



# Written on the body:

# Tattoos go mainstream

By Brendon Bosworth

**L**ONG gone are the days when tattoos were the sole preserve of vagabonding sailors, white supremacists and hardened criminals. So long gone, in fact, that it's trite, even a little embarrassing, to mention it. You can't switch on the TV or open a magazine without seeing some sports star or celeb sporting new ink. And you'd be amazed at how much body art hides beneath the collar and tie corporate armour worn by those in big business. It might even be surprising for some if the annual budget meeting was held in the buff: "The boss has

a tattoo where?"

In South Africa tattoo culture has made major inroads into mainstream society. As Simon White, co-owner of Cape Town's popular parlour Wildfire Tattoos, explains. "It's not as underground as it was, we're now in the mainstream. We're tattooing average people, day in day out. My average client is in their mid-thirties, males and females...I get a lot of people working in the financial industry; at least 60 to 70% of my clientele."

"People used to spit at me and throw stones at me when I walked down the street with lots of tattoos," says White, whose

business has been in operation since 1994. "But now they ask me where I got them and if I can give them a better price."

Manuela Gray, White's business partner and an equally esteemed artist, says she's worked on clients from all walks of life. "It's quite expensive nowadays, especially for the bigger pieces, so you're looking at people who have good jobs and can afford it. That's elevated the status of tattooing."

### **Making it to the malls**

The fact that one of the two Wildfire stores is located at Canal Walk—the



*Manuela Gray, co-owner of Wildfire Tattoos*

*Photograph by Andy Lund*



Ganja style

Photograph by Scott Smith

apogee of consumer culture—and listed under “health and beauty” on the mall’s information board, is a sign that skin art has become a sought-after commodity for those who can afford it. You can now pick up designer jeans, new sneakers and a tatt all in the same shopping session.

The store itself is immaculate. Health and sterilisation regulations are stringently adhered to—a far cry from the dimly lit backyard joints with filthy fingered artists and second-hand needles that populate the nightmares of concerned parents.

Tattoo art even has its own annual symposium nowadays, and the Southern Ink Xposure, which features artists from around the globe, was again held at the Cape Town International Convention Centre this year. All further proof of just how mainstream and acceptable body art has become.

While so-called purists may bemoan the commercialisation of tattoo culture, other leaders in the field see it as a form of recognition for the art.

“We’re one of the few types of artists who

are making a living out of what we do on a daily basis, which isn’t the easiest thing to do,” opines Derek Baker, international award winning artist and owner of Metal Machine Tattoos, another mainstay of the South African body ink scene which first opened its doors in 1993.

“What we do is expensive. A lot of people have a misconception, thinking that what we charge is what we take home. Without kidding around, we only make 10% of what we’re charging. To me it’s about using the best equipment and the best of everything: I’ve invested a quarter of a million rand in tattoo machines. There are no short-cuts.”

White points out that despite the levels of professionalism exhibited by Wildfire, Metal Machine and other South African artists, tattoo art continues to be inserted into the category of “low-brow” art, lumped in along with the spraypainters, graffiti artists and custom car designers. “I think that some of the fine art techniques tattoo artists are using should elevate us out of there. We’re not low-brow in any way or form.”

The media has certainly played a role in driving the popularity of tattoo culture. Hit reality show *Miami Ink*, which aired for four seasons on Discovery Channel in over 160 countries, focused on providing insights into customers and the stories behind their tattoos at a popular Miami parlour. What’s more, it gave tattoo culture a prime time audience. That’s alongside the Hollywood A-listers—like Angelina Jolie, Johnny Depp and Megan Fox, to name just a few—who proudly display their ink. And, as much as hard rock die-hards might cringe to hear it, you can’t deny that Christina Aguilera, Justin Timberlake, Lady Gaga and their pop-friendly ilk have had an ink-friendly influence on a generation who most likely don’t know their Ozzy Osbourne from their Bon Scott.

Amongst others, David Beckham and his growing collection of tattoos has raised the acceptability bar for sports personalities. Local sporting heroes aren’t shy of getting inked either. White recently worked on high-profile rugby players Luke Watson and Ross Skeate, who both exhibit large arm pieces, as well as

Platinum Stars mid-fielder Dillon Sheppard.

Baker, who describes himself as a conservative family man, agrees that sports personalities have helped push tattoos into the public eye, but feels that certain “bad boy” rap stars and their negative messages are not good for business.

