



Figure 1 "Untitled", June 2007, Hannah Starkey, Photographs 1997-2017/Courtesy of Mack

Written in the Flesh

The Transformational Magic of the Tattoo

Joan Golden-Alexis

To tattoo one's body is merely one of the thousand ways of conjugating the verb 'to be' that fundamental concept of our metaphysics—Michael Thévos

What lies deepest of all in man, is the skin—Paul Valery

In this paper I am going to approach the subject of the tattoo and the process of tattooing from two perspectives; the socio-political, and the personal. Ultimately, on the most intimate level, in the realm of the personal, I will explore the psychic process of six people who have chosen to tattoo their bodies.

I began my introduction to those who seek tattoos, and particularly the six people in this study, by spending one day each week in various tattoo studios. I listened, and listened, and never spoke. I soon discovered that the relationship between the tattoo artist and the person seeking a tattoo was often exquisitely intimate. The tattoo artist began the conversation by simply asking, “What kind of tattoo do you want?” Within seconds, a breathtaking story would unfold, transforming the moment from the present into something that held something old, and the beginning of something new. The artist would then excuse himself to sketch the tattoo. I marveled time and time, again, at how the artist could fathom so much, with so little information to go on. I never interfered in the dialogue between artist and client; I just listened. After some time, I began to get a feel for those artists and those clients that touched something in me. I began to record what they said, and take pictures. Finally, in order to round out this study, I found what I needed in the stories listed in websites, and from bits and pieces of tattoo videos.

Introduction

In a society that is overtly characterized by untruthful political narratives, moral blindness, marginalization, and violent immigration policies, many of us are living with a growing experience of personal and social exile. The sense of psychological exile aroused by the loss of a social-political context that is responsive to diversity, has increased psychic anguish and emotional numbness on all levels of our society.

Psychoanalysis, in its exploration of the human psyche, was designed to offer the “individual a sense of autonomy, and identity distinct from one’s place in the family, in society, and in the social division of labor.” (Zaretsky, 2004, p. 5). It was intended to develop a growing connection between consciousness and the unconscious, and the development of an ability to reflect, which would allow one to evaluate oneself, and the society in which one lives.

However, In the last several decades, both in academic circles, and as a method of healing, analytic psychotherapy and psychoanalysis, with its central focus on the unconscious and the multilayered psyche, has decreased in popularity. Seemingly, reflective of the current zeitgeist, cognitive therapy with its narrow focus of symptom reduction, and helping one to adapt to the current environment, has taken the lead. As a goal, symptom relief has replaced symbolic understanding of the symptom—that is, the symptom understood as an access point to the unconscious, and to the potentially transformative aspects of the personality. In a society where many of its citizens have a limited access to a psychology supporting such transformations, those living with a profound sense

of social exile, and psychic pain (both personal and social), often turn to some form of artistic expression of human truth that can break through the current corrosive socio-political atmosphere.



Figure 2 Tattoo Image from Stephanie Tamez, "Compassion"

In an attempt to reconstitute their psychic space, many turn to art in all its forms, and many have turned to the human body, the first canvas, for art and self-expression, for psychic repair, and potential restitution. Not surprisingly, there is a new interest in tattoos, and other forms of body modification, as a method of healing. These methods (having been utilized for centuries to cure arthritis, to express autonomy, and to connect with higher and sacred curative

powers), have increased in popularity.

Emphasizing the innate psychic sense of “becoming” and memorializing it on the surface of the body, tattoos have had an explosive impact. The tattoo, and other forms of body modification have become important both as a method of healing personal and social trauma, and also as a healing balm, an affirmation of the Self in a society insensitive to individual differences and the connection of inner and outer events.



Figure 3 Tattoo Image from Roxx, “Symmetrical Forearm Tattoos

Evoking Sacred Mandalas

Tattooing and the process of tattooing bring the emphasis back to the body, the skin, and to the multi-layered psyche. In fact, except for psychoanalysis, little in my opinion more directly connects the body, and corporality to interiority and the Self, than various forms of body modification.

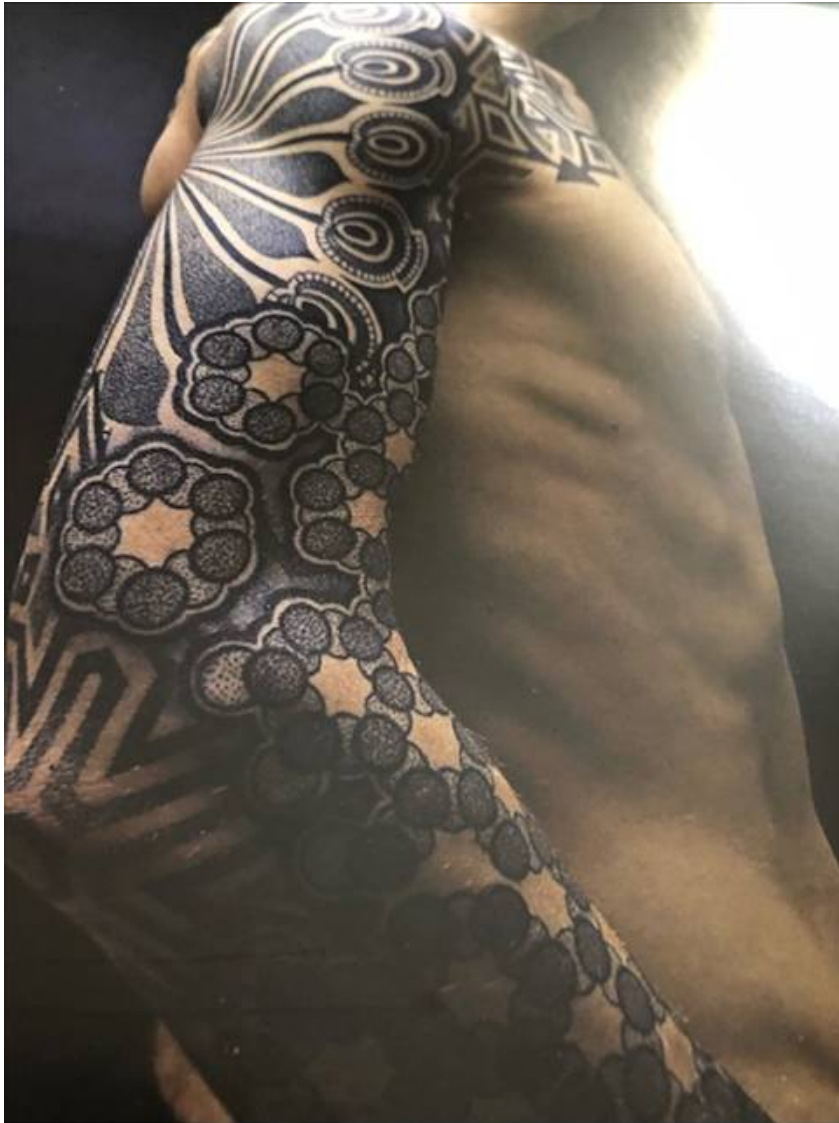


Figure 4 Tattoo Image from Nazareno Tubaro, "Sleeve with Designs Evoking Sacred Geometry"

