



INK SIDE OUT

Visual artists are incorporating tattoo imagery and techniques into their art, and gaining mainstream exposure for it

BY MARGOT MIFFLIN

COURTESY DE PURY & LUXEMBOURG



IN ROALD DAHL'S 1953 SHORT STORY "SKIN,"

a man bearing a portrait tattooed by a young Chaim Soutine stumbles into an opening of the late artist's work, reveals his signed back piece, and inspires an impromptu bidding war. One dealer offers to pay him to live on permanent display at a seaside resort; another proposes removing the portrait surgically, but the portrait-wearer declines. Weeks later, a new work by Soutine, heavily varnished, hits the market. And the man is nowhere to be found.

The story crystallizes two of the three reasons tattooing has never earned respect in the art world: the difficulty of displaying—and harder yet, selling—a work that eats, sleeps, and ultimately dies. And the third reason: class. As folk art, whose iconography has long been linked to the military, prison culture, and alternative lifestyle subcultures, Western-style tattooing has remained a resolutely low-brow medium, attracting little institutional interest.

Until now. Visual artists are not only dropping tattoo imagery and techniques into their art, but are also gaining mainstream exposure for it. If only Dahl could have witnessed the opening of Belgian artist Wim Delvoye's installation at the Louvre this year, which featured a tattooed Swiss man named Tim Steiner. Steiner, or "Tattoo Tim," wears on his back a black-and-gray Madonna positioned beneath a Mexican skull and pink roses, flanked by bats and swallows and anchored by Japanese waves, all referencing classic tattoo styles and imagery. *Tim* had been purchased in 2008 by the German collector Rik Reinking for

OPPOSITE Tim Steiner is part of Wim Delvoye's installation at the Louvre, *Tim*, 2006–08.

ABOVE Delvoye tattoos a live pig for his piece *Art Farm Yang Zhen (Beijing)*, 2005.

150,000 euros. Steiner's contract requires that he exhibit himself three times a year, and when he dies, his skin—varnished or not—is to be given over to his buyer.

Delvoye learned to tattoo in the early '90s, practicing first on pigskins acquired from slaughterhouses, and then on the skin of live pigs, which he began exhibiting in 1997. "I hated the idea that I would have assistants who would master a skill that I wouldn't master," he says. So he practiced. He chose pigs because they provided a large work surface and because, as low-status animals, they served as ironic vehicles for the grand symbolism typically accorded to tattoos: "This is my dog, my father who died, my beloved son, my principles—I love Jesus, I love rock 'n' roll, I believe in the U.S. army. All these beliefs are expressed in tattoos," says Delvoye.

While Delvoye lovingly spoofs tattoo iconography, Mexican artist Dr. Lakra embraces it. "I always liked naïve images that are symbolic and powerful, but not well done in an artistic way," he says. "They're really innocent. They're done by people who don't have artistic training," adds Dr. Lakra. "But in a way, they're more powerful than images that are more professional."

Dr. Lakra (né Jerónimo López Ramírez) enjoys a dual career as



ABOVE Detail of a site-specific wall drawing by Dr. Lakra for his 2011 show at the Drawing Center in New York.

a tattooist and a self-taught visual artist. His 2010 retrospective at Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art was a milestone, marking tattooing's slow journey into high-culture venues, including the Drawing Center in New York. Dr. Lakra's drawings of skulls, serpents, demons, and Maori *moko* (facial tattoos), applied to found images of pinups, businessmen, and Sumo wrestlers, are culturally rich and graphically arresting. They proved irresistible to the young museum visitors who turned out for the ICA exhibition opening clad in leather—and ink. When it traveled to the Museo de la Ciudad in Mexico City in 2011, the show turned out to be one of that museum's biggest hits.

Dr. Lakra began studying tattooing in 1991 in Mexico and continued in Europe, where he steeped himself in tattoo literature that he couldn't find in Mexico. He later pursued the art in San Francisco, where his work caught the eye of Ed Hardy, the single most influential living tattooist, now retired and working as a full-time visual artist. A graduate of the San Francisco Art

Institute who has played a major role in the evolution of tattoo color and design since the 1970s, Hardy curated the landmark show "Pierced Hearts and True Love" at the Drawing Center in 1995. It was one of the first tattoo-themed exhibitions to command serious critical attention. He both mentored Dr. Lakra and included him in the show—Dr. Lakra's first—setting him on a professional path that led to gallery representation in London (Kate MacGarry) and Mexico City (Kurimanzutto).

"Lakra is an anomaly in the sense that he is the first tattoo artist to be embraced by the art world, but not really for his tattoos; rather for his use of tattoo imagery and style in a fine-art practice," says Pedro Alonzo, who organized the ICA exhibition after following Dr. Lakra's work for years. "Part of the problem tattooing has is that there aren't any market forces behind it. The other part of it is that, from an academic position, it's always been looked at as an anthropological phenomenon." Given that more than 30 percent of people under 30 are tattooed, it was important, Alonzo felt, to engage an audience with first-hand knowledge of the increasingly popular medium. While folk art, science, and history mu-

seums have been mounting tattoo-themed exhibitions for over half a century, art museums have been comparatively slow to recognize tattoos' esthetic potential.