“We refuse to do anything associated with any form of gangsterism. If someone wants ‘Thug Life’ tattooed across their stomach I’m like ‘No, that was Tupac. He was a full-on gangster. It was part of who he was and now you want to be the same?’ I don’t do anything to do with white supremacy or gangs because I don’t believe in it.”

### Not a kid thing

White is equally vocal about Wildfire’s strict policy of only working on clients over the age of 18 who can produce valid ID. By law one can legally get a tattoo at 16 provided there is parental consent, but he says one of the biggest issues is in the case of divorced parents, where the parent who is not the legal custodian accompanies the child to the studio, trying to be the “cool” one, and gives their signature even though

they don’t have the right to allow their kid to be worked on without the other parent’s consent.

“We also try not to tattoo things that will destroy people’s lives. You get the youngsters coming through wanting to get the back of their hands tattooed, even if they have no tats to begin with: that’ll destroy their opportunity of getting mainstream work,” says White.

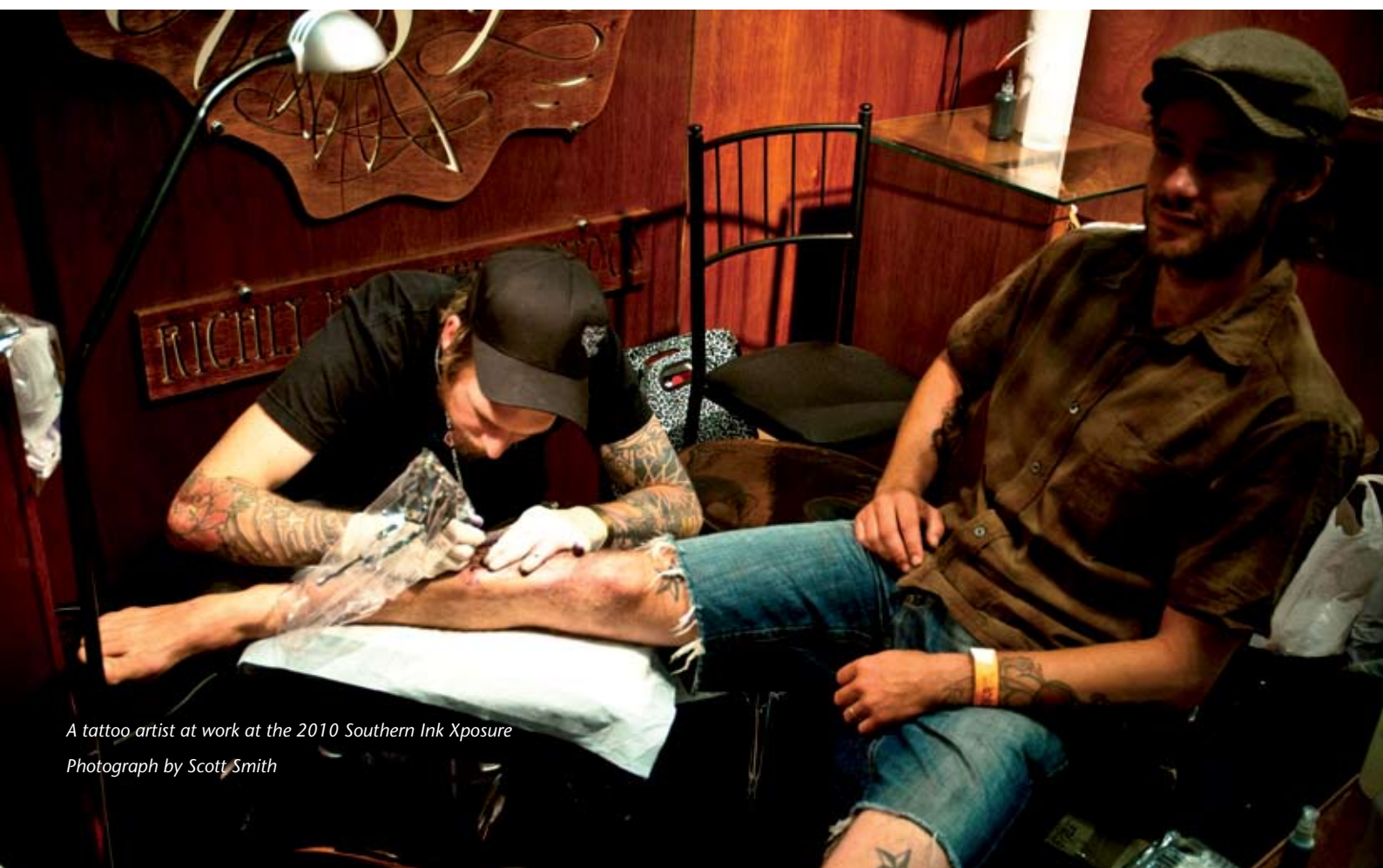
Baker says a common scenario plays out

“People used to spit at me and throw stones at me when I walked down the street with lots of tattoos...but now they ask me where I got them and if I can give them a better price.” – Simon White, co-owner of Wildfire Tattoos.

when parents phone him to say their teenager is hellbent on getting a tattoo and could he please talk them out of it and persuade them to wait till they’re older, which he does. He explains that as you grow your thought-processes change, as does your body, which can cause the tattoo to blur and stretch.

“I tell them the truth without sugar-coating it. If you can educate the kids properly they’ll pick the right tattoo when they’re ready, 18 or 19, and won’t have to get stupid cover-ups later.”

The relationship between mainstream religion and tattoos is also complex. Views on tattoos seem to differ as widely as the number of belief systems. There are Christians with bible verses, angels, crosses and other holy insignia etched into their skin, while others wouldn’t dream of it. And, while Hinduism has no qualms with tattoos, they are strictly “haram” in Sunni Islamic lore. They’re also forbidden by the Jewish religion as written in the Torah, and the tattooing of prisoner numbers onto inmates in the death camps during the Holocaust further vilified tattoos in Jewish culture. Yet there are some adherents who are inked and some even proudly wear



A tattoo artist at work at the 2010 Southern Ink Xposure

Photograph by Scott Smith

Jewish symbols, such as the Star of David, as a testament to their belief.