Privileging the body always privileges psyche; modifying the body often awakens and strengthens linkages between consciousness and the unconscious

psyche. The body's expression is akin to artistic expression, and the tattoo has the potential to awaken the petrified silence of the psyche induced by trauma.

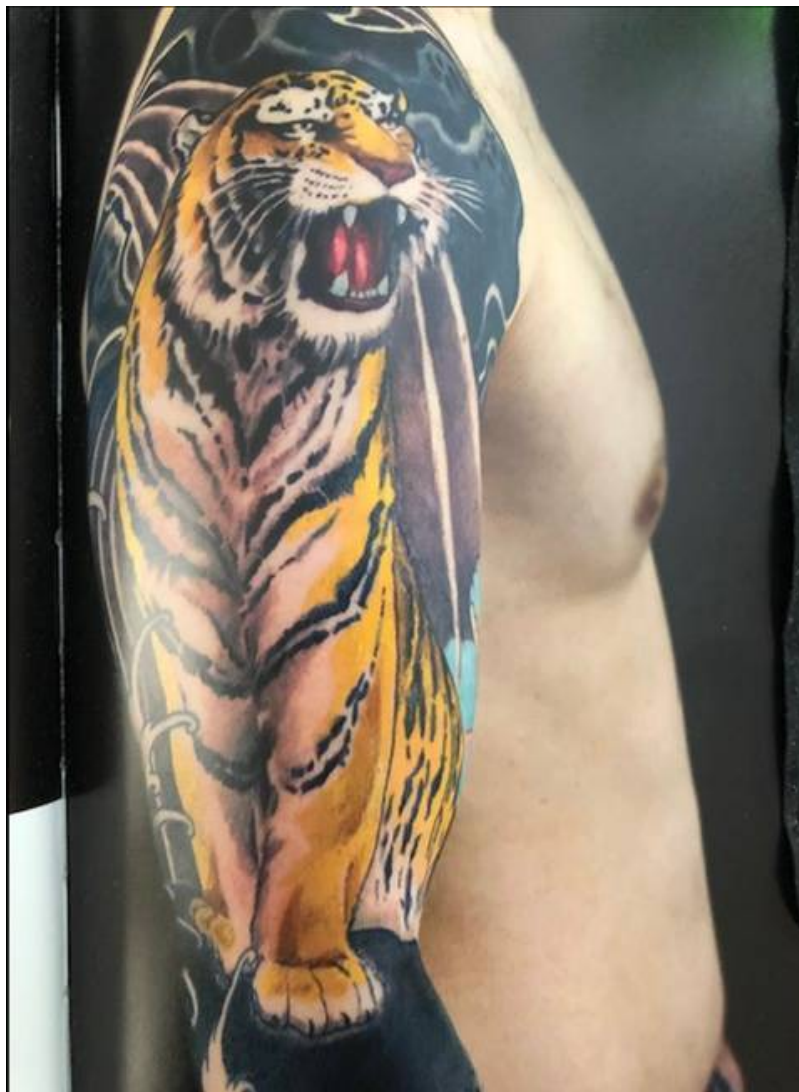


Figure 5 Tattoo Image from Kore Flatmo, "Tiger Amid Waves and Waterfalls"



Figure 6 Tattoo Image from Sake, “Raven and Crying Woman”

The process of body modification can play an important part in turning the visual and wordless within, into symbols, dissociated experience into consciousness, and most centrally, visceral experience into psychic meaning, expanding the capacity for representation and symbolizing. In fact, one can conceive of the process of tattooing as a converting of the skin into a “ritual space” for healing. (Lars Krutak, 2013, p. 8)



Figure 7 Tattoo Image from Sake, “Female Portrait with Smeared Makeup”

“The ambiguous power of these practices rests—as Gell so cogently points out—upon their capacity to open up and seal the boundaries of the body—and, thus by extension, the boundaries of the self.” (Benson, p.237) “What is external is transformed into something internal to the subject; memory, a critical property of contemporary self-identity, is externalized and fixed upon the skin.” (Benson, p. 246). Written on the skin, “tattoos collectively form a secret history of grappling with the self in relationship to body...”(Mifflin p. 147.)

