

TATTOO ARTIST MAGAZINE

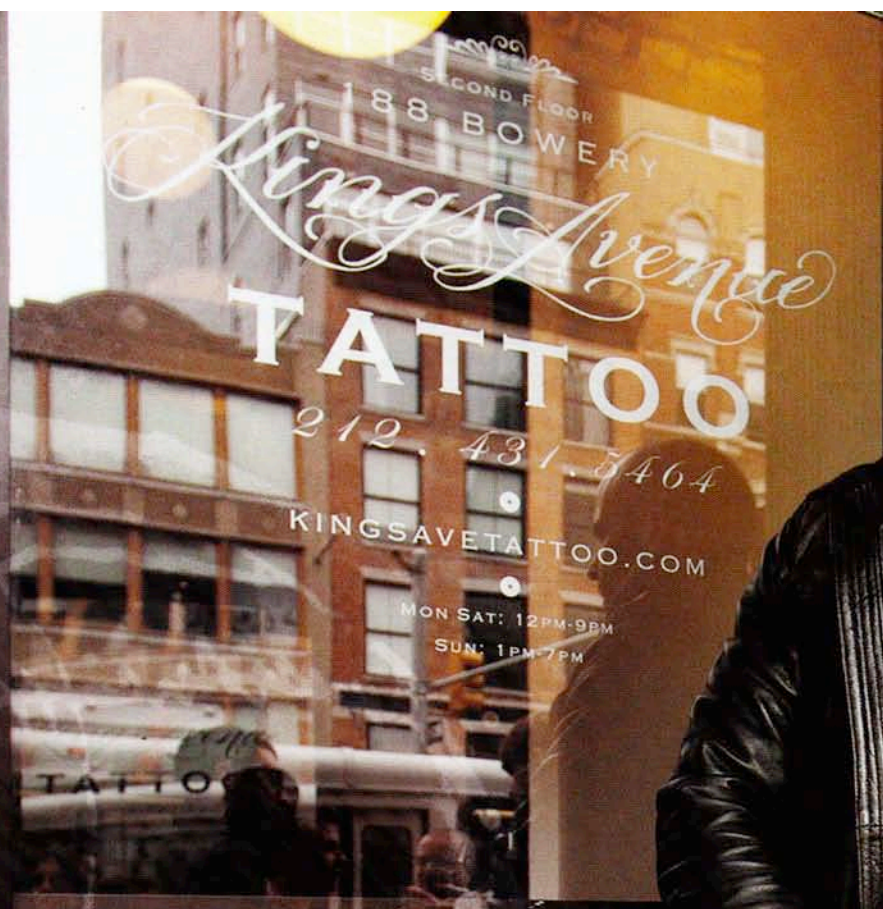
28



2011

RUBENDALL

Mike Rubendall Henry Lewis Dan Smith



Interview by CIV

Mike Rubendall

Photo by Richard Todd

Civ: My first question, because I don't know some of these things, is where were you born and raised?

Mike Rubendall: I was born and raised on Long Island, New York, in a place called Massapequa.

Beautiful Massapequa. Home of the Stray Cats.

You're right, you're right. And that's where I ended up opening the shop, Kings Avenue. In my hometown...

In your own hometown. I like that about you. Good Guy Rubendall. Is that Jewish?

No. German. I'm half-German and half-Italian.

I knew you were Italian. I'm half-Italian too.

Only the good half. I was brought up Italian.

Only the good half. [Laughs] I know. I don't talk about my Irish side either. Your father is Italian?

No, my father's German.

And what did your father do for a living?

He was a banker, on Wall Street.

For how long. Whole career?

Probably 20 years.

Mom was a housewife?

Yeah.

Perfect. Do you have any brothers and sisters?

I'm the youngest of three. I have a brother that's 10 years older than me, he's 43, and I have a sister that's eight years older.

Nice. And what do they do?

My brother works for the MTA, the railroads, and my sister owns a hair salon.

