

TATTOO LIFE

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**THE BLACKWORK
AND GRAPHIC STYLE
OF FREDÃO OLIVEIRA
FROM BRAZIL**

**THE KINGS AVENUE
TATTOO**

**IN NEW YORK WITH MIKE RUBENDALL
GREZ AND THE ARTISTS OF THE TEAM**

**KOREAN TRADITION
AND CULTURE
IN TATTOOS BY LIFO**

**AMERICA'S EAST COAST CAPTURED
IN HERB AUERBACH'S
TRADITIONAL**

**REALISTIC AND
BURSTING COLOR
ANJELIKA KARTASHEVA
FROM RUSSIA**

**PETER STANICK
LABYRINTHINE AND DREAMY
VISUAL ART**

Time horizon

Today it is absolutely normal to speak about custom tattoo and we could go so far as to say that tattoo is now absolutely custom, personalised for just one client. The concept of custom tattoo first appeared in the 90s and it caught on immediately, marking the beginning of that spontaneous and unstoppable movement which led to the desire to generate art and culture on the tattoo scene. Since then, tattooists have felt the need to (at least try) to leave their mark in the field, to make a creative contribution to tattoo. Each with an imprint of their own, the fruit of diverse influences and inspirations, has tried to "produce culture" and in a certain sense historicize their work. I've thought long and hard about what it means for a tattooist to grow in such a way as to make their years of work into an experience that is constructive and meaningful (for themselves, for their clients, but also for the sector as a whole). Reading about the experience and reflections of Mike Rubendall and Grez in the article in this issue on the Kings Avenue Tattoo gave me food for thought. One thing in particular stood out for me from what they said: how the time horizon changes according to your experience. If you are only starting out, or when you haven't been working that long, the time horizon doesn't go beyond the week, but when you have acquired a certain maturity in your work, then and only then the timescale stretches and planning becomes a fundamental aspect in order to manage everything as well as possible. Everything, and it is fleeting, you acquire patience and a certain awareness of the fact that to get results you need to allow yourself time. And so you learn to manage the day to day but also to truly become a professional. And this year it has been more useful than ever to have a long term perspective. Not being able to work and having to wait for this situation to blow over has been really hard for everyone, but for some it has been utterly devastating. I have come to the conclusion that having the maturity to know how to manage personal issues on a day to day basis but also deal with out of the ordinary situations such as the one that has involved the entire world, well, above and beyond all the artistic flair and talent a tattooist might have, that is one of those aspects which show whether or not you are a true professional.



Miki Vialetto

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Cover photo

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THE PLACE WHERE TATTOOING BECOMES CULTURE

THIRTEEN EXTRAORDINARY TATTOOISTS. A SHOP LAID OUT LIKE ONE OF THOSE PLACES YOU HAVE TO VISIT AT LEAST ONCE IN YOUR LIFE IF YOU LOVE TATTOO, CUSTOM. IT COULD ONLY BE IN NEW YORK AND IT IS WITH GREAT PLEASURE THAT WE WENT BACK TO VISIT THEM NOW THAT NEW YORK IS OPEN FOR BUSINESS AND READY WITH THE BEST IT HAS TO OFFER. WAITING FOR US WAS MIKE RUBENDALL, THE FOUNDER, AND WITH HIM GREZ, WHO HAS BEEN AT KINGS AVENUE SINCE IT OPENED ITS DOORS TO THE PUBLIC IN 2005. TOGETHER WE SPOKE ABOUT MANY THINGS, NOT JUST THEIR INCREDIBLE CUSTOM STYLE, BUT HOW THINGS CHANGE FOR EVERYONE, AND HOW THE YEARS IN THIS CASE ARE NOT A DRAWBACK BUT A PLUS IN THE CAREER OF A TATTOO ARTIST.

And under the umbrella of KINGS AVENUE there is an extraordinary team of artists, thanks to whose work in synergy this hub of talent manages to produce outstanding culture in the world of tattoo. So let's line them up and introduce them:

Chris O'Donnell, Rose Hardy, Matt Adamson, Becca Genné-Bacon, Chris Fernandez, Will Lollie, Laura Leonello, Jasmine Wright, Ian Hansen, Mike Brummett, Lina Hsiao.



