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THE CONTENDER
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FABLES & REFLECTIONS
CHRIS MORRIS

ELIZABETH THUG
IS NOT WHAT YOU THINK

FREE INSIDE



12 PAGES OF PORTFOLIOS



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awesome placement and uncanny black fluid drips, those of which trickle down his provocative women with abundance.

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All good artists have an unquestionable commitment to progress. Rebecca Rimmer talks to ten tattooists who reflect on their individual artistic journeys.

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For such a free-spirited art form, modern tattooing can seem quite set in its ways at times. For many of us, variety isn't important. We know what we like and we like what we know. It's a theme that comes up during coffee with Chris Morris.

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"I wanted to give something back to the NHS," states Guy as he disinfects my leg before applying the tattoo stencil. Guy Fletcher is an award winning tattoo artist whose unique take on portrait tattoos has made him in hot demand.

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The Museum of Tattoo Art?

Tattoo Art by Jess Yen

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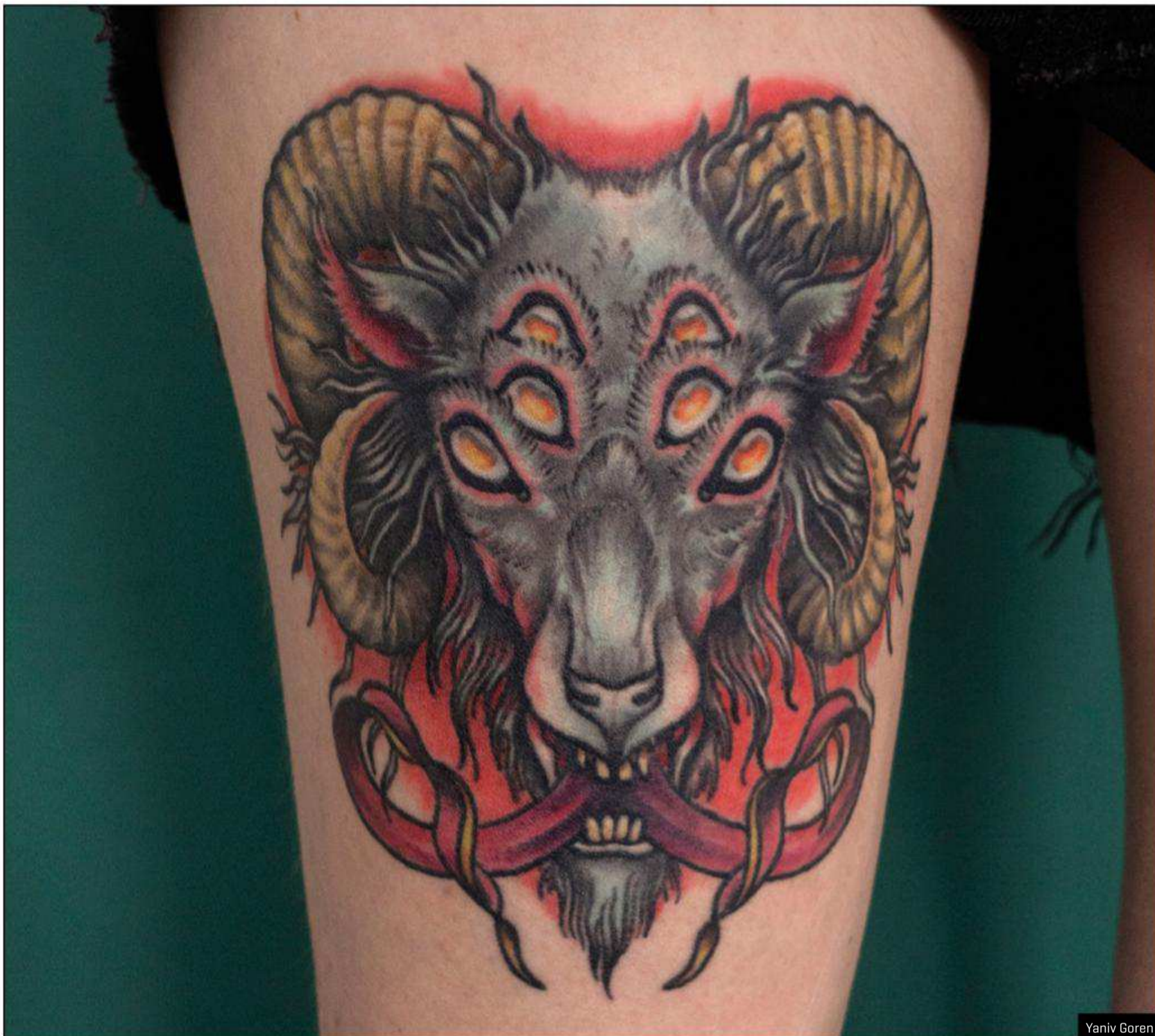
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SATURDAY NIGHT
& SUNDAY MORNING



Yaniv Goren

The Sheep In Wolf's Clothing

Part of the deal of driving this magazine shaped car, is not only to pay attention to what's going on in tattoo-land but also to keep a (slightly beady) eye on the magazine landscape itself. It comes with the territory. For instance, a photographer will always be aware of other photographers out there. You'd be a fool to believe you were the only wolf in the forest.

Yesterday, I went out into the forest—aka: WHSmiths—and took a look at said landscape and found the revamped version of Rolling Stone. I always loved that magazine but to say it had fallen on hard times across

AN EXTRAORDINARY AMOUNT OF TATTOOERS HAVE ENTERED THE INDUSTRY... IT'S HARD TO SEPARATE THE WOLVES FROM THE SHEEP



SION SMITH • EDITOR
editor@skindeep.co.uk

the last twenty years would be an understatement, and yet, thousands upon thousands of people continued to pay homage to it with cash even when it was lying broken in the gutter simply because it was Rolling Stone.

Not quite dead, but certainly wounded like it had been hit by a Canadian logging truck in the night.

Anyway, this new format of Stone appears

to be at least sitting up in the gutter. Even if it's not walking by itself, it's a start.

When something has been around for the whole of your life, you trust that what comes out of its mouth must be of some kind of value but that's not always the case.

My point with all of this, is just because an artist has been around for a while and/or advertises themselves as 'award winning', doesn't mean they're still great, or indeed, used to be. There are a million analogies you could dress it up in. Italy the greatest football team in the world who didn't make the World Cup? Al Pacino's last movie? You can't even remember what it was called.

Statement, not question.

Unless you're constantly doing this trip to the proverbial newsagent, a younger wolf can easily wander into the forest and start marking your territory while you're busy looking at the flowers.

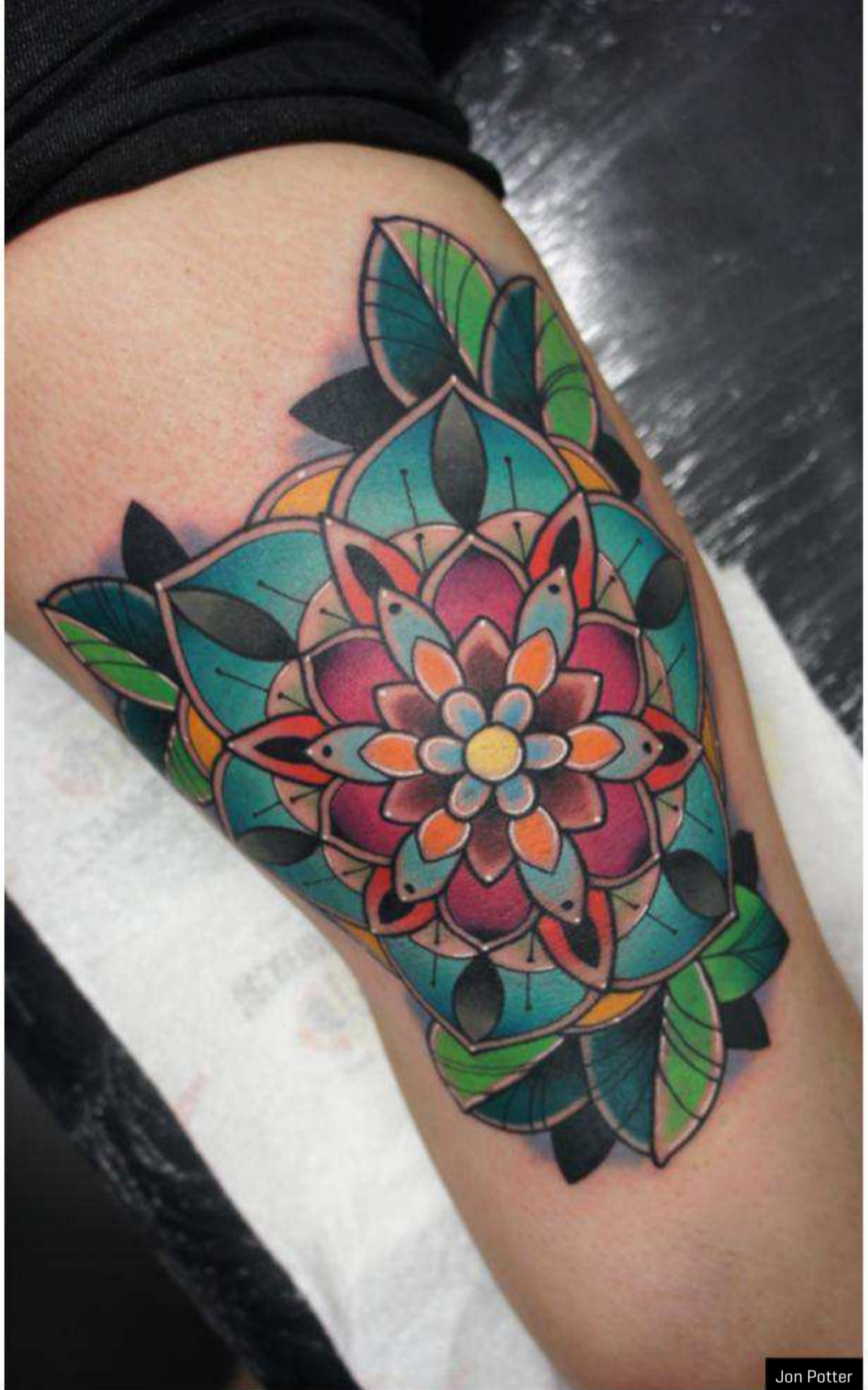
This last few years has seen an extraordinary amount of tattooers enter the industry. Some are great, some are not. All artists appear to be sponsored in some way which gives them some validity and makes it hard to separate the wolves from the sheep.

It's a relatively easy task to make a studio look wonderful. It's easy to put up a website. Easy to grab yourself thousands of followers online. What's not easy is actually being wonderful every single day you pick up a machine and being that Lone Wolf in your own forest.

For far too long, tattooing became what Lester Bangs called *The Industry Of Cool*. Maybe it still is. Some people want to be tattooers (or at the very least, associated with it) because it's 'easier' than learning to play guitar for acclaim, less stressful than banging your head against theatre doors to cut your teeth as an actor—or whatever—but it's not.

Every job that looks cool from the outside is more difficult than you'll ever know until you're in the thick of it.

I've watched tattooers who were 'pretty good' toil away in darkness for years and become great and still people don't know who they are. I've also watched tattooers who were 'pretty good' not get any better but have still carved a portion out of a forest to call their own by doing all the right things... except get better.



Jon Potter

SOME PEOPLE WANT TO BE TATTOOERS BECAUSE IT'S 'EASIER' THAN LEARNING TO PLAY GUITAR, LESS STRESSFUL THAN BANGING YOUR HEAD AGAINST THEATRE DOORS TO CUT YOUR TEETH AS AN ACTOR— BUT IT'S NOT

Your job, as a tattoo collector, is to figure out who is the wolf, who is the sheep, who is the sheep dressed up as a wolf and most importantly, who is the wolf dressed as a sheep.

All of this of course, depends what you want. Hopefully, you simply want a great tattoo—and fantastic tattooers are legion out there. It's not hard to get a great tattoo. I would be sitting here looking out of the window every day of the week if that weren't true... and yet, still the sheep-wolves continue to come out of the woodwork because they have believed their own (usually, internet-fuelled) hype.

I said it only a few issues ago: people buy Coldplay albums in their millions and I honestly believe it's just because other people do, but the world is tiny these days and our choices for awe are phenomenal. There's no excuses left in the world for getting a bad tattoo.

Trust me—I've stood out here for a long time. ▣

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Are tattoos a protective shield from the outside world?

Today, I power-washed my patio. As I blasted a two-hundred-mile-per-hour force out of a little plastic tube, years of grime slipped away down the drain in seconds. As I rested for a minute, I noticed in the corner a stow-away, a clinger-on-er, a little creature that was sure-as-hell going nowhere. With his shell stuck very firmly to the floor, I wasn't going to attempt to disturb his peace. Today, my new little friend (Steve the Snail) has got me thinking about living things and how they grow shells and skin to protect themselves from 'all the bad shit'.

The truth is that it is cruel (and often crap) out there. In 2018, humans can often feel attacked at all angles and not just by power-washers that pop out of nowhere on a sunny Saturday afternoon. A roof over your head isn't adequate protection when you're constantly connected to everyone and everything—in the 21st century, predators can strike at any time, by any means. Even if, like the hermit crab, you lean towards introversion and isolation and enjoy sitting silently at the lowest depths of civilisation, you're still going to have to come to the surface at some point—your bills aren't going to pay themselves. And when that time comes, you need to be prepared, ready to stand strong in your thick skin.

Considering the state of today's world, it is no surprise then that some of us benefit from creating brand new body-layers of our own. When this occurs, what we see is a development of the well-known *homo-sapien* into a more colourfully-decorated sub-species, a passionate creature living on the edge of society known for its obsession with embellishing its skin. By the same manner in which varieties of the *dardanis calidus* search the sea for a third-party casing in which to hide, we tattooed homo-sapiens spend years covering our skin in memories, objects, images, words, numbers, phrases and shapes in order to find



Trevor Powers, Marion Street Tattoo

HUMANS CAN OFTEN FEEL ATTACKED AT ALL ANGLES AND NOT JUST BY POWER-WASHERS THAT POP OUT OF NOWHERE



REBECCA RIMMER

comfort within a self-made jacket, sheltered from threat by a lifetime of pretty pictures.

Charles Darwin said that, "it is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent that survives. It is the one that is most adaptable to change." I do believe that if you're inking your skin, you are resilient. We are growing our own armour, building our own frameworks, and allowing the most natural, progressive and longest-occurring thing in the world to take place. One day, they might write textbooks about this because we, my friend, are evolving. ▣

Florence 2018 Tattoo Convention



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TOYSHADES—JUST IN TIME FOR SUMMER



Hopefully there's enough of the summer left for this giveaway: Toyshades have given us ten pairs of sunglasses to give away—and in a bonus deal, you also get to choose your own design from a pretty cool range of products.

All you have to do is head over to skindeep.co.uk/competitions and enter the competition answer TOYSHADES—we'll choose 10 winners and send your email address over to those guys... who'll then invite you to choose your own pair over at toyshades.com and they'll send them out direct. Simple!





@dannywoodstockphotographer



Hobo Jack

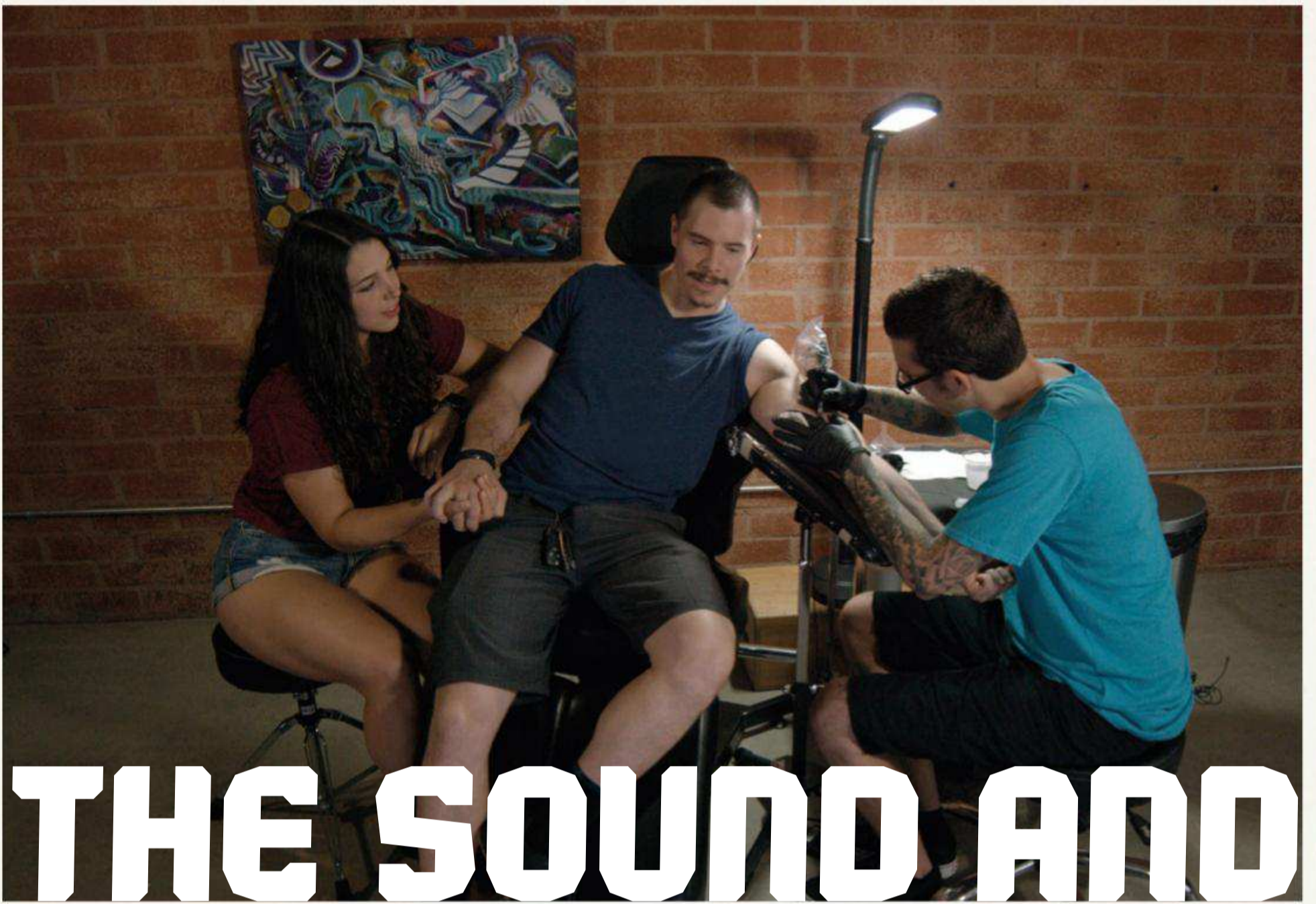
The Summer Six Collection from Hobo Jack is aesthetically vibrant and sure to turn heads aplenty when you don this magnificent series of apparel over the summer months. The striking nature of the illustrations used in this collection, which includes tattoo regulars like bulldogs, tigers and panthers, really does help to make this range stand out from the competition and we can't believe just how affordable Hobo Jack t-shirts are—from £5.95

up to £16.00. Something which makes it hard not to want to buy every one of the new tees in their Summer Six collection.

UK based Hobo Jack have become experts in producing the sorts of T-shirts that men love over the last few years and they've really hit the nail on the head with this Summer Six Collection. Visually vibrant, handprinted in the UK and boasting great comfort courtesy of the 100% ring spun cotton used in their creation, what's not to like? ☐

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THE SOUND AND THE FURY

How do tattoos and technology come together in the 21st century? Rebecca Rimmer interviews the man who can make your memories sing...

SkinMotion.com

Nate Siggard has been tattooing for over a decade. Originally from LA, he's spent the best portion of the past decade travelling the west coast of the United States. Most interestingly, however, he is a self-educated technologist. What that means is that he's been designing and building web applications since the 90s. In 2007 his digital career was put on hold when he was offered a tattoo apprenticeship but today, a decade later, he's re-kindling his passion for all things tech with one exciting new project.

Time to talk Soundwave Tattoos.