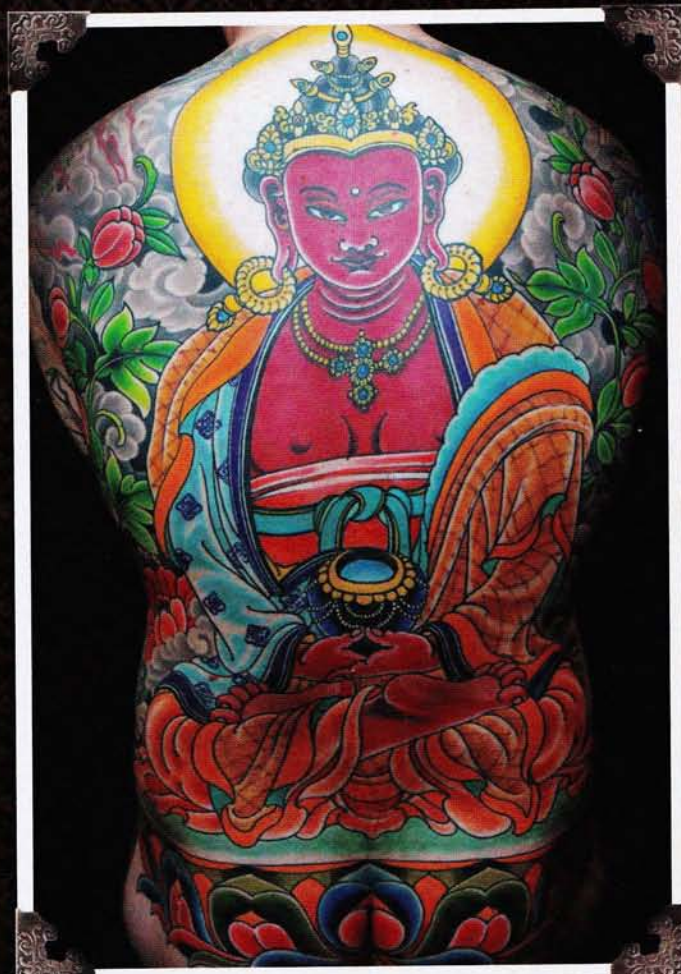
Nice! So you guys are perfect. When you were in High School, did you do any sports, or clubs, or after-school stuff? Or were you just a *split-after-school* kind of guy?

No, I was a jock. I was heavily into sports and always very active.

Yeah? What'd you play?

Lacrosse, football and I did a lot of surfing and BMX when I was younger. During the later half of my high school years, like my Junior and Senior year, I got into hardcore/heavy metal music and tattooing, so that derailed my pretty boy image and any type of desire to be a professional athlete.

That's okay. That's a good thing to get rid of sometimes. After high school, did you go to college? Or did you get right into working?



No college, I was 17 years old when I first started working for Frank [Romano].

That was your apprenticeship? At Da Vinci tattoo?

Yeah, that was 1995, that I started with Frank. I was still in high school, skipped college and I never had any sort of formal art training, or anything like that—I just went right into the tattoo biz.

Why did you think tattooing was going to be good, if you had no formal art training? Did you just like to draw?

I never really thought tattooing would turn out the way it did for me. I drew since I could remember. I got influence from graffiti and music at a young age. You know, the basic things that move you as a youth. I had always enjoyed being creative and was fascinated by tattoos so it made sense at the time.

Me too. Same thing. What about part time jobs? Did you do anything that like beat your brains in at the beginning, so that you were like, "I want to do something cool for a living?"

No. I mean I've always worked, my whole life, since I was 13 or 14—I had a paper route, and then I worked in a pizzeria, and then a junkyard. Then, once I found tattooing and realized I could make a career out of it, I became obsessed.

Perfect.

My parents got divorced when I was 10 and I used to go with my dad to his side job, which was driving a tow truck in Jamaica, Queens when Jamaica was really bad. He would have me go on the truck with him and hook up cars in these real suspect areas at all hours of the night. Not really a place for a 10-year-old, but it gave me a good sense work ethic.

I used to work on a Coke truck.

Yeah? [Laughs] But even working one summer at a terrible job teaches you, like, "Man, I don't want to do this forever. There's got to be a better way to make a living."

