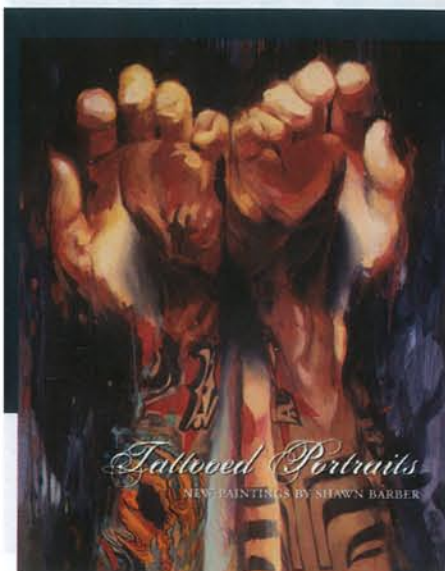


Tattooed Portraits Shawn Barber

INTERVIEW BY NEIL

Barber

Shawn Barber is an artist with an incredible vision and passion for tattoos, tattooists and the tools of their trade. Shawn somehow manages to capture the soul of his subjects and looks at the subject of tattooing in a new and refreshing way.



His work has recently found its way onto the hit TV series Miami Ink where the programme focused on a painting he did of Kat Von D. As well as creating these stunning paintings you see before you, Shawn has had many an exhibition of his work in many parts of America, teaches art at college and somehow has found the time to start his own tattooing career under the tutelage of Mike Davis at Everlasting Tattoo in San Francisco. The moment I saw his work, I knew that I had to find out a little more about this extremely talented artist...

Can we start with a bit of history, how long have you been painting and what inspired you to start to paint?

I have been painting seriously for about 10 years. Seriously in the sense that I wake up everyday with the motivation and excitement to paint and actually have sat down and applied pigment to surface for that many years. Art history, figurative painting, the Internet and my peers along the way have inspired me throughout this time. The Internet has opened up the possibilities to see what's really happening EVERYWHERE in art, from the past to the present.

Can you tell me a bit about your history as an artist? Are you self-taught and have you had any formal art training, college?

I have always had the impulse to draw, drawing is an immediate means to be creative with very few materials. In high school, I drew mostly superheroes and artwork for friends' bands. I thought that was it. Superheroes and comics. I didn't really have an interest in anything else. I went to community college right after high school for a year and a half and dropped out to pursue a higher education in substance abuse. At 25 years old, I went to back to college and really started looking and appreciating art history. A select group of peers in college challenged

me and my work. This experience has given me the most significant impact towards my art and how I live my life. Moving to San Francisco has only intensified my desire to create and be progressive. The art scene and calibre of artists here is humbling and motivating. I have been teaching art at the college level for seven years now - it's exciting to see how younger people think and react by their own impulses.



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What mediums do you like to work with?
Primarily, I'm an oil painter.

Are all your subjects in your tattoo portraits from real life?

The Tattooed Portraits Series is documentation, analysis and celebration of artists that are tattooed, tattoo artists, tattooed art, tattooists tools and materials, and contemporary tattooing today. The people that I am painting are very specific artists, whose works that I respect and admire. Artists that are unique individuals with sincere devotion to their craft and a complete sense of integrity. These artists are all busy, working professionals, as am I. It is impossible to have them sit for days while I paint them in my studio. Most are friends or have become friends and I have learned from and about all of the artists that I have documented. I shoot more reference photos than I need, and work from that experience to start each painting.

At what age did you get your first tattoo and by whom?

I got my first tattoo at 16 years old - a horrible scratcher rendition of Spiderman on my leg - the tattooist was a biker dude that was by no means an artist. He had me actually design a few custom tattoos for him because he couldn't draw

them himself! Unfortunately, I also have a decent sized piece on my back from him as well, another piece of crap that doesn't look anything like the original drawing. Needless to say, "You get what you pay for"...

Who are your favourite tattooists?