When was the light-bulb moment, when you decided to explore the concept of soundwave tattoos?

In April 2017 after tattooing a pair of matching soundwaves on some friends, my partner Juliana said "wouldn't it be cool if you could play that sound back?!" and I re-

alised that I had the skills to make that possible using augmented reality. 20 minutes later the first Soundwave Tattoos were played back. I tattooed one on myself, of Juliana and our daughter Lyra saying "I love you", and Juliana filmed me doing it. I posted that video on Facebook and it went viral. Our lives would never be the same again.

What exactly is a Soundwave Tattoo?

It's a special type of tattoo that shows the visual representation of a sound which, when combined with Skin Motion's patent-pending augmented reality platform, is able to be read and played-back using our mobile app. The majority of people who get Soundwave Tattoos someone they love, many of them having passed away. People all over the world can upload their sound (at skinmotion.com) and the website will guide them through the creation process, including a tattoo directory with more than





350 tattoo artists around the world who are licensed and trained to create Soundwave Tattoos.

Have you been able to tattoo many, or have you been focused on the app development?

I have done a couple dozen but after founding Skin Motion I have been primarily tasked with creating the platform and educating tattoo artists and customers about how Soundwave Tattoos work. The Soundwave Tattoos I have been fortunate to do have allowed me to understand how potent of an experience getting one can be, they have consistently remind me of the importance of compassion for everyone's unique journey through life. For the time being, I have suggested that anyone who would like to get a Soundwave Tattoo reach out to one of the many artists in the Skin Motion artist directory. In the future, I hope to have more time to focus on getting back into a consistent tattooing practice offering more Soundwave Tattoos as well as therapeutic tattoo sessions in general.

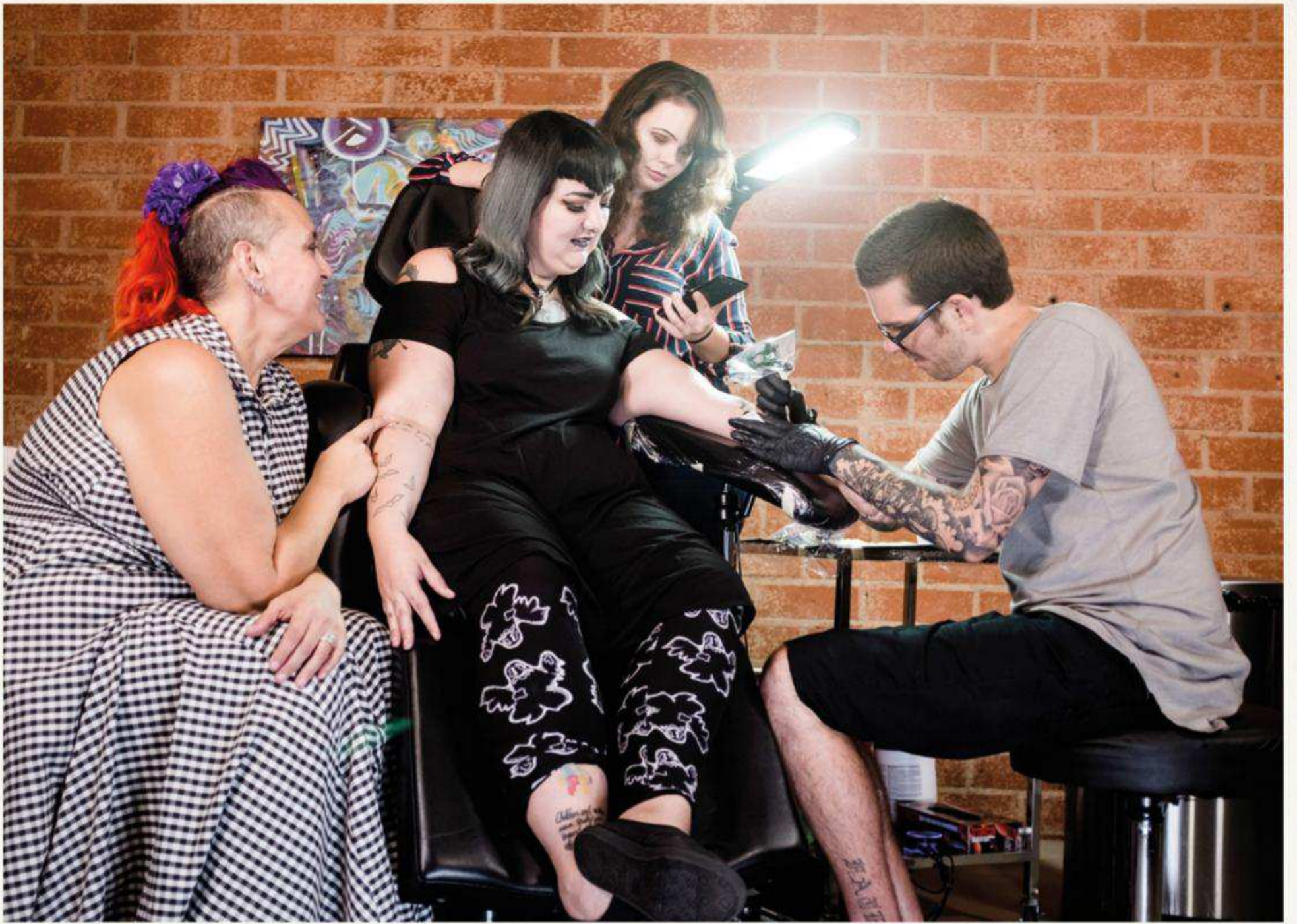
How do you see the project developing in the future?

I like to keep a foot in multiple worlds at once; where we have come from, where we are now and where we are going. Tech start-ups are an entirely different beast compared to having a personal tattoo practice—they require

the contribution and effort of a small village to make possible. We are very fortunate to have attracted some extremely talented and passionate contributors to the company and continue to seek strategic partners and associates who would like to be on this journey with us. We are a 'people-first' organisation and without a doubt growing our team is our top priority. As we continue to grow we are able to add new features and services to the Skin Motion platform. On the immediate horizon, this will include more detailed and customised artist profiles and featured tattoo artists, partnerships with non-profit organisations and charity events, and continuing to simplify and optimise the Soundwave Tattoo creation process so that it is as accessible as possible. Of course we are also exploring other uses of augmented reality and the potentials it will allow us to add depth and meaning to the already very meaningful and expressive medium of tattooing.

And what about your plans as a tattoo artist?

I have been more stationary this past year since founding Skin Motion than I have been in my adult life and it is very challenging! I have plans to do a tour across the United States later this year and would very much like to expand my travels around the world to visit the tattoo artists who are working with us and to learn about tattooing and tattoo culture from as many perspectives as possible. I am



inspired by the history and indigenous uses of tattooing, particularly tattoo as ceremony and a spiritual practice and hope to expand my understanding with first-hand experience as I travel.

Has the whole project been rewarding?

It has been an honour and privilege to bring this new expression and medium to the world and I am grateful for the support we have received. It has challenged me in ways I did not think I was capable of overcoming and the encouragement and support from my family and friends and the extended tattoo community around the world have lifted my spirits and pushed me to continue when I could not see a clear path forward. I believe that tattooing has been and will continue to be a sacred rite of passage for transformation—one that empowers people to overcome the limitations that keep us from experiencing our truth and living in integrity with the ability to express our uniquely special authenticity that the world so desperately needs. I am humbled to carry this potent medicine and to share it. ▣

REBEL INC.

Wayne Simmons talks with some of his favourite rebels within tattooing, artists doing something different with their inks. This month he meets Amanda Piejak of Cień in Warsaw

 @amanda_piejak

When I catch up with Amanda Piejak, it is something of a busy and exciting time for her. The Warsaw-based artist is in the midst of a move, opening a brand new studio with a group of like-minded artists and friends. “Our studio is called ‘Cień,’” she tells me. “This means ‘shadow’. We picked this name because all three of us work using just black ink and we like to play with contrast.”

The tattoo scene is growing “insanely fast” in Warsaw, she goes on to say. There are studios popping up on every street, and conventions are becoming increasingly popular. “Crowds are huge at these events and I’m always amazed by the quality of artists I see there. It’s like we have suddenly gained the courage to catch up with the rest of Europe.”



**...IT'S LIKE WE HAVE
SUDDENLY GAINED THE
COURAGE TO CATCH
UP WITH THE REST OF
EUROPE**







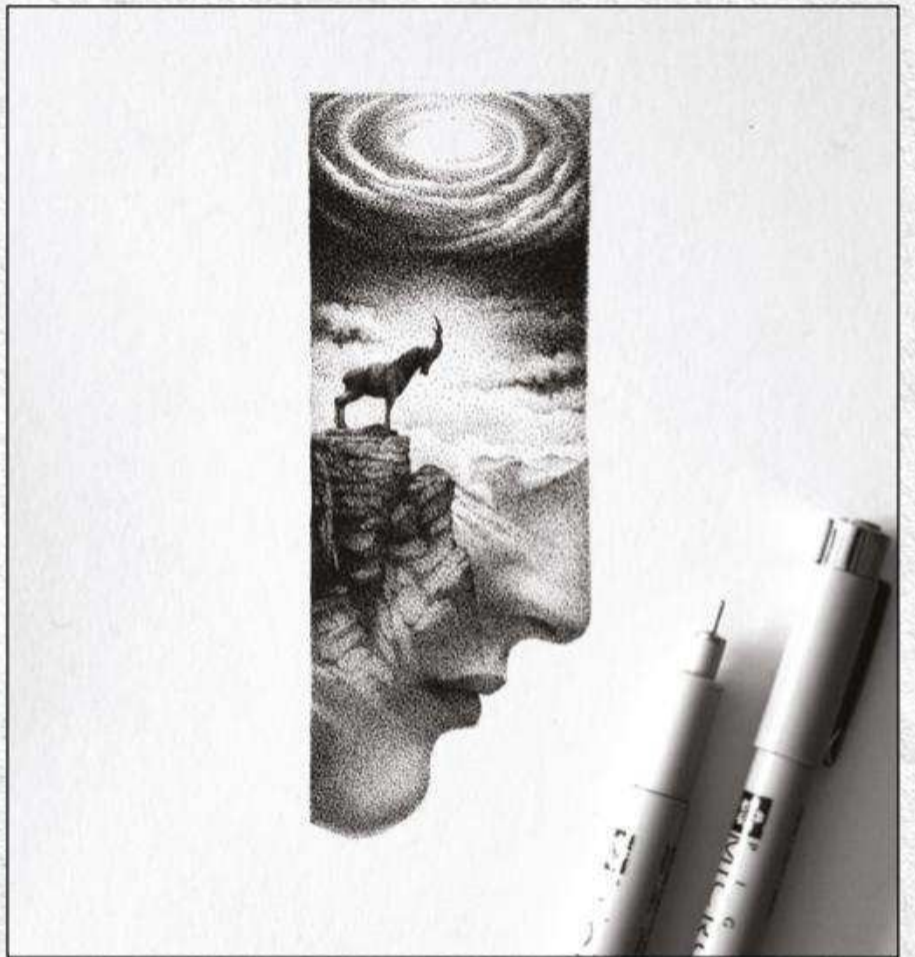
I USE SMALL NEEDLES AND I'M MAKING SURE TO FILL EVERY MILLIMETRE OF SKIN

This courage Amanda talks of relates not only to the number of tattoos being put out, but the type as well. Traditional and realism remain just as popular in Poland as they are in the UK, but there's a definite move towards more diverse styles, too, something Amanda encourages. "It all depends on the client's individual taste," she cautions. "Tattoos are only as diverse as the people getting them. But yes, I can agree that styles like dotwork and fineline are much more popular here, lately. They haven't pushed away any other styles but they are definitely be-

coming a much more popular trend."

It was the uniqueness of Amanda's own work that first drew my eye. It's not just your average, run-of-the-mill blackwork she's putting out, but an incredibly eye-catching blend of styles—for the main part dotwork and realism. I marvelled at how much detail she was able to get even within the smallest of tattoo. I ask her how she manages to achieve this. And also how she works to ensure the tattoo will not become blurred over time and lose this detail.

"I use small needles and I'm making sure to fill every



millimetre of skin,” she explains. “I’m always watching how tattoos are ageing on my clients’ skin. If the tattoo is done well and clients take care of the tattoo, it will last a long time without changing.”

Having worked as a graphic designer in another life also helps. Amanda sees skin as just another medium and it’s a healthy approach to have, especially with regards to trying new techniques. She feels she has reached the peak of her abilities in terms of her skillset with tattooing—the nuts and bolts, if you like, of building a tattoo. For Amanda, then, the main focus right now is the creative side of things. “I’m using a lot of new elements and compositions. Maybe I’ll try to connect different styles. This seems to be the biggest challenge for me—trying new things. Lately, I’m leaning towards bigger and more abstract designs.”

Nature seems to be a rather vocal muse, shall we say, within Amanda’s work. I’m wondering what is it about animals, wildlife and the environment that attracts her: is it just the aesthetic appeal—that she simply likes drawing these things—or is there a deeper meaning or message within her art that she’s trying to get across? For Amanda, it’s difficult to answer this question as her art, as she sees it, is ever evolving and not trapped within any one particular concept or theme.

“I’m creating collages,” she explains. “I want my work to tell stories, contain moments captured in time. I like to close them in geometric figures. And yes, nature was the main theme of my first designs; I liked to use real pieces and build unreal, minimalist compositions out of them. But nature isn’t the only theme in my designs. Lately, I prefer collages related to humankind, with



IF THE TATTOO IS DONE WELL AND CLIENTS TAKE CARE OF THE TATTOO, IT WILL LAST A LONG TIME WITHOUT CHANGING

a more existential message.”

A lot of this comes from allowing herself to be an open book, so to speak, when it comes to soaking up inspiration. Amanda follows hundreds of tattoo artists on Instagram, all of them very different, she tells me, from what she herself does and from each other. She finds something interesting in every style—from realistic tattoos to traditional. And it’s not just the world of tattoos she looks to.

“I feel inspired by many forms of art: photos, movie scenes, paintings or dreams. I want my work to have some depth to it: memories, emotions or the basic truths about life and people. I can find inspiration for that almost every-

where. Sometimes I find inspiration simply in myself or I don’t find it at all and I just make things which end up becoming art.”

Which brings us back to the Cień project. For many of the artists I talk with, opening a new studio is primarily about creating a safe and comfortable place for the client to visit. But for Amanda, it’s particularly important that she, as an artist, can relax and feel at ease, too.

“With Cień, we are mostly focused on creating a friendly atmosphere so we can feel at home working there,” she explains. “For me, this is the most important thing: a peaceful place to work is crucial to being able to create good art.” ▣



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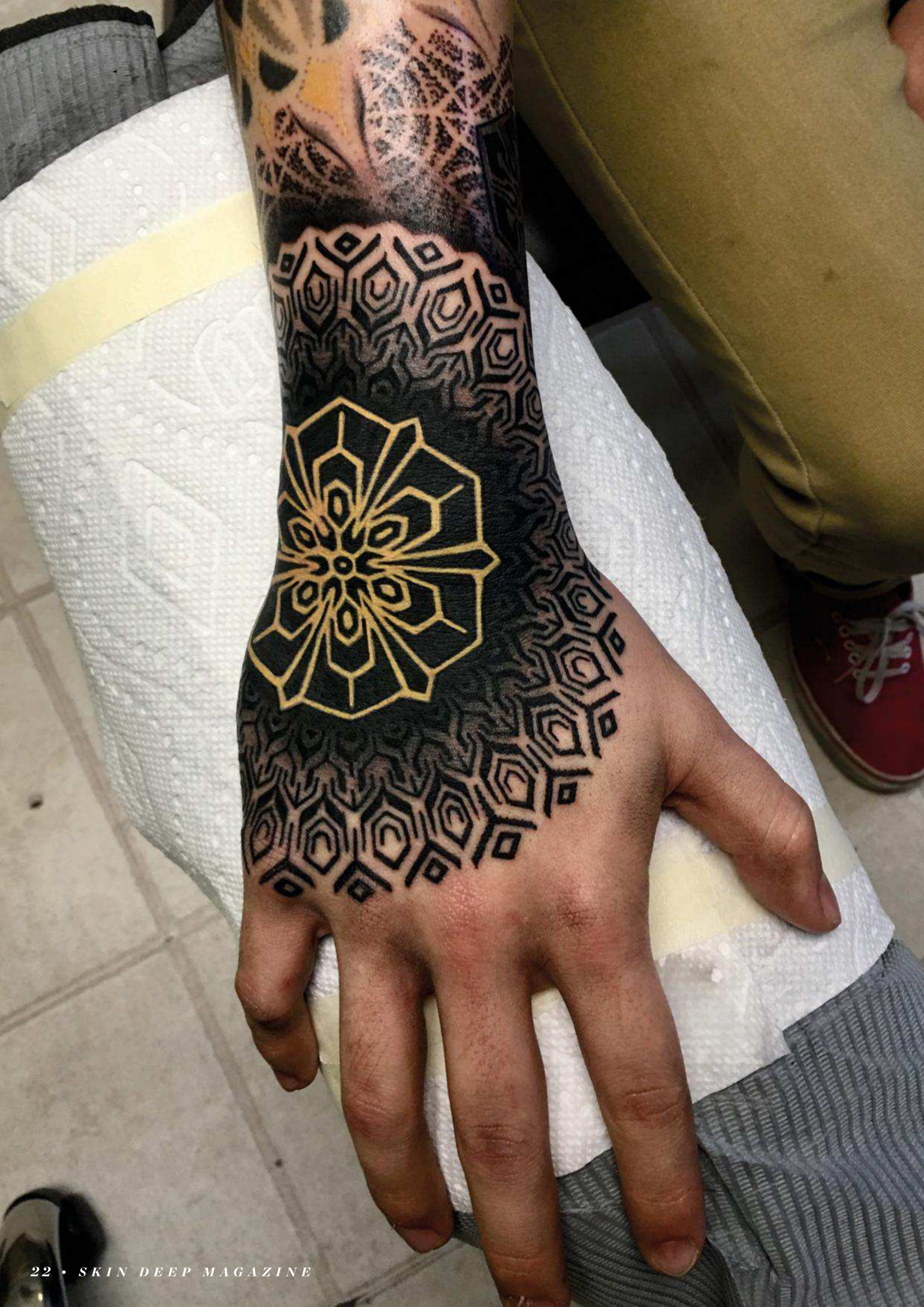
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ART COMES FIRST

"You know what it is. Black and yellow. Black and yellow. Black and yellow. Black and yellow..."

Am I reciting Wiz Khalifa lyrics? Of course not—don't you know who Jake Gordon is? Get with the programme.

When I first saw Jake's tattoos earlier this year and the mysterious magic he was working on skin with two simple colours, I absolutely knew we had to talk to this artist as soon as possible, and quiz him about how he cooks up said magic in such an original way.

Only 23 years old, West Virginia's Jake Gordon has been tattooing for six years but has been immersed in the industry from the age of 13. "I am one of the incredibly lucky people who happens be related to an amazing tattoo artist," he tells, "my aunt and mentor, Patty Colebank, decided to give me a chance in tattooing at a young age, and I couldn't be more grateful for her teachings."

Jake doesn't lose sight of his lucky beginnings and is one of those wonderfully humble artists who doesn't let the media buzz around his tattoos go to his head: "the biggest challenge in this industry is probably all the goofballs in tattooing who want to be rockstars... none of us are doctors and none of us save lives. This is the best job in the world but acting like an asshole because you have a lot of Instagram followers is fucking lame."

Following the crowd isn't Jake's style. His recent popular yellow on black tattoos stemmed from his desire to "create something completely original", something that would become a signature 'Jake Gordon' look. After playing with getting the ratio right between these colours, sometimes in black and grey pieces as a replacement for white, one of Jake's long-term clients came to see him specifically requesting a geometrical piece utilising just black and



yellow. The piece popped, and the rest was history. He now experiments with other bright colours such as blue, which when juxtaposed with a black-out background, give a result that is quite unique.