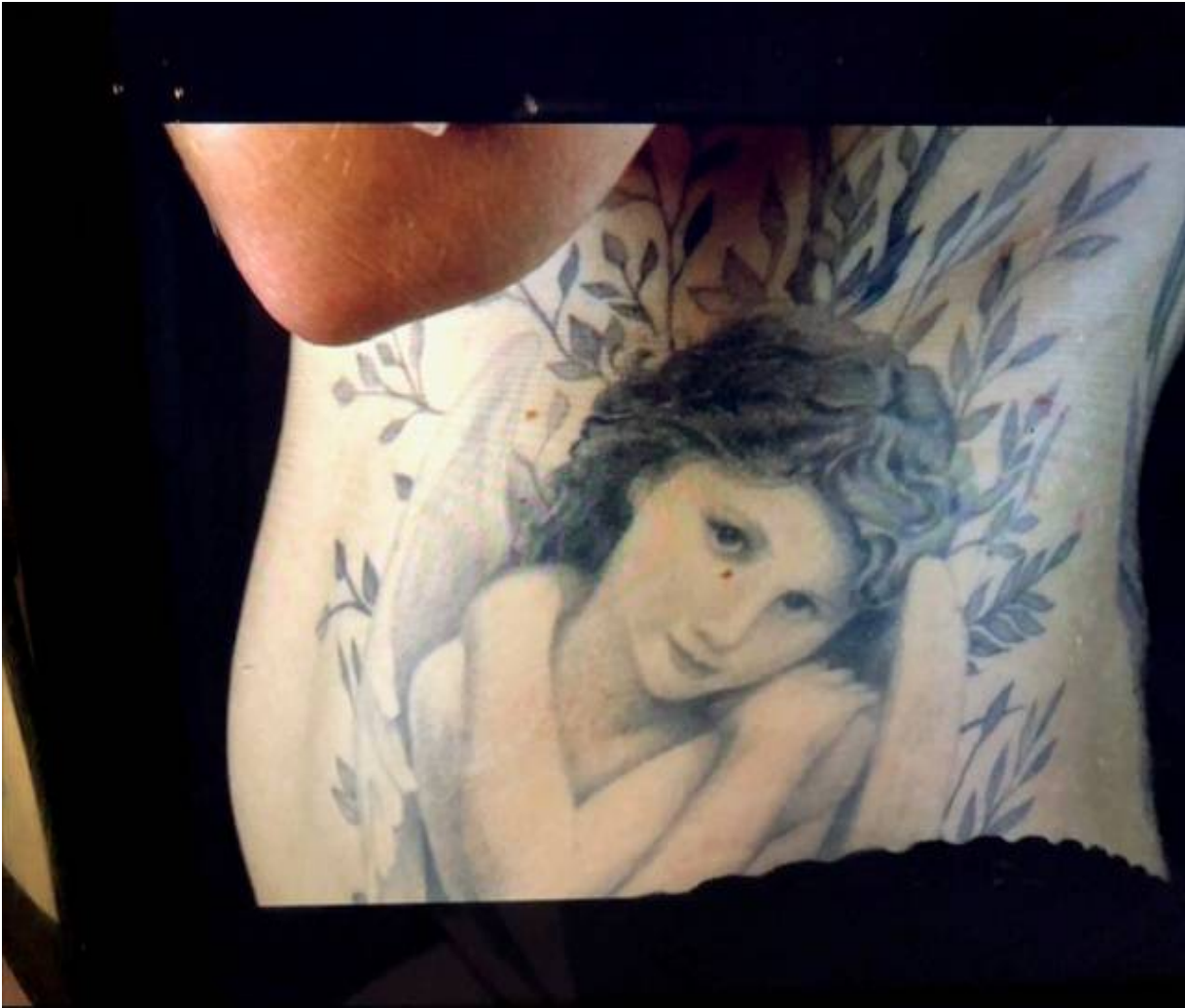


Figure 8 Tattoo Image of Erin Chavez, “Angels,” Artist/ Corey Miller

In fact, tattoos often directly transform the psychological existence of profound wounding—from sexual assaults, or from deeply invasive or deforming surgeries--into traumatic emotional experiences, sealing and containing them, reclaiming the body for the Self and initiating a generative process within.



*Figure 9 Tattoo Image from Peter Aurisch, “Figures Embracing”
and including the words, “The world ends with a smile.”*

Inside the choice

Choosing to tattoo an image on the surface of the body initiates a ritual act, (a re-wounding) that permanently transforms the individual’s relationship to his or her original wounding, and its emotional vulnerability. A wound, that is, a conscious intentional self-wounding, opens a “gateway to a potential transformation and a window on encapsulated history.” (*The Book of Symbols*, p. 734)



Figure 10 Tattoo Image from Simone Pfaff and Voker Merschky, “Beauty and Death United”

Choosing to be tattooed initiates the profound self-sacrifice of self-wounding. The archetype of one who consciously wounds himself, changes the experience of the wound dramatically. The initiation of the tattoo enlists the conscious hand in the repeat of the wounding, and the wounded one becomes the one who wounds in order to heal. The painful self-wounding is an act made to transform the person’s identification as victim, to one who chooses to actively enter the conscious struggle, potentially re-experiencing in a transformed form the previously impenetrable pain, the darkness surrounding, and clouding that pain, and the psychological and or physical assault that initiated it.

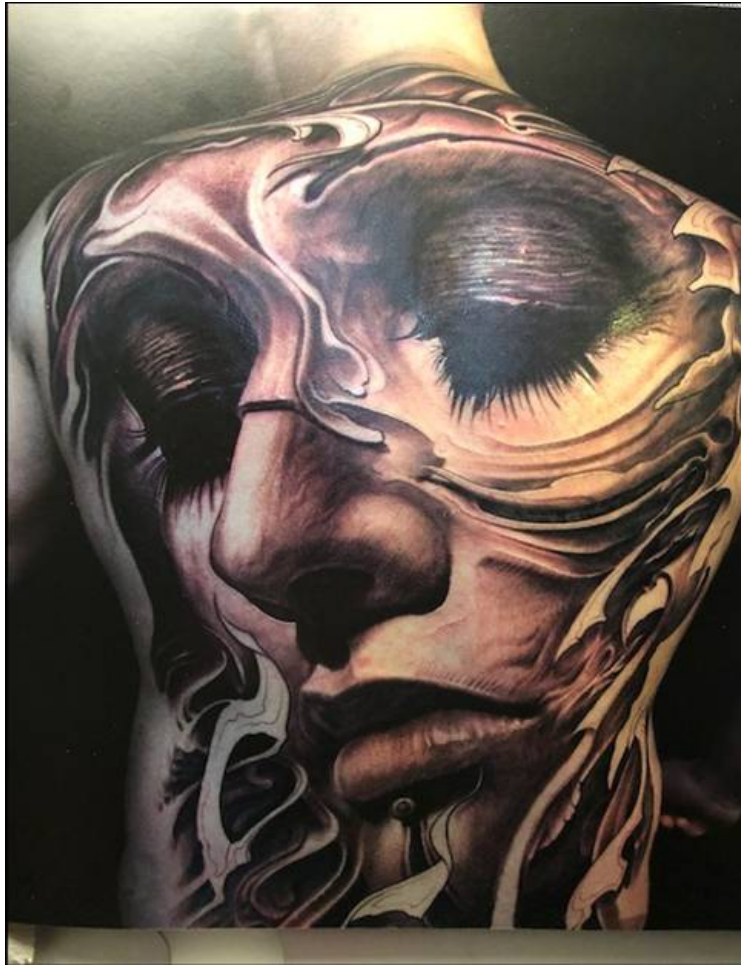


Figure 11 Tattoo Image from Victor Portugal, Back Tattoo, “Elegant female face morphing into tattered ribbons”

Thus, this intentional sacrificial act of tattooing initiates the uniting of the paradoxical opposites of victim and perpetrator into one healing unit. After the self-wounding, the victim carries access to both sides of this emotional split. It is the connection to such a new source of energy that transforms passivity into activity, and allows access to an active involvement in the process of healing. The ritual of placing the tattoo, initiating the self-wounding, enduring the painful embedding into the flesh, initiates intense emotion and awakens autonomy in regard to the original wound and the secondary wounding.



