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1956 Alfa Romeo 1900C Super Sport Zagato Coupe

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John Schinella: From Hidden Talent to High Profile

A summer internship opened the path to a career creating numerous famous cars for General Motors. Gary Witzenburg draws out a designer's story.

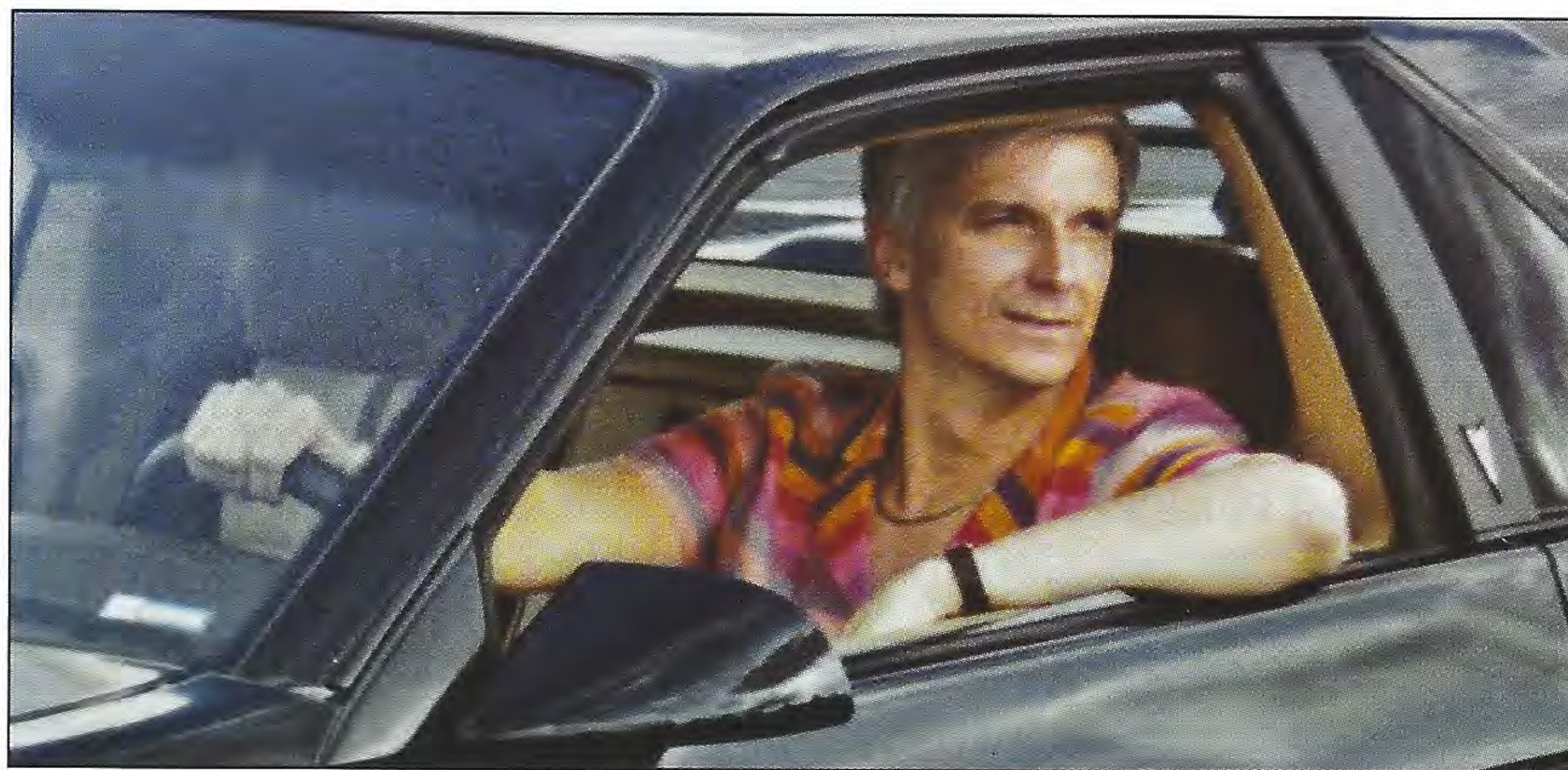
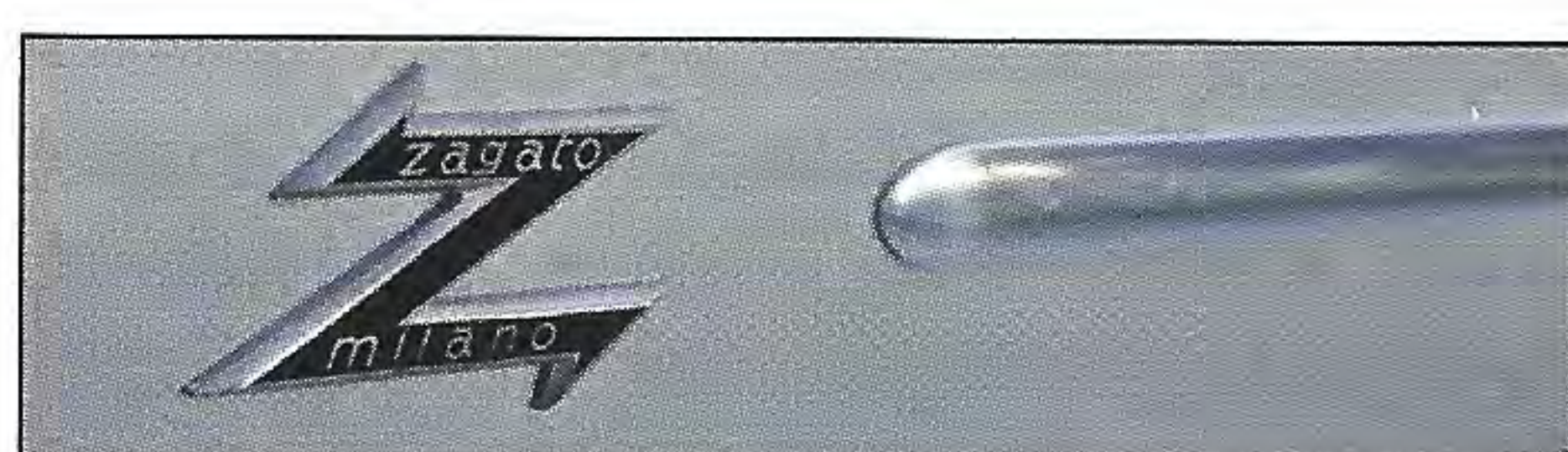
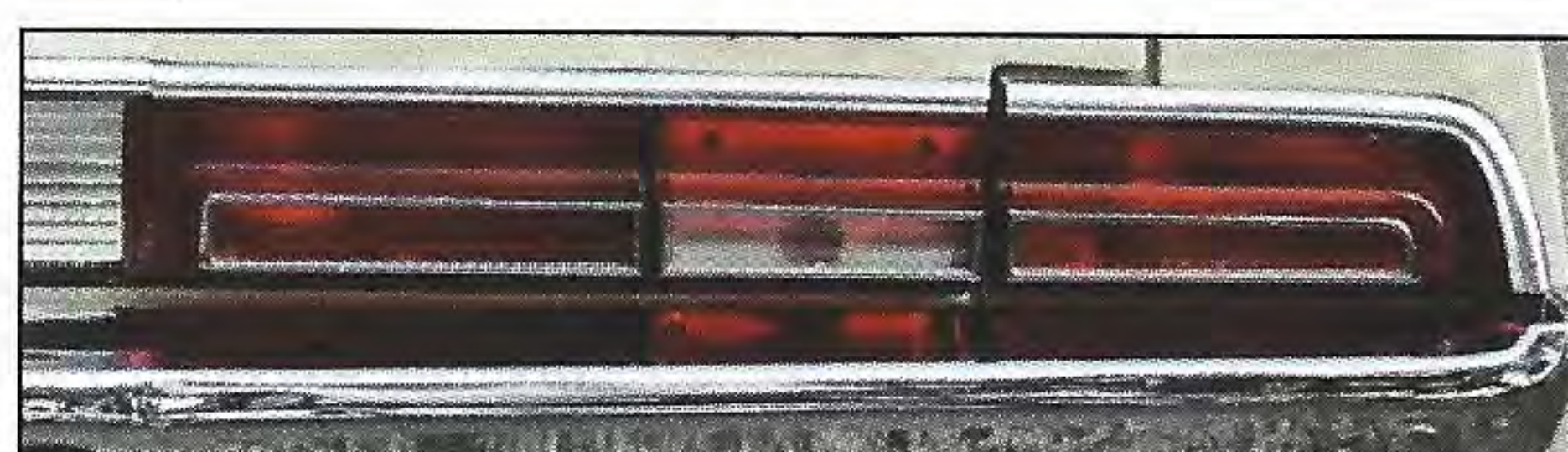


