

Etcher creates worlds on the window

By Michael Kelly
Staff Writer

Robert Rich has this dream:

He's climbing a scaffold outside a glass skyscraper. Halfway up, he stops and takes out an electric-powered engraving tool. Then he begins to scratch a corporate logo or a pastoral mural the size of a billboard into the glass. He is paid millions. Praises flow. He becomes a famous artist.

Back to reality: These days, Rich is a 33-year-old itinerant artisan, cut from the same breed of back-to-crafts Sixties people who still scratch out a living by hand-carving leather belts. His is the lot of the free-lance hot rod customizer, tooling around America in a souped-up pickup with chrome exhausts, engraving naked women, dragons, flying saucers, wizards, castles, comets, and fairies into the vents, windows, and side mirrors of cars.

His reputation is confined mostly to gas stations and car-customizing shops. His office is his truck. His business card has at least two phone numbers because he never remains in one place long enough. His salary: under \$10,000 a year.

It is a Wednesday afternoon, early April.

Rich, who grew up in Dumont, dashes into a Cresskill coffee shop, collapses into a booth, and lights a Winston. "If I can just get these books written about glass engraving and then do a movie about it, I know everything will come together," he blurts. "I'm tired of this car stuff. I want to get into heavy architectural stuff. There are buildings going up in the next few years that I want to do."

Rich pauses a moment, then laughs, realizing that dreaming of carving murals in Manhattan's glass boxes could cast him as the Don Quixote of the craft business. Is it a pipe dream? Well, says Rich, it would certainly pay better than the present or the past.

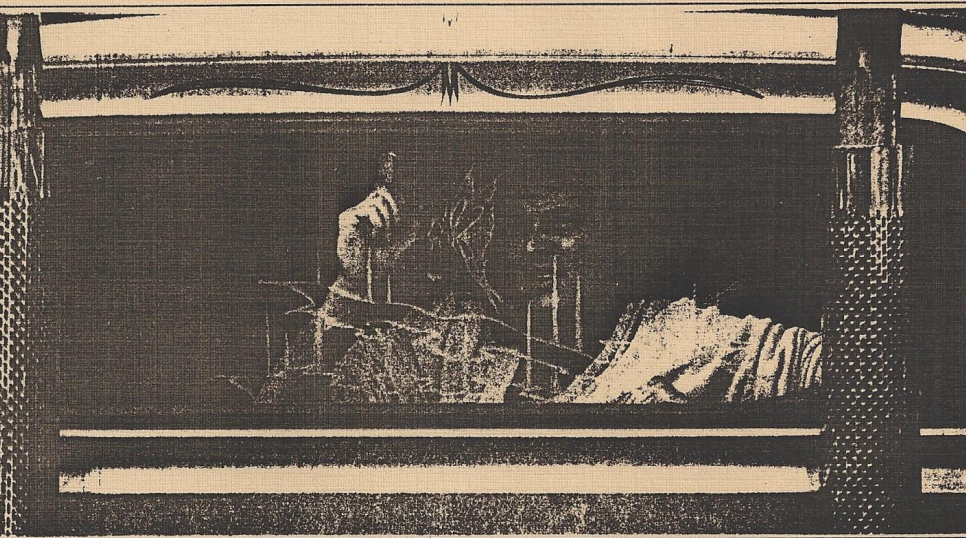
On many occasions, Rich has engraved vent mirrors in exchange for a tank of gas. In St. Louis, he carved nymphs into the

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mirror of a massage parlor. In Virginia Beach, he engraved glass tops of coffee tables. In Hollywood, his most famous job was scratching roses and lace into the windows of Zsa Zsa Gabor's Rolls Royce Sedan. In North Jersey, he's engraved mirrors at taverns and hair salons.

It's a craft that plays on people's fantasies. And, to those people who think custom refers to the chrome on a muscle car, Robert Rich is an artist.

If Rich had his way, though, he says he would carve only roses and butterflies,



Staff photos by Peter Monoson

Robert Rich looks at glass, not through it. Above, a fantastic species of butterfly; below, Pegasus through the looking glass.

landscapes and lace. But just as poets sometimes pay the mortgage by writing for girly magazines, Rich pays his bills with money from the naked women and dragons he engraves on the vents and rear windows of cars.

Although some inevitably turn up their noses at this kind of craft, Rich has found even more people turn their heads in admiration.

"I go to a lot of custom car shows, and a lot of people are trying to copy Rich, but they can't because he's so good," says John Lange, owner of Elegant Motor Car Works, a custom car shop in Englewood that has commissioned Rich to engrave the windows of several dozen cars.

In addition to nudes, Rich has carved a complete solar system into a car's sun roof, a mountain scene with bears and deer on a station wagon. He can design scenes in which Spanish galleons battle flying saucers or prehistoric birds fly over medieval castles. His price: \$150 for a vent, \$5,000 for all windows.

"He's one of the best in the country," says George Barris, the famous North Hollywood, Calif., car customizer. "The stuff he did on Zsa Zsa's car was absolutely beautiful."

Rich has heard the praises hundreds of times. But he is quick to point out the economic realities of his craft. "Things have really been serendipity," he explains. "I'm like a traveling salesman, but not like the

guy who stays in the Hyatt Regency. If I'm an artist, my real art is trying to keep the art alive."

Built into Rich's art is travel. Says George Barris: "Rob's is not a business that you can stay in one area. It's a specialty business. You don't have ten jobs backed

up, and you don't have repeats. To keep working, you have to keep moving."

Since dropping out of a pastry chef apprenticeship program at Bergen County Vocational-Technical High School in his freshman year in 1986, Rich has lived in Dumont, Virginia Beach, St. Louis, Chicago,

Milwaukee, Denver, Washington, D.C., and parts of Florida. His constant companion has been his pickup. To fuel his dreams about someday making a movie, he keeps a copy of Constantine Stanislavski's book "An Actor Prepares" on the truck's front seat. But to remind him of reality, Rich has inscribed his personal motto on the truck's front fenders: "P.S. Send lawyers, guns, and money."

"Sometimes, when people ask, I say 'I'm an artist,'" says Rich, who resembles the late Jim Morrison of the Doors rock band. "I tell them I carve pictures on glass, but there's no title for it. I guess if I had to fill out a form, I would write down gypsy."

It's now early morning at the Knickerbocker Mobil gas station in Cresskill. Here, thanks to some friends who own the gas station, Rich has established an office of sorts.

In one corner stands an air tank, which Rich uses for sandblasting designs on glass. In another corner stands a half-finished project: a two-by-three-foot mirror for the "Hair Depot" salon in Dumont. To accentuate the salon's train motif, Rich has carved a steam locomotive into the center of the mirror. Eventually the mirror will resemble a turn-of-the-century railroad ticket.

"No two jobs are alike," adds Rich, open-

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