There are so many and for so many reasons. The short list includes- Filip Leu has to be at the top of the list for pushing the envelope right now and really dealing with the whole human form. Grime for his intensity, colour theory, attention to detail, composition and uncompromising integrity. Don Ed Hardy for pushing the envelope throughout his career and redefining American Tattooing. Paul Booth for being Paul- He's a great guy, a great artist. Paul means what he says, and like Grime, has uncompromising integrity when it comes to what he wants, who he is and what he believes. I have so much respect for these people because of their intent, their unwavering passion, and for what they have done to shape, inspire and progress tattooing as art.

Have you ever considered tattooing as a profession?

I started a formal apprenticeship with Mike Davis at Everlasting Tattoo in San Francisco about a year ago. I started tattooing actual

people about six months ago.

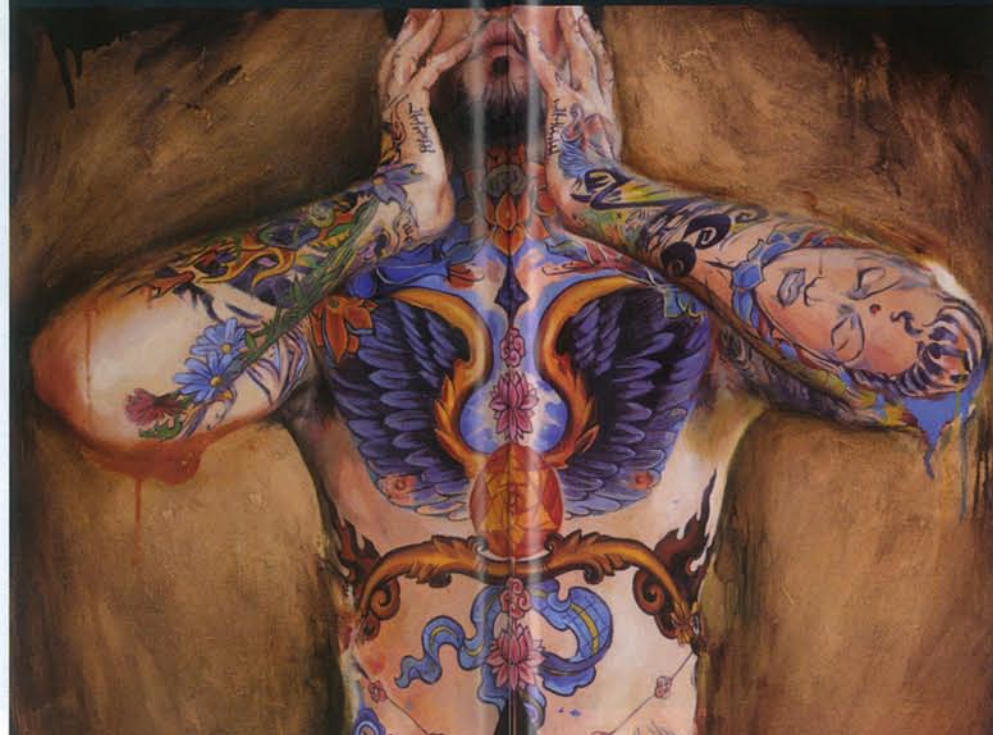
I'm only working one day a week right now because I have prior obligations - I teach at an art school in San Francisco and have four solo shows this year and also do quite a bit of commercial work. I'm looking forward to trimming down my schedule to spend more time tattooing. I have so many artists around me that have been showing me things and teaching me what they know that my progression has definitely accelerated. I just need more practice. I am also tutoring and giving painting demo's and lessons to



a lot of different tattooists - all of the guys at Everlasting. Paul Booth, Grime, Phil Holt, Yutaro Sakai, Patrick Conlon, Joshua Lord and others. In turn, they are helping me really learn the art of tattooing. Every tattooist that I have met has given me advice, insight and encouragement. I can't wait to see what my tattooing will look like in five years.

Do you find working with tattooed individuals interesting?

As a tattooed person myself, who is slowly adding more and more art to his body - I am



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down for the long haul. Starting this series has only intensified my interest in everything that involves tattoo. I think that by wanting to learn the craft and becoming a tattooist only clarifies my intentions and obsession with the medium.

What do you think of tattooists as artists?