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John Schinella: From Hidden Talent to High Profile

by Gary Witzenburg

Unlike most auto designers we've known, John R. Schinella did not originally aspire to that calling. Though he came from a long line of sculptors on his father's side and, as a child, enjoyed drawing while listening to music on the radio, he had no idea what level of talent resided in him. Also inherited from his father, who had raced motorcycles in his youth and took his family to all types of motorsports events around his home state of New Hampshire, was a love of cars and racing.

Best known for a decade and a half of pulse-pounding Pontiac Firebirds, and the big "screaming chicken" bird graphic that adorned most Firebird Trans Am hoods, the depth and breadth of Schinella's career achievements are truly impressive. Born in 1939, he grew up in Concord, New Hampshire, as the son of a printing-company foreman and a registered nurse. He attended the University of New Hampshire, then Boston's New England School of Art. A year short of his degree, he was selected by General Motors for a three-month internship at its Design Center in Warren, Michigan, and was one of very few such interns that GM retained.

Schinella's first studio assignment had him working on the 1965 Cadillac. Then came the 1966 Jim Hall Chaparral mid-engine racer, the Mako Shark II concept/show car, the '67 Chevrolet Camaro, and the '68 C3 Corvette—and those were just the beginning of a 38-year career that included stints in England and Australia. He also single-handedly raised a daughter from a former marriage who, among many other good things, was a high school state-champion swimmer. We sat down with Schinella at his beautifully redesigned, expanded, and rebuilt lakefront home in Michigan to talk about his life and career.

CA: If not art or design, what did you originally aspire to do?

Schinella: Highway construction was big in the Fifties. The president wanted highways like German *Autobahns*, and I wanted to be part of that. But I decided that was not where I wanted to be and delayed college for a year to earn some money. I worked for my dad at his printing company, and he worked me every



overtime hour and every weekend, and I made a lot of money and put it away. When an insurance company asked me to design their annual report cover and content, I did this illustration of a city of tomorrow, and they paid me \$1800.

That paid my first-year tuition, room, books, and meals at the University of New Hampshire, where John Hatch, a highly acclaimed professional painter who taught basic design, asked me what I was planning to do with my talent. I said I didn't know. He said, "You could stay here, graduate and be a painter, or you could design things. Everything you see and touch in this world, someone has designed. I think you should go to an art or design school."

So I interviewed and got accepted at the

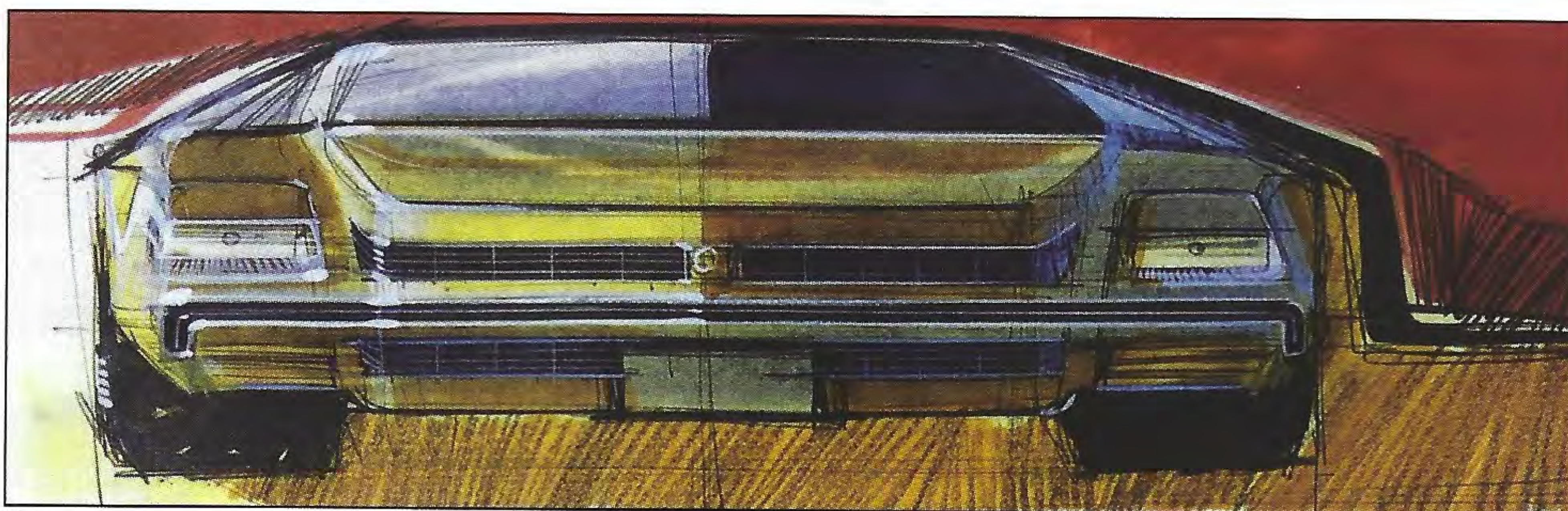
New England School of Art, and when I first walked in there, all the artwork on the walls scared hell out of me. What have I gotten into? How can I accomplish that? And by the end of that semester, my stuff was going up on the walls. I was shocked that this talent was coming out of me.

One professor said, "You really have a lot of design in you. Are you interested in cars?" I said, "I love cars!" He suggested that I talk to a guy who had spent some time at GM, who encouraged me to write a letter to GM, so I did.

