

Mike Rubendall

New York artist Mike Rubendall doesn't really need any introduction. He's one of the big names of tattooing. A guest spot or residency at one of his Kings Avenue shops (Long Island or Manhattan) is a lifetime career goal

for many a tattooer, and his work is highly sought after by fans and collectors the world over. We interviewed Mike for Total Tattoo a few years ago and it was a real pleasure to catch up with him again.



Mike, tell us how it all began for you.

I started tattooing in 1995, when I was 17 years old. I learned under a gentleman by the name of Frank Romano, at Da Vinci Tattoo in New York. Now that I'm an older tattooer, I can really see the benefits of working in a street shop back then – just for the simple fact that you did whatever came in the door. That forced you to become really versatile.

So you did pretty much anything?

I did everything from tribal bands to biomech, black-and-grey realism and Japanese – and I learnt how all those different styles work on the body, and how to apply them. I got a lot of volume and mileage out of tattooing all day every day. And I was young, so I hadn't had the chance to pick up too many bad habits. If you get into the industry when you're older, and you've previously been focused on a different art – painting or graphic design for example – you can kinda fall into your old habits and routines. It's difficult trying to break that; tattooing is an extremely difficult medium.

In other words, if you've developed a muscle memory with a paintbrush, it's hard to adapt to a machine?

Yeah, exactly. You have to re-program your brain on how to do things.

When you became a tattooist, it was during the time of the tattoo ban in New York?

Yeah, but I was fortunate because I was in Long Island where it was still legal. It was underground, though, and rough and tumble. Definitely not the way it is now. I was a young artist who was into hardcore and metal – I wasn't a biker or into drugs or partying – and I was just fascinated with the art. The first time I saw it, it was like I got struck by lightning.



What changes have you seen in the industry over the years?

Tattooing is obviously more accepted by the masses now. There's all the art school kids, and the level of talent has definitely advanced. The equipment is better too. Reference and knowledge are so much more accessible – you can learn so much on the internet, with YouTube etc – and there are a lot more publications. When I first came up it was more difficult. It was a closed trade and access to information was very limited. It's easier to learn now, and it's easier to get good, fast.

Do you think that's a good thing?

It's a double-edged sword. More tattooers means more competition, but I invite that, because I think it advances the art form as a whole. It pushes you to the next level. You can't just do mediocre stuff anymore. There's a lot of shows in town, so you have to be on top of your game and provide real value to the people you're tattooing.

Is it important for you to surround yourself with other talented artists?

For me, that's extremely important. It was always a theory of mine: When you hire A-list players, they work together. You don't have to push them because they're already motivated. Nobody wants to get left behind! And we critique

each other in a healthy way. That feedback is vital. There's no way you're going to grow if people don't tell you what you're doing wrong, because you might not see it in your own work. So it's important to create a safe environment where that can happen in a positive, constructive way. We're always wanting to step up our game and do different things. I think that's been a really big part of Kings Avenue's success – thinking about how we can make the shop even better and improve the customer experience. We don't want to be ordinary.



We've interviewed a lot of artists who have worked with you, and they've all found it inspirational.

I always feel that the people I hire help me to be a better tattooer! They inspire me! They motivate me and it blows my mind when I hear people say things like they feel 'honoured' to work with me. It's humbling, because I'm just a regular guy doing the same thing as they're doing. But it's always nice to hear that I've had a positive impact on people. Sometimes I feel like I haven't done enough for tattooing. I want to keep the community going in the right direction, do the right thing for everybody, and – yes – hopefully inspire people. I don't want to stop growing. I want to keep improving. If you become stagnant or complacent, that's death to an artist.



What drives you to keep pushing yourself?

Maintaining that integrity. As the Kings Avenue shops grow, I don't want the level of quality to diminish at all. That's really important to me. I never got into this for the money. I could open up fifty shops, but it's not about that. It's more about the legacy we leave behind. I want Kings Avenue to be one of the most influential tattoo shops in the world... or even one of the most important in history. That may sound egotistical, but it's coming from a good place. I really want the best for our community because the community is something I really believe in and feel strongly about.