Figure 12 Tattoo Image from Stephanie Tamez, "Phoenix Arm Tattoo"

Each choice—of the moment chosen to become tattooed, of the artist and his artistic mode of expression employed to create the tattoo, the choice of image, the color, the size, and placement on the body--offers the potential for a deeper connection to, and a possible reflection on the extent and implication of the original psychic wounding. In almost every case, it is uncanny how the individual intuitively, or instinctively knows where the tattoo must be placed. Knowing where the tattoo belongs on the body brings with it a renewal of a deeply resonant connection of the body ego, and psyche.



Figure 13 Tattoo from Little Swastika, “Back Piece Evoking Pastel Drawing”

The tattoo itself, is a compensatory conscious marking and re-wounding of a secret wound. It results in the wearing of the wound in plain sight. The image worn on the surface of the skin begins its retrieval from the lost, the hidden, and positions it to potentially awaken that which has been silenced by trauma and relegated to amorphous visceral experience. In this one courageous act, what has been partly a secret to oneself, is exposed to Self and other, and is now opened to varying levels of consciousness.

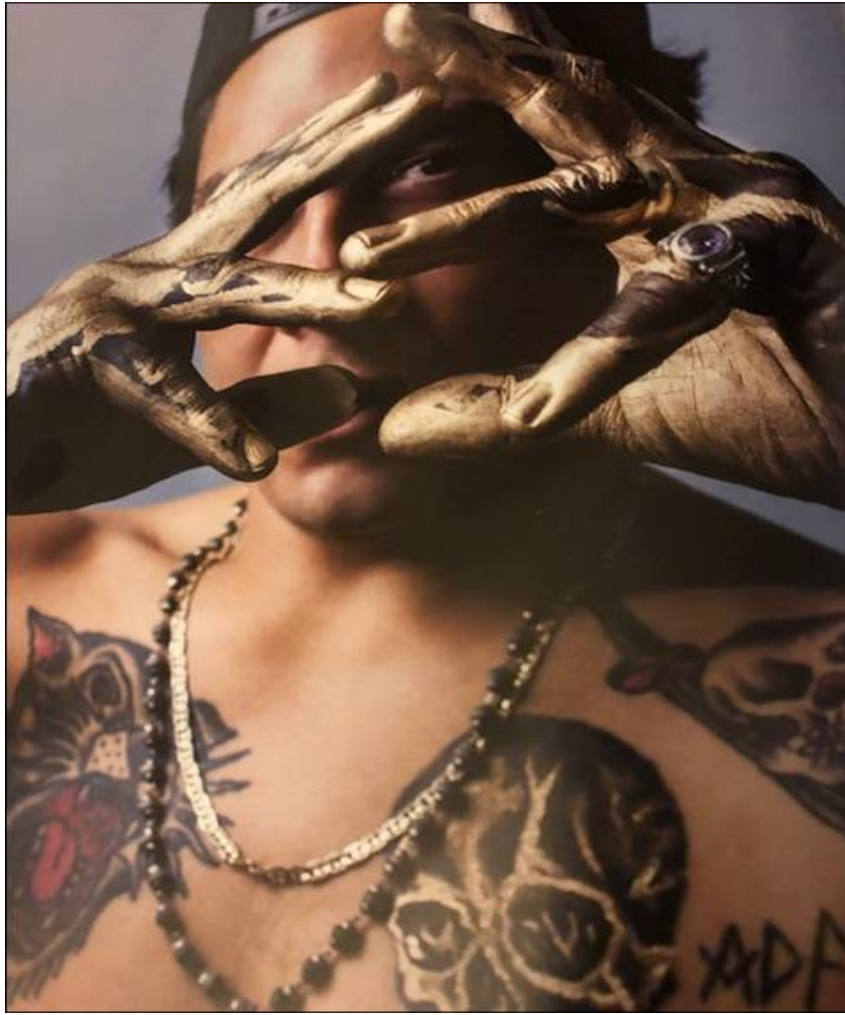


Figure 14 "Self-portrait", Lance de Los Reyes, "Quiet Lunch"

The extent of consciousness involved with the meaning of carrying the mark of the tattoo, the degree of profoundly engaging the physical pain, and the degree of accepting the pain of the loss and carrying it in a visible way varies greatly from person to person. However, in most circumstances, the heated attention, physical pain and intense emotion involved with this powerful ritual serves to release energy and erupt the instinctual life force. Wounded self, wounded healer, sacrifice-sacrificer, all move us into the territory of sacred acts, and tap into an instinctual resource for growth and the forward movement of psyche.

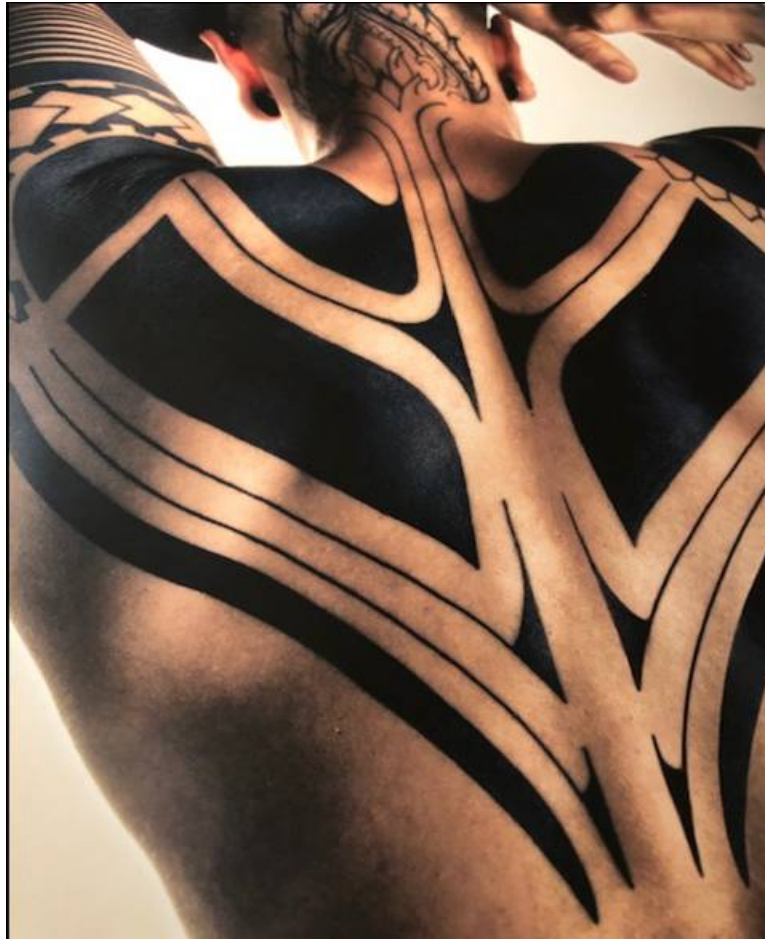


Figure 15 Tattoo from Roxx, Back Piece “Accentuating the Spine and Ribs Underneath”