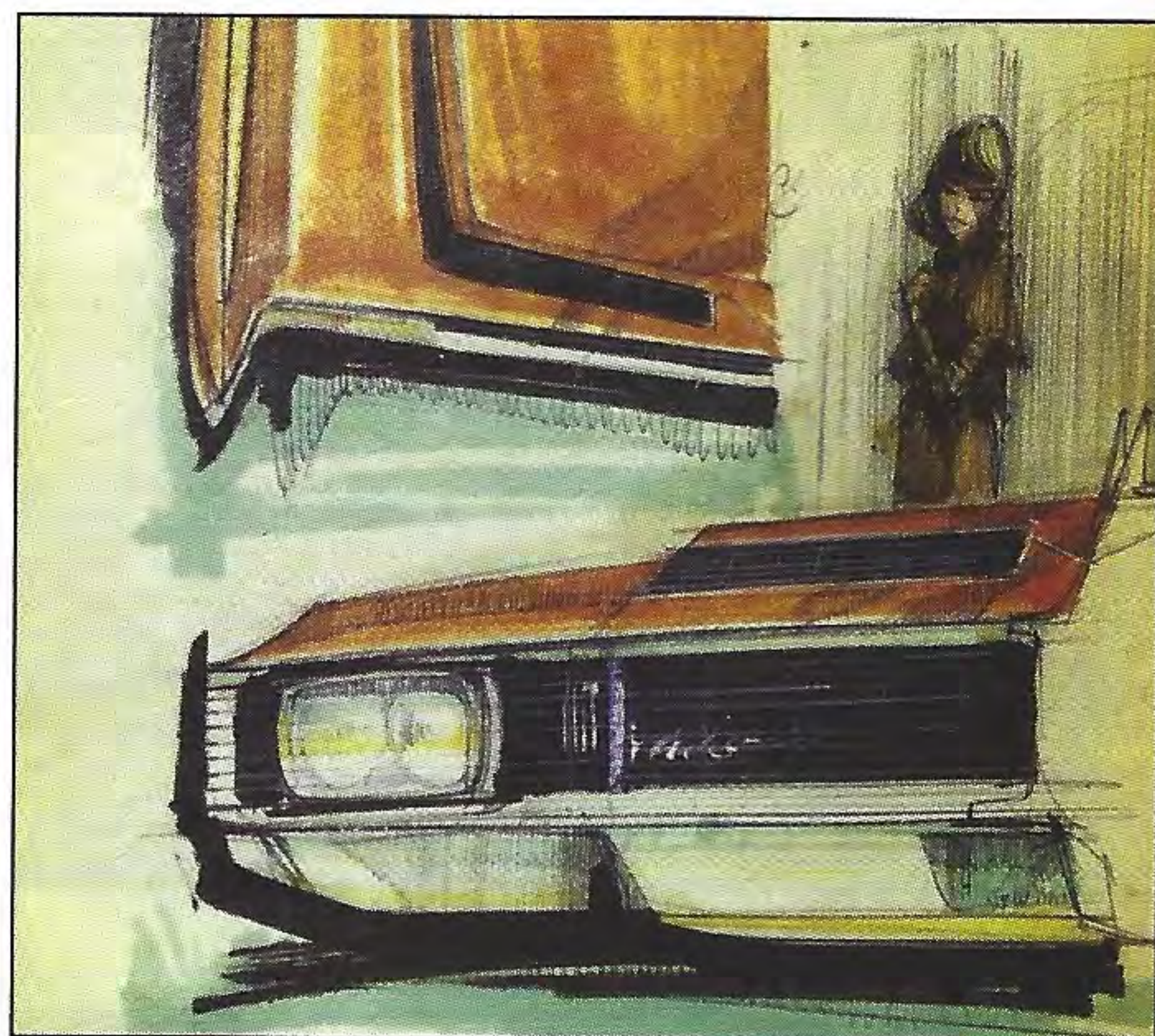
GM replied, "Send your portfolio." So I put some work together, including some car stuff, and sent it. They came back and said, "We're not hiring now, but keep up the good work. And work on these three problems when you get a chance." I did