Jake admits that one of the biggest challenges with solid black tattooing is being confident that the art will heal well. To him, simplicity is key: "[the design] doesn't allow you to get too extravagant with the lines." The level of perfection reached in those areas of solid black, Jake thanks his "great teacher" for: "I was taught as an apprentice to keep

THIS IS THE BEST JOB IN THE WORLD BUT ACTING LIKE AN ASSHOLE BECAUSE YOU HAVE A LOT OF INSTAGRAM FOLLOWERS IS FUCKING LAME



I WAS TAUGHT AS AN APPRENTICE TO KEEP NEGATIVE SPACE IN A TATTOO MORE OPEN THAN IT LOOKS ON PAPER BECAUSE OF HOW THE INK WILL SPREAD IN THE HUMAN BODY OVER TIME

negative space in a tattoo more open than it looks on paper because of how the ink will spread in the human body over time. Without this piece of knowledge from Patty, my mentor, I wouldn't be able to tattoo in this style now."

Despite knocking solid black-work out of the park (and agreeing that this is becoming a speciality in the industry), Jake puts out into the world pieces that encompass realism, dot-work, script-work, traditional and more. Again, he puts this down to his mentor and his being taught to follow one very simple but vital concept: 'art comes first'. Remembering to be selfless remains an important thing to him: "I don't like saying 'I only want to tattoo this' or 'I only want to tattoo that'... even if I am not into the tattoo, I man up and make it something I am into. This approach forces me to try to tattoo in a lot of different areas."

If you're asking what's next for Jake Gordon, you're looking at an artist that is by no means going to follow a predictable route. As well as being taught to give every single person that walks through the door "more than what they ask for," Jake also reminds himself every day to be experimental and take risks: "some experiments in tattooing work better than others," he laughs, "but you don't know until you try."

Jake Gordon tattoos at Patty's Art Spot in Morgantown, WV (USA). He's planning to come to the UK in the next year or so, keep an eye out on his Instagram @handshakesnaketattoos.





Elizabeth Thug

One of the greatest things about Skin Deep and its audience, is that it's very receptive to running with ideas you don't find in other magazines, thus: Jonathan Carroll is one of the boss's favourite authors and a few weeks back, he discovered this short story from him about a tattoo [natch] and figured you might enjoy it too. Reading is the new anti-social media don't you know. We've also thrown in some great work discovered in the inbox this month just in case you freakout at so many words...

She walked into the place and without saying a word, handed the man the wrinkled yellow slip of paper she had worked and fussed over for hours the night before. There were only two words written in careful block letters. After glancing at it (she watched his eyes carefully to see his reaction but his face remained blank), he looked at her, then once more at the paper to be sure he'd seen correctly. Eventually he asked slowly, skeptically "Where do you want it?"

Her shoulders drooped. Her whole body relaxed at his question. She had imagined so many scenarios of how this scene was going to play out, but what the man had just said was not one of them. She'd anticipated derision or perhaps stunned surprise from him; maybe some suspicion, questions like "You want *this*? Why?" Or worst of all, a mean little smile that said you're an idiot, lady, but hey, money's money and if you want to pay for this, I'll give it to you.

"On my hand." She stuck her right one out, palm up. With her left index finger she pointed to the middle of the right palm. "Here. I want it here."

"Okay." He handed back the paper. "You want it in block letters or in some kind of special script? We've got a book of fonts that you can choose from."

"Comic Sans."

"Excuse me?"

"I want it done in a Comic Sans font. Can you do that?"

He pointed to the paper. "Like it's written there?"

"More or less. I brought along a Comic Sans alphabet in my bag that I could show you. Can you do it?"

He chuckled. "Easy. I just spent three hours doing Hokusai waves on a skinny guy's forearms. I guess I can write two words on your palm, right?" The sentiment was snarky but his voice wasn't — it was only stating a fact. "Are you Elizabeth?"

"No."

He scratched his cheek and looked at her with more interest. "Are you a thug?"

She grinned and shook her head.

"But you want this on your hand forever?"

"Yes."

He spoke wistfully, musing to himself. "People want the strangest things written on their bodies."

"I can imagine."

"One guy wanted a strip of bacon and a toaster. Another had me do a car battery over his heart. But what do I know, huh? The guy's got money, I give him a car battery."

She nodded.

"Delco."

"Excuse me?"

"It had to say DELCO on the side of the battery. He wanted it specific."



“Specific.” She didn’t know what else to say.

“And you want ELIZABETH THUG tattooed on your palm?”

“Yes.”

“Who’s that, your girlfriend or something?”

This moment and question she’d expected. She was not a brave woman but would have to be brave now. She spoke quickly because she wasn’t used to being rude and it was difficult for her. “I’d rather not say.” She spoke firmly—the subject was closed.

He put up both hands in surrender. “Okay, I’m cool. You want to get started?”

He was finished in less than an hour and did a great job. The new tattoo on her palm looked exactly as she had imagined—maybe even a little bit better.

As he worked they talked. He told her stories about people who’d come to his shop. Like the man who wanted the car battery tattooed on his chest was a long haul truck driver who was going blind. He was terrified of what was happening to his eyes and how he would cope with the rest of his life. He wanted the battery tattooed over his heart so he could touch it whenever things got really frightening. It would remind him of good times and that life could be good as well as bad.

“But why a battery? Why not a truck if he’s a truck driver?”

The tattoo artist wagged a finger in the air. “Good question. I asked that too. He said trucks couldn’t run without a battery. They’re the heart of the machine.”

She wished she hadn’t asked. She liked mystery more than answers. Both as a child and an adult she never asked or wanted to know how magicians did their tricks, how special effects were done in movies, or why men gave her flowers now and then. Her life was unmysterious so much of the time that any chance she got, she avoided clarification and

hungrily embraced the unknown. Part of that was because she was so unmysterious. She had almost no secrets. Nothing naughty or fishy was hidden away under her bed or stuffed deep into closets. Anyone could walk through her apartment with a 1000-watt flashlight and a magnifying glass, snooping everywhere, but find nothing that would cause her to even blush. Just the thought alone made her despondent. She looked at people around her, friends and work colleagues, and was certain most of them had secrets or secret lovers, or secret stashes of stuff that both mortified and delighted them when no one was looking.

One boyfriend she broke up with said he knew things were going wrong between them the same way you know your shoelace is untied before you look—a sort of loosening and slight shoe wobble that makes you check. “I basically knew it was over when I started feeling the

same kind of loose wobble between us, you know what I mean?” She was hurt more by the description than by the fact he no longer wanted to be together. More mortifying, he was right. Shoes have no secrets and neither do shoelaces, tied or otherwise. No passionate other woman ever lurked in their shadows, ready to leap out and scream Ah Ha! No operatic *cri de coeurs* that led to wrenching emotional scenes where the truth finally flooded out because too many dark secrets and words had been left unsaid until that moment. No, to him all their relationship added up to was an untied shoe and by extension, she was a shoelace.

This was the reason for her tattoo.

While buying coffee one morning, she’d chanced to glance at the hand of a well-dressed middle-aged woman standing nearby. A photo-realistic blue accordion was tattooed on the back of it. She was so taken both by the image and mystery of why anyone would choose to have it drawn on their skin, that she covered her mouth with her hand because she didn’t know if she was going to laugh out loud or splutter in glee.

At once she realised a person didn’t need to be mysterious at all—only their skin did. From then on she studied any tattoo she saw. She sidled up to people on the subway and once sure they weren’t looking, peered closely at their arms, their legs in shorts, the backs and sides of their necks, their forearms thick with muscles or thin as a chopstick, so long as they were inked.

Most tattoos she saw were dull, dismal, or trite—cartoon characters, Celtic or Maori designs, mermaids, devils, and Christs, advertising logos like the Nike swoosh or once even the McDonald’s hamburger arch. Why? She constantly wondered why people volunteered their skin as a billboard to tell the world they were clichés, unoriginal,



or worst of all—they just wanted to be like everyone else.

In contrast, the mysterious blue accordion on a woman's hand was enthralling. An accordion? Why? What did it mean? Was the woman a musician, or was there a deliciously recondite meaning to her tattoo only she and a few select others knew, but the world would never discover? How could anyone see that tattoo and not wonder about the person who owned it? Mickey Mouse or a dragon on a bicep? Snore. An accordion across the back of a delicate female hand? Brilliant.

She was so smart yet uninspiring. She worked in magnetic bubble technology. When she told people that, their eyes either turned off all the lights or else got jumpy and nervous, wanting to escape. If you were interested in vortex dynamics of high temperature semiconductors, she was your girl. But let's face it—nobody was and it was perfectly okay. She knew in the world's eyes she was like a store that sold only one rarefied thing like Iranian caviar or antique French needlepoint. But she did have other interests. Come on—give her some credit. She liked to go swimming, line dancing, and absolutely loved to kiss. When she created a profile for online dating services, just

trying to describe herself in an interesting original way was a challenge. What she wanted to say was I am smart, have a great sense of humour, like sex, and am up for more or less anything. But you probably wouldn't think that if you were just to look at me. So here's the deal—Get in touch, let's talk, and maybe we can dance. In the end after much soul hemming and hawing that's exactly what she did say but the results of her candour were unfortunate, to say the least. The only men who responded were creeps, bores with dubious issues, or guys who started whining in their very first email to her.

But seeing the accordion tattoo revived her. It changed her attitude from $\frac{3}{4}$ hopeless to hopeful by giving her a concrete plan she'd put into action as soon as she walked out the door of that tattoo shop.

How happy she would have been if she'd been able to glance in a rearview mirror and see the look of puzzled admiration on the face of the tattoo artist as she left his place that day. Whoever she was, she must be cool to want this tattoo on her palm, no matter what it meant. He even wrote the enigmatic words down on a scrap of paper so he would remember: *Elizabeth Thug*.

A few nights later at a popular downtown bar, a stranger glanced at her hand. After doing a small double take and narrowing his eyes, he reached over and took hold of it. A nervy gesture and she winced slightly because the hand still hurt from the tattooing, but she didn't mind. This was the beginning.

"Elizabeth Thug." He said the name without a question mark at the end. He was decent looking. His tie was pulled to one side and his shirt collar was open.

She looked at her hand as if to make sure they were talking about the same thing. Then she smiled at him and nodded once.

He waited for her to say something. When she didn't he asked if she was Elizabeth Thug.

She shook her head.

"But it's tattooed on your hand."

She nodded again. "True."

"Why?"

"Why do you think?" Her voice was soft and friendly but gave nothing away.

He looked at her as if she'd just spoken to him in a foreign language. "What do you mean?"

"Why do you think 'Elizabeth Thug' is tattooed on my hand?"

He smiled but it faded. He smiled again but it was different this time; confused, quickly gone. "Is it you, or a relative?"

She said nothing and made a sour face. It said come on, boy; you can do better than that.

"No?"

She sighed and withdrew her hand from his so she could lift her glass. "No."



Alice Totemica

He sat up straighter. “Are you Rumpelstiltskin? Do I have three guesses and if I get them wrong, you’ll put a spell on me?”

“You never know,” she winked.

“Okay. You’re a feminist and Elizabeth Thug was the world’s first female boxing referee.”

She tipped him a nod for his clever answer. “Not bad. Wrong, but original.”

He rubbed his hands together. This was fun; he liked it. Liked that she got his humour and hadn’t pushed his answer away like it smelled bad.

He guessed two more times and was wrong of course because the secret was ‘Elizabeth Thug’ meant nothing. They were simply two words that came to her out of the blue when she was showering one morning. But moments after they arrived in her mind she knew exactly what to do with them. Once she was sure she wanted two disparate words that signified nothing, she tried out many others just to be sure. But she kept coming back to those two and they were the words she had tattooed onto her palm.

The first evening at the bar with the man was useful and sexy. The guessing game opened things up between them and although she never revealed the secret of the tattoo,

he was clearly interested in her. When he asked for her telephone number, she wouldn’t give it. She teased that if he had given the correct answer she would have, but oh well – maybe next time. He asked if there would be a next time. She said she came to this bar fairly often. Maybe they’d see each other here again. And then she left. On the cab ride home she stared at her tattoo in delight and knew she had made the right decision.

Scheherazade was so wrong; she had it all backwards. For 1001 nights, she told her king new stories to keep him interested and spare her life. But men don’t want to hear stories – they want to *tell* them. They want to talk; they want to hold the floor. Males want the world to listen to whatever it is they have to say. That was the single thing she learned from her dismal period of Internet dating – most men really only want to talk to someone who listens. Some want to download while others want your sympathy. Some want admiration but not as many as she had originally imagined. More often than not, men just want to tell you what they’re thinking or how they see the world. They prefer an appreciative audience but willingly settle for an attentive one. She realised after meeting so many men in a short period of time that the

best way to start things going on a date was to give the guys a little verbal push and off they'd go — talking about themselves, their world, their take on things.

'Elizabeth Thug' was a natural outgrowth of the discovery. She presumed correctly most men preferred guessing what her tattoo meant rather than hearing the truth. If Scheherazade had done it right, all she'd have had to do was get her king talking about a subject that intrigued him and she wouldn't have had to tell a new story every night for three years.

A dog, a cat, her sister, her mother. A friend, a car, her favourite bar. These were some of the guesses men made about her tattoo. In the beginning when she was just getting used to the attention those mysterious two words created, she was coy or lady-like in her denials. No, I'm sorry, that's not it. Oh, that's an interesting guess but you're wrong. Some men tried to charm the answer out of her. Others were derisive and taunting. Why would I care what it means? She was sweet even to them. She smiled and purred because you asked. If you're not interested, that's fine. But of course they were interested and all their gruff was a bluff.

However as time passed and more and more men guessed wrong, she became impatient. She knew it was ridiculous because how could anyone get it right when there was no right? Still, she grew irritated and positively snapped at some of them when they guessed stupid.

"The family boat? Are you joking? Would you want the name of a boat tattooed on your skin?"

This man took a long drink of his double Jameson's and then wiped his mouth with a scrunched up cocktail napkin. "I was just kidding," he said defensively.

She looked at him like a teacher who's just caught a student cheating on a test.

No boat, no best childhood friend who died tragically, no title to her unpublished first novel. She sort of liked



Craig Bartlett

the guess and considered giving the man her telephone number but in the end said no.

Her sister came to town and two minutes after they had hugged hello, she noticed the tattoo. "What the hell is *that*?" When she heard the explanation she slapped her hands against her cheeks and hooted, "I love it! You're out of your mind."

The two women went to a bar that night so she could show her sister what happened when men noticed her hand. They were there forty-five minutes and three men struck out guessing.

"Ooh look — see the really handsome guy at that corner table? Go over and ask him."

She looked over and saw a hunk with short hair and a three day beard sitting alone with a beer mug held between his two hands, staring intently into the off.

"But I've never done that — gone up and just asked."

Her sister nudged her shoulder. "Come on, be brave. It's like cold-calling in telemarketing. Let's see if you can get him to bite."

After finishing her drink for courage, she walked over to his table. He looked up at her slowly and smiled, but it wasn't warm or welcoming — only a 'hello-what-do-you-want' smile.

She put up her right hand like an Indian chief going "How!" The good-looking man saw the lettering on her palm and squinted to decipher it.

"Elizabeth Thug?"

She nodded.

He took a sip of beer. "Am I supposed to guess what it means?"

She nodded again, feeling awkward and uncomfortable now so close to his handsomeness.

"I don't want to."

She took a sharp breath, a little gasp of humiliation, and turned quickly to go.

"But wait a minute — can I ask you something?"

She stopped but didn't turn around. The rude bastard could talk to her back.



"Do you ever scare yourself on purpose? I must do it five times a day."

She frowned and half-turned to him. What was he talking about?

He addressed his beer mug but loud enough so she could hear. "For some absolutely unknown reason, I need to scare myself at least a few times every day. Maybe it's just the adrenaline rush, right? Maybe I just dig the body-buzz you get when you're scared or nervous. But it's insane."

"ATM machines, right? They scare me."

She thought he was joking. "You're scared of money machines?"

"I am." He nodded and tapped the table for emphasis. "Worse—I make myself scared of them. That's the big difference, you see. As I'm walking up to one to get some money, I think this machine is going to eat my card and then what? How am I going to get around without any cash?"

She stared at him. "But even if it happens, just go into the bank and tell them to get the card out for you," she said reasonably, still not believing he was serious.

He shook his head. "Not on Sunday, or ten at night which is when I usually end up needing money."

"Or how about this one—I'm riding alone in an elevator in the middle of summer. It's a small car and not air-conditioned. Every time, every time I'm halfway to my floor I suddenly think what if this elevator broke now and stopped? What if I had to stay in here for hours because nobody came to get me out; or no one was in the building? And as soon as I think that, I get boiling claustrophobia. So I say to myself shut up—just stop it. Stop being stupid, but it does no good. Being reasonable never works. It's



like I create demons to eat me alive from inside out.

"Or I'm on line at the post office..." he made to go on but stopped. "I do it to myself, understand? An ATM machine is just a machine. They're tested a zillion times before they're installed, so they never fail. But that doesn't make any difference—it's gotten so bad, just about every time I go up to one I get nervous. Sometimes I almost physically lose my balance because I'm so worried."

"Why do we do these things to ourselves? Life's hard enough, right? Why make it worse by scaring ourselves? Or making ourselves miserable by creating stupid imaginary scenarios that never happen anyway?"

She could think of nothing to say. Instead she just opened and closed both hands and pushed them against her sides. How did she get into this? She just wanted to go back to her sister.

He rubbed his head with both hands. "It's not even masochism; it's weirder than that. The things we do to torture ourselves, you know? I used to think I liked me, but not so much anymore."

"Do you know what I was thinking about before you came over here? I'm going to name it. So every time it happens to me from now on, every time it comes, if I have an actual name for it I can say 'George, go away.' Or 'George, go back to your room now and quit messing with my head.' Treat it like a bad little kid who needs to be disciplined."

He lowered his eyes and for several moments stared at



Daryl Healey

her hand. “Elizabeth Thug.” His eyes moved up her body. When they reached her face he was grinning. “Elizabeth Thug! That’s what I’ll name it. Thank you. That’s perfect. The next time it happens I’ll say, ‘Elizabeth—get out of here. You can’t do it. Not this time.’” His entire expression and body language radiated how much he liked the idea. “Get lost, Elizabeth *Thug*. I’m only getting some money from the machine, so leave me alone.”

He raised his beer mug to her, a toast. “You don’t mind me borrowing the name for this, do you? I will worship you for the rest of the week. Elizabeth Thug. That’s exactly it.” With a triumphant voice, his glance dropped to the table, dismissing her. But he did look sort of transformed.

There was nothing else for her to say or do but return to her sister who’d watched the whole thing from the bar. What could she tell her? What had just happened? Walking back, she glanced down at her right hand and saw a bit of the tattoo there, the name he would remember and use. The name that actually meant something now, but not to her. ▣



Tony Blue



Tanya Buxton

You can find Mr Carroll at jonathancarroll.com where he regularly posts magic and there are also links to his backlist. I tried to buy this story from him but he was having none of it and instead asked for the money to be donated to a Miniature Bull Terrier rescue charity. Sold!

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DRIIPS, GRAFF AND INK

There is something truly mesmerising in the way tattooist Sewp builds up his compositions with detailed linework, awesome placement and uncanny black fluid drips, those of which trickle down his provocative women with abundance



Words: BSteven Guichard - Kenny

When we consider bodily fluids such as spit, sweat and blood, it is often human nature to look in disdain or attempt to detach from what is being presented. But these substances are brought into the forefront in Sewp's work, a brazen hit of the abject to the proverbial. The artist cites experiment film as influential to his practice, and it is not hard to see why. Sewp's imagery fucks with familiarity,

presenting a twisted, lurid fragment of normality caught up in a dicer. Mashing up the explicit with the evil, Sewp carves a place for himself as a tattooist prepared to threaten the banality of modern life with his trippy, dripping oddities.

YOUR TATTOOS ARE BOLD AND DISTINCTIVE WITH FORMS OF THE EVERYDAY TWISTED WITH AN OMINOUS EDGE. WHAT LED YOU TO BECOME INTERESTED IN THIS STYLE OF TATTOOING?

