents on my father's side arriving by car in Medemblik. This was the small Dutch town where my twenty-something parents lived, a long way from civilisation and in a house where there was no car out front or television in the living room, but with my father's Honda moped parked in the shed. The moment was apparently so important that it had to be recorded for posterity. In front of the rolling camera I see a car parking up opposite our house. Granddad is driving, his wife without a driver's licence – as was customary at the time. The car is a Ford Cortina, nicely middle class. I see self-confidence radiate from my granddad as he steps out of the car he owns. Men don't get out of their cars like that anymore. Nowadays they act indifferently, as if it's no big deal. Ownership is implicit. That BMW is only what you deserve. For granddad, the car was still a dream come true. He crosses the road with presidential dignity, my grandma at his side. You can tell they're aware that someone is filming their five minutes of fame. You see them *being seen*. Granddad later bought a Volvo. With the respect for material things that was still so common at that time, I thought: how rich we must be, something so powerful. And of course, the fact that that was what was thought was exactly the point of buying it. The fact I thought that was down to my roots in a social class that was still in awe of the symbolism of upward mobility.

On another narrow film reel I see my maternal grandparents in an identical scene, but now with different characters and arriving in a different car. They park their French, artistically designed Citroën Ami, the 1960s model with the chrome bumpers. My other grandfather isn't wearing a hat but a beret, a symbol of artistry and a higher social standing than granddad Cortina. But the level of pride is the same. You can see the self-confidence of my car-owning grandfather radiating from him. But he paints, plays the cello, reads Voltaire and Freud, and is a secondary school headmaster. People like that don't own a Cortina. He is an intellectual and intellectuals drive French cars because, after the Second World War, they would never get in a German car again and because French cars are not guilt-laden machines but still blemish-free aesthetic objects.

While I could never have explained all this as a child, I instinctively knew exactly why granddad Cortina drove the Ford and grandfather Ami the Citroën. Because as well as your financial standing, even then cars expressed a socio-cultural profile. That knowledge was embedded in the DNA of owner and viewer, sender and receiver – that's how much

of a statement a car made. That was then, but it's no longer the case, certainly not to that extent. In Western Europe, the previous rough correlation between wealth and car size, socio-cultural status and chosen make is history. Everywhere you see successful millennials in unaffordable SUVs, and in the last two decades the target customer of a once traditionally elite brand like Rolls-Royce has rapidly accelerated from old to new money. These days, those cars are driven more by rappers and footballers than the British aristocracy and classic Hollywood stars. Meanwhile, the cultural-social elite move in a post-material world, driving second-hand cars, not necessarily Volvos. They no longer care. A top lawyer in a dented Peugeot, that's the real establishment.

Had Martin Roemers been able to photograph my grandparents in the 1960s, the look captured on their faces would have been different to that of today's drivers. They would have looked as the first 19th-century people did at the earliest cameras – except for greats like Nadar – with the intimidated paralysis that now leaves a curious impression. That shyness is gone, the battle has been fought. In a column about famous Dutch people and their cars in a Dutch car magazine, the people portrayed generally look more casual than proud, because car ownership has long since been taken for granted, or at least it seems that way in the eye of the beholder – me, in this case. That special feeling quickly wears off as soon as the goal of the desire or ambition to own a car has been achieved. And anyone who owns a Ferrari or flashy BMW must, in the spirit of today, pretend that it is perfectly normal, because in your world you can have anything you want. It's what modern slogans promise. You're allowed to exist too, everyone is unique, the sky's the limit. Pride is too humble a pose for what modern people deserve as a reward for their work.

What is interesting is what happens to people who, while chasing the dream, get stuck in the gap between utopia and reality. They often decorate or ridicule their meagre possession, or let time gnaw away at it out of indifference or perhaps in fact deliberately. Colourful artwork can turn a bus fit for the scrapyard into a feast for the eyes. A beat-up American car is transformed – on comically oversized wheels – from poor man's junk into a rebellious act. In doing so, people turn necessity into virtue, showing their courage and perseverance against all odds, warding off the ever-palpable proximity of the abyss. As Roemers' photos testify, this cheerful camouflage of their vulnerability is a serious matter. Strikingly, only a few of Roemers' subjects are shown smiling. Among those who do are the Senegalese duo in a Renault 21 sinking into the ground who seemingly have little reason to rejoice. But perhaps their tragedy becomes a kind of comedy, now they have nothing left to lose. Almost everyone else looks dead serious. In some of the countries where Roemers shot his portraits, happiness can evaporate in an instant. Even in car paradise, heaven is often just the antechamber of hell – something Roemers makes painfully clear.

