

Adelaide Ink by Mik Massingham

As a tattooist and a practicing professional visual artist it is rare to be given the opportunity to cross the borders and cultural divisions that separate our industry and the mainstream visual arts community. Recently myself and several other prominent Adelaide tattooists, in conjunction with some of Adelaide's local artists, were given just that; an opportunity to become involved in a fine art exhibition with a difference.

Inspired by the popularity of the hit Foxtel programs "Miami Ink" and "LA Ink", Dr Noris Ioannou and Tamara Baillie from Nexus Multi-cultural Arts Centre in Adelaide approached Tribal Mike and Morag from the Tattoo Gallery about putting together a fine art exhibition with a theme based on body art, to be run during Adelaide's Arts Festival. To those of you not familiar with it, "The Festival" is a major event on The Visual and Performing Arts calendar and the most significant annual Arts event of the year in Australia and probably the entire South Pacific region. What was surprising was that Noris not only wanted to host an exhibition celebrating our industry in an event of this magnitude, but he was relying on the participation of the general public in a "tattoo show and tell" segment during the official opening, to spark interest amongst those who came along. When I first heard about this idea, I must admit I was a little skeptical and thought that it might be a bit lame, but to my surprise and Noris' credit, this was a truly inspirational concept.

Being my usual punctual (some would say "anal") self, I got to the opening a few minutes early. The opening was to be held in two parts; a "show and tell" followed by the "official opening" of the exhibition to be introduced by Tribal Mike and Noris. Unsuspectingly I said hello to Tamara and she asked me if I wanted to speak about my tattoos and tattooing in general. I'm not much of a one for public speaking, however I agreed as it was only fair given the opportunity that I had been offered. Little did I know that directly after Noris' eloquent introduction, I would be up as the first guest speaker (thanks Mike!). At this stage, with nothing prepared and a modest crowd waiting for my pearls of wisdom, I felt that my initial reaction to this stage of the event would be correct. How wrong I could be. As I was speaking, and continuing right through to the end of this first segment, people kept piling into the venue until it probably couldn't have fit any more without breaching safety standards. It was truly amazing. As I listened to more and more of these people from all walks of society talking, sometimes passionately, sometimes humorously and always sincerely, about their reasons behind the choices that they made when getting their tattoos (and not all of them good) I felt a sense of pride that I

hadn't quite felt to this extent before; that we, as tattooists, have the respect and trust of our clientele to render an image that is so extremely personal to them, and the pride that they themselves carry with them after it is done. Although I am always aware of how much a tattoo can mean to my clients, it is almost an abstract awareness of it, it wasn't until hearing this public forum that I realised just how much and how highly, we as tattooists are regarded by those on whom our art adorns. I think that Mike will agree with me that this was a truly humbling experience and one that I certainly did not expect. In the end the "Show and Tell" went the full two hours it was allocated and could easily have gone for another two.

Another surprise was waiting for me when this very interesting segment of the opening finished. When I exited the upstairs function room to make my way downstairs to the Gallery proper for the "Official Opening", I was amazed to see even more people already waiting to go into the Gallery. There were at least two hundred people trying to cram into an area that holds fifty at a push; and all this at a minor exhibition during a festival that has hundreds of Performing and Visual Arts shows on around the city. It is just another example of how popular and widely accepted tattooing is becoming.

Once inside it was a little hard to see all of the work displayed, due to the high volume of those attending. Once the crowd began to thin, though, it was immediately obvious that the standard of work on display was very high. Well known and highly regarded Adelaide Tattooist, Shep, from The Body Art Shop had three pieces on display that showed the influences of traditional tattoo design from the US, Japan and Polynesia. These were easily recognisable due to their vibrant colour and heavy tonal contrasts.

Allan Kelly's emotive work, "Metamorph=Bio" had a cubist and almost "Latin religious street art" feel to it which contrasted very effectively with Humna Mustafa-Khamsa's Hindu influenced "Khamsa" series done with henna on silk.

Ann Newmarch and Michael Kluvanek did a collaborative Photographic effort based on the patterns found in textile and tattooed skin while Lampin, one of my tattooists from SRT Studios did a huge and visually impressive tattooed: "Marilyn" which had an almost Andy Warhol "Pop Art" feel to it and a catchy title "Burn Hollywood Burn". What I found most inspiring about this is that I had given him only three weeks notice to produce something, well done mate.

The extremely talented artist whose work was used on the posters and invitations for "Adelaide Ink", Deidre But-Husaim, displayed a beautiful and regal Post Modern image of a woman with a facial tattoo. Unfortunately for us, but fortunately for Deidre, the work used in the poster and invitation, "Beauty Marks #5", was sold to a Sydney art dealer prior to the show. Graciously though, she allowed me to have some images of her work from her "Beauty Marks" series, for which we can be grateful as they are simply stunning.

Not everything was canvas based art either. Marilyn Stock, a local artist who is highly influenced by body art, took a completely different take by creating body casts of people and painting traditional tattoo designs upon them. Stephen Skillitzi created an impressive Maori Moko mask from cast and fused glass with copper wire, while Simone Hede had created porcelain jewelry and kitchen objects with a tattoo design based theme.

Last but not least is the work done by myself. Since opening my gallery/artist studio below my tattoo studio I have been producing a wide variety of styles and this exhibition was significant in the fact that it allowed me to further explore the development of tattoo influences in fine art. I had four pieces on display, two in charcoal, "Latent Memory 1&2" which were a look at the cultural and historical influences of tattooing. The next two are acrylic on canvas paintings in a post-modern style. "Living Art #1" is an urban landscape with a male figure with a burning skull tattoo. The second, "Living Art # 2", is of a Geisha with a tattoo of a snake wrapped around bamboo that gradually evolves into a three dimensional snake coiled to strike. The interesting thing about this work, and yet another indication of how popular and accepted tattooing is becoming, is that it was chosen to be the cover of "The Adelaide Review", Adelaide's Visual and Performing Art's Newspaper during the biggest Art's Festival in the calendar.

All in all, this exhibition has verified for me that we as tattooists and tattoo enthusiasts have finally reached that point where we are no longer considered as a dangerous sub-culture, but can be proud to take our rightful place as devotees of one of the most ancient and revered artistic movements of history-Tattooing.

Many thanks must go to Norbert Ioannou and Tamara Baillie from Nexus Multi-cultural Arts, Tribal Mike and Morag from The Tattoo Gallery, all of the artists who put in their time and effort and most of all, the public who supported this event and tattooing in general.