When I was a kid I was always drawn towards eerie artwork. My favourite books were the "Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark" series, illustrated by Stephen Gammell. As I got older I discovered other illustrators like Ralph Steadman and Gerald Scarfe, whose drawings I would drool over. I wanted my artwork to reflect my attention to detail, the same way those guys did. The use of different line weights and cross-hatching to create depth with nothing but black ink just blew my mind. To create such an impactful drawing with black ink and a simple idea was inspiring to me. I went to university for illustration, but dropped out after two semesters. I realised



TO CREATE SUCH AN IMPACTFUL DRAWING WITH BLACK INK AND A SIMPLE IDEA WAS INSPIRING TO ME

that I was only drawn to the idea of being an illustrator because my favourite artists were illustrators. I just wanted to draw cool shit, and if I didn't like what I had to draw it would feel like just another job.

A BLACK FLUID SUBSTANCE PERMEATES YOUR WORK, IT TRICKLES AND DRIPS OFF OF YOUR CREATIONS, WHAT GAVE YOU THE IDEA FOR THIS?

It's hard to pinpoint exactly where it came from, but if I had to pick I'd say graffiti. Nothing gives me more joy than hitting a huge dripping black tag. It's also a tool I use to fill areas of negative space. If there's something missing from a composition, I like to fill it with drips. The heavy black can help balance a design.

WHAT TECHNIQUES DO YOU USE TO ENSURE THIS MATTER LOOKS FLUID LIKE IN NATURE?

Solid, clean linework. I usually use three different needle groupings for the drips: a fat one to start (a 14 or an 18 usually), a 9 or a 7 to start tapering, and a tight 3 to taper right off

the end. I really just try to imagine how the drips would work in real life. If the design is of a girl and there's drips running down her body, I want to be sure that the fluid is moving over the muscles and curves in a realistic way. This way I can also imply a shape or musculature with a more graphic approach with minimal shading.

IN MANY WAYS THIS SUBSTANCE COULD BE INTERPRETED AS BODY FLUIDS, MAKING THE WORK PROVOCATIVE AND DANGEROUS, WHY DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DRAWN TO SUCH IMAGERY?

It's all body fluids. It's cum, blood, piss, snot, spit, all of it. I've always been drawn to everything strange. Anything fucked up, if it's done tastefully. I know that's subjective, but I know what I like and when I see something weird and original, I appreciate it more than anything. I'll obsess over videos I've found online, or movies, or a song. I'll listen or watch it until I'm sick of it, then I forget about it for a few months so the next time I see it I can revisit my appreciation for it. A movie can have a shit storyline, but if the photography and imagery is interesting I'll love it. Harmony Korine is a director who does that incredibly well. *Spring Breakers* was a shit movie, but fuck the imagery is incredible. He's a great



WITH ARTWORK SO EASILY ACCESSIBLE, THERE'S NO EXCUSE FOR PUMPING OUT GENERIC RECYCLED TRASH

director too, of course. There's an amazing scene in *Mr. Lonely* where the farmers have to kill all the sheep because they're diseased, and it's all set to a beautiful song called "The Maid Freed from the Gallows" by John Jacob Niles. A girl dressed as Little Red Riding Hood later sings it while she's walking along some train tracks in the fog. Scenes like that always stick with me, and I get shivers when I see it no matter how many times I watch or listen.

IT HAS COME TO BE A DISTINCTIVE AND ICONIC FEATURE OF YOUR WORK; DO YOU THINK IT IS IMPORTANT THAT TATTOOISTS FIND SOMETHING IN THEIR WORK THAT MAKES THEM STAND OUT?

Absolutely. As Ron Swanson said: "Never half-ass two things, whole-ass one thing". If you're going to be an artist, be the best fucking artist you can possibly be. With artwork so easily accessible, there's no excuse for pumping out generic recycled trash. Just because you see some repost of a random blackworker getting 10,000 likes for a rose silhouette doesn't mean you should cover your next flash sheet in



black roses. Of course these things can influence your work, and I completely understand there will be similarities between other people's artwork and mine. But drawing from influence and jumping on the bandwagon are two totally different things. If you are happy and complacent with your work, your progression grinds to a halt. That's how you drain all substance from yourself as an artist, and you become another brick.



IF YOU ARE HAPPY AND COMPLACENT WITH YOUR WORK, YOUR PROGRESSION GRINDS TO A HALT. THAT'S HOW YOU DRAIN ALL SUBSTANCE FROM YOURSELF AS AN ARTIST, AND YOU BECOME ANOTHER BRICK

WHAT OTHER TATTOOISTS DO YOU ADMIRE THAT FEATURE A STYLE THAT IS FRESH, DYNAMIC AND ORIGINAL TO THEM?

There are so many. I have to say, my co-worker and one of my closest friends (@thehalfdecent) has been one of my biggest influences. Super motivated and great work ethic. The guy gets shit done and is constantly on the prowl for the next original idea. We try to avoid putting our real names anywhere online, considering we're still semi-active in the graffiti realm. Not that we would be difficult to find if the cops wanted to find us... but still, I'd rather my full name be as far away from my artwork as possible. Some of my other favourites are Lord Slummington (@slumdog.tattooer), Oscar Hove (@oscarhove), Joao Bosco (@joaoboscoart), Maxime Plescia-Bu-



chi (@mxmttt), Mustard Tangerine (@tommy_oh), and Pari Corbitt (@pari_corbitt).

HOW DO YOUR DESIGNS COME TO FRUITION? DO YOU DISCUSS WITH YOUR CLIENTS EACH CHARACTERS POSE AND AESTHETIC? OR IS IT A MORE OF AN ORGANIC CREATIVE PROCESS?

I have a quick discussion with my client beforehand. If the design is one of the blackout girls, I'll just ask if they want nudity or not. Depending on the placement I'll make a decision regarding what composition will fit best (full body pin-up style, half body, just the head etc.). My stencils are super simple, ba-



sically just adhering to the proper proportions. The shading, hairs and drips are all drawn in either right at the beginning, or after the initial linework. This keeps things interesting, and can help me create a design that fits the body well.

THERE IS A GRAFFITI LIKE AESTHETIC TO MUCH OF YOUR WORK, ESPECIALLY IN THE WAY YOU BUILD UP LAYERS AND TEXTURES, DOES THIS ART FORM PLAY A SIGNIFICANT FACTOR IN YOUR TATTOOING PRACTICE?

Graffiti taught me an indescribable amount about art, especially tattooing. The importance of a clean outline, composition, problem solving, efficiency, and detail. I get the same feeling when I see an old tattoo as when I see an old piece of graffiti. An appreciation for how the piece has aged, its weathered look, and how styles have evolved. The fortunate thing with tattoos is that they're

likely to stick around much longer than graff. If I work on a piece for 6 hours, it could get buffed the next day, or a train could roll out on me halfway through painting. With tattooing, I don't really have to worry about my client rolling away mid-tattoo. Unless they're getting their ribs blacked out or something.

DO YOU THINK GRAFFITI TRANSLATES WELL TO THE PRACTICE OF TATTOOING?

I think one of the biggest things to translate is the attitude both graffiti writers and tattooists have. Not to generalise at all, I'm just saying this from the people I've met. They all



I'VE ALWAYS BEEN DRAWN TO EVERYTHING STRANGE. ANYTHING FUCKED UP, IF IT'S DONE TASTEFULLY

seem to have that underground, subcultural “fuck the norm” attitude. I’d rather see a city completely smashed with graffiti than a stark walled financial district bore, just as I’d rather see my skin absolutely covered in tattoos than my boring pasty ass.

WHAT DESIGNS DO YOU HOPE TO CREATE IN THE FUTURE?

I really want to focus on more large-scale projects; pieces that are more ornamental and dress the body as opposed to patchwork. Don’t get me wrong, the way I would approach a sleeve would be to patch things together because I fucking love that look. But I’d like to focus on large-scale torso pieces in

the future. I just need to do a couple to get the ball rolling I think.

I SEE THAT YOU GUEST SPOT AT OTHER TATTOO SHOPS; WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO DO GUEST STINTS IN OTHER SHOPS AND EVEN COUNTRIES?

Guest spots are good because they always come with their own little problems. Where’s the soap? You don’t have a stencil machine? Where’s the Dettol? Why is this outlet not working? Why does your printer suck? All that. They’re all hurdles that build character and help with your problem solving skills. Of course, meeting new artists and seeing how other shops run is super important. I remember the first time I went to Slumdog’s shop, and he had his scissors chained to the wall next to the stencil machine. I was like, fuck man! Genius! Little things like that. Networking and creating connections abroad will open so many doors, you won’t believe how many fucking doors there are. Visiting new countries and making money while I’m on the road is literally the best experience I’ve ever had. I could not ask for a better career. Every city I visit I try to go to as many museums and contemporary/modern art exhibits as possible. It’s important to separate yourself from the world of tattooing sometimes, and look at what the rest of the art world is doing so you can potentially bring that influence into your own work.

WHAT DOES TATTOOING MEAN TO YOU?

Tattooing is stressful, hell on the back, frustrating, annoying, exhausting, and the best fucking thing that’s ever happened to me. Pure freedom. There are always your ups and downs, but I always think back to when I was painting houses for \$12 an hour. Now I make art for a living, and that’s all I ever wanted to do and all I will ever do. ▣

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BACK TO THE FUTURE

All good artists have an unquestionable commitment to progress. Rebecca Rimmer talks to ten tattooists who reflect on their individual artistic journeys.

Some artists create work in the present, allowing no influence of their past or (potential) future to affect the ebb and flow of their creative process. But most tattooists I have met don't work that way.

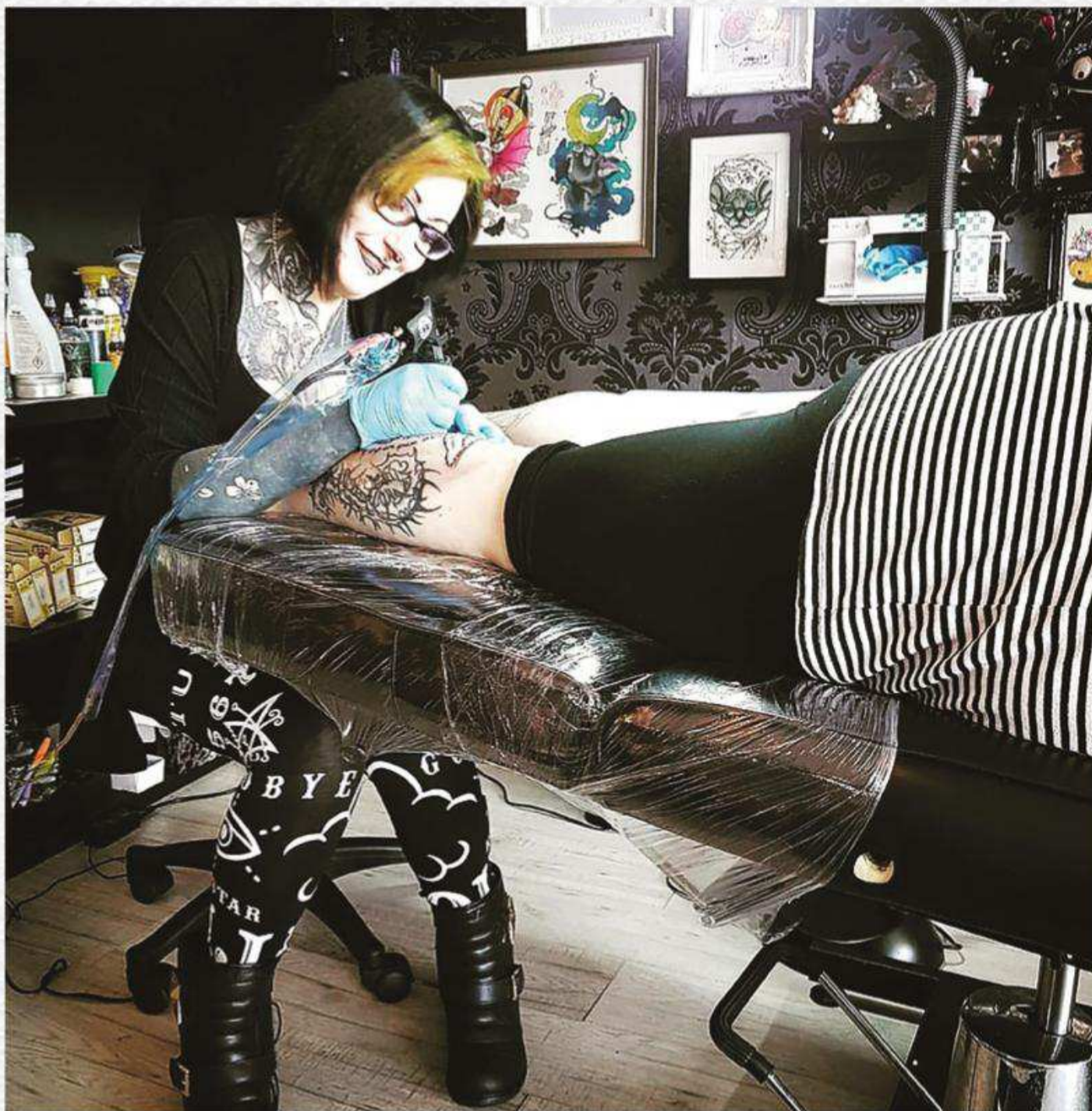
They are instead committed to pushing their potential to new levels, at the same time remembering their humble beginnings. These creative and skilful individuals are focused on bright futures, but still glance back at where it all started. The result is an ego-free dedication, a promise to work hard yet never forget where you've come from. This state of reflection is also a recognition of just how crucial it is to progress in this particular industry—when the artist's creation isn't being painted on a disposable canvas, but human skin that lives a lifetime, there's a life-long artistic devotion to quality and self-improvement, a commitment to a journey that is never complete.

Tattoo enthusiast Natalie is a walking, talking representation of tattooist Marie Cox's decade-long artistic journey. She wears both Marie's first ever tattoo, and 10 year's worth of tattooing progression. Interestingly, despite Marie offering to re-fresh some of her older tattoos, Natalie has always politely declined. This is because those of us lucky enough to be part of this journey, actually play an important part as jigsaw pieces in a vast web of crazy creation. Whether you wear 'new' or 'old', someone's first attempt, or a world-renowned epic masterpiece, every single tattoo is a gift, an experiment, a risk. Without this

unpredictability, that continuous development, tattooing would be an unquestionably dull place to be. I have many tattoos created by those at the start of their careers—these collections hold a special place in my heart, not just as my own personal memories, but as a reminder of my being a working cog in one of the most progressive and interesting industries in the world. Like Natalie, I will never cover them up.

Over the years, I have spoken to many artists who have explained the value of taking time out to reflect on these first tattoos, in order to acknowledge the decisions made (perhaps even subconsciously) over the years, the tiny changes that led to the emergence of their current working ethos. One tattooist once told me that nothing was more rewarding than juxtaposing her newest work with tattoos made in those first months, as it allowed her to see how her focus had changed, what important lessons she'd picked up, and therefore how she could continue pushing herself.

"I'm always learning," is a phrase so frequently heard by us tattoo writers, and a sentence probably printed multiple times in each issue of this magazine. I wanted to explore this further—how and why did our wonderful creators learn? What defines progression? How would these artists react to stepping off the treadmill for a second, pausing and looking back at how far they'd come? What meaningful reflections came to the surface when they dug out some of their first ever tattoos? Let's find out.



FIRST TATTOO

BEX PRIEST

Cult of the Sphynx, Wolverhampton
@bexpriesttattoos

“THIS FIRST TATTOO REPRESENTS THE START OF A NEW CAREER, THE START OF A DREAM.”

I don't often take time to look back and reflect on my journey but when I do, I'm completely overwhelmed.

This first tattoo was done on myself a little over 6 years ago—it's a simple design and I am still in love with it, it represents the start of a new career, the start of a dream. At this point, I was just getting the feel of using a machine and executing line-work. Today, line-work is one of the things in tattooing I get the biggest kick out of—I just love it.

Currently, I take on a lot of large-scale pieces in tricky areas—it's crazy to think that's I'm where I'm at now, with my clients putting their absolute trust in me to create something magical. I think really the suggestion of where I was headed is perhaps in that first tattoo somewhere—it's symmetrical and even today I do love producing symmetry.

Looking back at my first tattoo, over all else, just reminds me of how thankful I am for my clients, how [when you're living the dream] all the hard work can pay off every single day.



LYDIA AMOR

Black Market Tattoo, Leicester
@lydiaamor_tattoo

“IT’S EASY TO BE ABLE TO GET AWAY WITH DOING TECHNICALLY POOR WORK YET BE PRAISED FOR IT.”

It’s important to stop and look at how far we’ve come, to reflect positively on our progress as tattooers. This early tattoo was created on Mike Love, my partner. Made in December 2015, it was my third attempt at hand-poke tattooing.

As a hand-poke tattooer, looking at your progress is important, as it’s easy to be able to get away with doing technically poor work yet be praised for it. I’m proud that I’ve pushed myself to go past this and not settle for sub-par quality tattoos in the name of fashion and trends.

Looking at both of these photos side by side fills me with such a huge array of emotions! I feel proud of my efforts, how hard I feel I’ve worked to hone my skills over a relatively short time-frame [almost three years]. I’m proud that I’m still here and pushing forward. As well as feeling proud, I’m beaming with excitement: for the past and for the future, for all the new opportunities to come.



FIRST TATTOO



FIRST TATTOO



BEYNUR KAPTAN

Beynur’s Tattoos, Cambridge
@tattoobeynur

“IT WAS COMPLETE MADNESS. IT WAS THE START OF A CAREER THAT I AM SO INCREDIBLY PASSIONATE ABOUT.”

I started my tattooing journey in Balikesir, Turkey in 1993. Tattoos were a taboo and I’d only ever seen one person in my life with one, my father. At the age of 13 was embarrassed about an operation scar and a friend of mine suggested I hide it with a tattoo, but there were no tattoo studios in our town. That evening, I made my own machine from a walkman, a mechanical pencil and a knitting needle. Looking back, it was complete madness. It took 7 hours and was extremely painful. Although it isn’t great, it holds a very special memory for me. It was the start of a career that I am so incredibly passionate about.

I worked extremely hard in my apprenticeship and today I appreciate my teachers and the life they gave me. It is important to respect and remember where you came from, the mentors who gave their time to you. Eventually, I moved to the UK and this is when I noticed a big change in my work.

I am proud of my progression—I never had an easy apprenticeship, I didn’t have the privilege of the best machines and equipment. I think because I had to work hard for my career, be a social outcast in my community, I appreciate where I am a lot more today. I fought for my passion and I’m very proud of how far I’ve come.

ELLIE ROBERTS

Deviltown Tattoo, Glasgow
@ellierobertstattoo

“IF I STARTED THINKING EVERYTHING I DID WAS AMAZING ALL THE TIME—THAT’S WHEN IT TURNS TO SHIT AND YOU GET COCKY.”