Watch the video

BY MARGHERITA BALENI

What a pleasure to see you again, Mike! Especially after the pandemic which brought our sector to a grinding halt over the past year.

How's it going with you guys? I bet you're all over the moon to get back to work! So tell me, what has changed over this period?

(Mike) I'm doing well, thanks! Definitely a bizarre and challenging 18 months, but with businesses reopening and the nice weather approaching in New York, spirits are much higher and there seems to be a light at the end of the tunnel. We were shut down for almost 4 months. We are just grateful to be tattooing again and fortunately, we are all healthy and staying busy. People seem to be more excited than ever to get tattooed — some have

expressed that it's even helped them get through these challenging times. I've noticed people are more appreciative of their time, and more conscious with how they use it and who they spend it with. We've all experienced how quickly life can change. Although this may have been the most difficult of times, I'm optimistic some good will come from all of this.

Is the team the same as ever?

For the most part, the core team remains the same. We've lost some and gained some through the pandemic; it's to be expected, I suppose. I believe this is one of the best crews yet. They are all so talented! There has been great chemistry within the group, and it feels like a new beginning, lots of fresh perspectives and ideas. They all really care about what they do and want to push their artistic boundaries. It's very inspiring to watch, and it motivates me



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to do better work. I look forward to seeing where this ride will take us next.

Speaking of the team, let me give a shout out to Grez there who is with you for this interview. Hey Grez, do you want to say hi to our readers too?

(Grez) My name is Grez, and I'm from the central region of New York. I've been tattooing at Kings Avenue since our opening day, November 28, 2005.

Mike, you are one of the tattoo artists who made history in custom tattoo on the international scene. What are you most proud of bringing to this art over so many years of work?

(Mike) Proud is a hard word for me because I didn't get here alone, I've been surrounded with really good people. I'm not one to sit back and celebrate the wins — sometimes I don't even recognize them which could be a gift and a curse. I am, however, honoured and grateful to do work that's important to me; to have clients that want my work and give me the artistic freedoms necessary for

me to produce my best. I also do this around really gifted people that I'm proud to work with and call friends. I started tattooing when I was 17, and it has taken me all over the world, taught me so much about people, emotions and life in general. I never had a clear direction until I found tattooing; the art, the people, the culture, the experiences, the

travel helped me discover who I was and create a clear vision of where and what I wanted to be. My tattoos are a product of all of this and an extension of myself. I'm proud to say I still really enjoy tattooing after 26 years, have much more to give and look forward to exploring new possibilities.

Your name stands for professionalism and in fact Kings Avenue, the original in Long Island and the current one in Manhattan have always been a Mecca of tattoo. What's changed since 2005 when you opened your first Kings Avenue?



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(Mike) That's a great question. I was 27 years old when we opened up Kings Avenue in 2005, and my vision was different from what it is now at 43. Although the shop has grown substantially and evolved, at the core much of the considerations and goals are the same. We try to approach everything with the long-game mindset: to take care of each other and your community and think about how our decisions will affect the community as a whole, long-term. Our goal was always to create quality work that leaves an impact on the tattoo industry and contribute in a way that will hopefully strengthen the traditional values. Hopefully, leave it in better condition than we found it, and how we want to be remembered when we're gone. Just some simple fundamental guidelines that we try to keep in mind while navigating through the noise. Grez and I have put in a tremendous amount of work and learned a lot since '05. We now have more artists on board and need help with managing all of these moving parts. Therefore, we needed to hire more support. We could not do what we do without our head managers, AJ and Dylan. They are the glue that keeps the shop together and running smoothly so the artists

can focus on their art. We also now have families and much more on our plates. Fortunately, over the years with experience we've become more comfortable with daily obstacles like time management, decision-making and problem-solving. It's definitely not easy. We understand the importance of communication with the team, and always welcome feedback to hopefully create an environment where we are inspired to do our best work possible, while providing the best experiences possible to our clients. We've learned the benefits of trying new things, stretching ourselves and taking some risks, all in hopes to learn and improve on many different levels. Along with this comes some mistakes and failures. We aren't perfect, but it is the process that is the magic!