Through this powerful and embodied engagement, involving the sacred element of blood, the tattooed image has the potential to become a living symbol for the psychic process evoked in the healing response. The tattooed image has an “intimation of meaning way beyond the level” of the individual’s “present powers of comprehension,” (CW 15 Jung, p.76). The tattoo, now experienced as a symbol, is able to propel psyche’s conversation both forward into the future and backward into the past, and through its constant circling it creates something new that is at once, permanent, and shifting.

Each of the following stories carries the trauma of the original wounding, and is also transformed by the controlled trauma of the re-wounding, which takes place in the presence of a tattoo artist who has willingly offered to become a creative and perhaps healing part of the process.

Inside the Process: The Personal Narratives

Skin is always talking, expressing moods, showing you to the world, [and to yourself]. When a tattoo artist makes marks on the skin, he or she joins a conversation in progress—James Elkin

Sophia, “Two Wolves”/Artist, Shaun Bones



Figure 16 Sophia, “Half/Half forearm Wolf Tattoo”/Artist Shaun Bones

Sophia wants a tattoo to “express the new journey” that she is on. After the sudden break-up of her long engagement, Sophia loses her bearings, and emerges five months later keenly aware that she is “two different people.” She says, “Now, there is the past me and a future me—two sides. ”

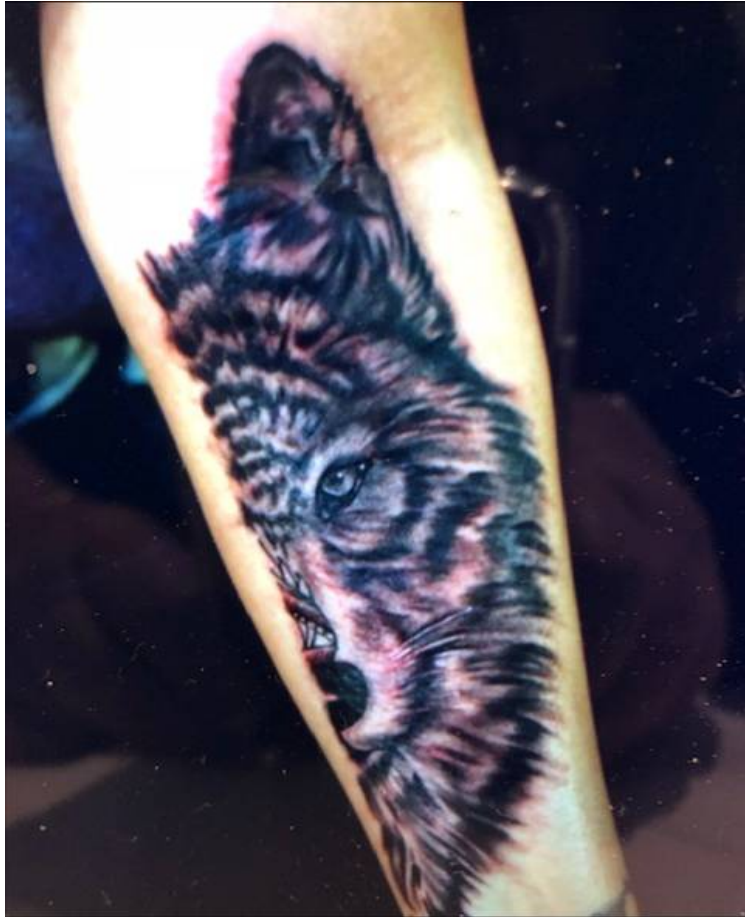


Figure 17 Sophia, “Half/Half forearm Wolf Tattoo”/Artist Shaun Bones

On one side, she has tattooed her past-self, pictured as a realistic wolf. This is the “good Greek girl” that has now lost its dominant hold on her. It is a recognition of her past identity, and the heritage that she holds sacred. This is the wolf as instinctual beast and what she terms, the “me” that “I must not forget.”



Figure 18 Sophia, “Half/Half forearm Wolf Tattoo”/Artist Shaun Bones

On the other forearm, she has her future-self, depicted as an abstracted form of the wolf. This is the “wild child,” a side, more consciously emerging, but present, now, only as a “yet-not-articulated potential.”

The decision to be tattooed gives Sophia the opportunity, and the choice to re-enact her trauma, the loss of her old life through both a literal and symbolic engagement in a way that contains the seeds of repair.

In this instance, the tattoo and the process of tattooing proves invaluable, as it offers Sophia the possibility of more conscious awareness and conscious control of both sides of her personality. The images she chooses and where she chooses to place them, and the mobility of the placement enables us to see the special gift that the tattoo offers in this moment in Sophia’s life.



Figure 19 Sophia, “Half/Half forearm Wolf Tattoo”/Artist Shaun Bones

The wolf image brings its raw instinctual energy to the unavoidable truth of this division of past and future, of “good Greek girl” and “wild child.” The twoness is here and must be dealt with.

However, with one side of her personality enfolded on each of her forearms, she can bring her forearms together, and see the parts fitting together, forming a mandalic image of the completed and emergent process, existing now, only in potential.

Positioned in that way, Sophia can have consciousness of each side of her personality, moving them back and forth, experiencing the “one after the other” as she places her forearms together, then, apart, opening each side of her two

positions, holding each part in consciousness, separately, and then together, in a way that allows each to fertilize the other.

This linkage can create new emergent forms for the integration of past and future.