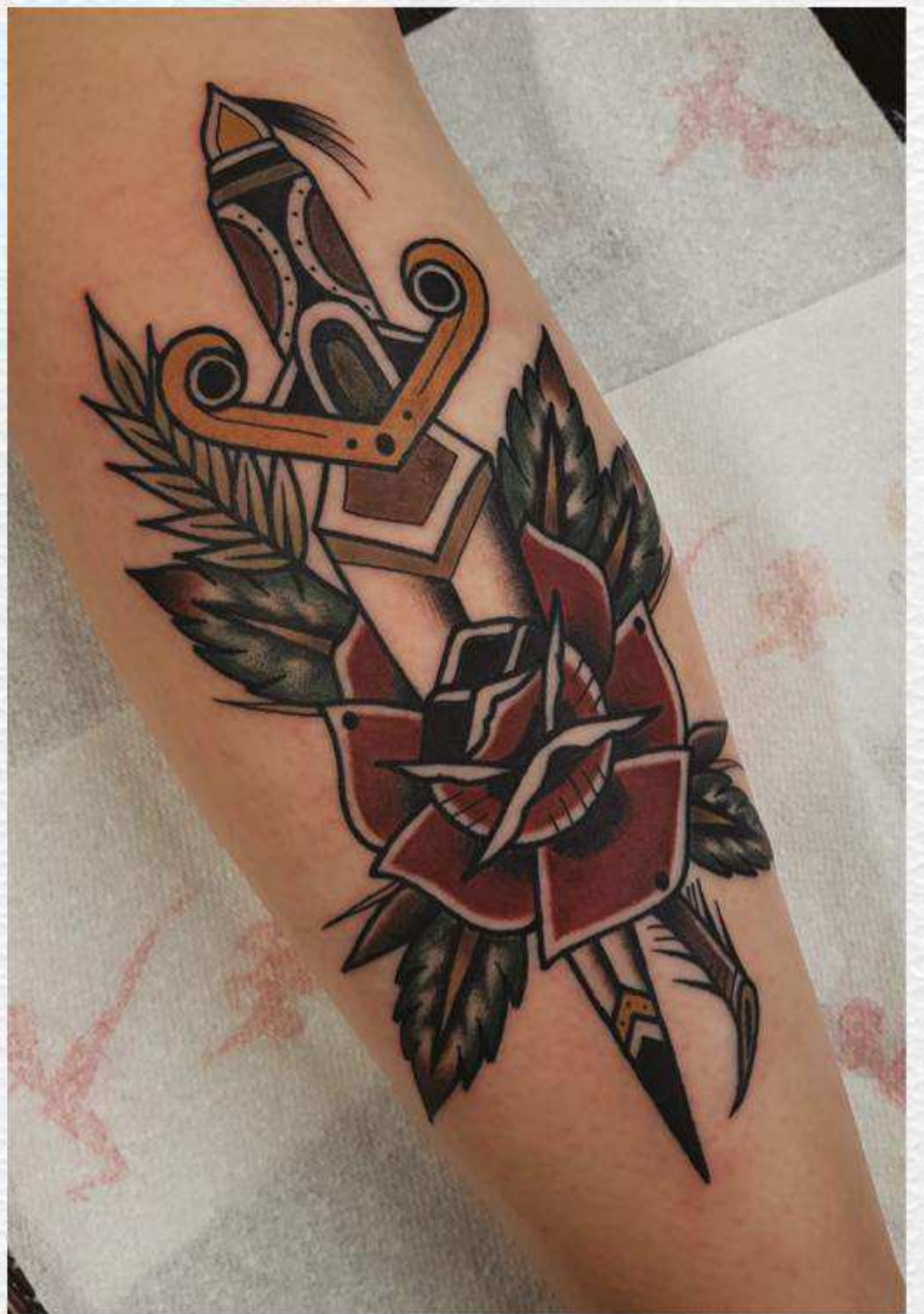
This dagger was the first colour tattoo I ever did. I remember being so nervous before, but was pretty happy with it afterwards. When I first started tattooing, I only had super bright colours, which I did enjoy and still do from time to time. But everything I tend to do now is dark and muted—weird, dark shit is definitely my favourite thing to do!

I am quite critical of my work, which I don’t think is a bad thing. I would be worried if I started thinking everything I did was amazing all the time—that’s when it turns to shit and you get cocky. Better being hard on yourself, that’s how you improve.

I’m still quite bad for comparing myself to others and beating myself up for not being as good as some of my favourite artists, but I am getting better at just doing my own thing and remembering how much I have improved.



FIRST TATTOO



FIRST TATTOO



ELLIS ARCH

Painted Lady Tattoo, Birmingham
@ellisarchtattoo

“I DON’T THINK OF THE WOBBLES, OR THE MISTAKES, I THINK ABOUT THE MOMENT, THE PERSON, THE FEELINGS, THE CONVERSATIONS.”

This rose on my dad is one of my earliest tattoos, but actually the very first tattoo I did was a basic outline of a traditional cherry blossom design. When I think back to these times, I don’t think of the wobbles, or the mistakes, I think about the moment, the person, the feelings, the conversations I had as it happened.

Even today, I still have a few nerves before I tattoo, due to the pressure of wanting it to be the greatest it can be for this person. I feel the pressure to make it my best work. Even though time has passed and technically I have improved, I still have the same feeling of wanting to get better. There is always something I can improve on.

I have just recently moved to Painted Lady in Birmingham—a prestigious studio that when I first started tattooing, was an ultimate goal for me. I sometimes forget that working here was such a huge deal—you get so caught up in your goals, looking at the steps you’re taking and back at your accomplishments, and suddenly you realise that you’ve actually climbed a pretty big hill already. This is a real adventure. I’ve made it this far, I can climb the next one.

GAZZ NEAVES

Black Rabbit Tattoo Collective, Newbury
@gazztattoos

“THINGS ARE MOVING SO QUICKLY THESE DAYS THAT IT’S EASY TO FADE INTO THE SHADOWS.”

This is one of the very first tattoos I made for an old friend of mine back in 2010. I remember at the time being so excited about it. When I compare this to what I’m doing now it does make me proud of everything I’ve become. I can see clear improvements in both my artistic and technical abilities and that all my hard work and sacrifices weren’t for nothing.

These changes only come with time, experience, and a fair amount of learning from your own mistakes! Without criticising your own work, comparing it to your own older stuff and what others are doing, you’re only going to plateau and get left behind. Things are moving so quickly these days that it’s easy to fade into the shadows. If I ever get to the point where I think I know all the answers, that’s the day I quit.



FIRST TATTOO



FIRST TATTOO

ARIENETTE ASHMAN

Vaes Tolorro Tattoo, Bournemouth
@aatattooer

“HE IS A PERMANENT REMINDER OF HOW FAR I’VE COME, KEEPING ME IN CHECK AND REMINDING ME TO CONSTANTLY DO BETTER.”

Like a lot of tattoo artists, I did my very first tattoo on myself, an owl on my lower leg. I still have him to this day and have no intention of covering him up—he is a permanent reminder of how far I’ve come, keeping me in check and reminding me to constantly do better. I was so excited to finally make my first actual tattoo, my boss at the time turned to me afterwards and said “you’re gonna be a tattooist after all!”... I was stoked.

I remember having goals for myself when I started tattooing which seemed so unattainable back then and even though I still see flaws and faults in my work all the time (an artist’s curse), I have achieved what I wanted to, and then some. Although the style and quality of my tattoos has changed and improved over time, my thirst for knowledge and hunger to constantly do better has always stayed the same. I’m relatively happy with my progress but there’s always room for improvement, always more to learn. Ever onwards, as they say!

MARIE COX

Folklore Tattoo Studio, Tamworth. @lady_fts

“I MUST HAVE DONE OK. 10 YEARS LATER NATALIE IS STILL GETTING TATTOOED BY ME, LITERALLY A WALKING CANVAS OF MY ARTISTIC PROGRESSION.”

This lettering was the first tattoo of my apprenticeship—I did it about 10 years ago on a lovely girl called Natalie. I must have done OK because a decade later Natalie is a good friend and client, still getting tattooed by me, literally a walking canvas of my artistic progression. She is covered in my experiments of style and technique, she loves everything I have done for her.

When I reflect upon my journey, I am proud of how far I have come, how my technique and execution of tattoos has greatly changed, due to knowledge and help from my friends. What really sticks in my mind all these years is how blessed I was to have people trust in me.

I’ll never forget how this first tattoo felt, and how it still feels the same now. It drives me to push myself to make sure that I’m doing my very best for my customers. For me, tattooing is driven by that need to do right by my clients. I am truly grateful to them as they gave me the fire to scrutinise my work technically and aesthetically. I’ll keep pushing for perfection [which I’ll probably never find!] so they can wear something they’re proud of forever. If I’m proud of it too then that’s a bonus!



FIRST TATTOO



FIRST TATTOO

LUCY FROST

Dark House Tattoo, London. @lucyfrost_tattoo

“SAT WITH A TATTOO MACHINE IN MY HAND FOR THE FIRST TIME, I COULD NEVER HAVE IMAGINED WHERE I WOULD BE TODAY”

I tattooed this lotus some time in spring 2015 [at the start of my apprenticeship] – it was created on a friend, and I’ve tattooed her many times since. It changed my life forever, and for the person getting the tattoo it can be a life changing experience, too. For my friend, the lotus was a symbol of the beginning of her spiritual journey, enlightenment, and self-regeneration.

Over time, my work has changed in size and complexity. I have also introduced more natural elements into my designs, and have moved away from the very simplistic, geometric style I began with. I think my work is always changing and evolving, I’m really inspired by the different artists and cultures I encounter on my travels, and I think this is reflected in my work.

Looking back, I remember how nervous I was! Everything was so new. Sat with a tattoo machine in my hand for the first time, I could never have imagined where I would be today. It can be easy to lose sight of the bigger picture, when you are busy day-to-day, but it’s refreshing to stand back and see things more objectively.



FIRST TATTOO

MIKE LOVE

Black Market Tattoo, Leicester
@mikelovetattooer

A TATTOO TELLS JUST AS MUCH ABOUT THE PERSON WHO MADE THE PIECE, AS IT DOES ABOUT THE PERSON THAT WEARS IT.

My first tattoo was raindrops on my soon to be wife, tattooist Lydia Amor. We all start somewhere and this tattoo is part of my journey to where I am and what I am doing now. Making that first piece, I remember being so uncertain and scared, but also hadn't felt passion like it before.

My work has changed a hell of a lot. Over the past few years I chose to really focus on my line-work – I wanted my lines to be so clean and solid that you would never think they were tattooed by hand. This is something I will never stop focusing on.

When starting out I kept telling myself, 'hand-poke' is not a style. It doesn't mean your work has to be ignorant, that it has to be technically shit, and the design doesn't have to be basic. You can do anything you want, hand-poke is just a method, and once you take away your limitations and make challenges for yourself you, with dedication and passion, you will achieve whatever you want. A tattoo tells just as much about the person who made the piece, as it does about the person that wears it.

It is important to look back at your old work, study it, and be hard on it – you only become better for your clients by being real with yourself. Looking at my progression today, I can't feel accomplished, not do I think I ever will. But I like that. It doesn't mean I can't still be proud though.



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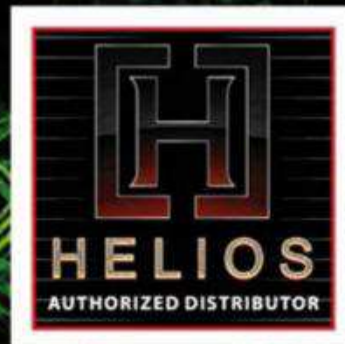
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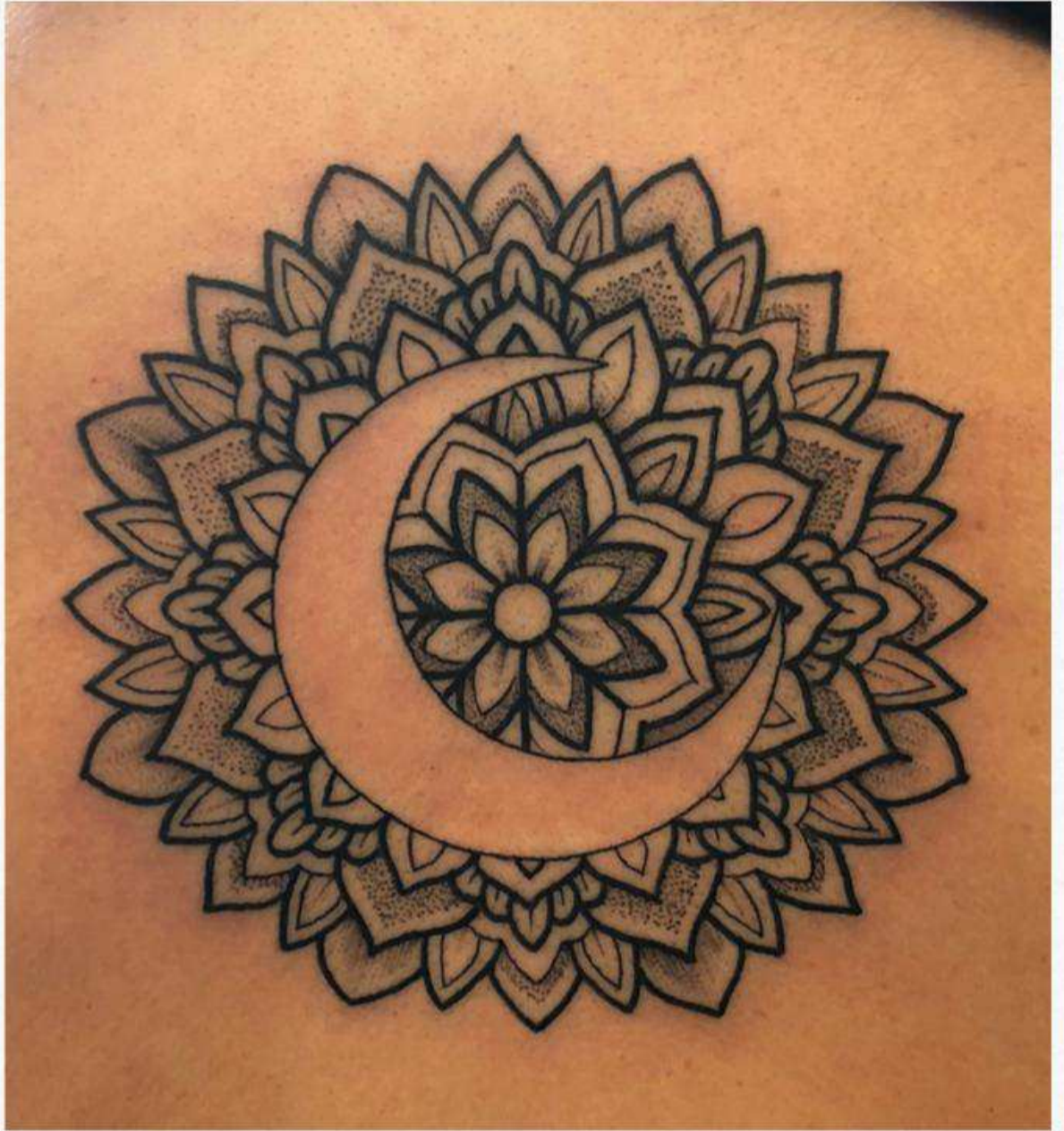
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FABLES & REFLECTIONS

For such a free-spirited art form, modern tattooing can seem quite set in its ways at times. As a community, we often like to pigeonhole ourselves: artists specialising in one style, collectors who seek out only old school or tribal or realism, maybe only trusting one single artist to cover their skin. For many of us, variety isn't important. We know what we like and we like what we know. It's a theme that comes up during my chat with Chris Morris...

The Cardiff-based artist certainly can't be accused of stagnating, having re-located to Wales, for uni, from his very own Smallville, the delightfully named Westward Ho! on the coast of Devon—"it's the only place in the UK to have an exclamation mark in the name so I always make a point of telling people you've got to say it like you would 'Thundercats are go!', he tells me with a smile—and taking on an apprenticeship alongside his studies. But after graduating in 2012, a move to the bigger smoke of London, where Chris spent some time working with his buddy, Mowgli, then a stint at Old London Road, proved a step too far. "In the end, London was just a bit too 'London' for this delicate flower, so I had to get back to my roots and closer to the country."

And so it was back to Cardiff. At first, he tells me, for a haircut, "which seems like a long way to go but my barber friend had just moved there and everyone else I'd seen in London kept messing my fade up," but, for whatever reason, this time Chris just fell in love with the place and decided to make it his home.

While settled on a new base of operation, Chris still struggles to settle on a style. At first, I looked at his use of colour and bold lines and threw the label of new school at him, but he wasn't having

IN THE END, LONDON WAS JUST A BIT TOO 'LONDON' FOR THIS DELICATE FLOWER, SO I HAD TO GET BACK TO MY ROOTS AND CLOSER TO THE COUNTRY







I'M THE DREAM CONSUMER FOR THESE STUDIOS. I MEAN, I'M JUST STOKED TO BE WATCHING THIS KIND OF STUFF PRODUCED ON SUCH A MASSIVE SCALE



any of it. "I don't know if I can define my work at all because I essentially just design and tattoo whatever makes me happy!" he protests.

Not that new school isn't something that speaks to him. One of the first artists to really jump out at him, in fact, was Leah Moule and he certainly can appreciate a good, clean new school tattoo. "To be honest, though, I still don't really understand what makes certain tattoos fall into certain genres. To begin with, everything I drew was in black and grey pencil and generally consisted of roses, ships, wings and what have you because that's what I assumed I should be drawing for tattoo designs. But the more I searched, the more I realised that colour was what I cared about. Regardless of what the subject is, so long as there are colours knocking about in there then I'm interested. I can appreciate the skills that go into black and grey tattooing but it just doesn't grab me like colour does."

Not having a particular style or specialism is definitely a strength, in my book, especially when it's backed up with a strong focus—that



being a love of colour in all its myriad forms. It sees Chris trying his hand at everything from the aforementioned new school to realism and even a little avant garde. But there's definitely a theme within his tattooing that is hard to deny.

Chris is a geek.

And a proud geek, at that.

"Comics are my favourite medium, and the TV/film adaptations that come from them."

He's particularly into Batman, the Jason Todd story arc being his favourite, but super-



heroes in general tick all of his boxes. “I’m the dream consumer for these studios. I mean, I’m just stoked to be watching this kind of stuff produced on such a massive scale. I’m like the kid parents plonk in front of the tv to keep them quiet; so long as there’s bright colours, cool looking costumes and possibly a cape in the vicinity then I’m golden.”

Like all geeks, Chris lives and breathes this stuff. You can see that very clearly in his work—it’s the focal point for much of what he does, in fact. We get talking about what it is that makes geek stuff (for want of a better term) so tattoo-friendly. Is it the longevity of some of these characters—Vader, Batman, Deadpool etc.? I mean, they’ve been around forever. Parents who dug the comics as kids are now bringing their own kids to see the movies. Geek stuff is becoming more cross-generational by the day, it seems. But Chris has another perspective on it all.

“I think it’s actually less about the characters themselves and more about the passion that they bring out in people. It’s so personal,

so individual to everyone, the way a certain character might make you feel, but it’s the intensity of those feelings that makes it special. You just have to take a look at any comic con to see how much this ‘geek stuff’ really means to people, and that’s what makes them such good tattoos. While pop culture material constantly changes, if you feel passionately enough about a character to get them tattooed on you then every time you look at that tattoo it’s going to be a permanent reminder of those feelings you had for them.”

It was this passion that moved Chris to open his own studio, Tales & Fables in Cardiff: having his own space that reflects the things that breathe life into his work is vital to his ongoing evolution as an artist. He was careful not to go overboard—“there’s a good mix of geeky stuff in here as well as just



I THINK IT’S ACTUALLY LESS ABOUT THE CHARACTERS THEMSELVES AND MORE ABOUT THE PASSION THAT THEY BRING OUT IN PEOPLE



WHAT REALLY PUT IT IN PERSPECTIVE FOR ME WAS SEEING HOW PEOPLE ARE ABLE TO BE COMPLETELY THEMSELVES AT COMIC CONS



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general pieces of art to not make it feel like the inside of a kid's treehouse"—but it's still very much a melting pot of all the things that inspire him. And then there's his clients. It's clear reading the blurb on the studio website that a big part of Chris' mission is to make a 'safe space' (to coin a phrase) for the people who come through the doors. It gets me thinking again about that stagnation within tattooing, the realisation that many of us have become quite insular, sticking with the artists and the studios we know rather than shopping around. Is this, perhaps, due to a general feeling of apprehension about tattoo studios? Is there still something of a fear fac-

tor for people going in?

Again, Chris has a unique take on this—and one that's very much educated by his experience of geek culture. "I think what really put it in perspective for me was seeing how people are able to be completely open and completely themselves at comic cons," he tells me. "They know there isn't going to be any judgement from the people around them and that they can just relax and enjoy themselves."