What criteria do you use when choosing your tattooists?

(Mike) We are pretty selective in who we hire. Obviously, the quality of work, style and creativity is a priority; however, we look for much more than that. We want to work with quality people who are driven, responsible, professional, and respectful. During the process we have artists sit in and guest with us several times in order to get to know each other



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before we make an official hire. This way we can all figure out if it's the right fit for both parties. We believe in building a strong culture by hiring good artists as well as good people; the right people that work well together, learn from one another and that will level each other up. Someone that just doesn't show up for a paycheck but will work really hard toward something they are passionate about.

GreZ, I've got a question for you about something that got me wondering seeing as how we're so used to it... How come you're not on IG?

(GreZ) Unsurprisingly, this is a question I get fairly often. I have nothing against social media platforms. I think they've done both good and bad for our business and everyday lives. I just feel I don't want to make my life more complicated. I communicate on a daily basis with all that are closest to me, either via text messaging or phone calls. Anything else I feel would be business-related, which can be filtered through the shop. We have a wonderful management staff here at Kings Avenue that greatly simplify our lives. This way, any free time that would go

toward more work-related things can be dedicated to my family and creative interests.

You've been at Kings Avenue since it opened. What changes have you seen in the ambiance, demands from clients and life in the shop?

(GreZ) Kings Avenue opened its doors in 2005, with three artists total and an assistant. Since then, we have grown substantially, but not excessively. One of the most difficult aspects of building a shop like Kings Avenue is finding the right balance between talent, personality, and drive. We all want to surround ourselves with creative personalities that will bring a new layer to our shop. In the environment and atmosphere we strive to create, it will benefit all of us creatively, emotionally, and financially. Mike has always had a long-term vision for everything in his life, and this has affected all of us in the most positive way. From the beginning, we were all kids, never considering anything past the week in front of us. Now, thanks to Mike, we have options like health insurance and 401(k) retirement plans. I can't stress how important this all is for us, knowing that we

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can't all be working at this pace when we are 65. This shows the growth and evolution since our early days. We can still all be tattooers on an everyday basis, but with a long-term vision. Kings first opened in 2005 with a total of three artists and one assistant. Since then we've grown a lot but never too much.

Your style, so closely associated with Traditional, how would you say it has evolved over the years? What interests of yours or themes have had an influence on this period?

(GreZ) My style has definitely changed over the years, but I feel the true foundation has stayed the same. From my early years, when I apprenticed at Halo Tattoo in Syracuse, New York, I had a great amount of exposure to artists both past and present that affect me still on a daily basis. My dear friends King Ron and DJ Rose, the owners of Halo, were driving down to Washington, D.C. often. Jinx Proof Tattoo was housing some major names that were key to my development, both technically and creatively: Dan Higgs, Seth Ciferri, Brady Duncan, Matt Rinks, and housing guest artists like Scott Sylvia and Jef Whitehead. These names, along with Ron, DJ, Ed Hardy, Chris Conn, Sailor Jerry, Mike Malone, were imperative to my development as a tattooer. At times I tend to stray a bit too far from simplicity, and need to reel it all in. These names still influence me greatly on a daily basis.

Once I began working alongside Mike Rubendall and Chris O'Donnell, it brought a whole new language to my visual vocabulary. These guys were dealing with the same issues, but on a large-scale basis, and with full backgrounds. It was a huge eye-opener, and I've taken so much from that influence.

There are many outside sources I also tap into for creative drive. Overall, the number one would be nature. As tattooers, we are all so very connected to nature and all the themes it has to offer. That, combined with symbolism, provides me with endless avenues to explore.

Mike, Grez, one last question: how have you got through this really challenging year? What did you miss most about your work?