Social media has brought a kind of superficiality to some aspects of the tattoo scene...

It's all frosting and no cake! There's no substance behind it. It's life experience that matters. I've been travelling since I was 18 years old, and it's taught me so much that I could never have learnt at school. I feel very grateful. Travelling is a huge thing. You meet so many different and interesting people, and you learn a lot about different cultures. And talking about the tattoo community - it's such a cool cast of characters! So many smart, creative, motivated people. I think we're very fortunate to have that, but a lot of tattooers don't seem to take advantage of it; they're too busy with their heads down, on their phones.



Do you notice different client attitudes in different countries?

I think European clients tend to be a bit more open-minded than Americans. They're OK with not having creative control. Sometimes Americans want to play the art director role! That can be very restricting. I try to avoid clients who are too controlling, because I want to do good work – and whilst I feel it's the client's tattoo and they should have the final say, I know they won't get the best from me if they place too many limitations on the design. It's great to work with people who are more easy-going. You listen to their ideas, and you take their personality and combine it with yours. From that, you can create a work of art. And after all those hours, and all that work and energy you put in, if they walk away happy – and you've made a tattoo that you can put in your portfolio and be proud to show – well, it's totally fulfilling. It's hard to achieve that if you have somebody who is in effect looking over your shoulder and keeping you under their thumb.

Tell us about your creative process.

My process has developed through years upon years upon years of trial and error. These days, I find it best to take a photo and do a series of thumbnails on a smaller scale. It makes it easier to get the composition, and you're able to see how the image will flow with the body. Flow is an important aspect; every client's body is unique and has a different shape – we're tall, short, fat, skinny, etc – and you have to work with the contours, which is difficult. I'll prepare on paper and stencil just the main images (a dragon, for example) but I'll always draw the background on, so it works with the body and gives a natural, tailor-made look. There's a raw power in that which I've always been attracted to. It wouldn't feel the same if I stencilled every bit of the image.

Can you tell us more about how you draw your designs?

When I'm preparing a drawing I always have some music or a podcast on in the background, otherwise I get into my own head and tend to overthink things. Typically, I'll do a rough sketch and leave it on my desk at home. I'll let it sit for a day or so, and when I come back to it I'll often see something I don't like. I like to



analyse and study the design, even if that means I'm a bit over-prepared. It's what works for me. Some may find it hard to believe, but I still use reference. It keeps it fresh! If I just drew things out of my head, they'd come out the same every time. I get really inspired by looking at old Japanese woodblock prints.

Do you use digital tech for drawing?

I still do everything by hand. I'm not tech-savvy. I don't own an iPad and I wouldn't know how to use one! I think tech is great for people who want it; I watch people at the shop working on an iPad and it looks very efficient and time-saving. But I think there's something romantic about the whole handmade concept, from start to finish – from drawing to tattoo. I've been tattooing for twenty three, twenty four years now and that's how I've always done it. I'm all about change and growth and adopting new ways and techniques, but iPads are one thing I've yet to be comfortable with. Again, I don't think tech is a bad thing – it helps us in many ways – but it's not something I'm particularly interested in myself. It's the same with tattoo machines. I see people using pens and so on, and if that works for them and they get a good result then it's fine.





You've been involved with various television shows. How do you feel about those?

I don't know if you're familiar with VICE's series 'Tattoo Age'? I think that was a really accurate insight into our industry. It was very honest. It showed the way we operate. We need more of that, because it portrays tattooing in a positive light. Reality shows and their dramas are not always such a good thing. They can be so misleading for the general public. I would prefer to see more documentary-style programmes. But it all helps to make tattooing more accepted, which means more people wanted to get tattooed. However, we've lost the stigma and the secrecy of tattooing, which was cool too. I'm happy that I grew up in the nineties with all of that, but you know, times change. There's good and bad with everything. As long as tattooing is portrayed in a positive way... well, you can't ask any more than that.

You've branched out into a lot of artistic projects over the years. How do you decide on what to take on board?