Exactly. So tell me about the apprenticeship. For people who don't know Frank, he's a character. At 17 years old, being thrown into that environ-

ment, how long did your apprenticeship last? And how brutal was it? I appreciate an old-school apprenticeship, so tell us a little bit about that.

Well I was 17, and it was 1995.

1995, in Long Island. The tattoo scene was not what it is now.

It was not *cool*.

It was sketchy and scary. I mean, I remember going to get my first tattoo in '88 in Long Island, because it was illegal in New York, which a lot of people don't know about. So you were in a *real* tattoo shop. Not like how we have it now, where it's kind of like a calm, passive, salon-type atmosphere. So what was it like when you walked in?

It was pretty mind-blowing. I didn't expect it to be like it was. You know, going to clubs and hardcore shows and seeing all this beautiful work, I didn't get to see the behind the scenes stuff, or what went into being a tattooer.

So I was working at a pizzeria at the time and looking through tattoo magazines, wondering how to get in? I was





calling supply companies, calling local tattoo shops and trying to get any little bit of information that I could, just to get my feet wet.

Long story short, I walked into Da Vinci, met Frank, and he made it seem like it was going to be almost impossible to get an apprenticeship with him. He basically said, "Take 10 of these drawings, go copy them, don't trace them, bring them back, and we'll see where you're at."

So it took me a couple of months to do that before I brought them back... He gave me another 15 and I did that again, and came back and he gave me another 15, until finally he saw that he couldn't deter me in any way. So he agreed to let me hang around. I swept, I washed his car, I cleaned the toilet, I got physically



beat into the apprenticeship. Through Frank I really learned the meaning of "tough love."

You got beat into the gang.

Yeah, *jumped-in*. And that was the beginning of a very long, difficult process. Looking back now I cannot picture it working out any better. Frank's unorthodox method of teaching, for me at that time was the most effective way of learning about art, tattooing and life... I grew up fast. I just put my head down and figured this is what I need to do. I never really thought that it sucked, or hated being there. I was willing to do whatever it took to learn how to tattoo. Now, I can see that there was a certain magic that tattooing had, that kept me driven and unwilling to give up on the whole idea.

Stepping into something like that, I think you came out perfect.

There were a couple of points where I was on the brink of a nervous breakdown and all that—because I was a young, confused, naïve kid, you know? Regular life, regular childhood, very normal upbringing, playing sports, doing well in school and then I get thrown in with this pack of wolves, forced to deal with life on a very unfamiliar level. It was a totally different life-style.

I think that's one of those things where, if you can make it through those points, or those parts of life, where you don't break, and you can test your mettle, then you know you're going to be okay.

Still, to this day, I feel like my coming up in the scene, in that era and with that group of people, set me up for life. It really prepared me for "real life" and the real obstacles that arise throughout life. I feel like the tattoo world taught me things they don't teach you in school.

I know, and I'm sure you feel the same way... But when shit happens, I don't panic.



In a way it desensitizes you to really heavy situations or you feel confident in diffusing any type of crazy situations that you never imagined even being involved in.

People are like, "Did that crack you? Did you break?" And it's like, "I didn't even bend, man. I just walked right through it." Yeah. See? Frank.

Good old Frank... He's the General. He definitely possesses the mentality of a leader.

Fucking Frank. [Laughs] Now, you mentioned New York, and those days... Eddy Deutsche came and tattooed in Long Island in the early 90s, which I found exciting and strange. This was before I was tattooing. But I think there was a lineage, because he was in with Peter Tat2, which was Frank's dad's shop. And he worked at Dynamic, on Deer Park Avenue. Remember that shop?

Yes. For sure

So Eddy was in Dynamic, but I think there was some sort of continuity between the Eddy Deutsche era in Long Island, to the Mike Ledger era in Long Island. And then I think that was the passing of the torch, and then it was passed down to you in Long Island when Ledger left.

So not as like comparison, but do you see that there is some sort of an inspiration, or a style, or an elevated aesthetic that you three hold in common?

I was aware that Eddy had a major influence on everybody in Long Island. He kind of set the pace for many tattooers on Long Island, and he obviously had a certain look to his work. It was something no one had ever really seen before and had a tremendously powerful impact in a very short period of time. It just brought Long Island tattooing to a whole new level.