I think that tattooists as artists are definitely changing the look of the general public. More and more tattooists that actually are artists are redefining the stereotype of what a tattooed person looks like. The general public is seeing better art more often and, hopefully, aren't staying ignorant or blind to the fact they don't have to pay for bad tattoos. Hopefully it will weed out the scratchers and people that just shouldn't be permanently scarring peoples' skin.

Do you or have you, ever seen your art become a tattoo? Are you aware of anyone wearing your art - like your doll series for example?

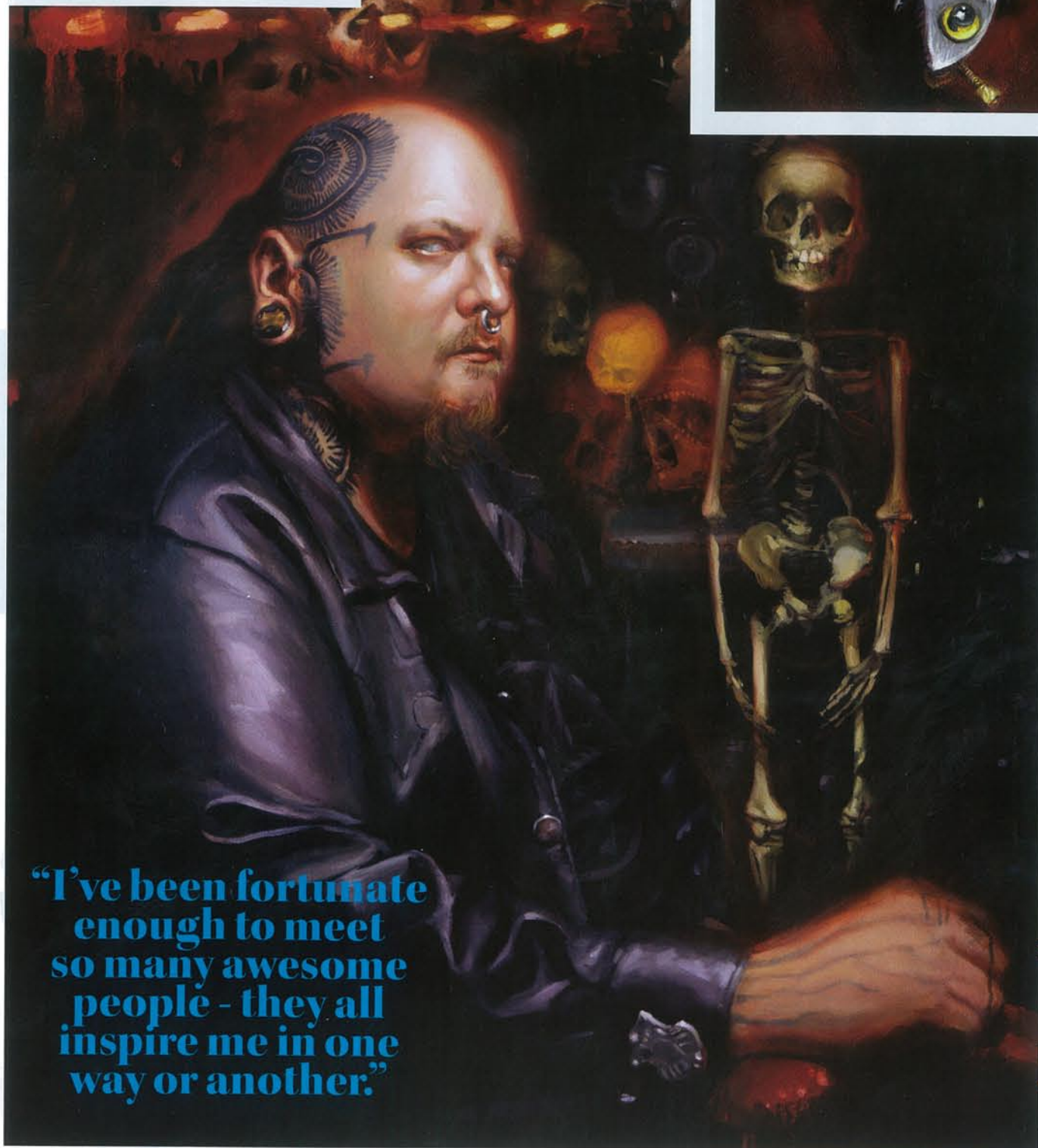
Other than the few people that I have tattooed with the doll series work, and myself - I haven't a clue if anyone is wearing my art. ☺



Have you ever displayed your artwork at a tattoo convention and if so, how did you work go down with the public and the other tattooists working there?