He found the flip side of the coin of good fortune in the very place I also visited this year, a place where cars have become homes. In Los Angeles, the dividing line between poverty and wealth is sometimes quite literally as wide as the pavement. On Washington Boulevard in Venice, I have the gentrified bungalows of the wealthy on my right, and a row of dilapidated RVs and work vans, with the occasional stretch limo in a pitiful state, on my left.

On the tiled pavement in between, you walk through an intoxicating stench of urine, your mind burning with questions. What brought their drivers here? A hippie gathering or a rock festival? Google doesn't know either. Could this be the hottest destination for a new underground scene? It's nowhere near holiday season, though, and there are far too many of them.

Then you see it. A flat tyre, a cloth where a windscreen used to be. People aren't driving these cars anymore. They're living in them.

A young woman steps out of the stretch limo. She looks full of life and normal, nothing out of the ordinary that would make you look twice. She puts a coat in the boot and takes out some clothes, then disappears again behind the tinted windows of the passenger compartment. It could be her car. Two hours later, she's still there, sitting in the front seat, talking on the phone. That's when I know for sure: this is her home.

The street is the bathroom, which explains the stench. I'm walking almost literally along the edge of the abyss that people on the American West Coast are now disappearing into en masse. According to official figures, there are 75,000 homeless people in Los Angeles. Many are much worse off than the RV dwellers or the woman in the stretch limo on Washington Boulevard. Fentanyl addicts roam the city like an army of zombies. Anyone here who doesn't earn enough or has no savings is always teetering on the edge of the danger zone. Life is unaffordable. I Google a simple one-bedroom flat, not even in a good location, and $3,000 a month is considered reasonable. You have to be rich to survive here. And many people aren't. So the car, once a symbol of unlimited prosperity, has become the final refuge for the underprivileged and the unfortunate. If you see one parked in Westlake or Skid Row, covered with newspapers or sunshades, sometimes still looking presentable, you can figure the rest out.

It was Martin Roemers who told me about the Van Lord, a man in Los Angeles who rents out vans to people who can't afford a home. In 2019, Gary Gallerie, as he's called, is interviewed by the *LA Times*. At that point, he owns 13 vans.

Tenants pay him between $150 and $300 a month in rent. They don't get the keys. They can't drive away. That's right, says Gary, it's illegal, but necessity knows no law.

Martin Roemers gives a face to the have-nots behind the statistics. In his photos, you see the people I caught glimpses of in the RV parade on Washington Boulevard – seemingly ordinary, sane-looking citizens who are down on their luck. The musician Carl lives in Santa Monica in his battered Honda Civic. That's also where Tom lives, in his Chrysler station wagon, packed with provisions, household items, cats and a dog.

Look at Tom's car now. Until not so long ago, it was a big upper-middle-class family car, a status symbol. Who knows, maybe he bought it brand new as a middle finger up to those he was leaving behind – you'd need to discover the secrets under the hood. But then a mistake or misfortune perhaps turned that white thing into his last lifeline, or the nail in his coffin. And so the car seals your place in the world, even if you've lost it, your rise or your downfall. After I saw Roemers' brilliantly colourful photo series, there was one feeling I just couldn't shake: how relatable these people seem. That's us. All of us.

Musicologist and writer Bas van Putten is a published author on music and cars. He drives an electric Mini, a slightly less electric Japanese micro-cabriolet, the Daihatsu Copen, and an Audi A2.

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Priest Nagabushna prays for a new car | Suzuki

Bengaluru, India

Jordan; Juan, mover; Bertha, homemaker; Gabriel | Plymouth

Los Angeles, USA

Mohammed; Afiya; Ayeisha, housewife; Aizah; Sana, housewife; Hafsa;
Abdul, merchant in car parts | Suzuki
Nandi, Karnataka, India

Jovanny, forklift driver; Jaylene; Cassy, homemaker | Oldsmobile
Los Angeles, USA

Denise, office assistant; Jeramy, landscaper; Vicky | Chevrolet

Los Angeles, USA