

tattoo you

Why is it that more and more young women are feeling the urge to use their body as a blank canvas and get irreversibly inked up? Posy Dixon strokes her chin and investigates

A seagull eating a chip. Winnie the Pooh and Piglet holding paws walking into the sunset. “DUDE” in massive block letters. A selection of the more memorable tattoos I have come across in my time, which I think pays testament to the huge variety of styles, inspirations and motivations that leads to individuals choosing to ink their skin for the rest of time.

Tattoos tell stories, project identities and often become a permanent “freeze frame” of an individual’s existence, emotion and desire at a certain moment of their life. The history of tattooing is a mixed affair, dating back to the fourth millennium BC, when Ortzi the Iceman (the oldest preserved human relic) sported 57 carbon tattoos on his legs and spine. From ancient tribal markings, to the branding of holocaust victims to symbols of various subcultures, history has proved tattooing to be a powerful expression of human identity that mutates and transforms within the society in which it exists.

In modern western culture, tattooing has experienced something of a revolution over the past five years, with way more women than ever getting involved in tattooing as an art form and industry.

I personally have thought long and hard about getting a tattoo several times in my life. On one occasion aged 17 I was actually cycling through the streets of Honolulu to get an Hawaiian tortoise tattooed onto my spine, when I was hit by a car which sent me straight to A&E, bypassing the tattoo shop. I still thank that reckless driver to this day. Now at 25 I am still craving a tattoo, and think I am coming closer and closer each day to the “revelation”, when I will finally know what I want.

So for now, as part of my research and exploration into the world of body art and the epic amount of choice that is involved in getting a piece, I have tried to capture those women who, in my eyes, are changing the face of tattoo. From those inspirational girls who project a heavily tattooed image with confidence, beauty and style, to the talented female artists that have broken into the male-dominated

realm of the tattoo parlour – let us celebrate and congratulate the 21st century’s girls of tattoo.

When digging out the roots of this cultural shift, you can’t ignore the rise of tattooed women celebrated in the public eye. Everyday the papers print snaps of the elite guest list crew, young and beautiful women sporting visible tattoos with pride. Of *FHM*’s 2008 “100 hottest women”, 80 per cent of those listed had at least one tattoo. From style gurus such as Kate Moss to inspirational Olympians such as Yolanda Griffin, powerful female role models are sporting ink with pride.

There has also been an incredibly positive and creative movement in the practice of tattooing itself. More and more women are working as and training to become qualified artists – which in turn is helping to develop a unique relationship between women and tattoo.

I met with Saira Hunjan, the first ever woman to grace the front pages of *Total Tattoo* magazine, and a ground-breaking artist who is helping to pull down the boundaries between art and tattoo. Petite, stunningly beautiful and surrounded by an amazing aura of open friendliness, Saira destroys any stereotyped image of a tattoo enthusiast as she sits down for a chat over vegan bruschetta and a cup of herbal tea.

Raised in south London but with strong connections to her Indian heritage, Saira knew from the age of 14 that she wanted to be a tattoo artist, having spent her formative years drawing all over her sisters in ink, henna, or whatever she could get her hands on. Ignoring the advice of careers coaches and teachers, Saira spent her GCSE work experience leave cleaning floors and learning the ropes at her local tattoo parlour, and has stayed in the business ever since. After a long hard slog through a male-dominated industry, Saira never lost her enthusiasm for drawing and designing, and a decade later it has paid off.

These days with an eight-month long waiting list (having been tagged as the celebrity’s tattooist of choice after drawing the distinctive swallows which adorn Kate Moss), Saira has become an inspirational



PHOTOGRAPHY: SAM ASHLEY

Saira Hunjan



He asked, “Should I turn my ex-wife Ana’s name into ‘banana’ or ‘anal’?”

role model to both men and women in the tattoo industry. As an artist Saira works through a series of consultations with her clients before raising the needle, never repeating the same design twice. Clients commission pieces as a collector would commission a painting, ensuring personal tattoos remain original for life.