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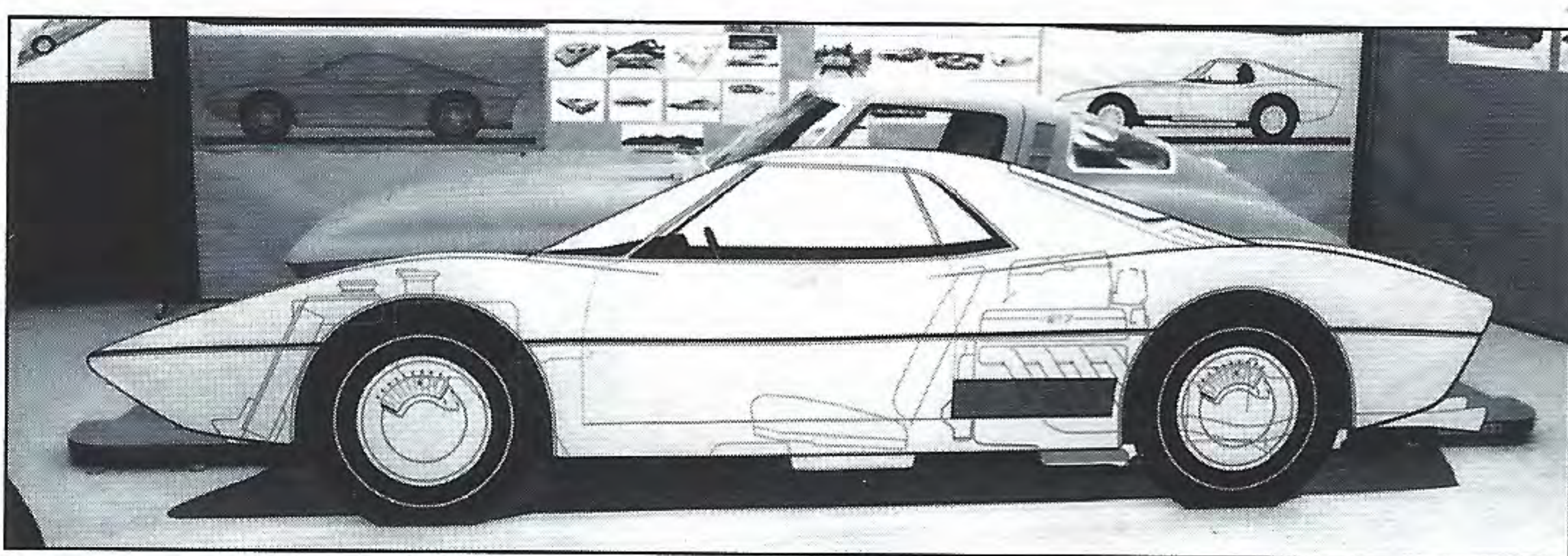
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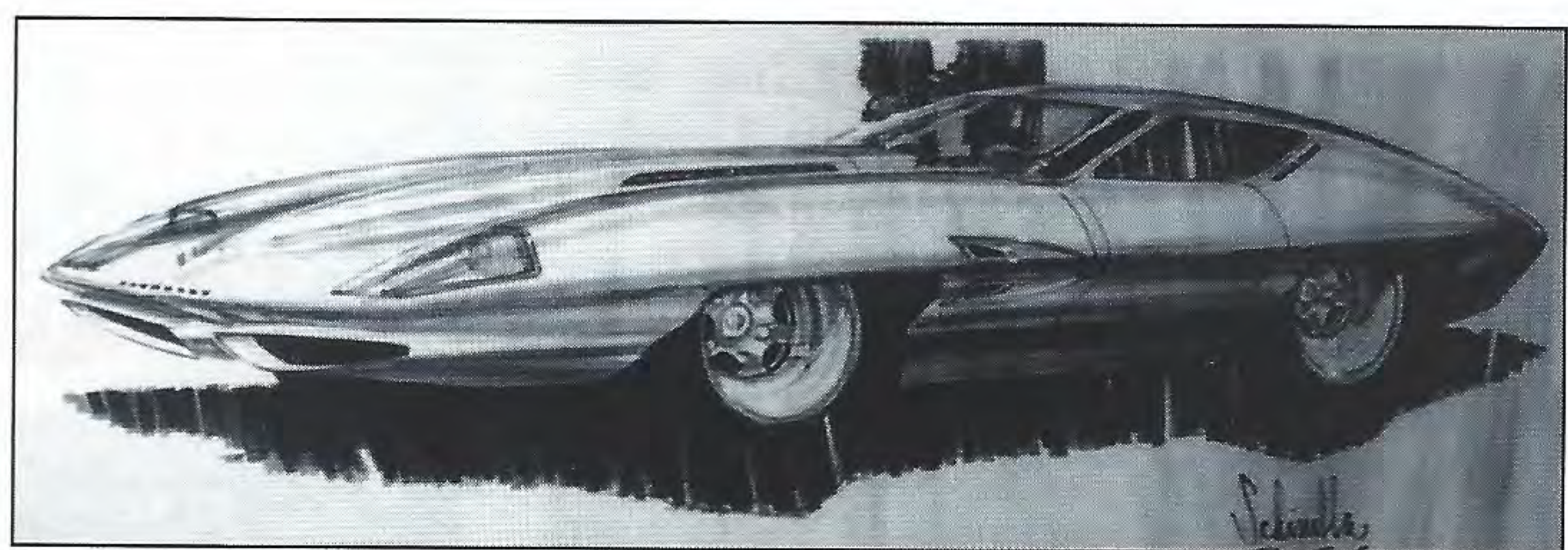
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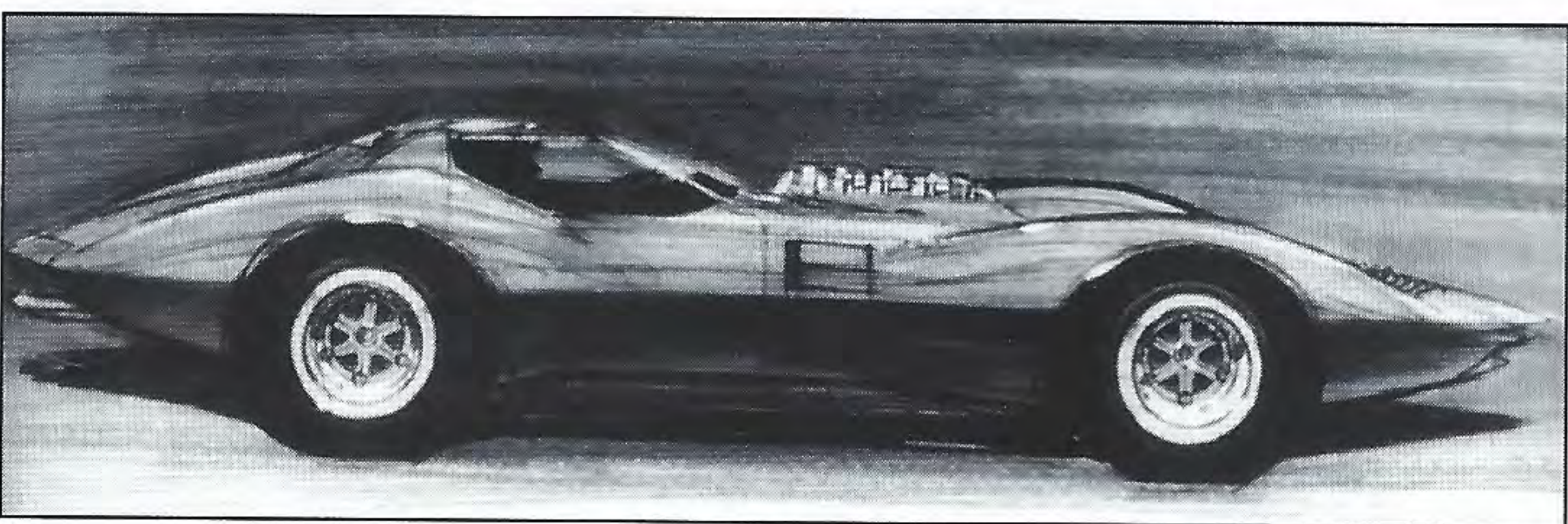
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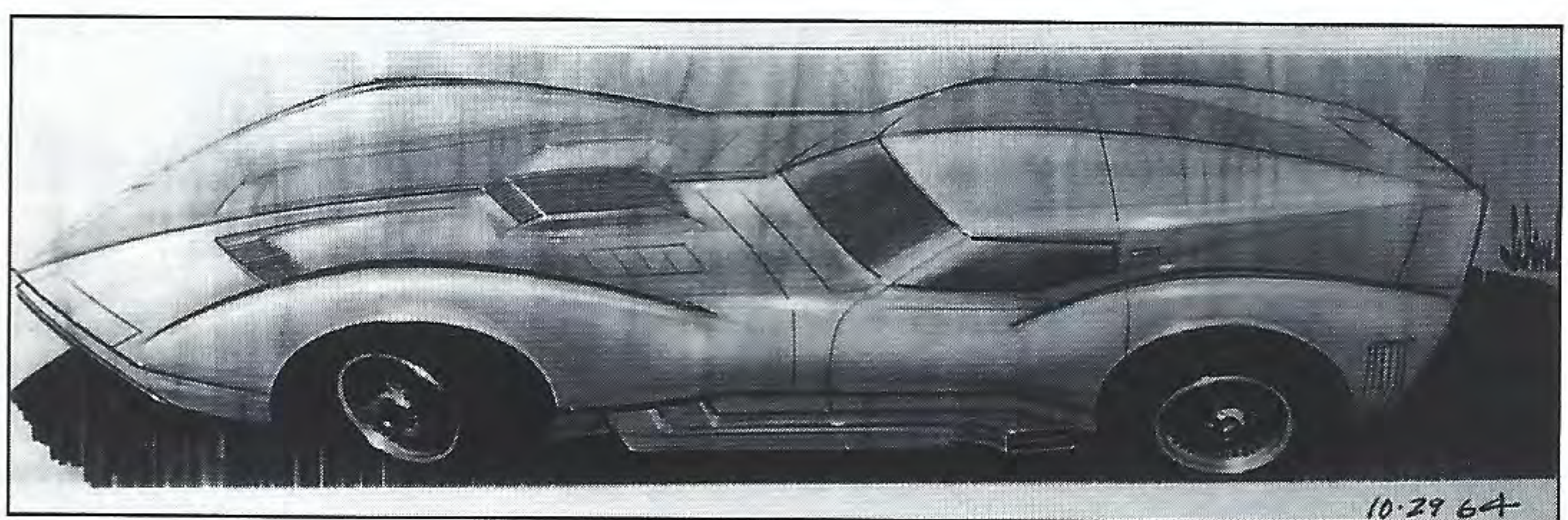
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1. John Schinella (center) spent more than 38 years designing vehicles—many of them now revered—for General Motors. 2-4. Though best known for his work in the Pontiac studios, his first assignment was for Cadillac. He sketched these ideas for the 1965 Caddy in 1962. 5. A Schinella drawing for the Chevrolet-powered Chaparral racecar done in the secret “warehouse” studio set up by Design Vice President Bill Mitchell. 6. In mid '63 he was working on a possible midengine Corvette for Chevrolet. 7. A future Corvette sketch from March '64. 8-10. Later that year Schinella penned ideas (8, 9) for the Mako Shark II show car.



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them in 30 days and sent them back, and I got this nice letter saying, "Thank you." But they were still not hiring.

CA: So how did you end up there?

Schinella: In 1961, the summer before my senior year, I was working at an advertising agency in Boston, and the director came out and said I had a phone call in his office: "It's General Motors. I think you should take it." So I took the call. They said, "We're looking for people who think outside the box." They were interviewing 30 or 40 students across the country to pick a few to intern there to see what happens. "Would you like to be included?" I said, "Yes."

Then in mid August, just before the semester began, I got another call from GM. They said, "Mr. Schinella, we are offering you a position. You need to report September 11. Can you come out?" I said, "Yes." I still had another year of school but decided I should go.

I called my folks, and my dad and my uncle, who sold Pontiacs, agreed to drive me out to Detroit on their way to Indiana to pick up a car. When we got there, they got me a motel room, and we went across the street to an Italian restaurant and had dinner. Then they gave me a hug and said, "See ya," and off they went. I had to go buy a suit for 30 bucks. I figured if this GM thing didn't work out, I might keep driving west to Hollywood and look for a job designing movie sets.

Two other guys who started that program that day were Lenny Casillo and George Gallion, and there was a whole team of Art Center students in another room. One day, [Design Vice President Bill] Mitchell and [top assistant Chuck] Jordan reviewed their work, then walked by, looked at what we were doing, and said, "This looks good, keep up the good work. We'll see you later." They fired most of those guys, hired the three of us as junior designers, and assigned me to Cadillac, Lenny to Chevrolet—where I wanted to go—and George to Buick.