That's the environment Chris wants to create within Tales & Fables and not just for the fellow geeks who can relate to the art on the walls or the unique décor going on—one of his favourite pieces in the studio is a huge mirror framed with silver roses that looks like someone's nicked it straight off the wall of the Beast's castle—but for anyone coming through the door. "I still want to make people feel welcome even if they're not a massive fan of the geeky scene. I guess I just want to make a place where everyone can come to be tattooed knowing they're going to be welcomed warmly and treated with respect." □

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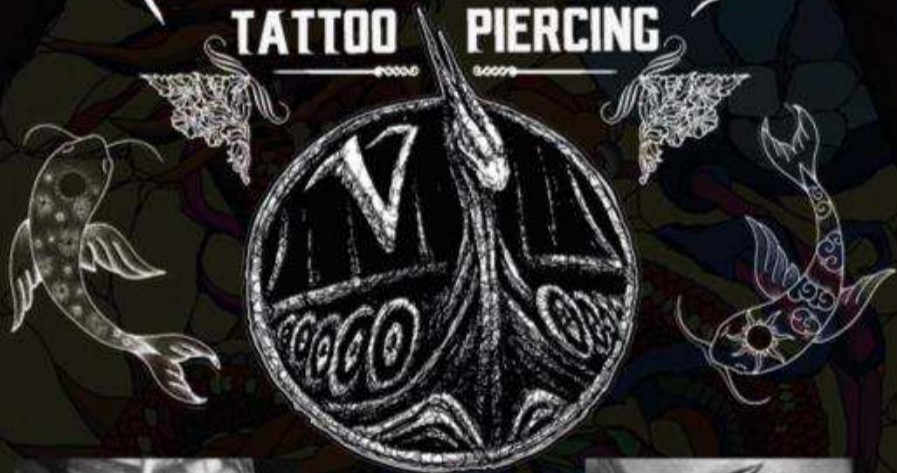
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SILVA BULLETS

With just two years of tattoo experience under his belt, there's no way Daniel Silva should have been able to beat Ed Hardy's son, Douglas, and Ink Master champ Ryan Ashley in a head-to-head showdown. But that's exactly what he did on Ink Master: Angels, shocking viewers and snagging a highly coveted spot on Ink Master's tenth season. While on the show, he surprised audiences yet again and, once the whirlwind was over, we were there to meet him on the other side

“Going into competition with the son of Ed Hardy, who I have a lot of respect for, was very intimidating,” admits Daniel Silva. Add to that the fact that he considers Ink Master Season 8 champ Ryan Ashley to be “one of the most talented artists I know” and the whole thing was like a dream.

“I felt really accomplished, but I also knew that was only the beginning,” he says, pointing out that going on Ink Master “after I just beat two big names in the industry meant I was going to have a target on my back. But I felt like that was going to give me that extra push to get me further in the competition,” he adds.

Despite being excited about joining the show—he eventually “realised that reality TV isn’t as glamorous as they make it seem!”—things got off to an, err, interesting start. “Day one on the set was kinda funny, honestly,” he recalls. “I love to break the ice and have fun and I know that can come off as pretty obnoxious at times, especially when everyone else is quiet and awkward. Plus, everyone seemed to think of me as this loud



pretty boy.”

What’s more, Silva’s season added a new element into the mix as, for the very first time, artists were paired up with one of three mentors and forced to compete in teams.

“I was definitely thrown off by the teams and how they were going to work,” he says of Season 10’s big twist. “But being the youngest



I'M GLAD I WENT HOME ON AN ISSUE THAT WAS NOT IN MY HANDS. I FEEL THAT LIFE WANTED ME TO LEAVE THEN AND I'M OKAY WITH THAT

on the show, and the one with the least experience ever to be on Ink Master, I knew that, at some point, I would really benefit from the coaches that had already won."

Even so, competing as part of Team Anthony proved to be challenging. "Anthony Michaels and I definitely did butt heads," he concedes, "but that's because he knew I could maybe be one of the finalists. Plus, I made sure he was super hard on me. The show may seem long, but it was only two months. That was not a lot of time for Anthony to get to know me and how I tattoo."

The same was true for the 18 tattooists who were duking it out, but "once they got to know me and realised that I am genuine, they all came to love me as a little brother."

Rising to the occasion, Silva made it all the way to the twelfth episode and went into the Top 7 before eventually being sent home

on a challenge testing composition. If you think he has any hard feelings about the way things turned out, though, you're wrong.

"I know if anyone else would have gotten that canvas, they would have gone home as well," he declares. "So, in a way, I'm glad I went home on an issue that was not in my hands. I feel that life wanted me to leave then and I'm okay with that."

CHASING DREAMS

Given that Silva has only been tattooing for three years, his success is all the more impressive. Reflecting on how he's been able to come so far in such a short period of time, he says it's all about putting in the hours. "I'm so passionate about bettering myself that I work 15-hour days every day," he reveals. "Still, I know I'm only scratching the surface on what I can do."

It's this unfaltering dedication and passion for art, combined with circumstance, that helped Silva turn his life around after being arrested at 19 and spending a year in jail.

"I turned 21 years old a week before I got out and tried to get a job every place," he admits. "No one would hire me because of my

DANIEL SILVA ON... CALIFORNIA LIFE

I was born and raised in California, so I had no choice but to go to conventions all over the state. Now, I know that I will never leave California. Sunny skies and palm trees are the life. I insanely want to visit Australia and Japan, though.



background. I had always been an artist—my friends have never seen me not be passionate about art—so, given those two factors, I knew that creating my own business was going to be my only route to success. I felt like tattooing was a great way to express myself and achieve my goals.”

His mind made up, he put his savings—a mere \$300—to good use, buying tattoo equipment that allowed him to start chasing his dream. Something he did all by himself without any sort of mentor.

“I have worked alone in a piercing shop since the start of my career,” he says before elaborating, “I rented and made my own space in a shop with one piercer. I could not find an apprenticeship that would take me in, so I found a place that was licensed. I told the owner that I could make him more money than if he got another piercer in the shop and I basically moved in and learned how to tattoo all on my own. Now, after three years, I’m finally moving to Los Angeles to work the California dream.”

And he couldn’t be prouder of his underdog status. “I love the fact that I’m the underdog!” he gushes. “It gives me so much joy surprising

people who assume that, just because I’m a young tattooer, I don’t know what I’m doing.”

In addition to surprising people (and continuously bettering himself), Silva’s “main goal in this industry is to be able to have my art be seen anywhere in the world and for people to know that I was the artist who created it. That means spending time on my drawings to make sure they’re 100 percent custom—that is so important to me.”

Which is why every single piece he tattoos involves rigorous research. “I ask all of my clients to send me up to 10 reference photos

**DANIEL SILVA
ON... HIS
FAVOURITE
TATTOO**

My favourite tattoo is from an artist in Denmark named Ruben Jordan Langsted [who works at Death or Glory in Copenhagen]. I let him do whatever he wanted and ended up with a huge samurai mask on my thigh.



CREATING MY OWN BUSINESS WAS GOING TO BE MY ONLY ROUTE TO SUCCESS

DANIEL SILVA ON... HIS NO. 1 INSPIRATION

The only mentor I've had showing me the way was just everyone in this world waiting on time. Hearing from older people about how they regretted not fighting for their dreams when they were younger has been inspirational.

and tell me why they like each one and why they don't," he explains. "That way I'm able to create something that I know they'll be super stoked on."

As for downtime, there isn't much of it. "In the last three years I haven't had much time to have fun," he admits. "I don't like to waste much time and I feel like I am letting myself down every time I take a break. I do love spending time with my friends to help them with their careers, though. I have taught one friend how to tattoo and another about photography and now they

both do it full-time."

This fall, Silva will be hitting another major milestone, as he travels to work at his first European convention in Aix-en-Provence, France in October. As soon as he gets his passport, that is.

Before we say goodbye, I ask Silva to describe himself in the third person. After a brief moment, he shoots back with quite the statement: "Daniel Silva is the bridge between the TV industry and the tattoo industry, showing his passion and dedication to his craft while not letting fame get in the way." ▣

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LOVE ALL THE PEOPLE

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“I wanted to give something back to the NHS,” states Guy as he disinfects my leg before applying the tattoo stencil. Guy Fletcher is an award winning tattoo artist whose unique take on portrait tattoos has made him in hot demand. Despite his busy work schedule Guy recently ran a promotion via Facebook offering a discount to NHS staff

“A couple of good friends of mine have been through a really tough time over the past year or so facing life changing injury and illness. The NHS staff who supported and treated them were absolutely fantastic and I felt it was important to give something back.”

Once happy with the stencils placement guy starts prepping his inks ready to tattoo. Aside from my writing work I moonlight for the NHS working in health promotion. My family has strong links to the National Health Service. My parents were nurses, my aunt was a nurse, my best mate is a paramedic and my wife is a psychiatric nurse; the NHS is a big part of my social DNA.

“You look at the way the current government is treating the NHS and its staff and it pretty shocking. There’s also been a societal shift in the attitude of Joe Public; many people in 2018 have a real sense of entitlement. They don’t appreciate the public services that are available to them and it disgusts me when medical staff are abused, harassed and assaulted. So many people take the NHS for granted.”

Guy is based at North Star Tattoo in Harrogate. The building is split across 3 floors and Guy’s room is at the top of the building. The buzz of his tattoo machine is accompanied by a constant stream of black metal, hardcore punk and Scandinavian folk music. Guy’s fluid conversation helps dampen my nerves at going

Words: Matt Haddon-Reichardt · Images: Guy Fletcher and Matt Haddon-Reichardt



YOU LOOK AT THE WAY THE CURRENT GOVERNMENT IS TREATING THE NHS AND ITS STAFF AND IT PRETTY SHOCKING

under the needle after a 4 year break and our conversation drifts from the state of the public sector, to Hell Boy comics, through to the comedy of Bill Hick's.

"Bill Hick's did this beautiful sketch about marketing. How if you work in marketing you should go and kill yourself. It's really funny how it builds and turns round on itself but it's got a serious message, like much of Hick's later material. I wish Bill was still around today; he'd have a lot to work with."

I agree with Guy that in the modern era of social media and digital interconnectivity Hick's comedy feels more relevant than ever. The cynics and trolls of the internet would see Guy's NHS staff discount as a mere marketing ploy to cut through the chatter of Facebook and increase footfall in the studio. It is clear as we talk, and Guy tattoos, that this is not the case.

"I hate the rock star image of modern tattooing. When you look at tattooists what you have are people practicing a craft; when people ask us to put a permanent mark into

their skin that is a privileged moment. It's not we the tattooists who hold the power it's the person who elects to be our canvas. In the ritual of the tattoo it is the one who gets the tattoo who is sacred not the artist who works on them. Without customers making that sacrifice and allowing us to tattoo we have no power; all we have is potential. It's like the Vikings and their practice of people volunteering for human sacrifice to bring good fortune and appease the gods. It wasn't the one who wielded the blade who had the power but the one being cut. As tattooists we simply enable this age old process of sacrifice and conciliation but for us the conciliation results in art."

Forty eight hours before I sat in Guys tattoo chair I was in Suffolk at the site of Sutton Hoo where the greatest of all the Anglo Saxon kings, Rædwald, is thought to be buried. In his long ship tomb was a trove of treasures beyond the dreams of archaeologists. Amongst the weapons, gold and jewellery was a helmet of such intricacy and beauty that it made academics reevaluate the whole epoch. As I tell Guy



BILL HICK'S DID THIS BEAUTIFUL SKETCH ABOUT MARKETING. HOW IF YOU WORK IN MARKETING YOU SHOULD GO AND KILL YOURSELF

about my day at Sutton Hoo he smiles and reaches over to his book case.

"You should like this then," he says tossing me a paperback. The cover of the book features a picture of the Sutton Hoo helmet. I smile at the synchronicity of the moment.

"When you read about the Dark Ages you begin to realise that a lot of what we get taught at school or fed by the media is rubbish. When you look at the Vikings there is his whole image problem of them being marauding, axe wielding, maniacs, plundering the land of the Anglo Saxons. Most of the Scandinavians came to Britain as farmers and traders. The Vikings didn't even call themselves Vikings. Viking was simply an Old English word for pirate.

After DNA testing Guy discovered he is 97% Scandinavian and has a feeling of real affinity with his forefathers.

"People have lost their connection with the land and their community. What seems most important to people is what goes on in their virtual

lives on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. The other day I just took myself off into the woods for the whole day; no phone, no tablet, no smart watch. It's good for the spirit to disconnect from all this technology."

"When I studied in London I used to go to the Tate and look at the portraits done by the old masters. Their work holds real power. Back when they were working a painting was the only way to record what someone looked like. With their skill with oils they were able to freeze a moment in time and lock it into a canvas. These guys were master copiers and as a portrait artist that's how I see myself. All I do is copy what is presented to me to the best of my ability. I feel my background as an oil painter really helps and I build up the layers of a tattoo in the same way I layer oils."

Guy worries that as technology becomes more embedded in daily life tattooing is losing its heritage.

"If we are not careful tattooing is going to go to move away from its

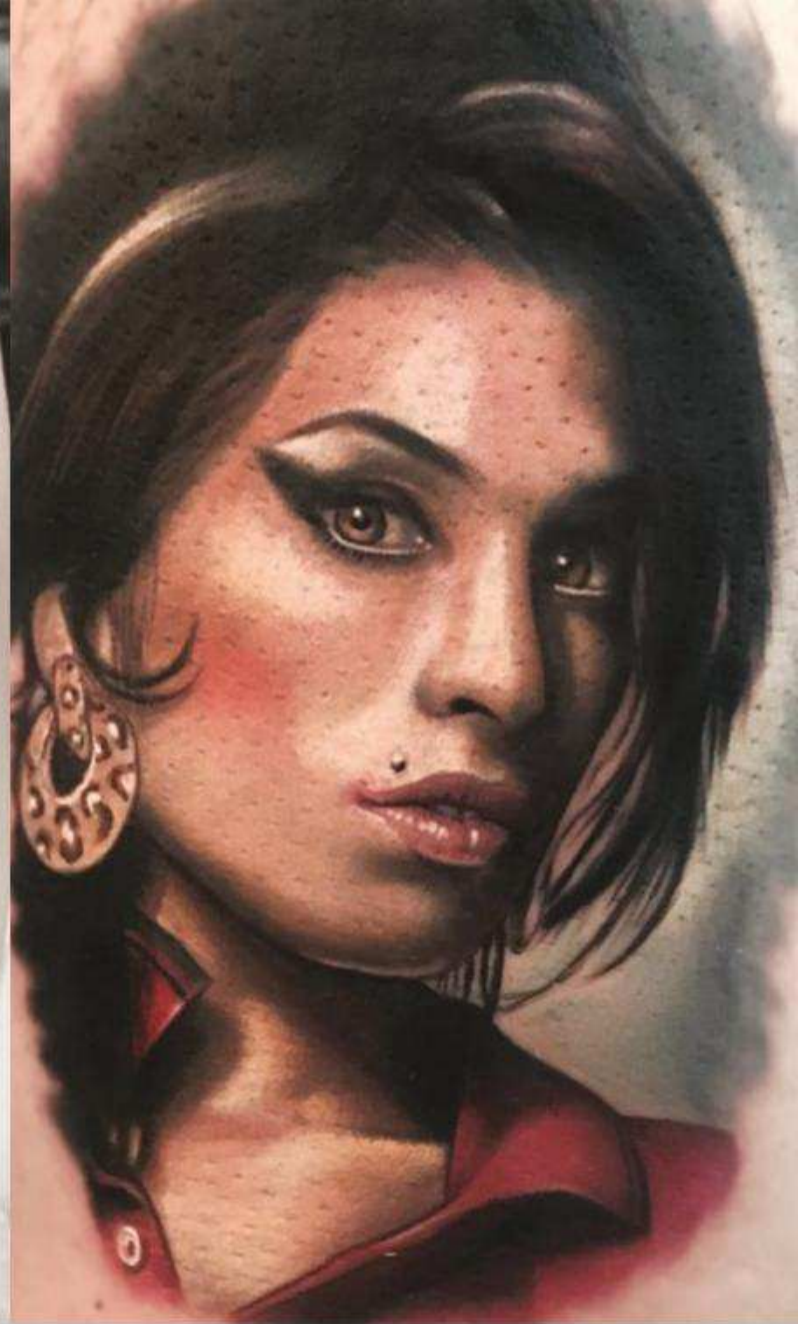
TAKING THE ART OUT OF THE STUDIO

"I started doing conventions only relatively recently and it's nice to take my work out of the studio. The convention circuit has really grown over the past few years and I finally got to a stage with my tattooing where I wanted to bring it into the domain. Facebook and the rest have their place in my work flow but meeting people face to face and talking tattoos is what gets me inspired."

"It's great to have won awards and it's brilliant to have people appreciate my art but for me that's simply the cherry on the cake. I take the most pride in the feedback I get from satisfied customers and it's a real privilege to give them a tattoo that resonates with their life. Nothing says a job well done more than seeing someone come back for a second or third tattoo. When that happens you know all the hard work is forging in the right direction."

Away from tattooing Guy continues his passion with art through the medium of oil painting.

"I continue to paint and my work with oils helps me refine my work as a tattooist. Hopefully soon I'll feel confident enough in my work to exhibit it but at the moment I'm happy to keep that element of my creativity private."



WITHOUT CUSTOMERS MAKING THAT SACRIFICE AND ALLOWING US TO TATTOO WE HAVE NO POWER; ALL WE HAVE IS POTENTIAL

roots of being a craft based art form and into the realm of modern art. With modern art it's not about the product it's about the concept, the title; the blurb that explains the piece. You can present anything and if you put enough spin on it you can call it art. A dead sheep, an unmade bed, a blank canvas; get the marketing right and it becomes art. Once an artist is given credibility through clever marketing they become a sought after commodity. In tattooing the equivalent is tattooed celebrities. The tattoo they have may not be particularly good but that doesn't matter; people will go to the tattooist who made it or ask for the design to be copied. The perceived kudos of the celebrity permeates the design and the artist regardless of merit."

"Where we enter a perfect storm scenario is when this image is disseminated via social media. The more likes, shares and comments the picture of the tattoo gets the more power the concept of the tattoo absorbs. With the end goal of social media glory, via celebrity endorsement, the tattoo becomes like modern art; something ethereal that has to be explained to have credibility. Our craft goes from being about art and becomes marketing bullshit. Like Hicks said, if you work in marketing go kill yourself."

I agree that Bill Hick's had a point about the evils of marketing. Guy laughs.

"That's why I love Hicks; he told it like it is without fear of alienating his audience or being liked. He was unapologetic in his honesty, unlike today's media darlings who apolo-



gise for anything and everything if someone cries offence."

After over five hours of tattooing Guy is finished and we are both pleased with the result.

"I have to say that is one of the most unusual portrait requests I have ever done."

I smile.

"Well as it was an NHS staff discount it seemed appropriate to get a tattoo relating to the NHS, so a portrait of my wife was the obvious choice" I explain as Guy wraps the tattoo.

"I agree dude, but did she have to be pregnant and wearing a gas mask?" Quips Guy.

I shrug.

"Well she is a psychiatric nurse."



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THE ARCHITECT

After studying and working as an architect, Italian artist Santhelia made the transition to tattooing. Here, he discusses his journey and influences with Nicky Connor

purotattoostudio.it  [santhelia](https://www.instagram.com/santhelia)

“**B**efore I was a tattooist I studied Architecture and Design in Milan and I still carry on working as an Architect, but in a smaller way. My background is based in the general architectural culture and design, I also have a wide range of interests that include various forms of art, especially modern and contemporary styles and Street Art in all its forms. I’m also very interested in signage printing techniques and everything that comes from road and city advertising.