The dynamic of separate and together offers the prototype for what Jung terms the “one after-another as a bearable prelude to the deeper knowledge of the side-by-side. (CW, 14 §206)

Joanna, “Unicorn”/Artist, Moses Savea



Figure 20 Joanna, “Unicorn”/Artist, Moses Savea

Joanna requests a unicorn tattoo to be placed on the side of her upper thigh. She loves unicorns, and all mythical creatures. She says, that “one of the

happiest moments in my life was the Halloween when I was a unicorn and had a unicorn horn worn proudly on my forehead.”

Joanna, like Rilke in *The Unicorn Sonnet (Sonnets to Orpheus II, 4)* focuses on, the “animal that doesn’t exist” and Joanna “dares nonetheless to love its transformations, its bearing, its gait so much, that in the tranquil gaze of light (and of Joanna’s gaze) it lives.” In the space Joanna insists on setting aside for the unicorn in her psyche, and feeding it “only the possibility that it might exist, gives the beast such strength...” that it exists permanently within her.

Like the shaman who puts on the mask of a sacred animal, assuming a magical and symbolic relationship to its essence, its gesture and rhythm—Joanna wears the horn of the unicorn and proclaims “in that moment I was a unicorn.”

She knows, instinctively, as psyche knows, that this other world exists, is real, and she claims her connection with it as an unimaginable treasure. Wearing it as a symbol tattooed on her skin, she can again, gain access to this other world, the world of psyche, that she holds so dear, and utilize it to gain access to the emerging potential within her.

It is true, at the present time, when she proclaims “I am a unicorn” she reveals a significant lack of ego differentiation and an imbalance between ego and psyche. However, when she has a greater degree of separation, between ego and psyche, she will have a concomitant enhanced possibility to be in relationship with psyche.

However, even now, held in the only way accessible for her, her connection with the unicorn, and her certainty that the unicorn is real, (that psyche is real), remains a gold seed for Joanna, lighting her way in the darkness.

Tanya, “The Swan”/Artist, Jimi May

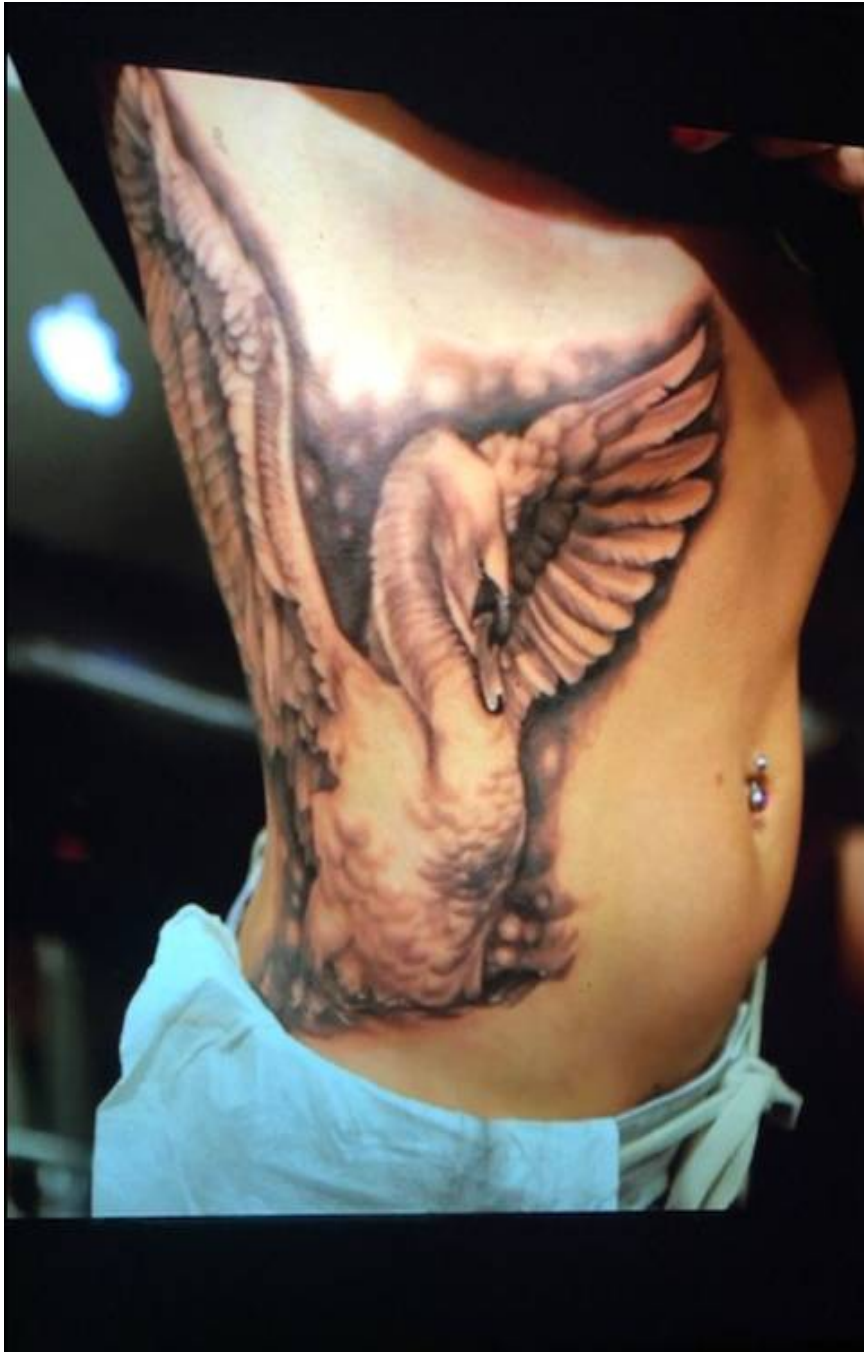


Figure 21 Tanya, “The Swan”/Artist, Jimi May

Tanya, at 40 years-old, accidentally finds out that she was adopted by the man she has thought was her biological father. She attempts restoration of her long-held identity through this tattoo. In response to being dislodged from her

biological identity, she has a large swan with expansive and angelic wings embedded in her flesh. She says that "Swan" her last name, the name given to her by her adoptive father is the only name she knows.

Now, with this extraordinary tattoo, she has adopted him, as he had adopted her. She has engraved a very large swan under her wing (her arm) in correspondence to her experience that her father had taken her "under his wing." She is made whole again, becoming "bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh"—the language employed in Genesis (2:23) which is expressive of a closeness that is only attainable through the most intimate relationships, relationships based on biological linkage.