I just started going to tattoo conventions - this past week I went to a convention in Reno with some friends and did some live painting - I think that the tattooists working there were more interested than the general public... I will be doing this more so in the future. My friend Norm, who is Grime's apprentice and an amazing graffiti artist, and I am putting together a art show and live painting event at this years convention in San Jose show in October. We have invited a few really high calibre painters to throw down and add something new to the convention

experience. Paul Booth and Filip Leu's Art Fusion changed the face of what's possible at conventions. I think that by bringing in artists that are not tattooists it will just enhance the reality that it's all about art, creation, experience and sharing what you have to offer to the general public. The San Jose Convention is a perfect place to start this live painting experience because it's an intimate venue that has a very selective group of tattooists that work the convention. Horitaka puts on a great show- there's a high energy level and it really seems to embrace the art of tattooing.



"I've been fortunate enough to meet so many awesome people - they all inspire me in one way or another."

On your website, your paintings seem huge. Are they?

My paintings range from 8x10 inches to 8x10 feet. I'm slowly going bigger and bigger with the works...

Who are your main influences and what inspires you?

For me it's about respect for sincere integrity. Choosing and pioneering your own path. Not being a follower and willing to sacrifice everything for what you believe. I love art and have thousands of influences. I've been fortunate enough to meet so many awesome people - they all inspire me in one way or another.

Over your travels, have you noticed any areas that are more open and friendly to tattooists/tattooing than others

There is a definite difference in how people react and respond to tattooed people depending on where you go. Japan is super conservative, especially the city where my wife grew up (an island outside the city of Hiroshima). A couple of old ladies moved a few seats away from me when they saw my tattoos, riding the train. South Florida is pretty conservative, as well. In my hometown in Central New York - A heavily tattooed person is still seen as an outsider or criminal. Here in San Francisco, it's the extreme opposite. All of the hipster kids have their hands,

Shawn Barber
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necks and feet tattooed before they're 21. Overall, the city here is a heavily tattooed city. San Francisco is definitely the Mecca for American Tattooing.

Do you have any ambitions in either the painting/tattooing industry or otherwise?

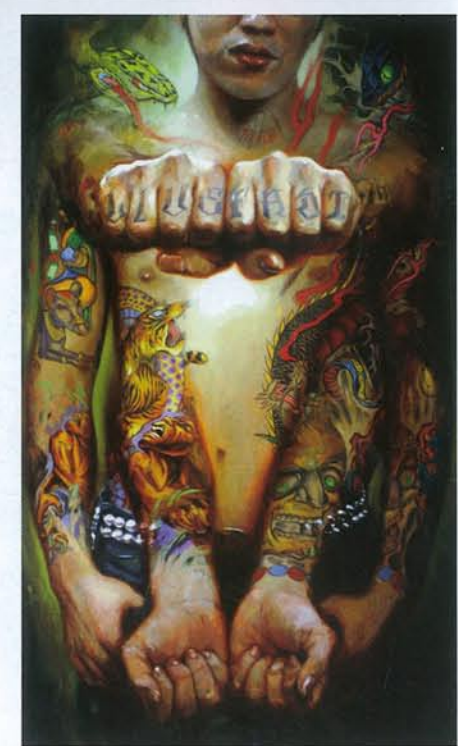
All that I am really interested in is progressing as a painter and tattooist and to offer something unique and new to both fields. If I am critical of what I do and surround myself with some of the best artists in the world, I really can't go wrong.

Is there anybody you would like to thank for helping you over the years?

There are so many people that have helped me along the way there is no way I could list them all here.

Is there anything that you'd like to add?

Thanks for the interest. ☆



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