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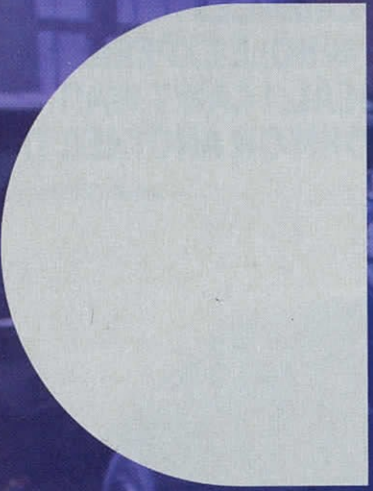
Setting an artistic table

**+
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CUSTOMIZING AN AUTOMOTIVE WORK OF ART

BY LAURA JOSEPH MOGIL
PHOTOGRAPHS BY SEBASTIÁN FLORES

READY TO HAVE YOUR DREAM CAR PERSONALIZED TO PERFECTION? THEN MATTHEW FIGLIOLA, FOUNDER AND CEO OF AI DESIGN, IS YOUR GO-TO GUY.

You'll find him by entering a nondescript door on an industrial side street in Tuckahoe. Inside is a hidden secret – an immaculate 10,000-square-foot facility where Figliola and his team of nine master craftsmen outfit luxury and sports cars with the latest and greatest in audio and video entertainment; plush upholstery; trim, cutting-edge security systems; and high-end performance tuning.

The 25-year-old shop's expertise in bespoke car interiors and exteriors spans the gamut, from recreating a stunning 1932 Ford Roadster from scratch to customizing a 2017 Ferrari 488 Spider convertible, complete with a hidden radar detector in its rear-view mirror whose placement was created using Ai Design's high-tech 3D printer. Discerning customers include sports and entertainment celebrities, leading record producers, famous fashion designers, tech billionaires, Wall Street tycoons and even the king of Morocco, Mohammed VI.

Figliola, an Irvington resident who grew up in Hartsdale, says, "It all began when I helped a friend install speakers in the car he just bought. I caught the bug right there and then and pursued installing audio systems as a hobby, working on my own first car, a 1979 Chevrolet Malibu station wagon, and at small jobs at auto shops after school."

After graduating from high school in 1985, Figliola learned the ropes at several upscale car customization companies, always with an eye toward opening his own business. "I did all types of electronic work, not just sound systems, but big fancy radar detectors, auxiliary lighting and body changes, plus performance enhancements like augmenting the motor and suspension," he says.

Figliola brought his wealth of artistic and engineering knowledge to Ai Design, which he first opened in Yonkers in 1992, relocating to Eastchester a couple years later and then finally moving to Tuckahoe in 1998.

When asked about what makes his shop unique, Figliola says, "We have competitors that do aspects of what we do, but I don't know any that have our range of expertise in high-end automotive customization in all of the U.S. and Canada.

"For a lot of 'car places,' their entry point is motors and making cars faster. For me, it all began with car audio and an understanding of how to navigate through a vehicle's electronic system," he adds. "Having grown that body of knowledge gives our shop a really big edge. A modern car has 40 or 50 computers in it, and, if you want to make big changes to it, you really have to know quite a few things."



Matthew Figliola, founding CEO of Ai Design.

He also points out that all those electronic changes often require major physical modifications to the car itself. “We’re known for our fabrication – the ability to make a part out of wood, metal, plastic, fiberglass or any other means,” Figliola says.

“For example, for there to be excellent upholstery, there’s a panel underneath that has to be shaped and sculpted. The substrate is where the real work is. The upholstery is like a finishing step. The beauty is the changes don’t stand out but rather mesh and look like they’re part of the car’s original equipment,” he notes.

In addition to electronic technicians and fabricators, Figliola also employs an array of seasoned mechanics and auto-body experts. “What’s so unusual is that the majority of our craftsmen can wear all hats if need be, but, of course, some excel in particular areas more than others,” he says. “When it comes to computer-aided design (CAD), we have one specialist, but there’s still a general understanding among the entire staff.”