Her sense that she is re-orphaned, dislodged from her identity, seems to draw her attention to the power of her name, "Swan." Feeling unyoked from it, from the defining experience of herself as "The Swan," she has the opportunity to move around her love for her father, giving herself the space to wonder, and to inquire into the symbolic meaning of her name for her.

It is clear that her name has now become a personal symbol for her, carrying important spiritual rights, her sense of identity, including who she is, and where she is from. Reclaiming her name as a product of an intimate and painful re-wounding, she owns it again through this tattoo, this time from the authority and creative agency of her own hand.

Placaso, “My Own Thing”/Artist, Franco Vescov—a Journey into the Barrio



Figure 22 Placaso, “My Own Thing,”/ Artist, Franco Vescov—a Journey into the Barrio

Placaso begins his narrative by announcing that he “doesn’t want to be like anybody else.” He seems to view his skin as a canvas for an oral pictorial history and a tangible means to tell his own story, to create himself, to view himself, name himself, as an original, and to provide a way for others to know his story.

Believing fully that pictures speak more powerfully and immediately than script, Placaso has most of his body covered with tattoos. Each image, although employing a vocabulary at points enigmatic to me, contains meaning driven up

by his living of it, and appears to be an attempt to bestow identity marks on his body, suggestive of something nostalgic, stable and ineluctable about his personality.



Figure 23 Placaso, “My Own Thing,”/ Artist, Franco Vescov—a Journey into the Barrio

Placaso’s inscription of his tattoos can be seen as a performance of permanence. The multiple tattoos provide a line of continuity, that moves through his life, and from which he can see himself. The images are soulful, powerful, story-telling stories that layer, image upon image—memorial images, images of loved ones, images of violence, of addictions, images of heaven, of

redemption, images of his barrio neighborhood, and most importantly images containing the stuff of dreams. His images attempt to mirror everything of value for him, and articulate the center and touchstone of his life. There are skulls, a clown, crosses, flowers, guns, tools, eyes with vision, all celebrating life and celebrating the power of sudden and violent death that is always evident in the Barrio. All the images attempt to capture with dignity and honesty the markers in his life.

Placaso seems, above all, to want to satisfy the desire to put everything that he loves on his skin, and have it with him always. As an assemblage constantly in view, Placaso can come to know his own uniqueness, a uniqueness rooted in his cultural inheritance—his identification with the Chicano culture in which he is deeply embedded.

Claudia Perez, Virgin, Artist/ Louie Gomez



Figure 24 Claudia Perez, "Virgin," /Artist, Louie Gomez

The painful experience of Claudia's mother's illness and certain coming death has provided the wounding and the ground for this transformational tattoo. Claudia seems to instinctively understand, that for her, the image of the Blessed Mother tattooed on her back can provide an access to what she feels she is destined to lose through her mother's painful death—access to her personal mother, to the sacred, and to the internal mother that allows for the potential for the forward movement of her life. She says, “By having my tattoo on my back, it just feels like I have my mom with me. I always am going to carry her with me; when I pray at night I feel like she is there with me, praying with me.”

The act of getting a large tattoo on her back is for Claudia a conscious replication of the literal suffering that her mother has experienced during her painful illness. Intentionally submitting to the step by step painful and lengthy process of getting this tattoo, is designed for her to simultaneously endure a replica of her mother's exquisite pain and to imprint an artistic rendering of the Mother of Christ on her back. In this repetition of her mother's pain, each wounding mark takes both a visceral, and a symbolic form, each puncture accents the pain, the acceptance of the loss, and makes possible its symbolic return.

The completed image and the wearing of it in plain sight emphasizes its retrieval from the lost, now in a different form. The tattooed image transforms the loss into an internal companion that can bridge from the bodily and material realm to the sacred. For Claudia, the Virgin fosters both an open window to God and renders her access to her own sense of potential wholeness.

Sean, The Family of Man and the Australian Gum tree, Artist/Tommy Montoya



Figure 25 Sean, "The Family of Man and the Australian Gum tree"/ Artist, Tommy Montoya

I will end with Sean's tattoo, "the Gum Tree," which he sees as a symbol of what his country (he is referring to Australia) is about. "It is strong, resilient, and it pretty much can withstand anything." He and his wife are represented on the trunk and the 23 members of his extended family (including the dogs) are on the branches. The words on the top of the tattoo are *Carpe Diem*.