(Grez) I think we all had different approaches in life over the last year. Without work, we were able to spend more time with our families, which was much needed. Being able to help our kids transition to online learning, along with this new lifestyle with masks and distancing, had its challenges. Now with all of us being creative people, we had to find ways to satisfy that need in the absence of tattooing. I was so very lucky to be able to sell tattoo-themed paintings, with many of them going to my wonderful clients. This provided a creative outlet while helping my children with school. Living in New York City, you're used to a fast-paced life,



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MIKE RUBENDALL



GREZ

packed with daily obstacles. I needed to stay busy to feel normal. Aside from the school and art-related projects, I chose to dive into many house projects as well, with landscaping and actually painting the exterior of my home. This all gave me just enough stress to feel normal. Most of all, I missed working alongside everyone at the shop. The wonderful crew at Kings Avenue bring me much happiness and inspiration. It was great to get this back after being closed for 4 months. **Looking forward to everything getting back to “normal,” but so very grateful that we are all able to work through this. I know our dear friends in other countries have had a much more difficult time.**

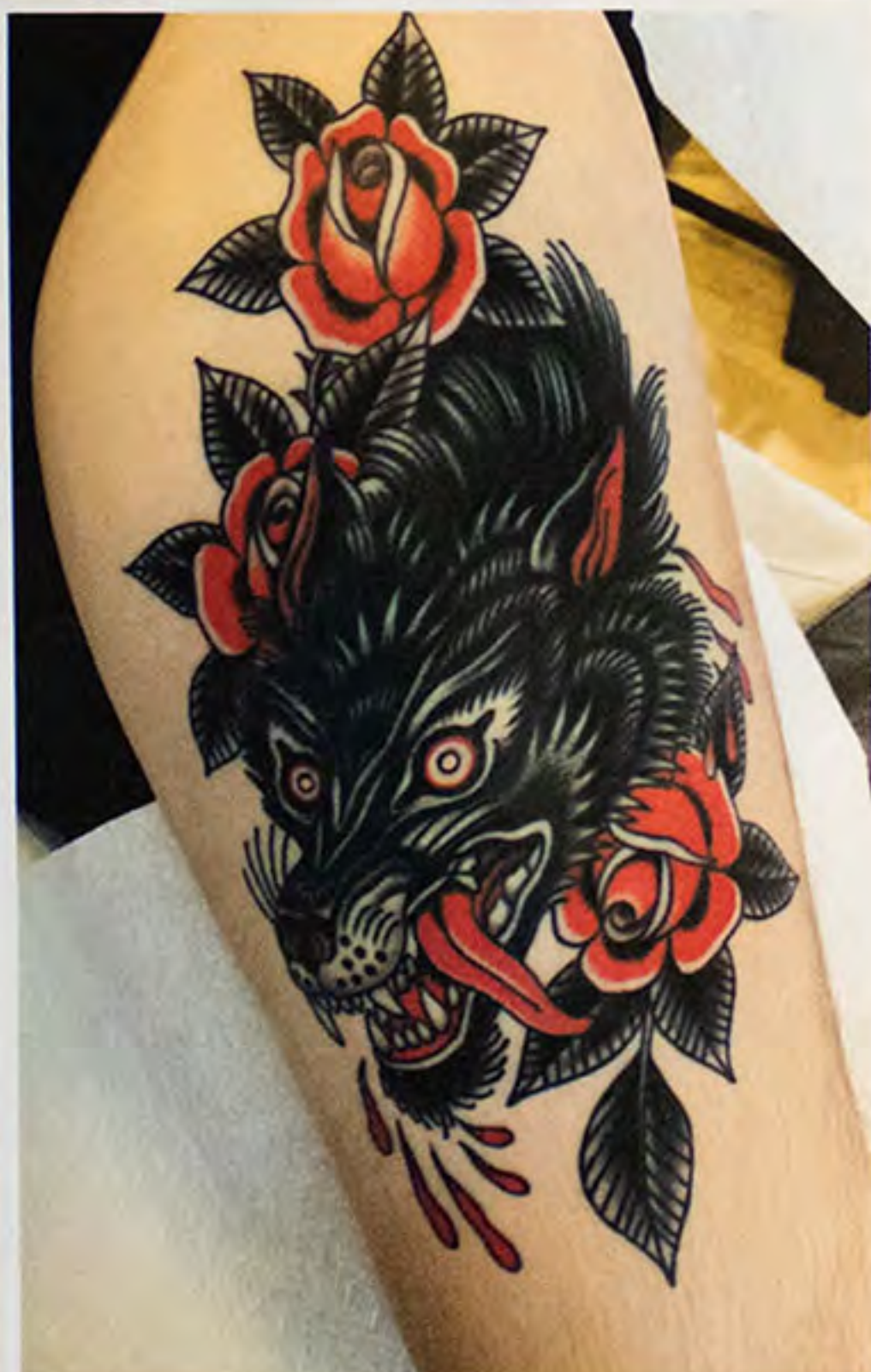
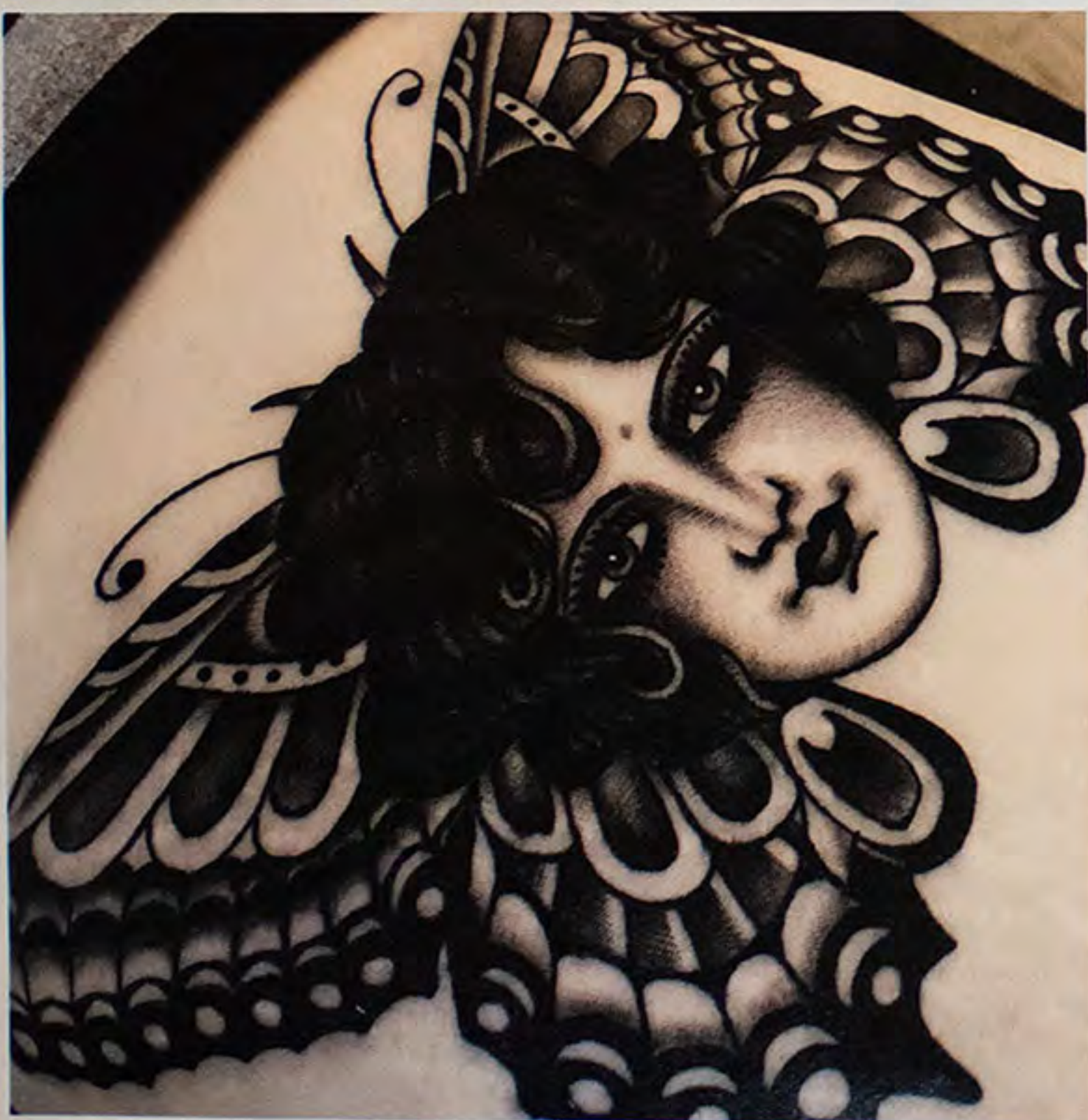
(Mike) Grez said it perfectly and I wouldn't need to add much more to it. One thing that helped me get through it was this naive thought that it was temporary and was all going to be over soon. I would have lost my mind if I took it more than one day at a time. I spent a lot of time with my family and shared some terrific memories.