One example of how the team all worked together is the pair of identical 2015 Cadillac Escalades that Ai Design personalized for a prominent music entrepreneur. The owner wanted to enjoy the exact same luxury vehicle on both coasts and to be able to listen to his personal music collection, which includes thousands of CDs accessible through the server located at his Los Angeles home.

Spending over a year and a half on the twin projects, the shop completely dismantled the cars inside and out in order to create an audio environment that rivals the finest world-class sound studios. “All of the circuitry, the miles of wiring, the modems and the 22 custom-designed speakers were completely integrated into the car and rendered invisible,” Figliola says of a hallmark of Ai Design’s work. “The music is

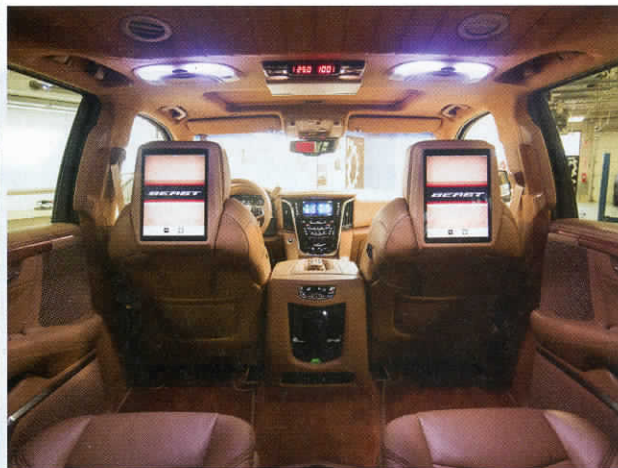


entirely controlled through two iPads inserted into the back of the two front-seat headrests.”

In addition, Figliola used a 3D printer to make 120 different parts in each Cadillac, ranging from a tiny switch bezel to an entire interior door panel. The upscale upholstery included custom-dyed saddle-brown leather seating, Ultrasuede ceiling paneling and luxurious Wilton wool carpeting (made famous by Rolls Royce). Rounding out the package, both vehicles were installed with a sophisticated radar detection system, added horsepower, improved braking, suspension changes, emergency lighting and even discretely placed fire extinguishers.

While Ai Design works on dozens of sports cars a year, from Porches and Ferraris to McLarens and Vipers, perhaps one of the projects that most stands out is the customized Mercedes-Benz CLS55 for Ken Block (well-known within motorsport circles as well as for founding the Gen X phenom DC Shoes). Completed in 2005, the car’s signature touches include “a matte black exterior that was revolutionary at the time and still is in demand today, a Brabus K8 engine that can deliver 575 in horsepower and DC logos emblazoned onto the head rests and trunk lid,” Figliola says.

He’s in the process of turning the interior of a music promoter’s 1977 General Motors RV into a mobile



Custom work by a Ai Design. Courtesy Ai Design

home that the client can enjoy as a hotel suite while traveling to music festivals across the country. While the body and mechanical restorations have been completed over the past year, the next step is to focus on the 136-square-foot interior. When finished, the space will include a custom-designed kitchen, dinette, living room with couches, sleeping space that can accommodate a queen-size bed and bathroom suffused with a Zen-like atmosphere.

Not only will there be a high-tech Sonos sound system, but Figliola is also installing a record player, because the client wants to be able to play his vinyl collection. “Plans also include a deployable awning, plus a grill and collapsible chairs that can be pulled out of built-in storage so the owner can enjoy the full camping experience. It’s going to be a very chill space,” he says.

At any given time there may be about 20 cars in the shop, and Figliola enjoys solving the challenges that each one of them presents. “I’m passionate about the whole creation process and just being able to design whatever we need from scratch,” he says.

“It’s very satisfying to get to know something as mundane as nuts, bolts and screws so well and also all the attributes of leather, plastic and wood that most people have no concepts of, plus in-depth details about an engine or a wheel,” he adds. “To me, it’s all on a palette, and you’re dabbling in here and there and assembling it all. I know all of the materials intimately and love being able to choose which ones would be the best fit for each car.”

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