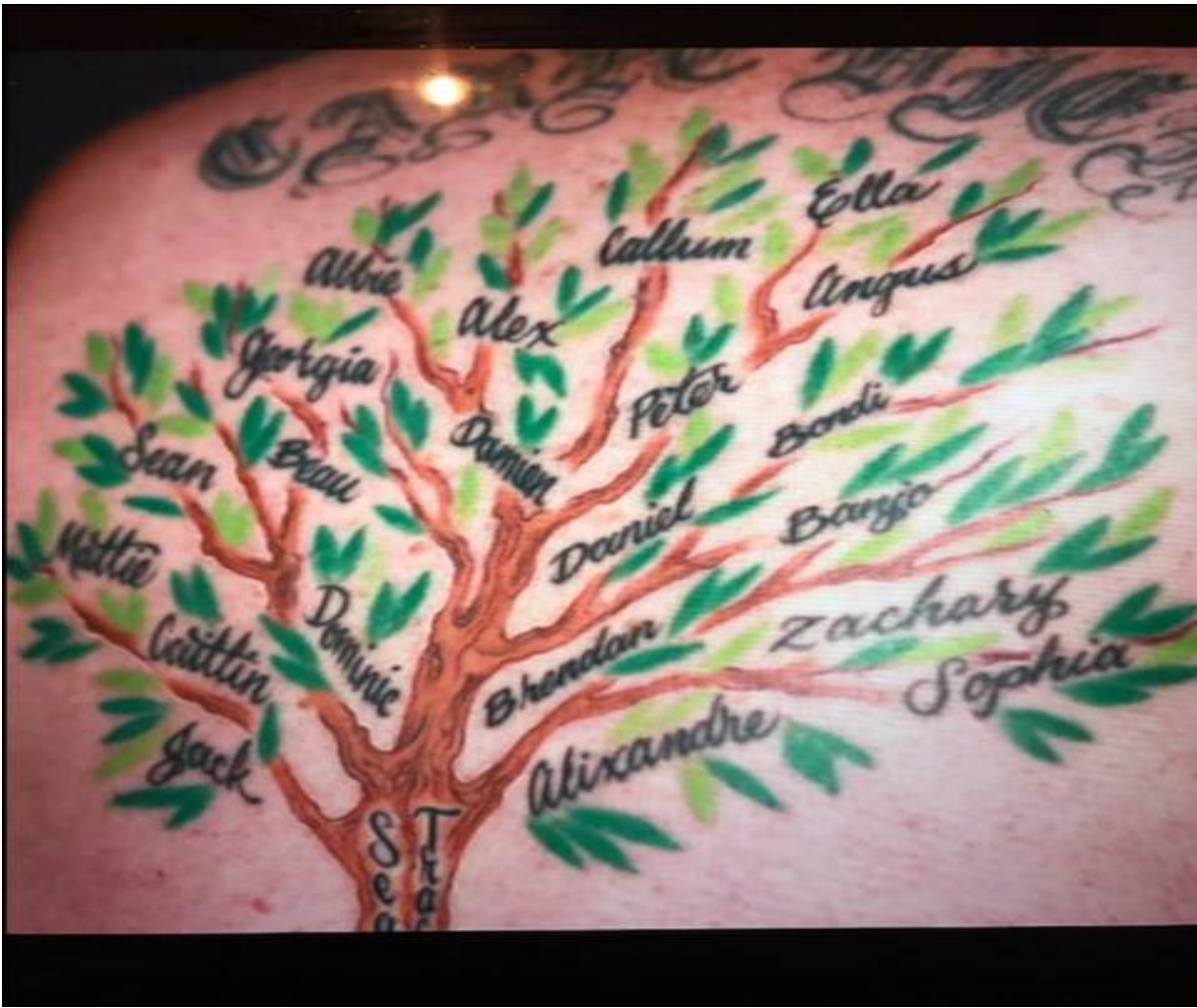


Figure 26 Sean, "The Family of Man and the Australian Gum tree"/ Artist, Tommy Montoya

Sean did seize the moment, and answered the call of a friend asking him, a seasoned steel worker from Australia, working in Connecticut at the time, to come and aid in the cleanup at the World Trade center during 9/11. Sean's experience and his powerful human response to it serves as a simple testament to the best and enduring in human nature, a testament that he himself both embodies and lives by. His words are profoundly validating giving expression to our lives, both individually and together. The inscribing of the tattoo brought everyone in the artist's studio into a physical embrace. I will quote his words as he spoke them:

“I went down to the world trade center the day it went down, and was doing a lot of cutting of steel and removing of bodies out of the structure. It was horrendous, absolutely horrendous. I pulled out the remains of seven firemen, took out probably three civilians. I had to amputate a fireman’s leg with a pocketknife because we couldn’t cut through his bunker gear with the saw, so I had to reach in and cut his leg off. We uncovered the remains of a woman, and she was dead, she was crushed, but she wasn’t mutilated, and to this day I see her face.”



Figure 27 Sean, “The Family of Man and the Australian Gum tree”/ Artist, Tommy Montoya

One of the firemen that we extracted had a very similar body size to one of my brothers, who is a fireman. And that was something that impacted me dramatically at that moment because he physically looked like my brother. It made me pause to think about how dangerous their work is and what they do for

a living. So, the family tattoo that I chose represents my love for my family, and knowing that they would do that same for me or for any other human being, if they were in the position that I was in.”

Conclusion

In conclusion, I can only add that I am deeply honored by the people and the artists who have shared their stories, and introduced me to their world, a world that I had little knowledge of and less understanding of, when I began this project two years ago.

At the point, that I am, now, in my journey, I can, at best, make one simple conclusion: Tattooing is not the transcription of experience, but in many cases the transformation of it, in relationship to the necessity within the individual to incorporate past wounding, integrating it and opening it, to become a creative link with the future.

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Image credits:

Figure 1: "Untitled", June 2007, Hannah Starkey, Photographs 1997-2017/Courtesy of Mack

Figure 2: Tattoo Image from Stephanie Tamez, "Compassion" (Mifflin, 113)

Figure 3; Tattoo Image from Roxx, "Symmetrical Forearm Tattoos Evoking

Sacred Mandalas,” (Friedman, 85)

Figure 4: Tattoo Image (dotwork) from Nazareno Tubaro, “Sleeve with Designs Evoking Sacred Geometry,” (Friedman, 123)

Figure 5: Tattoo Image from Kore Flatmo, “Tiger Amid Waves and Waterfalls” (Friedman, 55)

Figure 6: Tattoo Image from Sake, “Raven and Crying Woman” (Friedman, 158)

Figure 7: Tattoo Image from Sake, “Female Portrait with Smeared Makeup” (Friedman, 159)

Figure 8: Tattoo Image of Erin Chavez, “Angels,” Artist/ Corey Miller (Tattoo Nation, 2016)

Figure 9: Tattoo Image from Peter Aurisch, “Figures Embracing” (Friedman, 174)

Figure 10: Tattoo Image from Simone Pfaff and Voker Merschky, “Beauty and Death United” (Friedman 184)

Figure 11: Tattoo Image from Victor Portugal, Back Tattoo, “Elegant female face morphing into tattered ribbons” (Friedman 250)

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Figure 13: Image from Little Swastika, “Back Piece Evoking Pastel Drawing” (Friedman 172)

Figure 14: Photo: “Self-portrait”, Lance de Los Reyes, “Quiet Lunch”/Lance de Los Reyes/Book4/SS2017

Figure 15: Tattoo Image from Roxx, Back Piece “Accentuating the Spine and Ribs Underneath” (Friedman, 86)

Figures 16,17,18,19: Sophia, “Half/Half forearm Wolf Tattoo”/Artist Shaun Bones, (Bondi Ink Tattoo Crew, 2016, Season 2, Episode 8)

Figure 20: Joanna, “Unicorn”/Artist, Moses Savea, (Bondi Ink Tattoo Crew, 2015, Season 1, Episode 9)

Figure 21: Tanya, “The Swan”/Artist, Jimi May, (Bondi Ink Tattoo Crew, Season 1, Episode 8, 2015)

Figure 22, 23: Placaso, “My Own Thing,”/ Artist, Franco Vescov—a Journey into the Barrio, (From Tattoo Nation, 2016)

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Figure 25, 26, 27: Sean, “The Family of Man and the Australian Gum tree”/ Artist, Tommy Montoya, (NY Ink (2013) Season 3 Episode I)