Saira’s approach to tattooing and her distinctive style has earned her recognition from publications stretching across the magazine canon from *Total Tattoo* to *Vogue* and *The Guardian*. In collaboration with her sister she has now launched gypsydevi.co.uk, a website which showcases her talent through murals, glasswork, tattoos, fashion collaborations, textiles and more, proving once and for all that tattoo inspired art is a valuable genre that is increasingly appealing to the masses.

Although it’s hard to pin down, there are definite personality traits I recognise between pioneers such as Saira, and female snowboarders and surfers who have challenged stereotypes to rule at a male dominated sport. Unsurprisingly so, a few of my friends who happen to rock on a snowboard or skate deck, have also developed a lust for tattoos here and there.

Ex-pro snowboarder Juliet Elliot wears one of my favourite tattoos around, a thorny floral William Morris inspired sleeve that she got “because I thought it would look nice”. Similarly, Nikita shred girl Isabelle Desjardins states, “I got my tattoos because I wanted them... working on TV I know people judge me because of my sleeve, but it’s becoming less and less of a problem with the younger generation.” Both Juliet and Isabel fear not the sag of old age, sharing the opinion that “a bingo wing is a bingo wing.” We’re all going to end up old and

saggy in the end so why not enjoy youthful skin while you can? A sentiment I couldn’t agree with more. Personally I can’t wait until my generation are wondering around London aged 80, blue rinses, perms and tattoos a go-go.

So have we tempted you? Thinking about getting a tattoo? I’d highly recommend heading to a tattoo convention (where international artists congregate in one city to showcase their work). I attended the London Convention this year and was overwhelmed by the huge variety of tattoos on offer. Seeing the artists working on red, bleeding flesh, hammers home the reality of getting “inked” and also the commitment needed to get involved. It’s also a great place to meet tattoo enthusiasts who are generally happy to share experiences, recommend artists and explain their pieces over a beer.

According to the experts (a collection of the amazing women I met at the convention) there are a few vital rules to adhere to when taking the first tattoo plunge. Saira recommends thorough research both into the artist and the design that you plan on committing to your skin. Invest time and thought into where, what and who, as a little patience in the decision process can pay off years later when your tattoo is something you are still proud to wear.

Another common piece of advice was “go bigger” as smaller tattoos are often regretted in retrospect. A large piece can be a scary prospect, but many people will pay testament to the fact that a tattoo that is in proportion to the body it is drawn onto often looks more “natural” and aesthetically pleasing than a small stamp like effect. And the last bit of advice, however obvious, is never ever get a boyfriend or girlfriend’s name tattooed. It seems to be the relationship kiss of death... as one friend asked at the pub the other day... “so should I turn my ex-wife Ana’s name into ‘banana’ or ‘anal’?”. What a choice.



Posy finally gets her lip tattooed

EPILOGUE – LIP TATTOOS, THE ‘CONSERVATIVE’ TATTOO

Caught up in a hyperactive trip to New York last month, I found myself coming home with an unexpected souvenir. I acquired a deeply significant, mature and intelligent “YEAH” tattoo on the inside of my lower lip.

The reasoning behind it was simple – I was in Brooklyn sharing brunch time Bloody Mary’s with an amazing bunch of new found friends, and someone suggested a group inking session, and that was that, two hours later I sported my very first tattoo.

Lip tattoos hurt less than a bikini wax, the whole lot is done and dusted in under a minute. In most cases, they “fall out” or fade after a year or two, so if unhappy with your face art, you can reassure yourself that it’s probably not going to last forever. And if you don’t tell anyone about your tattoo, no one need ever know. Just a week after returning from New York I sat at a lunch with my Mum (who rates tattoos in the same box as body mutilation and heroin addiction,) giggling to myself about the “YEAH” hidden right behind my innocent smile.