CA: You never finished school?

Schinella: Nope. Twenty years later, [Human Resources] called me down and said, "You never graduated. You don't have a degree." I said, "Is that a problem?" They said, "Hell no, you're an exec now."

CA: How was life in the Cadillac studio?

Schinella: Working on that '65 Cadillac, we were doing these huge renderings.



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1-3. During two different stints in the Chevrolet II Studio, Schinella worked on projects that included the Super Nova (1) show car and, later, prospective Camaros. 4-7. In between, he spent five years in Australia, where he contributed to important Holden models like the first Monaro (4) from 1968 and the racy six-cylinder Torana (5-7). 8. Schinella's Pontiac years began in September 1971. His Pontiac II Studio turned out the Banshee III concept in '74, a car with a "face" inspired by Detroit Lions football player Mike Lucci. 9. Updates to the 1970-generation Firebird led to the first gold-and-black Trans Am Special Edition in 1976.

I finished mine and went to the library to do some research. We had a review with Mitchell and corporate execs, and when I got back, the chief engineer said, "Mitchell and the brass were reviewing the renderings, and when he saw yours, he said, 'Hang it up front.'" I thought I'd be in trouble with the gang, since I was the new guy. But it worked out well.

Then, while everyone else was doing

big renderings, I wanted to explore more ideas, so started doing little 8×10 sketches. I thought I might get in trouble, but when Chuck saw my 8×8 board half-full with those drawings. He said, "How long did it take you to do these?" I said, "I just did them this morning." He said, "Really? Wow! You have so many ideas, very diverse, very different. Keep up the good work."



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CA: Then you worked in Mitchell's secret warehouse studio.

Schinella: Chuck pulled me into his office and said, "Your stuff is really sporty. We're going to give you a special assignment in the warehouse across the street. You're going to work with [Larry] Shinoda, and [Tony] Lapine. I think you'll like it."

The first car we worked on was the Chaparral mid-engine racer. One day we got a chance to drive it on the twisty Seven Sisters course at the Proving Grounds, and I drove that thing around those corners and down the straight, the poles were going by so fast, then spun it out a little but didn't hurt anything. That was amazing! I was designing something, then drove it. That was something I'll never forget.

CA: What was next?

Schinella: They brought me back to start a new Chevrolet II studio to work on Corvette and sporty cars under Hank Haga, then back to the warehouse to work on Mako Shark II, which essentially became the '68 Corvette. That was an exciting program. Mitchell came over one afternoon and wanted to model the car. Carving on the clay, his pants and Italian-leather shoes got covered with clay [laughter]. He was smiling and having fun. Then his wife called because they had some function to go to. He said, "I'd better get home and change." And off he went. After that, they asked us to clean up the '65 Corvette, get rid of some fake scoops and things, and do a new wheel for it, and we worked on front- and rear-engine Corvette concepts.

CA: Then after a short stint at Vauxhall in England, you returned to Chevrolet II.

Schinella: Hank was the chief, and he made me assistant chief. We had inklings that Ford was doing the Mustang. We wanted to do a four-seat sports car to compete with it, and we did the Super Nova show car that went to the New York show. Mitchell believed in it, but Chevy had a lot on its palette so wasn't interested. But not long after the Mustang hit, it was suddenly "go" on Camaro. And when that was done, we did the production '68 Corvette.

We were doing a smooth bullet-looking car, but Mitchell and everybody loved Jags after the E-Type came out, so that led to a more European feel. We decided to try one side of the clay with the swoopy Mako Shark fenders, then looking at the

two sides, that's what we picked. Mitchell wanted the fenders even higher, so they had me tape a line a half inch lower, then erase it and leave the one that we liked where it was. Mitchell came in and said, "Yeah that's it. You've got it." [Laughter] I was scared to death that I would get fired.

CA: In mid 1965, they shipped you off to Holden's in Australia.

Schinella: I was working on a small commuter car. Then Chuck took me in his office and said, "How would you like to go to Australia and work on cars there?" I said, "Great!" I thought he said Austria [laughter], and I told my girlfriend I was going to Austria. The next morning, Chuck said, "You know, Australia is very far away." I said, "Australia? I thought you said Austria." "No, Australia. Do you still want to go?" I said, "Yeah." But it was supposed to be just six months.



Firebird Suite: How a Pontiac Icon Was Hatched

One of the iconic automotive images of the Seventies was the big flame-tinged bird graphic that adorned the hoods of Pontiac Firebird Trans Ams. As head of the Pontiac II Studio that was heavily involved in Firebird styling at the time, John Schinella was intimately involved with the creation of the "screaming chicken," which he recalls here:

This story is controversial, but I don't lie or take credit for things I didn't do. Looking at [an early Seventies] Trans Am with the skunk stripe and the bird decal on its nose, Bill Davis and I got to talking about doing something more unique. We kicked around various ideas, including a bigger bird that would go up the hood. Pontiac I Studio chief Bill Porter reportedly had designed a large hood bird, and some people have said that we took his design and improved on it. The truth is, I never saw his bird. People were doing large graphics on trucks and vans in those days, and Davis started taping a big bird, with its wings up and a flame influence from hot rods, on one of our boards. If you look at the dollar bill and the Navy insignia, the birds' wings are up.

I liked it and worked with him on it. Then Graphics did one for us, we laid it on a car, and it looked good. Hank Tarr took the drawing to a graphics place on Woodward [Avenue]; Bill and I picked the colors. They made a couple for us, and we put an orange, black, and yellow one on my company car, a



Left: After working with Bill Davis on a large firebird image, John Schinella had it placed on his own Firebird Formula. Then he took it for a test drive among the Detroit car culture. **Right:** When put on boss Bill Mitchell's black Trans Am, the design won an important fan.



red Formula, not a Trans Am, with an added shaker hood scoop, rear wing, and Trans Am wheels. Then we had it in the studio where everyone saw it and loved it.

Then one summer night I decided to cruise Woodward in it—up one side, down the other, through the drive-in restaurants and gas stations—to see the reactions. And everywhere I took it, people were pointing, honking, waving, and yelling, "Where can I get one?" I said, "Wow, we've got something here."

Irv [Rybicki], executive designer at the time, said, "You will never sell that. Over my dead body." But then we put a metallic tape gold bird on the black-and-gold '73 "John Player Special" Trans Am we had done for Mitchell and parked it under his office window, and Mitchell bought into it. Chuck [Jordan] and Hank [Haga], who was

in charge of Chevrolet and Pontiac [styling], saw it and said, "That looks good. Do you think Pontiac will buy it?"

When we showed it to Pontiac on three cars—red, white, and blue—Jim McDonald was the new general manager. I wanted it standard on Trans Ams. Pontiac Engineering wanted to keep the skunk stripe because it was American. Marketing and Advertising liked the bird, but Manufacturing didn't because they would have to put it on the cars in the plant. Finally, McDonald said, "Maybe John and his guys have something here. Why don't we offer it as an option?" Manufacturing was not happy and wanted to get rid of it, but by that time, just about every Trans Am we were selling had a bird on it. Without that bird on the hood, they were not considered real Trans Ams.

Gary Witzenburg



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CA: But they promoted you to assistant design director and kept you for five years.

Schinella: The most significant car we did was the HK program, an all-new, ground-up sedan, and we did a coupe that ended up racing and winning championships against Mustangs. Then we did an all-new Torana, a long-nose, six-cylinder small car that also won a lot of races. We worked around the clock on what were the most successful cars that Holden had ever done. I saw a lot of Australia and a lot of racing. It was a great five years that I cherish to this day.

CA: You came back to head up Chevrolet advanced design.

Schinella: I was supposed to get the Pontiac II Studio, but they put me on special assignment for a couple months, then gave me a new Chevrolet Advanced Studio to work on the first Chevrolet Monza show car and a program to do Corvettes and Camaros with shared components on the same platform for [Chevrolet General Manager John] DeLorean. But [GM President Ed] Cole didn't like DeLorean and didn't want that program, and it was dropped.

