

Shifting Gears

[Red Ink and Black Crayons: Drawing the Future at GM and Chrysler](#)

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By Roger Witherspoon

Ed Welburn was the picture of a man who was right where he always wanted to be.

The setting wasn't spectacular. This was the 2010 New York Auto Show and General Motors, just climbing back from bankruptcy, did not splurge on space or amenities. But there was Welburn, a quiet Black man whose bald pate was reflecting the overhead spotlights, seated on a plain stool between two of the latest products from his creative palate.

On his left, glistening on a slowly moving turntable, was silver, supercharged, 556-horsepower, Cadillac CTS-V; on his right, the new edition to his growing rolling flock, was a silver CTS-V station wagon.

Which prompted the question: "Ed, why would you make a 150 mile-an-hour station wagon?"

"Because we can," replied Welburn, grinning. "Besides, does that look like a station wagon to

you?”

In fact, the functional station wagon did not look like one at all. The rear was more tapered, the windows were trapezoids under a sloping roof reminiscent of Acura’s crossover, the ZDX, and the front was the aggressive grill of the Cadillac cat.

“Who wouldn’t want one?” asked Welburn.

The question was not really rhetorical. Buses and trains are modes of transportation. Cars are the largest form of utilitarian art most families ever invest in. It is how a potential buyer feels in or next to a car which closes a sale. And while news from the various 2010 auto shows was that GM and Chrysler are coming back from the brink and again competing in the marketplace, success will not rest on the existence of small cars, fuel efficient hybrids, the use of quality materials, and the latest electronic gadgets. That technology is widely known and every car company has them.

To sell cars by the millions, GM and Chrysler will need fleets with pizzazz, with flair, with allure, with styles that will bring buyers back into the showrooms saying “wow!” as they reach for their check books.

The future of these two troubled, historic, American automakers now rests largely with the fertile imaginations of two Black artists: the sculptor, Ed Welburn, Vice President for Global Design at GM; and the graphic designer, Ralph Gilles, Vice President for Design at Chrysler LLC.

The two men are cut from different cloths.



Welburn, the 60-year-old Philadelphia native, is a generation removed from Gilles, whose Haitian parents stopped in 1970 in New York to visit relatives and give birth to him on American soil before immigrating to Montreal, Canada where he was raised. Welburn grew up in the era of the 1950s “hogs,” those long cars with huge tail fins whose styling cues came from lumbering, big-winged, Air Force bombers. Not surprisingly, while his wife toots around in the sleek, Saturn Sky roadster – one of Welburn’s favorite designs – Welburn prefers to tool around in his vintage, yellow and black, 1969 Camaro.



Giles, on the other hand, is a product of the 70s and 80s, when stealth jets and sleek, fast, fighters dominated the design cues of transportation artists. While his hand is in all of Chrysler's cars and trucks, his wheel of choice is a black on black, 640-horsepower, 200 mile per hour, Dodge Viper.

And they are artists with different missions and starting points. General Motors came out of bankruptcy a slimmed-down giant with four successful, ongoing brands – Cadillac, Buick, GMC, and Chevrolet – which Welburn had been developing new cars for. He was most sorry to lose Saturn, a line he had just finished completely redesigning.

“But I understand it fully,” he said. “It is a business, like they said in *The Godfather*, which is still my favorite all time movie. I'm still proud of those designs.”

At Chrysler, on the other hand, Gilles is starting from scratch with no new cars in the showrooms and in the immediate pipeline. Chrysler ended a stormy relationship with Mercedes by bringing in a new CEO, Robert Nardelli, whose chief qualification was having spent the previous five years running down Home Depot, earning a reputation as one of the nation's worst chief executives, and walking away with a \$210 million severance. Nardelli cut cars he didn't like, including the aggressive Dodge Magnum, the signature Dodge Durango and the iconic, retro-styled, PT Cruiser. But he did not green light a new set of winning wheels.

Chrysler, which went bankrupt and become the partner of Italy's Fiat, is primarily a domestic auto maker. It is the weakest of the three American car companies and, historically, it has concentrated on large sedans and trucks – and area where Gilles made a name for himself. He now wears two hats: president of Dodge cars and vice president of design for *all* of Chrysler. His mission is to take Fiat's expertise with developing small, fuel efficient cars, and make those little boxes appealing to American tastes *in addition to* ensuring that Chrysler's remaining brands turn out an arresting fleet of high performing, eye catching sedans, SUVs, and trucks.

That requires something of a race against the normal three-year development timeline. Chrysler introduced a new Grand Cherokee in June – characterized chiefly by a remarkably upgraded interior – and hopes to produce modified or new versions of the rest of its line by the end of the year. But it will take more than tinkering with the interior to keep Chrysler in the black.

General Motors is still the world's largest auto maker and Welburn, as design chief, controls a

variety of crayon boxes to meet the world's disparate motoring tastes. He is the sixth design chief in GM's history, with his stamp on every vehicle conceived by the more than 1,600 designers at the company's 11 design studios in eight countries.