But that's changing. After its 2010 release, the documentary *Ed Hardy: Tattoo the World* by Emiko Omori was screened at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, the de Young Museum in San Francisco, and New York's Museum of Modern Art. Last year, the UC Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive hosted a serial video showing participants in Shelley Jackson's "Skin," a short story tattooed word by word on volunteers around the globe. The Honolulu Art Museum's 2012–13 show "Tattoo Honolulu" features ten contemporary Hawaiian tattooists.

Galleries, too, are awakening to skin art. Painter Shawn Barber's portraits of tattooed people (many of them tattooists) were shown at Joshua Liner in New York this past summer. Sundaram Tagore Gallery represents the Korean artist Kim Joon, who makes computer-generated images of beautiful, often intertwined bodies imprinted with abstract tattoo designs in saturated colors, and applies them to porcelain objects.

Tattoos are appearing not just in the halls of high culture,

but also as commodities walking out of them. In the 1970s, the artist and former tattooist Ruth Marten, a pioneer of New York conceptual tattooing, tried to persuade New Museum founder Marcia Tucker (then a curator at the Whitney Museum) to commission pieces on collectors' skin. Tucker, whom Marten had tattooed, knew the idea was ahead of its time and nixed it. But now artist-tattooists are doing just that. Both Dr. Lakra and Delvoye have tattooed curators, collectors, and gallery employees, sometimes in galleries or at art fairs.

"A lot of times people who work in the art world or are interested in contemporary art will say, 'I can't afford to buy one of your drawings, but I would like to get some kind of tattoo,'" says Duke Riley, who owns East River Tattoo in Brooklyn and is represented in New York by MagnanMetz Gallery. Riley's beautifully executed, finely shaded black-and-gray tattoos, recalling 19th-century scrimshaw, invoke the same maritime themes his epic performances and installations explore.

The commute between worlds, however, is easier for the well-known artist using tattoo imagery than for the established tattooist. As the owner of Saved Tattoo in Brooklyn, artist Scott Campbell made his name tattooing hipsters and celebrities, including Heath Ledger and Penelope Cruz, and now shows internationally with OHWOW Gallery. Using a traditional tattoo vernacular, his drawings and paintings feature guns, roses, and text like "Eat Shit Die," and his stacked and carved dollar bills contain relief images of skulls and spiderwebs. In a show this fall at OHWOW in London, he extended his interest in altered surfaces to carved and defaced lunar landscapes.

By contrast, few full-time tattooists have found representation in established galleries. Dr. Lakra believes this is not entirely a matter of tattoo prejudice. "I think tattooists spend too much time tattooing and not enough time seeing art outside the tattoo world," he says. "Tattooing in itself is not an art. It's just a technique. The same could be said of oil painting—the technique doesn't make it an art."

RIGHT A nautical tattoo done by Duke Riley.
BELOW His 2011 ink drawing *Beach 98th Street MTA Station Bungalow Pier Study*.





ABOVE Scott Campbell employs classic tattoo imagery in *Untitled (Snake and Roses (white))*, a graphite-on-ostrich-eggshell work, 2011. BELOW Intertwined female bodies are painted with tattoo-evoking patterns in Kim Joon's digital print *Bird Land-Chrysler*, 2008.



TOP: COURTESY THE ARTIST AND OHWOW, LOS ANGELES; BOTTOM: COURTESY SUNDARAM TAGORE GALLERY



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT **Jacob Dahlstrup Jensen, No. 2 (Fata Morgana Series), 2012 and Untitled (Stilt Walker), 2012, both hand embossed with tattoo needle; and tattoos by Roxx.**

The Danish artist Jacob Dahlstrup Jensen uses just one element of that technique—the machine without the ink—to puncture paper, creating delicate embossed images of skulls, waves, whales, and wistful statements like “Noone Knows I’m Gone,” which he sometimes incorporates into graphite drawings. Jensen, who will show at New York’s Munch Gallery in March, was drawn to tattoo imagery through his interest in still-life motifs and the history of vanitas paintings. “It seems as if the role of the vanitas painting, with its decaying fruit and skull motifs, has been replaced with the ‘carpe diem’ idea of the tattoo,” he says.

By historical coincidence, just as many visual artists are folding sub-legitimate tattoo imagery into their work, well-known tattooists are using the techniques of Pointillism, Cubism, Benday and Op art, Abstract Expressionism, photorealist portraiture, Minimalism, and pixel art in theirs. Tattoo artists Xed LeHead in London, Yann Black in Montreal, and Roxx in San Francisco, among others, are creating high-concept fusions of design, decorative art, and fine art on these diabolically difficult canvases. Transcending the closed language of classic tattooing, they’ve revolutionized this medium. But as skin art inches its way toward legitimacy in the art world, one frontier has yet to be crossed: the recognition of innovative tattooists for their tattooing alone. And, says Lakra, “That day is really close.” ■

Margot Mifflin is an associate professor of English and journalism at the City University of New York. The third edition of her book Bodies of Subversion: A Secret History of Women and Tattoo (powerHouse Books) will be published in February.