We had shop Zoom calls with the crew weekly to keep that connection alive. I think just finding ways to stay busy and being creative helped many of us power through. In addition, we were all able to put lots of work into our art & apparel company called KA Collective. Artists and clients were super-supportive through this channel and helped out quite a bit, so big thanks to all involved! I must say, I became used to having family dinners every night, so I shifted my hours. I now start tattooing in the early morning and leave in the early evening so I can catch the kids before they go to bed. We also adjusted the shop hours forward permanently to all get out at a reasonable hour. That's one nice thing we learned from lockdown. I missed the camaraderie we had together, the laughs and dumb shit we would talk about together daily. The simple things. What I would give to have a client crash into my rinse cup just one more time. I missed being in the hustle-bustle of it all. Tattooing is chaotic at times, but it's fucking awesome! I'm fulfilled when I'm doing it, it gives me some sort of purpose – and not having it was devastating. I look forward to tattooing tomorrow!

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BECCA GENNÉ-BACON

Becca Genné-Bacon began tattooing in 2012 in Brooklyn, New York. She focuses her work on bold American Traditional which have a powerful visual impact thanks to her colourful execution.



CHRIS FERNANDEZ

Chris Fernandez is originally from Miami, Florida, and at the age of 15 was already a graffiti artist. He lived and worked for some years in Washington D.C. before moving and settling down in New York City. Chris uses a Traditional style with an approach that plays with contrast and patterns, creating a composition that fits the body well.