It's tricky, because I get offered a lot. The way I look at it these days is that if the people involved are good people, and the project aligns with my standards and ethics, then I'll do it – especially if it's interesting and fun. If it's for something I would buy or wear myself, then I'll be even more likely to take it on. Obviously the last thing I want to do is look cheesy, or be seen as someone who sold out, but everything I've done I've always believed in. People might not agree, but I sleep well at night! At the end of the day, I just want to enjoy what I'm doing, and I still love tattooing as much as I did when I started.





Do you find it hard to say no?

Yeah, but you get better at it as you get older! When you've been around for a while, you know it's gonna be less painful to say no than get involved in something you don't want to be involved in. Everything comes at a cost, so you've got to pick and choose. You only have so much bandwidth. You can't give 100% if you say yes to every project and every client that comes along. There's many times that clients come in with ideas that we don't feel comfortable with, or that we know we can't execute 100%, and we're fine with sending them to someone else - because after all, we want them to have the best tattoo possible.

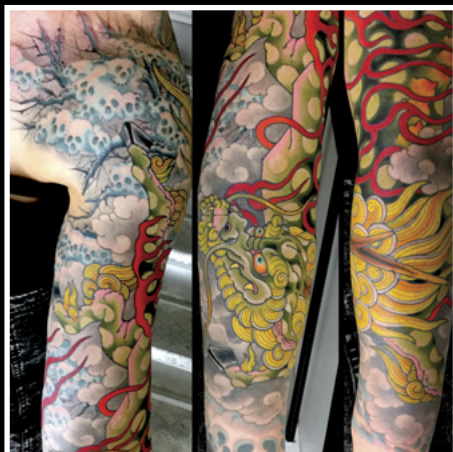
Do you have a good work-life balance?

I do my best. And I've gotten better at it! But it's hard. When I'm at the shop I feel guilty for not being with my family, and when I'm at home I'm thinking about the shop. I'm really working on being present where I am, because living in the moment is so important, and the rest will fall into place. It's like a fear of missing out, right?! I'm terrified of regret. I don't ever want to look back and think 'Shoulda, coulda, woulda...'



You've got two tattoo shops, a publishing company and now a supply business. What is your overall business philosophy?

This might sound corny and clichéd, but I just want to do the right thing. It's all about challenging myself. The supply company that Henning [Jorgensen] and I started came about because we felt there was a void that needed to be filled. Yes, there are tons of supply companies out there but we wanted to give the community something that we believed in. We met Jimmy [Whitlock] from Lucky Supply and found that we had a lot in common. We wanted to be able to sell products that we use; products that we can get behind; products that are reliable and do what they say they're gonna do. We're tattooers, so we're able to try them all out and vouch for them. So I guess my business philosophy is 'do what you say you're gonna do, and do your best to bring value'.



How do you tackle the inevitable obstacles and challenges? What advice would you give others?

I feel that if you're not failing, you're not taking risks and you're never gonna grow! The thing is, you have to fail. I'm hit with problems every day, and I'm constantly making decisions. Sometimes they're the right decisions and sometimes they're not. So you take what you learn from that past decision and apply it to the next thing, and you build on that. You just need to maintain your integrity, and not do things you don't believe in. Never rip people off. You can't short-change a client; that tattoo is gonna be with them forever. And if you're making books, put all your pride and love into them. Make books that you would want to read yourself or have on your own coffee table. Because that's what it comes down to; you make a product or create something that you would want yourself. I've learned to work through the difficult times. The thing is, I chose to be here; nobody forces me to do anything I don't want to do. I'm addicted to the suffering and the chaos and I enjoy it!

Tell us what you love about tattooing...

I love it because it's challenging. Even now. The creativity of it has always motivated me. There are so many variables – different people's skin, different body shapes, and no two designs are the same. I think that's what's kept me interested, as well as seeing the beautiful stuff that other people are doing, which keeps my eye fresh. I never imagined I'd be doing something like this for so long, but I'm still fascinated by it. It's like a drug to me. I can't stop thinking about it and I'm grateful for that! Life's too short to be doing a job that you don't love.

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