### **An indelible symbol of change**

As with any art form, tattoos are highly subjective. The newly baptised trance queen of Benoni might think her fresh Japanese symbol for unity, scrawled across her left breast, is the ultimate in tattoo chic, while the veteran human canvas, with 80% of his dermis covered in tribal pieces, each one painstakingly applied over a course of months by a master practitioner in Polynesia, may look at her with the type of pity typically reserved for amputated puppies.

It seems most people will go for a smaller tattoo to start, try it out and see how they feel

**“I don’t do anything to do with white supremacy or gangs...” - Derek Baker, owner of Metal Machine Tattoos.**

about it, then graduate to larger more artful pieces. Some of which are mind-blowing in their rendering: technicolour geisha figures; finely detailed dragons; tightly crafted portraits of heroes dead or alive. Ultimately, the significance of the tattoo to the wearer is what’s paramount.

“When you have a tattoo you become so in touch with yourself,” explains Gray. “I know that when people get tattoos they’re going through some type of change. There’s always an occasion that spurs it on even though they may not be aware of it. A lot of people like to have a little reminder of something or a celebration. Sometimes it’s purely aesthetic, but nine times out of 10 people look for something with meaning.”

Allan Martin, a successful marine hydraulic fitter, sees definite meaning in his ink. His back hosts an orange and black koi fish that stretches the length of his spine, surrounded by water and bamboo shoots with dragons on each side of his ribs. The ornate piece is the outcome of multiple sessions with Baker, done in installments over 18 years.

“A koi is a strong character that stands for determination and courage. It swims upstream and will always take the difficult route.



*Simon White, co-owner of Wildfire Tattoos*

*Photograph by Andy Lund*

According to Chinese myth, when it reaches the end of the river it changes into a dragon,” says Martin.

“My father struggled with liver cancer for a year and a half before he died; I saw how he was fading in front of me. I got his name tattooed into one of the bamboo shoots.”

Cassidy Kissoon, a regular customer who was sitting stoically in Baker’s chair with his head buried in a pillow as I conducted this interview above the incessant buzz of the tattoo machine, had a finely detailed dragon materialising across his back as we spoke. In

addition he sports ornate Indonesian tribal patterns down both arms and shoulders which signify “never-ending life.”

Age 32 and the head of a national call centre for a large cellular company, he goes to work fully cuffed with collar and tie, but lets it all hang out on civies day on Fridays.

“A lot of people stare, but I don’t really worry. There are so many people who are inked,” he says.

“A lot of people ask me why (I have so many tattoos). I tell them it lasts longer than romance.” **TBI**