

MOVING THROUGH THE GEARS

Ed Stocker REPORTING FROM *Auburn Hills*: Ralph Gilles, global head of design at Fiat Chrysler, has seen it all in his 25 years at the company. We find out about the journey so far – and ask what’s next for the industry. PHOTOGRAPHER *Weston Wells*

Ralph Gilles is a car nut. While this revelation may not be the biggest surprise to many – he is the global head of design for Fiat Chrysler Automobiles, after all – he takes it to a whole new level. Indeed, when not poring over sketches at the group’s headquarters just north of Detroit – or dealing with the more mundane task of sifting through emails from his multiple design teams around the world – he likes to jump behind the wheel of a race car and hit the track. Invariably racing alongside him is his wife, Doris.

Raised in a French-speaking Haitian household in Montréal, Gilles’ memories of automobiles start young. “Cars were the stars of shows and were deeply woven into the storyline of movies,” says the 47-year-old in one of the HQ complex’s dizzying number of conference rooms. “And the racing aspect was something that inspired me as well. When I fast-forward to my life today there are two sides to a car’s purpose: a device to get you around and then this sense of freedom.”

That liberty that a car represents is, of course, inextricably tied to the American Dream. But for Gilles it’s not just about the triumph of capitalism: it’s also the sheer joy of driving. And, yes, even a healthy dollop of escapism. It’s on trips north of the border to Canada or a jolly down to Tennessee that “the car comes back to being not only relevant but exhilarating”. Which is why, on his most recent trip to Italy, he clambered inside the bug-shaped frame of a Fiat 500 – on previous visits it has been an Alfa Romeo 4C or a Giulia Quadrifoglio – and embarked upon a 3,000km road trip that incorporated Turin, Florence and the Amalfi coast.

The Italy trip, and the choice of vehicle, is a reminder of the vast and diverse portfolio that Gilles oversees. The office buildings in Auburn Hills, Michigan, house some 15,000 employees and make up the second-largest covered building complex in the US (after the Pentagon). They have



long been the home of Chrysler; there’s even an avenue named after the brand as you approach. But the acquisition by Fiat in 2014 – the culmination of an alliance started in 2009 – has led to the cohabitation of carmakers as diverse as Maserati, Dodge, Alfa Romeo and Jeep.

While Gilles may have a global role, he also points to the “brand shepherds” in place, who marshal the design on a day-by-day basis. But he needs to be able to understand them all, which means delving into an Italian textbook (he later points it out on his desk, half buried under a heavy stack of car magazines) in order to be able to communicate with the European side of the business. “I love going from one end of the studio to the other, or jumping on a plane to deal with one of the other brands,” he says. “It’s the best thing in the world.”

It’s been quite the journey for Gilles, whose youthful features make him look a decade younger. His early years were spent obsessing over the Porsche 928, or at home in Montréal sketching out improvements to the boxy cars he saw in the street. In 1987 his aunt decided to write to Chrysler on his behalf, sending in his portfolio. The return correspondence – which said he had promise as a designer but needed to study formally – is framed and hanging on the wall beside his office desk. After he finished at Detroit’s College for Creative Studies he was promptly hired by the car giant.

Gilles has been at Chrysler for 25 years, long enough to have seen the peaks and troughs close-up. There was an ill-fated period under the stewardship of Mercedes in the late 1990s and bankruptcy followed by salvation in the wake of the global

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financial crisis. During that time he has risen from designer in 1992 to design vice-president in 2008, then head of design for FCA since 2015, via stints as president and CEO of the SRT and Dodge brands. So has he stayed on out of a sense of loyalty, a rare thing in an industry where company-hopping is common? “Chrysler has been good to me, number one,” he says. “But number two, it has always been a fascinating company because there is always something new, always opportunities.”

Recent work includes designing the Portal autonomous concept vehicle and some tentative steps towards electric. Although Gilles claims that “the integration cost is still very high”, he admits that electric cars do offer exciting prospects in design terms, such as playing with seat positioning due to the flexibility of component

Gilles’ top road trips

1 **Trip:** *Col de Turini, Italy*

Vehicle: Alfa Romeo Giulia Quadrifoglio

A winding mountain pass in the Alps that has held some great motoring events in its time. “The turbocharged 505-horsepower engine of the Giulia Quadrifoglio would make short work of the pass; its quick steering ratio and agility would help tackle the endless hairpins.”

2 **Trip:** *California State Route 1 (SRT)*

Vehicle: Fiat 124 Spider Abarth

A beautiful road running along the Pacific coastline in California. “I love the SRT and

it happens to be the first road trip I ever took with my wife. The Fiat 124 Spider Abarth is the best vehicle for this trip; it’s a drive where the Spider can sink its teeth into the road, rewarding commitment with effortless thrust.”

3 **Trip:** *Forres to Alford, UK*

Vehicle: Alfa Romeo 4C
Currently on Gilles’ to-do list, this route features about 130km of undulating roads. “I know that the Alfa Romeo 4C would be a great partner for this adventure. Nimble, fast and just enough of a spectacle that it would undoubtedly spark some great conversations.”

placement. When it comes to self-driving vehicles, Gilles admits to being conflicted. “Whenever you are having fun in a car, the autonomous thing would just make you nauseous,” he says. “It will work more in a gridlock situation where the density just doesn’t work anymore.”

One of Gilles’ biggest fears is that the car becomes just another soulless commodity that is taken for granted – but he is optimistic about the future. He draws a parallel between the evolution of the music industry and its almost infinitesimal listening choices and the “fragmenting” in the car industry that is leading to ever more vehicle categories and options. And despite the continued technological shifts – and the potential new design battleground of interiors, as autonomous vehicles become increasingly commonplace – he is by no means heralding the end of the conventional car.

Far from it, in fact. “In the 1970s they predicted that the sports car would erode away,” he says, with a smile. “But look at us now.” Because when you put the key in the ignition, it all comes back to that simple pleasure: the joy of driving. — (M)