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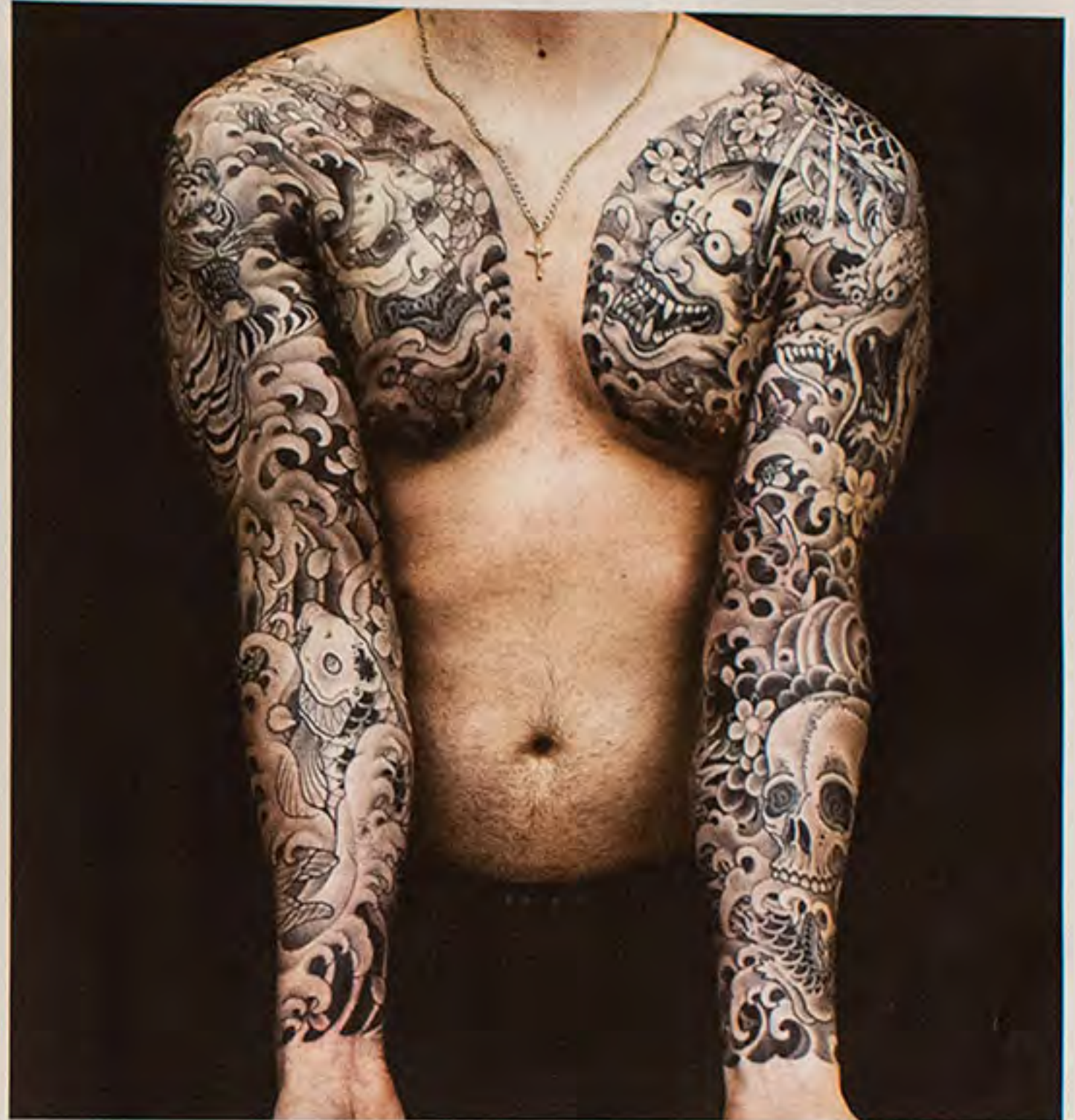
CHRIS O'DONNELL

Chris O'Donnell has been tattooing since way back in 1993. Chris specialises in a hybrid style which brings together the American and Japanese styles.