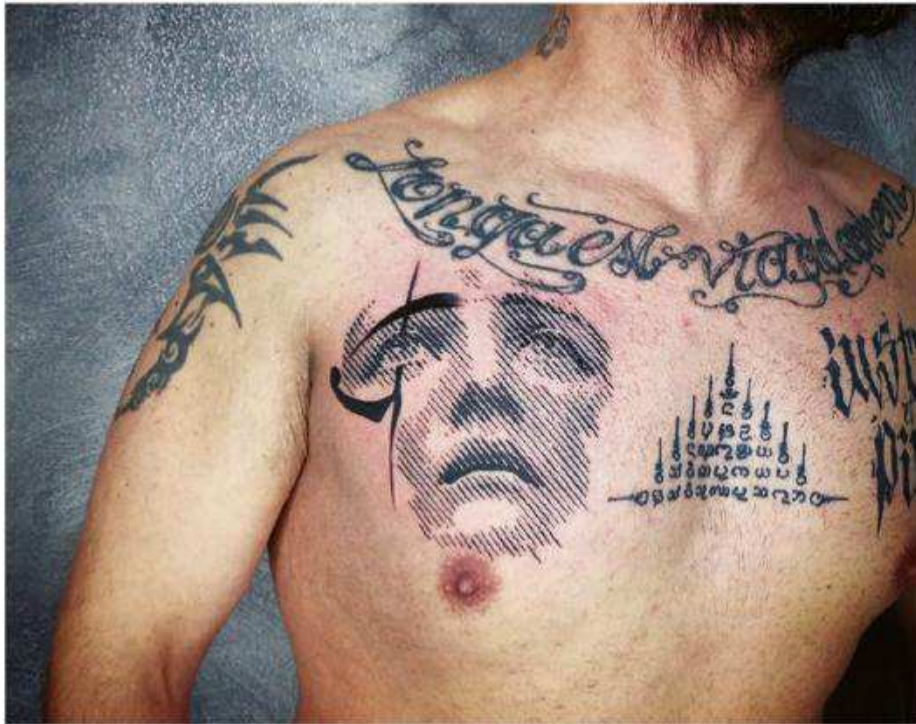
“Being an architect has influenced my work as a tattoo artist in the method of tackling tattoos as a project. First interpreting them as a proposal and then as a sequence of creative phases when developing the concept with the customers. Beginning the initial projects in both the architecture and in the tattoo field start in the same way on a sheet of paper, but the two methods of designing are very different because even if the body had a 3D area it is not used as a living space. However, both designs are created using an awareness of space and I try to imagine the area or the portion of the body that will ac-



commodate the tattoo.

“I met Marco Matarese in his first tattoo studio in Milan and together we proceeded to design the space that became the first Puro Tattoo Studio in Milan located in the Navigli area. This was the first real occasion that I experienced the tattoo and I fell in

I MET MARCO MATARESE IN HIS FIRST TATTOO STUDIO IN MILAN AND TOGETHER WE PROCEEDED TO DESIGN THE SPACE THAT BECAME THE FIRST PURO TATTOO STUDIO IN MILAN



I STARTED TO DEVELOP MY OWN PERSONAL INTERPRETATION OF THE TATTOO AND I STARTED TO EXPERIMENT WITH THE GRAPHIC RENDERING OF MY OWN WORK ON SKIN.

love with it. Then after a while I decided to turn my paperwork into tattoos and to start studying tattooing to become a professional tattooist. I then started working in the first Puro Studio as an apprentice, and, after a short time, I started to develop my own personal interpretation of the tattoo and I started to experiment with the graphic rendering of my own work on skin.

“The apprenticeship at Puro taught me to independently develop my own key to designing tattoos and to be able to offer these to my clients in total autonomy, without needing to be excessively influenced by the classic tattoo patterns and traditional designs.

I’m currently tattooing at the new Puro Tattoo studio in Via Mauro Macchi 50 in Milan. Even after the studio changed location, I chose to stay here because of both my friendship with Marco and because he introduced me to this artform.

“In addition to tattooing there are many artistic influences in my life, certainly, one of them, comes from Piero Fornasetti, from his technique and the style of his work, he has marked my work as both a tattoo artist and as an architect. I also like the image impact of the work pop artists like Andy Warhol and of street art in general both of these have influenced my way of communicating visually. In addition, both artforms are intended to bring art to a wide and varied audience and my work is intended to reach an even wider audience by working over a variety of mediums.

I have always designed and created my work using the techniques of making posters. I have always presented them on the walls and sometimes on customers’ interiors. I’m fascinated by the immediate communication that advertising images have. It was only after



I started tattooing that I thought to translate my poster work onto a human canvas. The transition from creating static to constantly moving work was not simple, but after some studies and changes I managed to translate the best elements of what I usually presented on the walls and interiors onto the skin.

With my own style and work, I take influence from on the effects created by the printing technique working in “halftones”. This is a technique that accentuates the photographic effects and makes them very legible and visible at medium distances such as 3-5m. This technique was originally used for poster advertising and I’m using it in my tattooing.

“My work starts from photographic inspirations that are then adapted to the client’s body, they undergo modifications through deformations, transitions integrated with geometries and texts. The starting point is always the customer and their body, it is composed of their individual shapes that dictate the evolution of the tattoo. Together with my clients, I develop custom and exclusive stylistic solutions. I try to understand what my cli-

I ALSO LIKE THE IMAGE IMPACT OF THE WORK POP ARTISTS LIKE ANDY WARHOL AND OF STREET ART IN GENERAL BOTH OF THESE HAVE INFLUENCED MY WAY OF COMMUNICATING VISUALLY.

ent wants to be, I want to be able to interpret them and give them maximum graphic performance. My intention is to create a surreal image suspended in time like a vintage print.

“When creating designs, the interaction with the customer is always crucial because often the best ideas have come from my customers who also help me to better understand their requests and ideas. I usually do work in my chosen style, but I really appreciate mixing different styles and am always making new sense of my work. It’s possible to contact me by email and I am also easily reachable by my social network profiles like Instagram or Facebook under the name “Santhelia”, or through the studio, Puro Tattoo in Milan.



I HAVE ALWAYS BEEN FASCINATED BY THE IMMEDIATE COMMUNICATION THAT ADVERTISING IMAGES HAVE. IT WAS ONLY AFTER I STARTED TATTOOING THAT I THOUGHT TO TRANSLATE MY POSTER WORK ONTO A HUMAN CANVAS.

“I admire many tattoo artists, from the past and contemporary, for their dedication and quality in work and creativity, but my references are very varied and often are not a part of the tattooing world. I have certainly been influenced by Marco Matarese who started me on my tattooing journey and I also really appreciate the work of Chris Rigoni for the variety of subjects he uses and his ability to

mix various different styles in harmony. Artists who have influenced me are those who have not stopped and channelled developed the usual styles well, but also those who wanted to bring newness and experimentation.

“Unfortunately, outside of work I don’t have much spare time now, especially since I became a father, but when I can I love to go around art exhibitions, galleries and markets for antiques and design inspirations.”

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As I walk through my local grocery store, I am constantly confronted with the challenges of living a life with purpose and growth. If this sounds a little over the top, there's a good chance it's because of my proclivity to overthink things, but I digress. Speeding through the aisles with purpose, the inevitable happens, and someone will stop me to ask about my tattoos, primarily, the one on my neck

Our back and forth will usually go as follows:
Overly touchy question asker:
“Oh my god, I love that piece on your neck, what is it? Why did you get it?”

Me (awkwardly avoiding eye contact, trying to run):

“It's a bad choice when I was 21. I got it because I was 21.”

I then move on, over-thinking about whether I was offensive or not. Though, if I was to be honest with them about what the piece is, I think that would be offensive on its own, seeing that it's a little zombie girl. Before the “zombie revival” I wanted a piece to throw back to the films of Fulci, but instead I got a constant question at the grocery store, or someone swearing it's from “Avatar”. Over the years I try to use this back and forth to say something positive in the end, but lately it's causing me to think about this idea of why we get specific content tattooed on

our skin, and does it even matter? Going further, what could we say is our reason for getting tattooed in general? Could it be a greater reason than a deceased relative or our life story? The adage “life is about the journey, not the destination” comes to mind.

The act of tattooing can, at times, be more significant than the piece getting tattooed; the action may be the reason. Here is an example in history from the diaries of French explorer Captain Bossu. During his time exploring what became the area around the “Louisiana Purchase”, Bossu, like many French explorers, found himself fascinated with Native culture; it has been coined the “French explorer Indianisation”. Here Bossu recounts his experience,

“I sat on a wildcat skin while an Indian burned some straw. He put the ashes in water and used this simple mix-

THE SCENE IS VERY SIMILAR TO WHAT WE SEE TODAY, THE MACHO MAN MAKING IT SUCH A BIG DEAL THAT HE WAS BIG AND TOUGH GETTING TATTOOED...



ture to draw the deer. He then traced the drawing with big needles, pricking me until I bled. The blood mixed with the ashes of the straw formed a tattoo which can never be removed. After that I smoked a pipe and walked on white skins which were spread under my feet... They then told me that if I traveled among the tribes allied to them, all that I had to do to receive a warm welcome was to smoke a peace pipe and show my tattoo. They also said that I was their brother and that if I were killed they would avenge my death. . . I cannot tell you how much I suffered and how great an effort I made to remain impassive... The spectators, surprised by my stoicism, cried out with joy, danced, and told me that I was a real man. I was truly in great pain and ran a fever for almost a week. You would never believe how attached to me these people have become since then.”

In Bossu’s account I am reminded of one of the many beauties of tattooing, the physical experience of it. The content of his tattoo is left at being “a deer”, but so much detail is given for the act, its very visceral. The scene is very similar to what we see today, the macho man making it such a big deal that he was big and tough getting tattooed, and telling all his friends how impressed everyone was. Any tattooer reading this can sense my sarcasm and inevitable truth about how much this client probably squirmed or whined, but I digress.

Tattooing has long been about the act of getting tattooed, something that during our height of tattoo reality shows, now gets overlooked. We look for meaning in the





***WE LOOK FOR MEANING IN THE PIECE, BUT
COULD ALL THAT PURPOSE BE IN THE ACT,
NOT IN THE CONTENT?***

piece, but could all that purpose be in the act, not in the content? Going further, could we be missing the point altogether, could the act of getting tattooed itself create what the reason would be? Philosopher Alan Watts brings up an interesting idea, adding onto the “life is a journey” adage, but saying that viewing these experiences as a “journey” may be missing the point all together.

He says: “If we thought of life by analogy with a journey, with a pilgrimage, which had a serious purpose at that end, and the thing was to get to that thing at that end. Success, or whatever it is, or maybe heaven after you’re dead. But we missed the point the whole way along.

It was a musical thing, and you were supposed to sing or to dance while the music was being played.”

Many times we find ourselves living in the world of nostalgia, missing the new song that is playing, searching for meaning while it plays out in front of us. Watts searched for tangible freedom in the act of living in the now, and according to many, that can be found in the art of building and riding motorcycles.

I have been tattooing Johnny Duggan for years now, and over those years I have found myself learning from and admiring his ability to constantly move forward. To him, living isn’t something to question, it’s something to do. He has also taught me about how this thought process correlates with motorcycle sub-culture, something I was quite ignorant in.

Over the years I have done a portfolio worth of tattoos on Johnny, yet they don’t have back stories filled with memories







MANY TIMES WE FIND OURSELVES LIVING IN THE WORLD OF NOSTALGIA, MISSING THE NEW SONG THAT IS PLAYING, SEARCHING FOR MEANING WHILE IT PLAYS OUT IN FRONT OF US

and dreams; but instead are more about our collaborative creative process, many of them happening right there in the moment. The purpose for the piece comes from that moment of creating the piece, and the life it lives thereafter. When talking to Johnny about his bike building process, it's much of the same thing. He didn't create a bike with a story and purpose, the purpose came from the creation of the bike, the experiences in that moment that lead to the road it would be on. Much to Johnny's chagrin, I would have to make a comparison of his attitude to that of Alan Watts and his earlier quote on the music of life. Sounds like a leap, but the book "Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance" may say different.

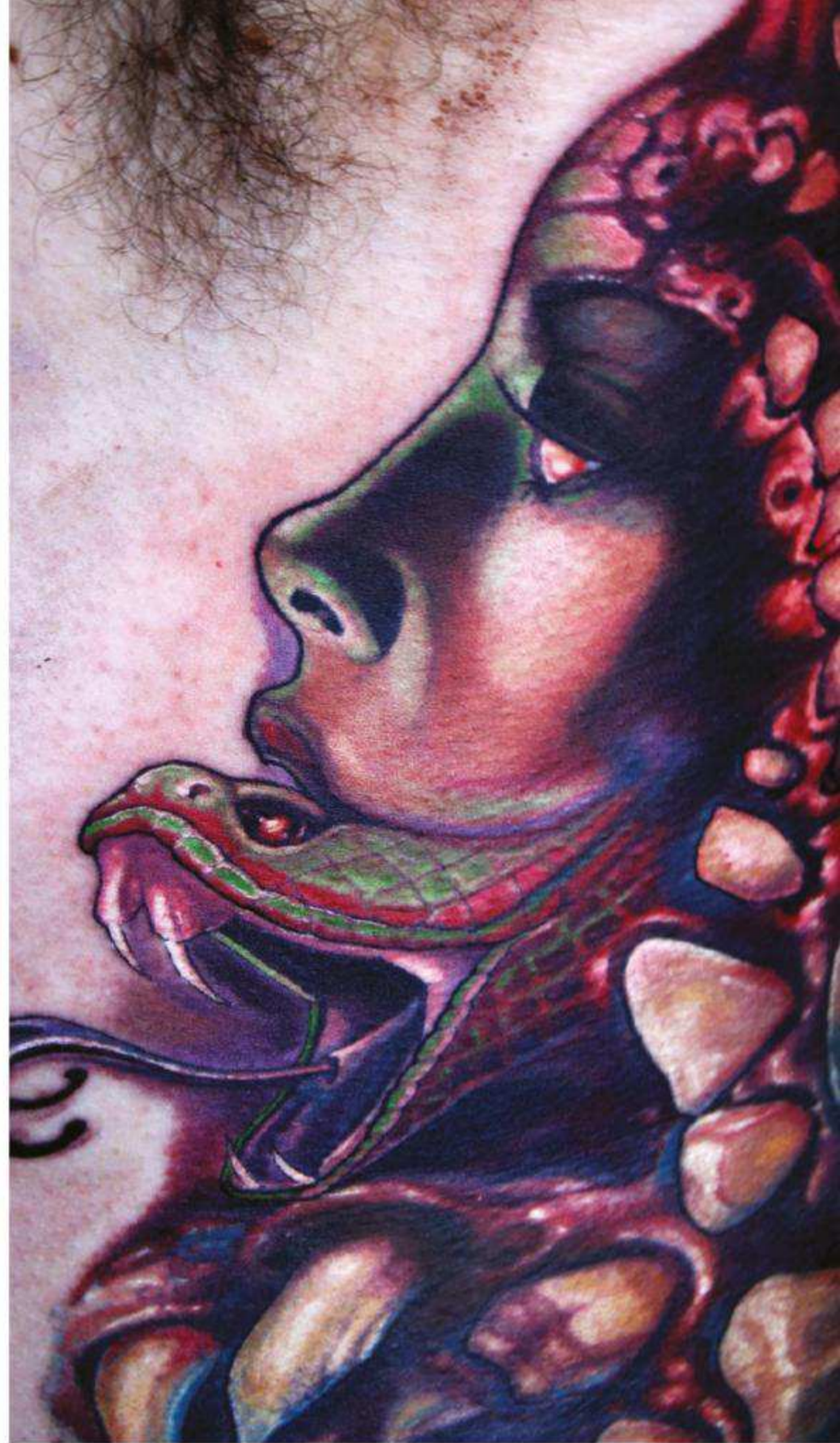
Robert M. Pirsig's book, "Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance" came out in 1974 to a world that was already inundated with films like "Easy Rider", giving a viewpoint of freedom through living in the moment on your ride.

Pirsig says, "In a car you're always in a compartment, and because you're used to it you don't realise that through that car window everything you see is just more TV. You're a passive observer and it is all moving by you boringly in a frame."

On a cycle the frame is gone. You're completely in contact with it all. You're in the scene, not just watching it anymore, and the sense of presence is overwhelming."

The act of riding a motorcycle, and further, building a motorcycle, causes one to have to be in the moment, with pain being the product if you lose that awareness. I knew very little about motorcycles before tattooing Johnny, so when he told me he built a bike that was starting to receive media attention, I began to ask a laundry list of questions. How did you build it, what did you use, how long did it take, and the finale, why did you build it?

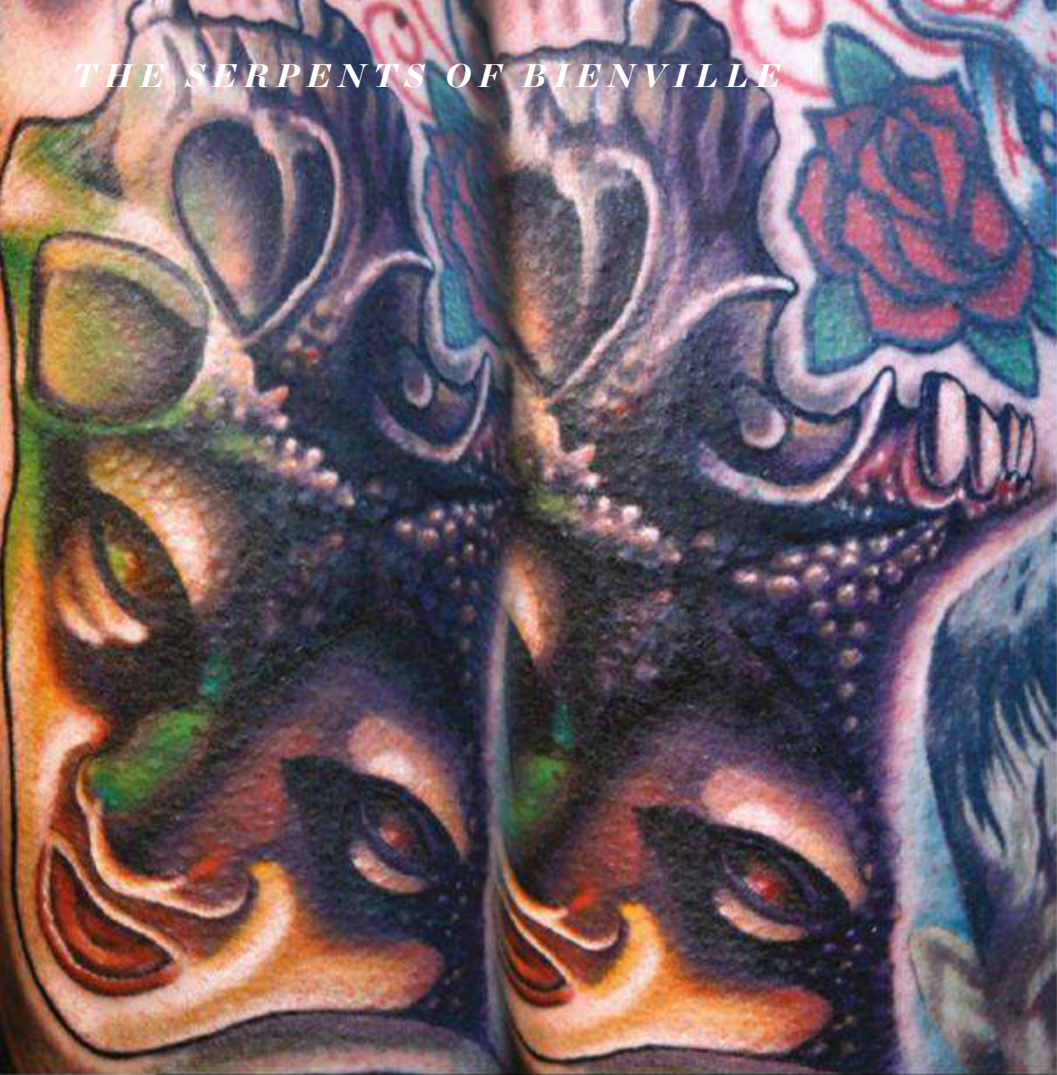
I had come full cycle, I was now the questionnaire that



I encounter in the grocery store.

Johnny answered without missing a beat, "No reason, just to do it". He then went on to give me the specific details on this bike.

Johnny said, "I've always loved choppers, and I've always loved performance bikes so for years I've been wanting to build a bike to do both. After scoring this 96" S&S stroker from my dad I decided to build a frame to do it justice, single loop somewhere in the 6" up range with 34 degrees of rake is where my eyes took me, I don't really get too caught up with the numbers. 6" over narrow glide off an iron head I shaved the legs and trees. I wanted big wheels so the brakes would look small a 21" up front with dual 10" discs and a 19" out back with a disc cut down to 8.5" to give it similar proportions to the front. Got a kick only ratchet top and 2" inch primo to put the power to the ground. Magneto so I could ditch the battery and keep the bike clean. I made the bars, frame, seat, sissy bar, stainless exhaust, and high mids in my garage. My buddy Trey Steele killed the paint on the tins and everything else I powdercoated. What ya see is pretty much what you get with this bike and that's the way I like it. It's been really



ONE OF THE JOYS OF TATTOOING IS BEING REMINDED HOW MUCH TATTOOING COMPARES TO THE HUMAN LIFE, THE RIDE WE ARE ON

fun and reliable and 115ftlbs of torque will always make you smile!”