CA: Then they gave you the Pontiac II Studio.

Schinella: Yes, in September 1971. The first thing we did was the '73 Firebird front, which needed its grille pushed back for the new bumper law. Then it got very tough for '74, and the [soft] Endura front had to go. I assigned Bill Davis to it, and we started stroking some sections of what it could look like and decided to put a black rub strip in it. Then we did the rear to mimic the front. For '76, we did a new bumper, got rid of the rub strip, and kept the upper with the big headlamps, then for '77 went to the horizontal quad lights.

That front was influenced by our 1974 Banshee III concept, which was influenced by Detroit Lions defensive captain

1, 2. Schinella (2, far right) was a resident of Trans Am Territory, a roving rallying point for motorsports fans who happened to favor Firebirds. 3. Among the specialty models that his studio turned out was the 1977 LeMans Can Am that served as a last hurrah for midsize muscle before downsizing. 4. Firebird influence found its way into the appearance of mass-market models like the front-wheel-drive J-body J2000 (later Sunbird) that bowed for 1982. 5. Schinella (foreground) with his design team for the all-new third-generation Firebird from '82.

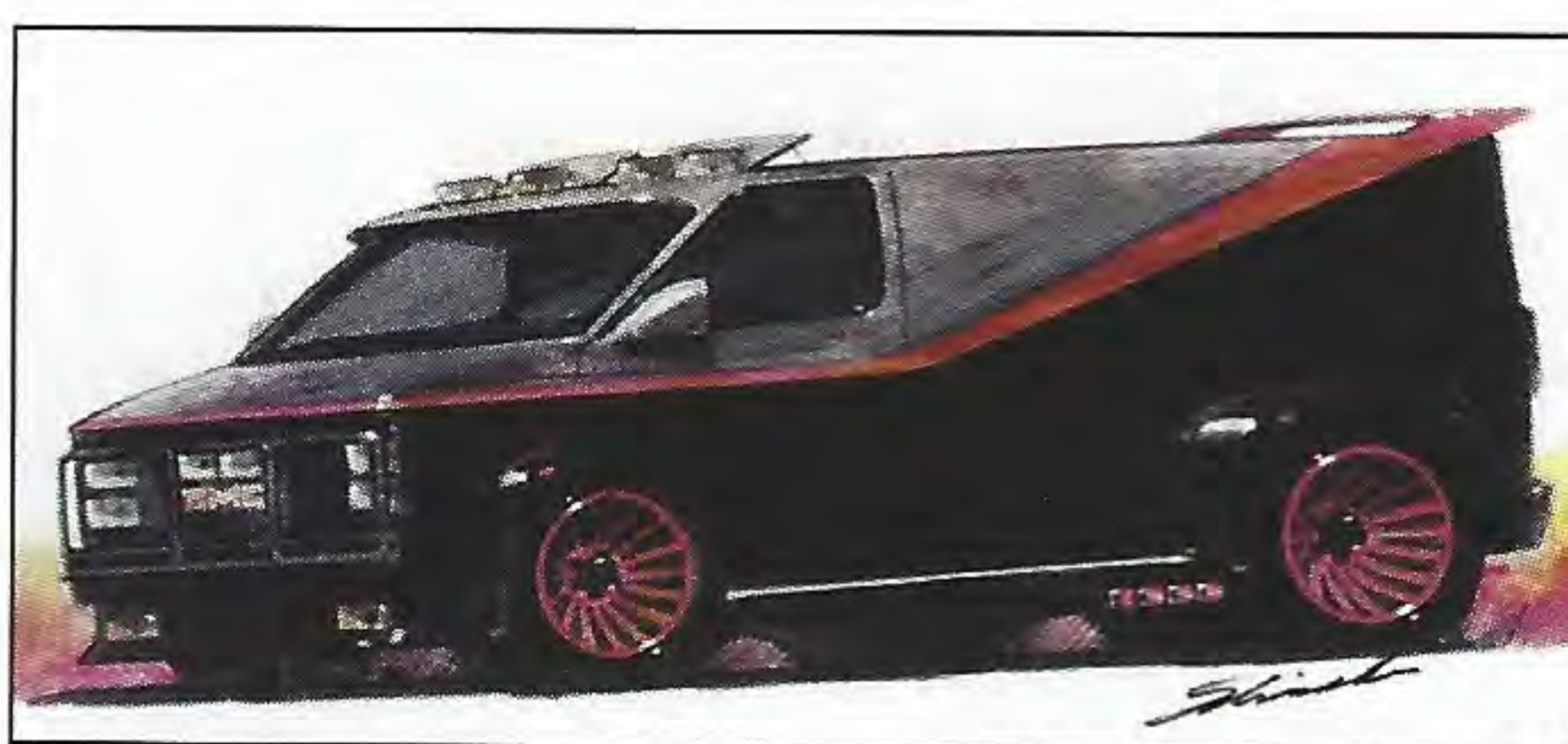


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1. A project in which Schinella had a hand was turning a Firebird into the "autonomous" KITT from the *Knight Rider* television series. 2. With series cast members Catherine Hickland and the Knight Rider himself, David Hasselhoff. 3. Another TV job was customizing a GMC van for *The A-Team*. 4. The 1987 Bonneville departed from more staid Buicks and Oldsmobiles on the same platform. 5. Schinella at the wheel of a midengine Fiero, a car that he named.



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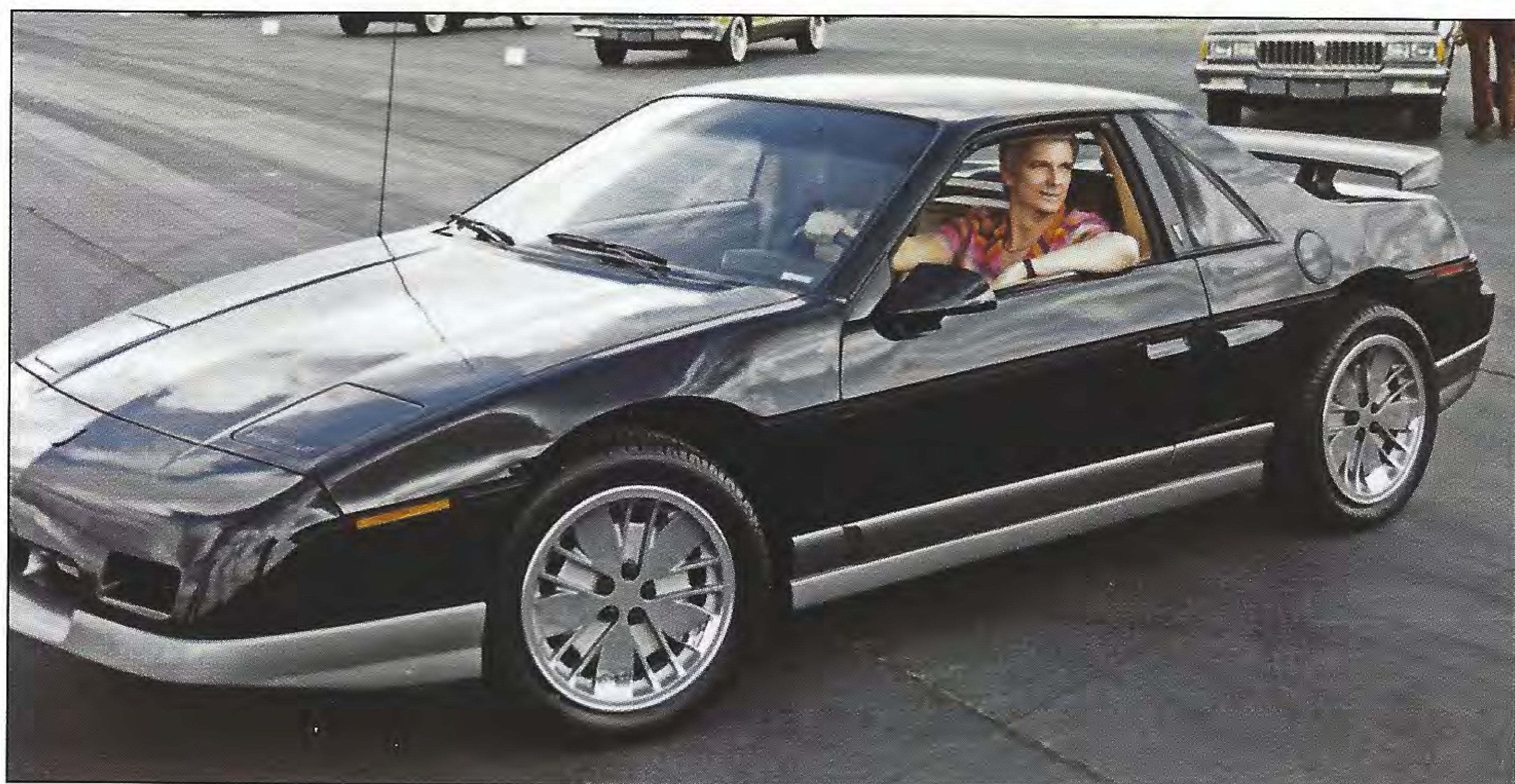