"I don't think what I am doing is the same as what Ralph is doing," mused Welburn. "I have a lot of respect for Ralph. But I am dealing with a global design organization dealing with a lot of different cultures. I am in and out of a lot of places I never thought I would be in and out of, and leading teams of people from cultures I never thought I or any one else of African American descent would be leading.

"I'm working with Australians for that market; folks from China or Korea for the Asian market; or Brazil or here in the United States. I don't dwell on that, but it doesn't escape me at all that it's a long way from Philadelphia."

For a young Ed Welburn, the 1958 Philadelphia International Auto Show was the key to his future. It wasn't the eight-year-old's first exposure to the intricacies of cars. His father, Edward, owned and operated an auto body and repair shop in nearby Berwyn, Pa., and young Ed spent hours watching his father working on the cars from the skeletons out.

"The '50s were a very car-oriented period," Welburn said. "And it was a period in which cars had a lot of flair. You could easily identify different brands by their looks. They all have very strong character.

"It was a very exciting auto industry, and I grew up in a family where there were always new cars around."

But the Auto Show was special. Designs were changing as American society shifted into a mobile culture. The automakers were experimenting with new designs, configurations and bold styles.



"I like a design that has flair," said Welburn, "that is very expressive and has character that can mean very different things on different types of vehicles. Some designs need to be expressive, and

others need to be quiet.

“But they all have to be contemporary. And that is what the big fins on the cars – especially the Cadillacs – were all about. They were built on the new technology of the time.”

His parents encouraged him to read everything he could about car design and by the time he was 11, he said, “it was my dream to be a designer, and I did not think of it as a field in which there were not a lot of African American designers. I just thought of it as a field I was extremely interested in.”

He took the unusual step of writing a letter to General Motors “and I just let them know I was an 11-year-old kid in Berwyn, Pa. , who was interested in auto design and wanted their advice. What courses should I take in high school and what other preparation would I need to go to a university?”

GM responded with a high school curricula and a list of the competitive colleges they recruited from. Welburn followed their advice and went to Howard University, which allowed him to design his own course of study, specializing in sculpting. He joined GM’s design center in Warren, Mich., in 1972 and began a steady progression upward. In his early years, the Cutlass Supreme, 1977 Buick Park Avenue, and the Oldsmobile Riviera sprang from his creative pad. Then, in 1985, GM asked him to design a 1,000-horsepower car for the legendary race driver A.J. Foyt to pilot in the Indianapolis 500. His 1987 Aerotech, with Foyt at the wheel, set a world land speed record, averaging 257 miles per hour and topping 300 on the straightaway.

In 2003, GM promoted Welburn to vice president of design, making him the highest ranking black executive in the auto industry. Two years later, the title was expanded to head of global design. In that capacity, if he is not globe-trotting, Welburn is in his office facing the equivalent of a giant video parlor.

“The screen I am looking at,” he explained, “is 18-feet wide. Today, the studio in Brazil is working on a car for their emerging market, and it’s like I’m in the studio with them – but I’m here in Michigan. The guys in our studio in Australia are part of the design review because I asked for their input. Every studio has roughly the same equipment. It is fast moving, full of energy and very creative.”



The participants in these global video design conferences depend on Welburn's artistic feel for the strengths of his staff. "It really depends on the project," he said. "I know my people and I know them all around the world. I know that the team in Australia has the emotion I was looking for.

"The team in Brazil is doing a fantastic job. But to give a different perspective, I didn't want a team that was just like the team in Brazil. The team in the UK, for example, where they are strong, they are really strong with Cadillac – something edgy, something stealth like. They are not the studio I would have gone to for this assignment."

Welburn sees the world as a global palate, with cultural changes in styles, tastes and textures. Asian artists, trained in intricate brush strokes and shades in jade, provide softer interior design cues for cars than the more brash Australian designers.

"I see the entire world more than anyone else in our organization," he said. "I was in Korea, China and Australia, and while I enjoyed the time I spent in the studios, I also enjoyed walking the streets, riding the cars, seeing the automotive landscape and seeing how people use and personalize their cars.

In Dubai, the architecture is very edgy on the exterior and very light in color. Inside, it's a shock when you see all the rich colors; brilliant colors that contrast to the exterior. We need to understand that taste as we sell cars in the Middle East. In other parts of the world, it may be colorful outside the building but dark and quiet inside. It is a way of looking at what artistic sense connects with people."

An example is the critically acclaimed Buick Lacrosse, which was put together by a team from Warren Michigan, taking lead on the exterior, and a team from Shang Hai, China, taking the lead with the interior. The car is a hit in both countries, particularly China.

"The design is much better than what either of those teams would have developed on their own," said Welburn. "There is an emerging design language coming out of China and it comes from their

art, whether it is jade sculpture or cut paper.