IAN HANSEN

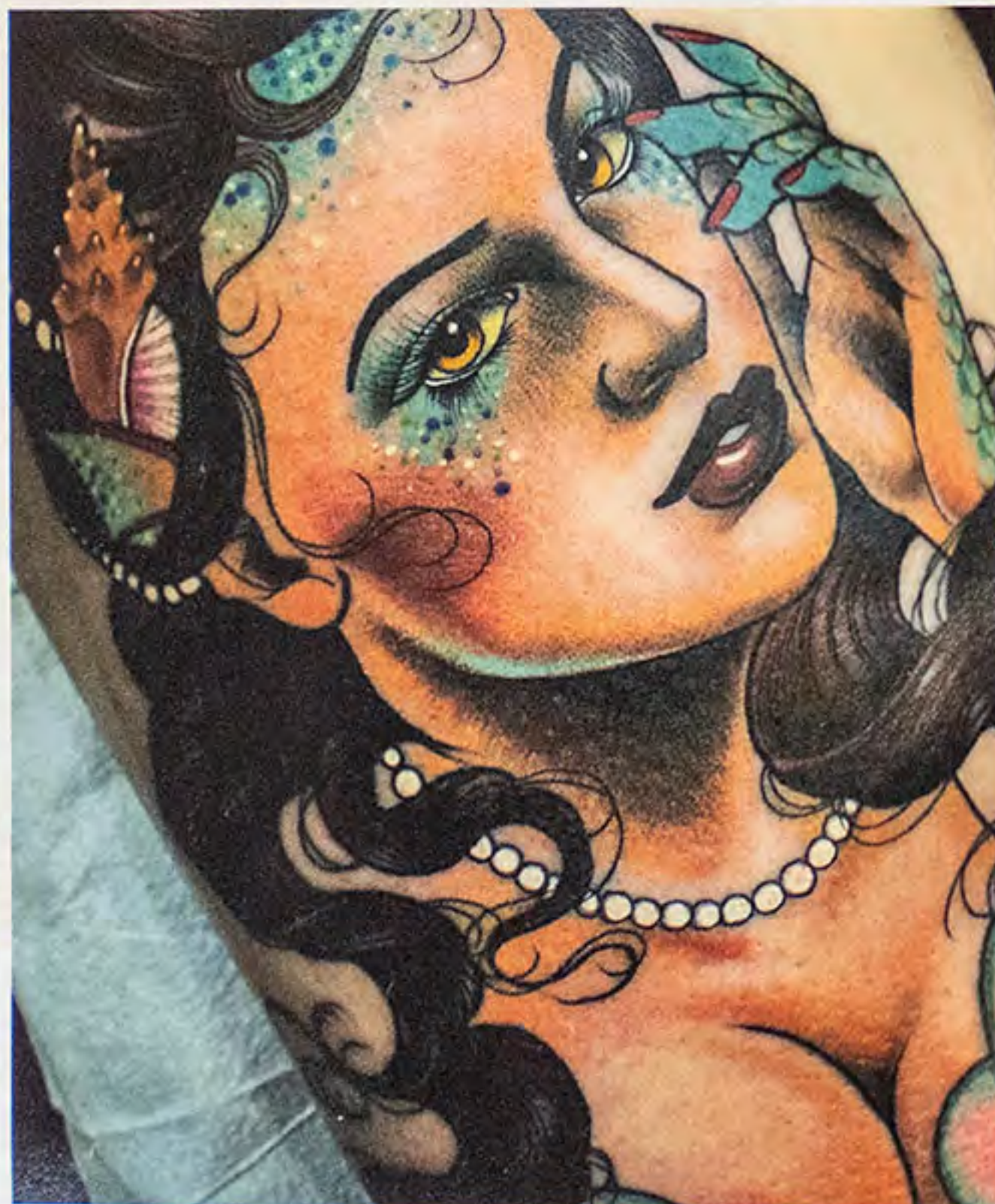
Ian Hansen specializes in large-scale Japanese inspired tattoos. He has a deep respect for Japanese culture and the traditions that go along with the art. Ian is passionate about sharing what he's learned with his clients and helping them find a personally intimate story or theme that connects to their life.



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JASMINE WRIGHT

Beginning in 2008 in California, Jasmine Wright's style of tattooing has evolved into an illustrative and emotional portrayal favouring figures and nature – playful, colourful, and dynamic illustrations that consciously strive to maintain long lasting imagery with integrity. Her future goals include continuing to draw inspiration from her colleagues at Kings Avenue, traveling, and creating through lived experiences.



LAURA LEONELLO

With love for black and grey tattooing, portraiture and realism, Laura creates long-lasting and timeless tattoos. Drawing on a wider range of influences, she aims to bring storytelling, myth and surrealism into her future work.



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LINA HSIAO

Lina Hsiao focuses on fine line black and gray drawing inspiration from Traditional tattoo imagery.



MATT ADAMSON

Matt has been tattooing since 2008, starting back in Newcastle, the heart of the North East of England. Matt confidently tattoos in many styles, however he has developed his own take on Neo-Traditional, Traditional and Japanese tattooing over his career and continues to push these genres.



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MIKE BRUMMETT

Mike Brummett is a tattooer from the Bronx, New York. His vision of tattooing is to explore versatility and give the client the best version of their idea that he can give.

Mike's style incorporates classic tattoo imagery and delivers a clean, powerful and readable tattoo.



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WILL LOLLIE

Immersed in culture and tradition, Will Lollie manages to create images which are unique and full of life, just like the people who wear his tattoos.