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Mike Lucci. I was working out at Vic Tanny's [health club] one day when Lucci was there. We asked him what it's like to crouch down and get ready for the play. He squatted down and started swearing and cussing, and his eyes did this [squinting intensely]. I said, "That look could be a front end," and we did that on the Banshee III.

When we did the '77 Trans Am Special Edition in black and gold, [stunt driver/movie director] Hal Needham was looking for a special car for a movie. He looked at everything we were doing, spotted that Special Edition, and said, "That's it! That's what I want." People think we designed that car for *Smokey and the Bandit*, but it was already in production.

Then for '79, we frenched in the quad headlamps over lower grille openings and did the silver 10th Anniversary Edition with the wider bird wrapped up around the cockpit. We also did the Trans Am wagon-back Type K concept, and that's when I worked on the Silverbird racecar. Then we did the 1980 Turbo Trans Am Indy 500 pace car. For the all-new 1982 Firebird, I wanted a smaller car with a turbo V-6, but Pontiac said, "We



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can't have a Trans Am without a V-8," so we had to go back to a bigger car.

CA: What was Trans Am Territory?

Schinella: Mitchell had the idea of setting up a special area, like a Corvette Corral or Porsche Park, to host Firebird and Trans Am owners at races, and Bill Davis came up with that name. Pontiac General Manager Alex Mair loved the idea, and his PR chief, Stan Richards, assigned Jill Rogers [who later married this writer] to help us run it. We painted up a GMC motorhome to look like a giant Trans Am and drove it to races around the

country, often bringing special show or concept cars for display. We'd get 200-300 cars, and people loved it. A great success!

CA: Your team designed much more than Firebirds.

Schinella: We did the subcompact Sunbirds; new '87 and '92 full-size Bonnevilles; the compact Ventura-based GTO; the limited-edition LeMans Can-Am; the Mr. T GMC custom van; KITT, the *Knight Rider* TV car—I remember sketching KITT's roving red eye on a napkin at lunch with producer Harker Wade—and the two-seat, mid-engine



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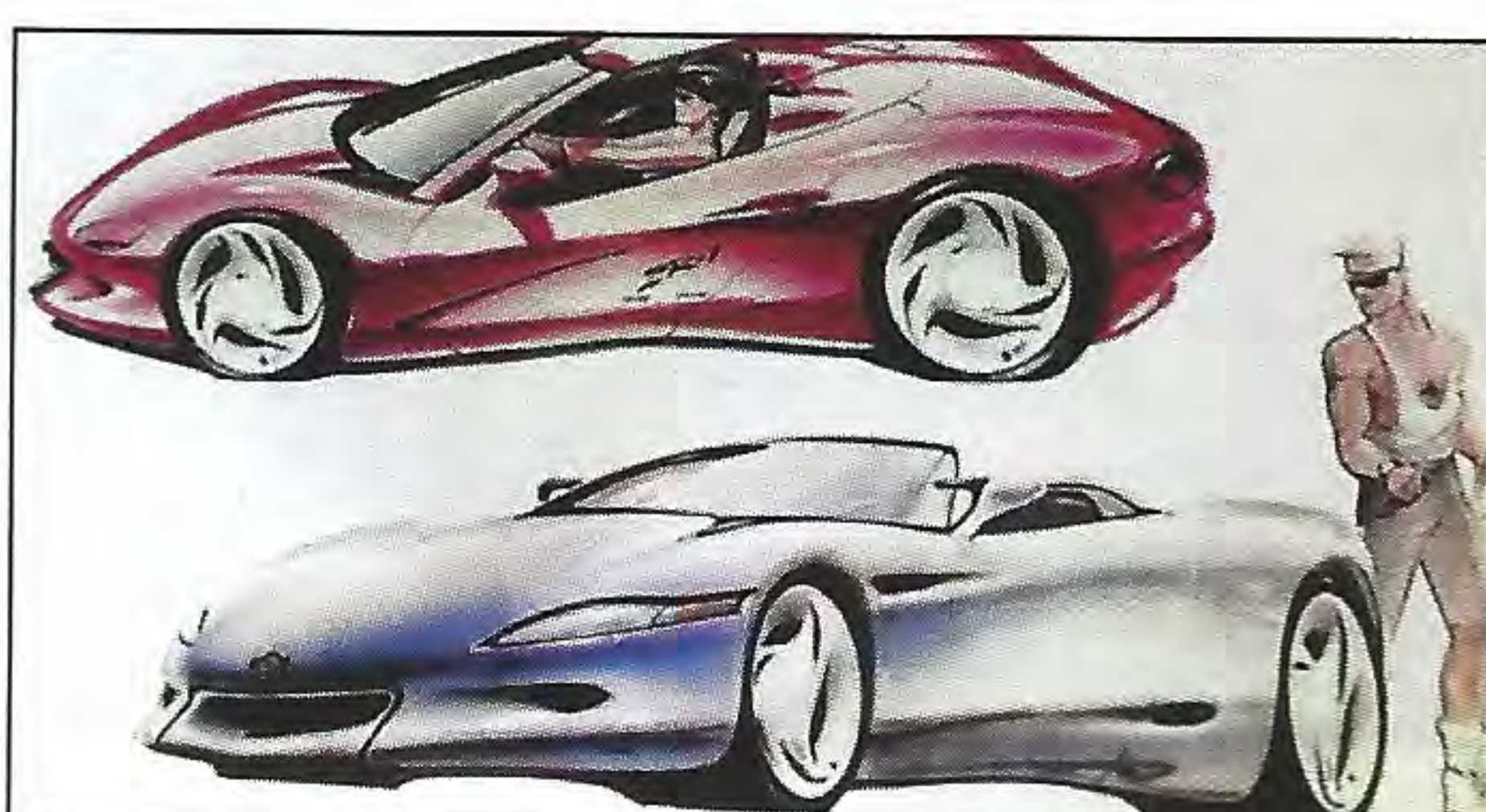
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up to my studio to make it a Pontiac. It was sold to the corporation as a fuel-efficient economy car, so it couldn't be too sporty. Then we decided we needed something sportier and did the fastback. We painted one Porsche yellow for a show at the Mesa, Arizona, Proving Grounds to surprise [Pontiac General Manager Bill] Hoglund. We were out in the ride area where you could see and hear it circulating from a distance, sounding very sporty with its V-6, and Hoglund said, "That must be a Ferrari." Then it came around and drove up in front of us—*vroom, vroom*—and he said, "Wow, that's our car?" He was shocked, and we got the green light to do it. I actually named that car Fiero (Italian for "proud") for my Italian heritage.

