



COURTESY OF SUSAN ELIZABETH PEPLER

Pepler, who saw this Chevy at the Botanical Garden in Havana, says: "I love to paint the reflective surfaces, the chrome and the windshields."

Cuba wheels into Westmount

Artist's colourful acrylics capture bold personality of vintage American cars

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Montreal artist Susan Elizabeth Pepler has brought the tropical ambience of Havana to a Westmount restaurant with a small but lively show, *Carros de Cuba*.

With vibrant, colourful acrylics, she has captured the personality and majestic curves and angles of the big, old American cars still in widespread use in Cuba.

A turquoise Buick Roadmaster dominates a narrow street in Havana Vieja, or Old Havana, with a solid, self-assured look.

The bumper on a green Buick is ever so slightly askew, making it look like a cantankerous tiger. The chrome trim over the headlights resembles quizzical eyebrows.

A blue-and-white '55 Chevy greets the viewer with a big toothy grin.

A turquoise Opel is surrounded by lush palm trees and cascading pink bougainvillea. The Opel is quite toothy, too.

"I feel like they are smiling at me. They make me feel happy," Java U owner Ronnie Mofford said at Monday's vernissage.

All but one of the cars have the yellow license plate familiar to anyone who has visited Havana.

Several have little yellow taxi signs propped up in the front window. These would be independent, unofficial taxis that don't have meters. They're just for Cubans and are not supposed to pick up tourists, though many do. (Tourists are supposed to take the shiny, new official taxis, often Subaru, Toyota or Mitsubishi. The embargo keeps out only American cars.)

Pepler didn't try out the vintage taxis, but she saw an old Cadillac in



COURTESY OF SUSAN ELIZABETH PEPLER

Pepler's painting of a Buick Roadmaster, with familiar yellow license plate.

Havana's Botanical Garden and the owner was happy to take her for a short ride.

The show came about because a visitor to an earlier Pepler exhibit had admired two of her paintings of old cars and told her she must visit Havana.

So she did just that, spending a week there in April, staying at the classy Hotel Nacional.

The cars did not disappoint. "I find them beautiful. I love to paint the reflective surfaces, the chrome and the windshields," she said.

"The cars from the '50s have the best look, full of character, almost like faces smiling at you."

"I've always loved something about cars, I know them all." (Just artistically, not mechanically.)

Funnily enough, despite this enthusiasm, she has never owned a car. "I'm painting them but I don't have one."

When she went to pick up her framed paintings, the framer told her that Alain Lévesque, an artist who also paints cars, had seen and admired her work. From him, she learned that there's a whole world of automobile artists and even a New York City

gallery that specializes in the genre

While this show concentrates on cars, Pepler's artistic interests are wide-ranging.

Her portfolio contains paintings of luscious fruits and vegetables, including curvy pears, a silky eggplant; broad-shouldered peppers, tropical plants bursting with life, luminous flowers, a pet terrier painted on commission, architectural details like stone planters, columns and elegant, sweeping staircases.

Pepler earned a bachelor of fine arts in studio art from Concordia University in 1984.

For a while after graduation, she did budget forecasting and cost-control for an engineering firm, which seems far removed from the art world, but she also worked at florist Caméléon Vert, which further nourished her lifelong love of greenery. That's when she first began painting plants for her own amusement.

She also studied illustration and design at Dawson College because she "wanted to draw everything."

For more than 12 years, she freelanced for advertising agencies, making storyboards, which look like comic strips and serve as visual scripts for shooting TV commercials.

Her work went into commercials for Molson's, Bombardier, Pharmaprix and the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

Sometimes she only had a few hours' notice to do the work, but Pepler said it was "a lot of fun, despite the strict deadlines."

These days though, she is devoting most of her time to painting. And another trip to Cuba is definitely on the agenda.

✦ *Carros de Cuba* continues at Java U, 4914 Sherbrooke St. W. until July 30.