“There were a couple of people who switched locations to help the blending process. Through virtual reality, we were looking at each others designs all day, every day, so it was a pretty seamless process.”

The process is far less smooth across town, where Chrysler is working to blend its American staff with those of the new Italian partners. But coming up with eye-catching designs is not a new task for Gilles.

In 2004 Gilles, then head of Daimler Chrysler’s creative Studio #3 was tasked with developing a new breed of cars to distinctly define the company’s major brands. His Jeep Liberty had already proved to be a successful link between Jeep’s comfortable, full sized, Grand Cherokee SUV and its small, off-road, warrior Wrangler.

“Dodge and Chrysler were separating themselves into different types of vehicles, with different customers in mind,” explained Gilles. “Dodge is a mainstream brand with an attitude.

“But Chrysler is more aspirational, more graceful with more high-end products. We’re going to a premium market where the main competitors will be Volvos, Audis and other imports.”

They had scored with the *Dodge Magnum*, a hot rod with a 340-horsepower Hemi engine masquerading as a family station wagon. They led the track with the 200-mile-an-hour, 500-horsepower *Dodge Viper*. And they added the Dodge Charger, an updated version of the muscle car of the past.

But it was the Chrysler division where Gilles’ studio needed to shine. Chrysler needed a high end sedan, with a classical look reminiscent of a Bentley, a rear wheel drive like the best from the company’s heyday, and a head turner engineered soundly enough to be parked next to a Jaguar or Mercedes without embarrassment.



The car, said Gilles, “would redefine us as a car company and it would be the kind of car the valets would park out front.”

What they came up with was the Chrysler 300. “That car was a perfect storm of all our ideas,” said Gilles. “That car really resonates.”

And when he sat in the drivers’ seat and stepped on the gas “I was almost in tears driving the car. It felt so right. It’s one thing to make it look good, but the engineers brought it home.”

Critics thought so, too, and Motor Trend Magazine named the Chrysler 300 its 2005 Car of the Year, beating out 24 competitors including Porsche 911, Lotus Elise, and BMW 6. Together, Gilles’ cars led the way in an amazing turnaround for DaimlerChrysler, whose bottom line went from an \$806 million *loss* in 2003 to a \$1.3 billion profit in the first nine months of 2004. In all, 2004 was a banner year for the 34-year-old artist from Montreal, Canada’s black community.

And it all began with crayons on a kitchen table.

Gilles was five when his parents took him to visit his Aunt Gisele on Long Island and she watched him drawing. What differentiated Gilles from kids at that early age was the fact that his drawings were clear and made sense.

“My aunt saw my sketches,” Gilles, recalled, “and she turned to her husband and said ‘Hey Mike! My Nephew can draw! Give him some paper to draw on.’”

So he began sketching wherever he went, passing dull moments in school with fanciful drawings of cars and other modes of transport. At 15, Gilles wrote a letter to Chrysler head Lee Iacocca, asking what it would take to become a design artist for the giant car company.

“And wow, they wrote me back,” he said. “I was so impressed. They wrote giving the different names of colleges they hire from, and that was all I needed. I felt a certain loyalty to Chrysler

because they wrote me, and it changed my life.”

Gilles attended the College for Creative Studies in Detroit, which trained about 40% of Chrysler’s designers, and went to work for the firm after graduating in 1992. Within a decade he had worked his way up to head Studio #3 in Auburn Hills, Michigan, one of the company’s seven design studios. Gilles equates the design studio with a movie lot.

“I direct a studio to draw,” he said. “We get together with the other team members and exchange ideas. It’s like when you make a movie, and you talk about the scenes in the movie before you film the thing.

“It’s like that with cars. No one person designs a car.”

In the short term, Gilles is primarily repackaging the cars in the existing Chrysler fleet. “We are spicing up the Dodge Caravan,” he said so it would not simply be a lower cost version of the Chrysler Town and Country. He is adding 20-inch wheels to the sprightly Dodge Nitro and made 19-inch wheels standard on the muscular Dodge Charger.

But, he acknowledged, this year “We are just playing with cosmetic changes.”

That will change. There will be a new edition of the 2010 Viper “and we will have a replacement for the Durango in the fourth quarter. It is all new and redesigned. It has not a stitch in common with the previous Durango and is a thoroughly modern crossover.”

And his team is working with the Italian design shops to redesign the Fiat 500, a popular small, European car, to meet American tastes later this year.

Chrysler, which skipped the 2010 auto shows, is playing catch-up, which puts extra pressure on Gilles and his artisan crew. “Everyone is confused by our new business model,” he said. “Had it been a normal year, the practice would have been to have had 14 to 16 models at the Detroit Auto Show.

“The products are still coming. The level of work is being done – but we are not pre-showing them like we used to. There will be a much shorter lead time. But we are certain we can keep the excitement.”

Gilles has a track record of producing exciting, crowd-pleasing cars. Chrysler’s future rests on his ability to do it again.