Though much of that was Greek to me, I did realise that this bike had become something of huge importance to Johnny; though it started without a meaning or purpose, he just wanted to build. The process ended with a bike that is tied to an engine from his father, his own sweat and time, and a paint job with care from a friend. This bike has purpose, the meaning coming from the creative act. Johnny’s tattoo experience has been the same way. With each piece and appointment, the experience, years of experiences now, dictate the content.

One of the joys of tattooing is being reminded how much tattooing compares to the human life, the ride we are on. When working on a client like Johnny for so many years it becomes easy to create together a piece that is bigger than just a tangible meaning, it becomes something akin to what Watts spoke of earlier, an experience that is the meaning of the experience. I never thought that tattoos and motorcycle building would be my gateway to this zen notion, but in those experiences I remember that our purpose is not an end game; life isn’t a journey to get to an end point, it isn’t linear. To live is to experience that exact moment in time. We are here to ride, to live, good and bad, all the same. The purpose of our creation is the act of creating, living.

As I walk through the aisles of that local grocer I visit every morning, I am again confronted with that same question: “What does your tattoo mean? Why did you get it?”

My mind swirls and I imagine Captain Bossu going through the ritual act of tattooing, Johnny talking about his reasons for spending so much time building a beauti-



ful motorcycle; his thoughts on getting tattooed for experiencing the act of getting tattooed. Alan Watts rings in my ears, saying that there are no “reasons” in life, life is the now, life is the experience, life is this moment of conversation that I am stuck in.

All I can muster up from my over-thinking mind is, “Because I wanted to.”

The experience of getting tattooed is an intensely personal one, and needs no single reason for getting done other than the fact that we want and choose to partake in an ancient practice, one revered and celebrated for thousands of years. We chose to envelop ourselves with an experience that forces us to be intensely present, to live in the moment, no matter how painful it might be.

“Because I wanted to” holds more clout and means more than I could have ever imagined. ▣

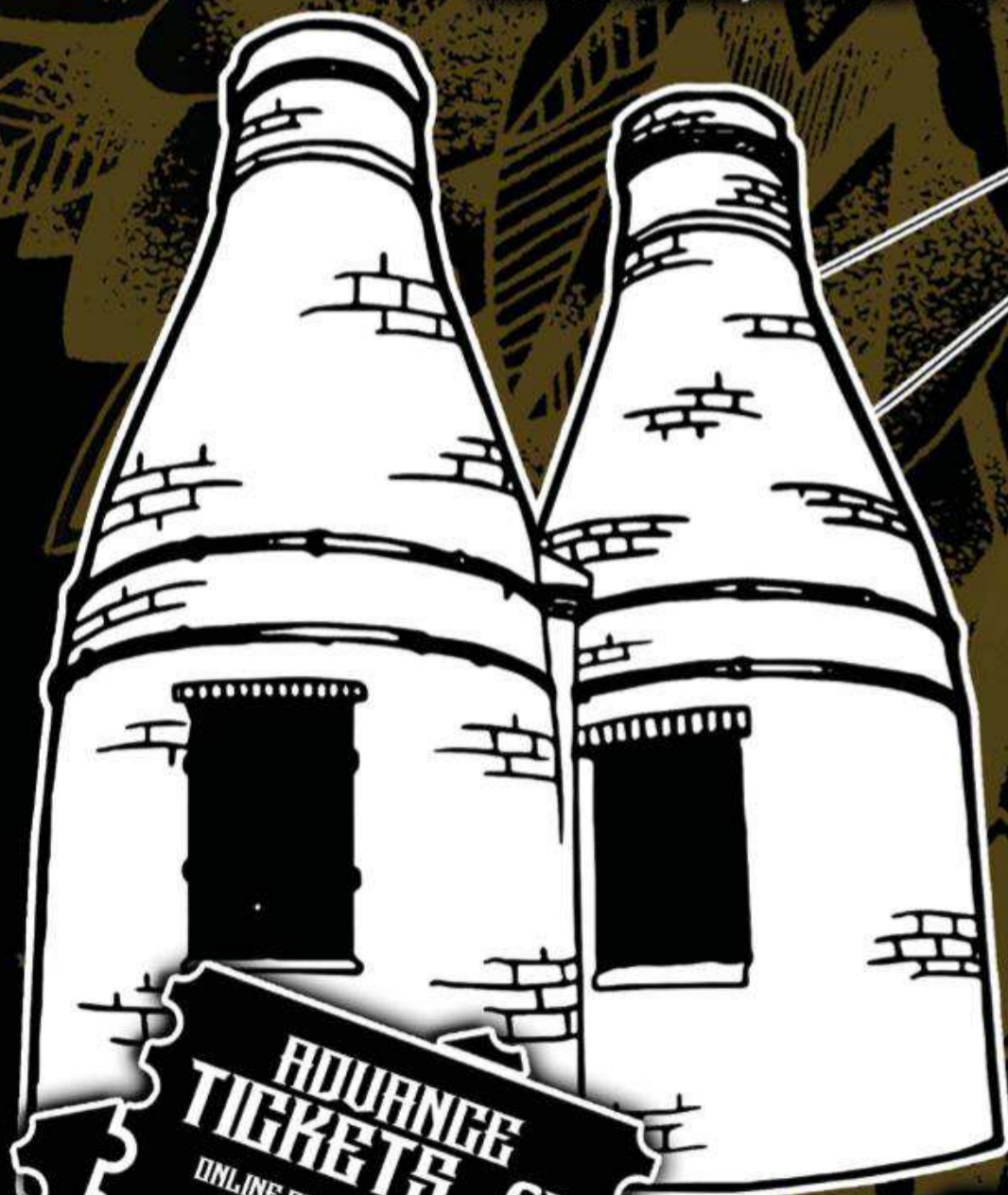
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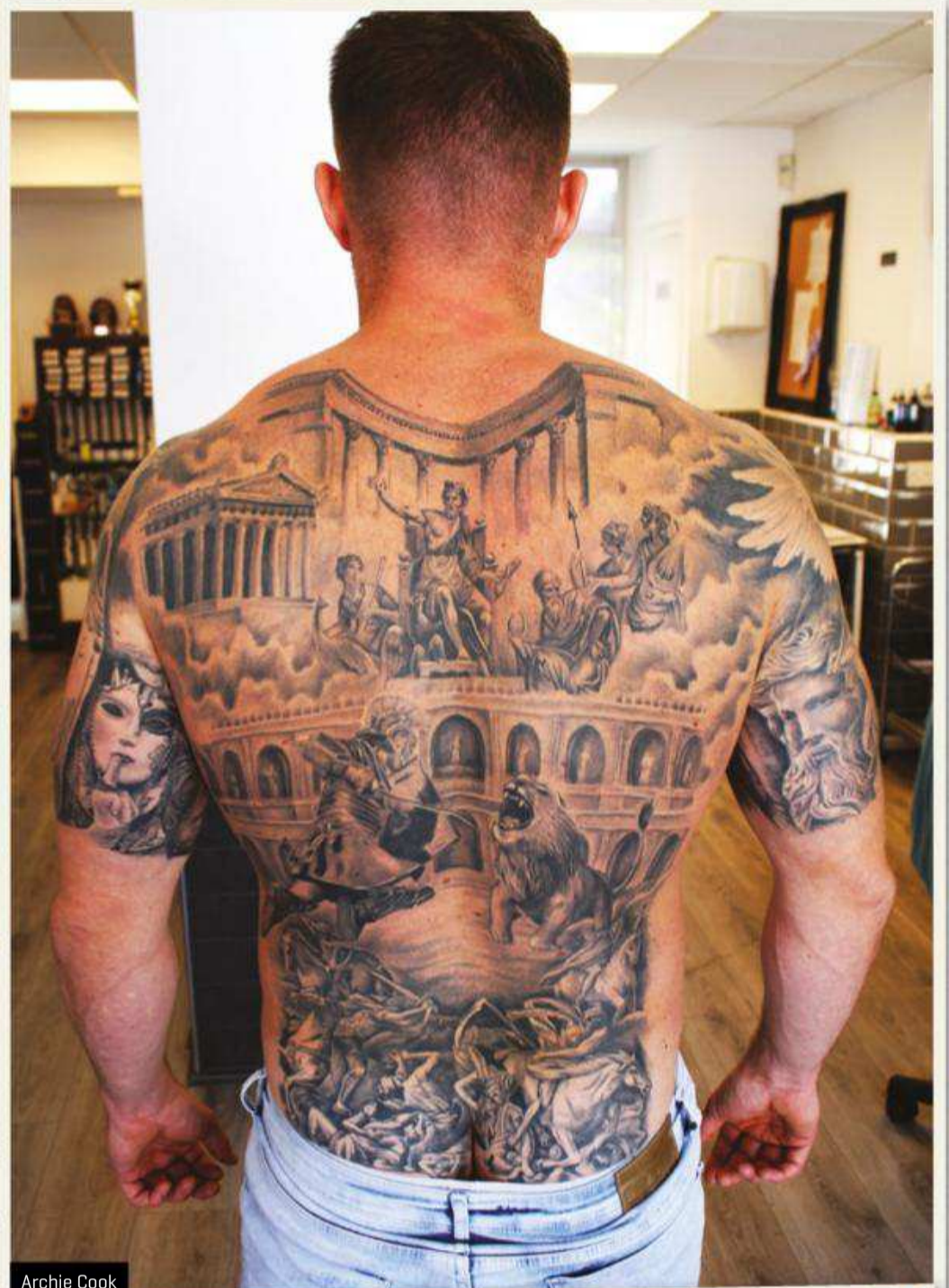
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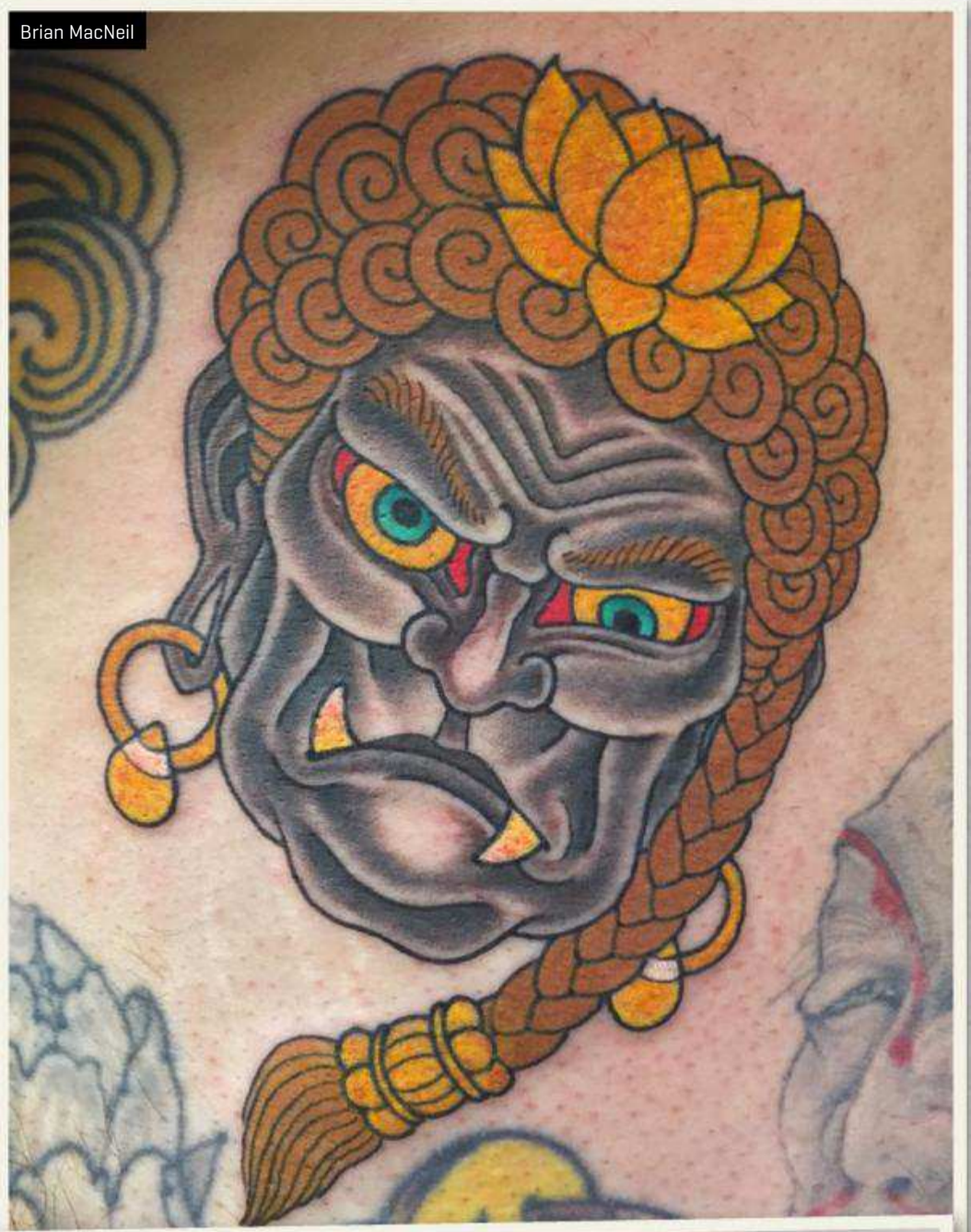
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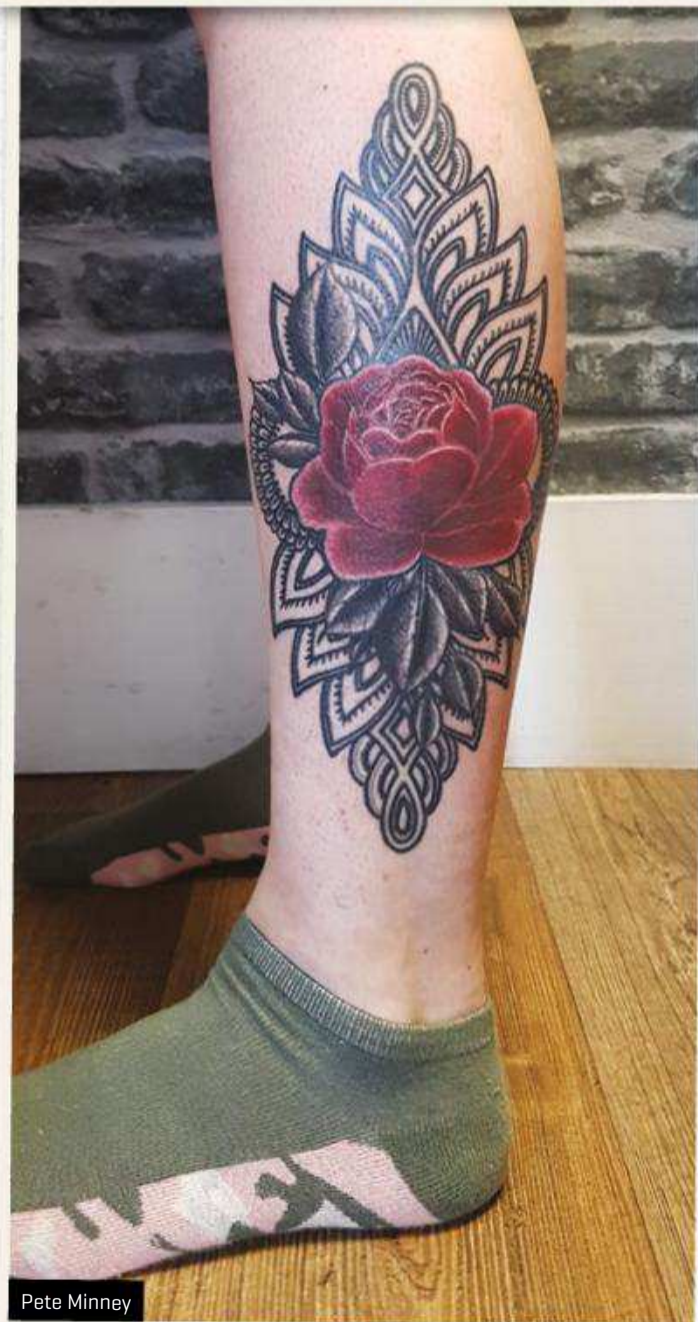
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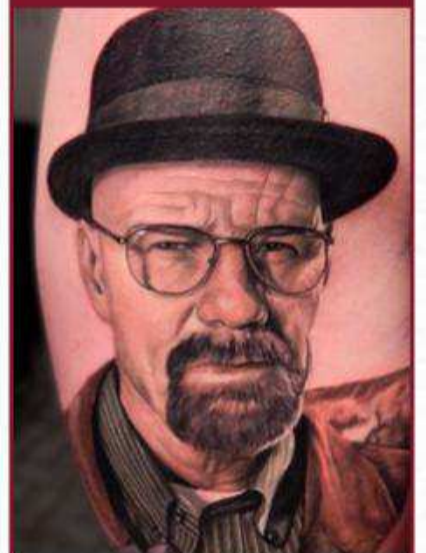


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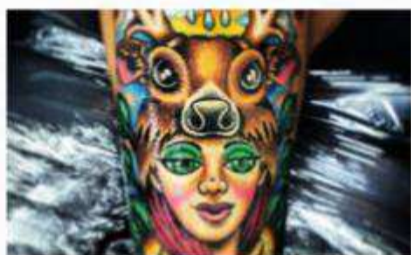
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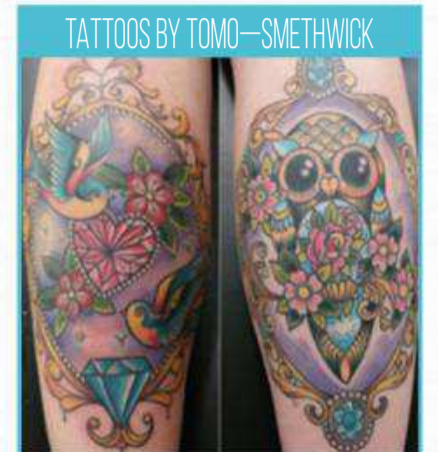
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TATTOO OF THE MONTH

by

Liam Jackson & Paul Vander-Johnson



Liam Jackson & Paul Vander-Johnson

We love a good mash-up over here. It's been a while since we've seen one worth shouting about but this has got rockets of all kinds strapped to it.

Hopefully, we don't have to explain what it is (God help you if you can't figure it out) but this is the level of tattooing you can own when you ask two artists who appreciate each others work—and each other as people—to collaborate.

It's not an easy thing to pull off—not well anyway. The risk of mistakes is high and the only word that needs to be on your lips aside from 'ouch' is 'trust'. Collaborating may have become quite a thing recently but this is head and shoulders above most we've come across.

"Nice work guys" feels like something of an understatement.

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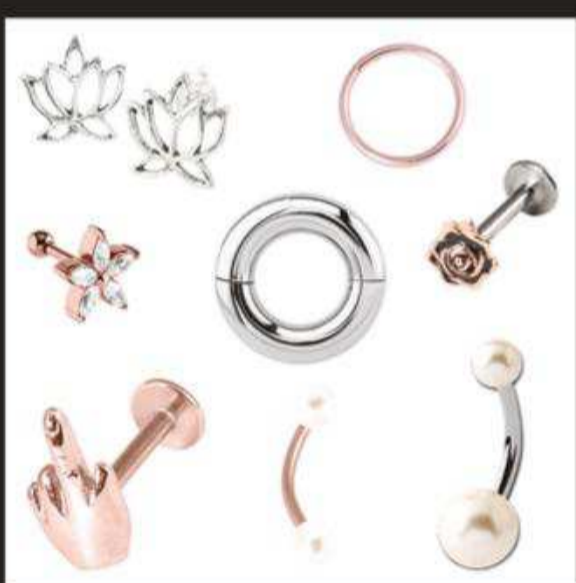
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