CA: Then you ran GM's California Advanced Concept Center.

Schinella: They sent me out there in 1987, and we did a lot of projects there. One of the most important was the California Camaro. A smaller car with a V-6, it was important in my life because I felt we did the right thing. Chuck loved it and wasn't happy with the car they were doing back in Warren. I heard later that when he showed it to them, he rubbed their noses in it. Jerry Palmer, second in command at the time, said that if Chuck had told us, we could have gotten that car. I said, "I'm sorry. We're not out there as competitors." He said, "I know that. Your job is to look into the future, and you did a super job. The car is beautiful." Their car was too far along, but they did get the front fender and mirror philosophy into it to appease Chuck.

We also did the '92 IROC Camaro and the Sting Ray III Corvette concept, a beautiful V-6-powered car. And we worked with AeroVironment on the Sunracer that won the 1987 solar-powered race across Australia, and the 1990 Impact electric concept car that led to GM's electric-vehicle program.

Fiero. We also designed a series of what became unique patented cast wheels

That Bonneville was fun to do. We wanted it sporty with smooth lines, but the uppers were shared with squared-off Buicks and Oldsmobiles. Not right for Pontiac. Our sculptor had an idea to try a rounded conic shape on a front that started soft, then went hard, and it looked great. And we had a lot of air

under the hood, so we lowered it. When [GM President] Lloyd Reuss came in, he said, "Wow! That car looks great. How did you get the hood so low?" He also liked the rear end, and that's what went into production.

CA: Tell us about Fiero.

Schinella: That car was not approved by the corporation, so the concept was done by Ron Hill in Advanced, then sent

1, 2. Schinella and company had ideas for a post-1988 Fiero that never saw production. 3. With studio staff near the end of his days at Pontiac II. 4. In 1987, Schinella was assigned to head GM's Advanced Concept Center in Santa Barbara, California. One of the designs turned out during his tenure was the 1990 California Camaro that had a bit of influence on the all-new '93 production car. 5, 6. Another exploration was the Sting Ray III, a conceptual Corvette in a smaller-than-current package first shown in 1992.



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From electric cars to electric trains: 1. While in California, Schinella was involved with the Sunraycer, an electric car that won a trans-Australia race for solar-powered vehicles.

2. He also helped to shape the two-seat Impact, which, as the EV1, GM put into limited use in a few select markets in the late Nineties as it learned more about electric cars.

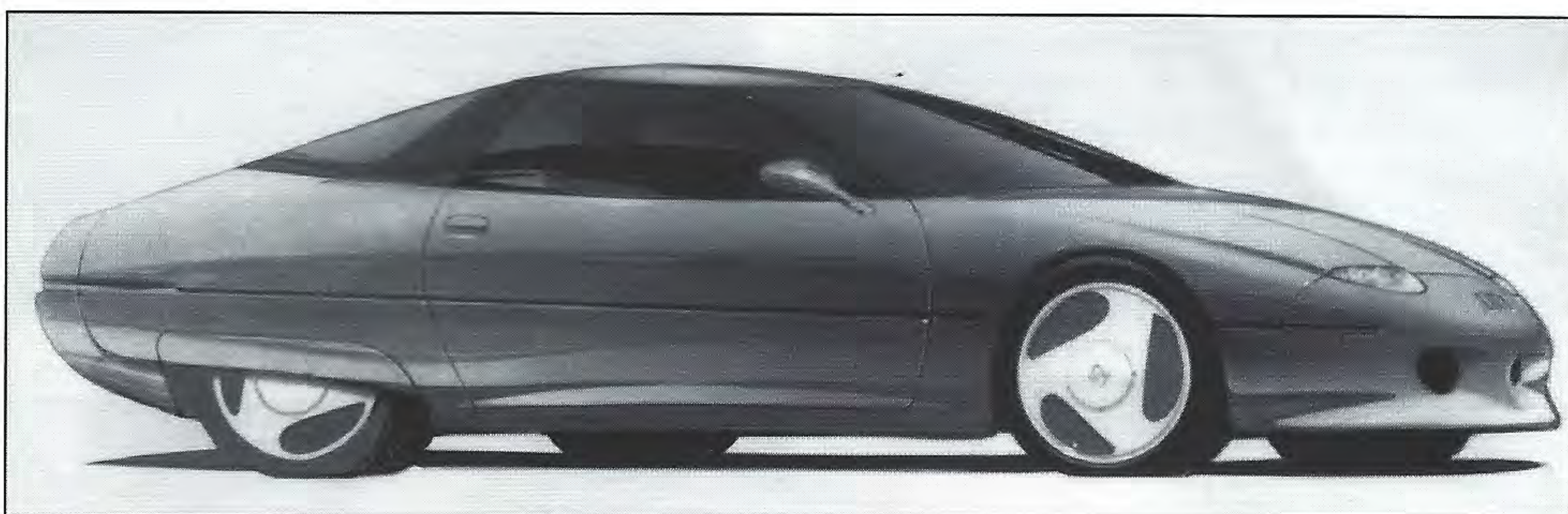
CA: You came back to Warren in 1990 as executive designer over Cadillac and Saturn.

Schinella: I started the red/yellow/green system, borrowed from the GM/Toyota NUMMI plant, to evaluate our design process for strengths and weaknesses, and oversaw the first- and second-generation Saturn designs. Then they put me over Chevrolet and Geo, where we worked on small cars with our Japanese partners and designed the next-generation Monte Carlo, Lumina, and Malibu, among other things. Then in 1995 they named me director of brand character over all Pontiac vehicles.

CA: Then you took early retirement in 1999.

Schinella: Seven years earlier, [Human Resources] had told Lenny and me that we had high ratings due to our age but were not performing to that level [laughter]. They said you will get increases, but lower than the level at which you're rated. Then in 1999, [Design Vice President] Wayne Cherry wanted to get rid of five executive designers—Lenny Casillo, Terry Henline, Bill Scott, Dick Ruzzin, and me.

That June, when he was telling us that, I also got the news that the baby my wife was carrying had died in the womb after three months. That tore me up! I really wanted a second child. When I told Terry, he offered to drive me home. Then I called him back from the car and asked, "What's the deal?" He said, "They're going to eliminate those jobs." I wasn't



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65, and not ready to retire, so I fought it. Finally, after a month, they said, "Sorry, you have to leave." But I refused. So they said, "You can stay through the end of this year, then you'll get a closet for an office and have no jobs, but you'll still get your salary."

I probably should have stayed and collected the money [laughter]. Maybe I was stupid not to do that. Lenny and I stayed through December, then I worked for a company doing Pontiac aftermarket stuff, and Lenny helped me on a Buick project. We also cleaned up the next Bonneville and tried to save the Aztek.

CA: You've kept pretty busy since then.

Schinella: I've designed and built, or rebuilt, 42 homes, including this one, 14 of them since retiring. I bought or built a house, then sold it; bought or built another, then sold it. This one was 100 years old and much smaller, and I've totally rebuilt

and expanded it. I even bought a book on wiring and wired it myself. I've been here for 26 years, and I'm back to painting watercolors. I love watercolor.

CA: What was your signature achievement?

Schinella: Thinking outside the box and pushing the envelope for newness and excitement for the customer. As for product, I would say the 1973 to '82 Firebirds and Trans Ams.

CA: You've built an impressive electric train set-up here, and you collect a lot of stuff.

Schinella: *Lord of the Rings* things; swords; Invicta watches—great design, bold, outside the box—model trains; World War II airplanes; diecast car models—Lamborghini Countach, Trans Ams, Formula 1 race cars, Jimmie Johnson championship-winning Chevrolets. Not to mention a lifetime accumulation of books and art, some of it my own.