Within a year...

Within a year, yeah. I believe Ledger worked with him for a little while, so he was seeing it first hand and was fortunate to be exposed to that early in his career. There was without a doubt some sort of lineage formed by Ledger, at the time, who was heavily influenced by Deutsche and Filip, and then I was at first influenced by Ledger, then later on Filip and Deutsche, so it was a natural progression. It would be hard to say Eddy Deutsche didn't rub off on all of us in some way or another.





I don't think people really know how close in proximity everybody was at that time. Did you work with Ledger at New York Adorned when he was there?

No. He left maybe a year before me. Ledger came up working for Frank's dad who owned a shop locally so I would see a lot of Mike's work growing up. He was a tattooer I looked up to in the early days.

Back to the topic of Deutsche, Someone up in Kings Avenue recently mentioned to me that they felt that they could even see some of Eddy's influence in some of the other guys tattooing in the shop, which I was unaware of. But it was kind of cool to see that he had that big of an affect on Long Island. And that it was so significant that it carried on through some of the guys I work with who were never really exposed to Eddy.

Yeah. I think he definitely did... for going on 20 years now. So that's a nice little lineage that he left for himself. Okay. So when you went to Da Vinci, did that start the Japanese thing for you? Or were you doing regular street-shop stuff. I mean, if you're working at a regular shop in Long Island, it's brutal some days. I mean how many St. Michaels have you done?

Hundreds.

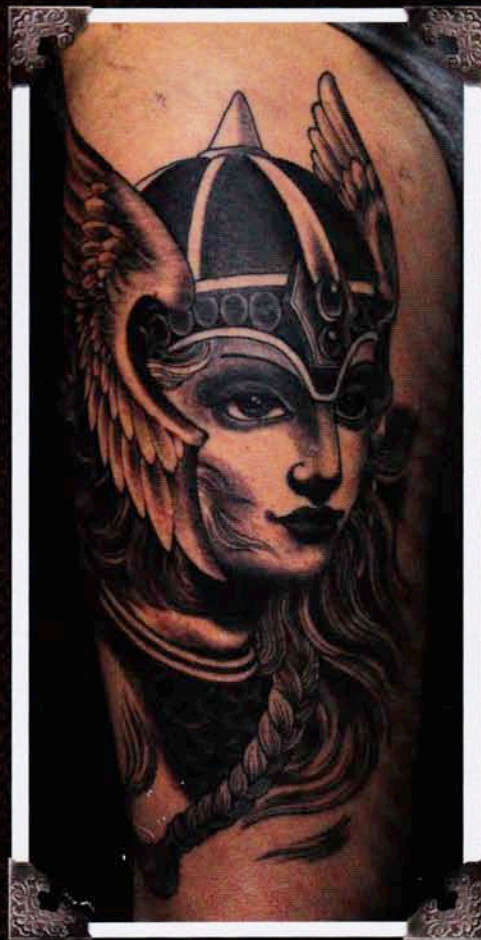
So when were you able to start the Japanese transition? Was it at Da Vinci?

Yeah, absolutely. In the beginning, when I worked at Da Vinci, I would do anything that came through the door because it was kind of slow and I didn't have the luxury to pick and choose. So I didn't really develop a style until many years later, and I didn't know what direction I wanted to take my art in. But I adapted well to Japanese. It lent itself well to tattooing, and it could stand the test of time.

I felt like I could draw it fairly well, better than bio-mechanical, portrait style or the new-school stuff. Don't get me wrong, back then I wasn't doing anything really well... But I just always felt that I could do this style better and I really enjoyed doing it. It took years to get the hang of it, and I still feel like it's one of the hardest things to master.

I just read something Horiyoshi said, that it takes two lifetimes to get Japanese right.





That it is. That's the funny thing about Long Islanders... They are really intense about getting tattooed. If they believe in you and what you do, they'll basically get whatever you tell them to get. They will be clients for life.

That's heavy *razzle-dazzle* though.

That's heavy *razzle-dazzle*. I've presented shit to them where I thought to myself, "They're never going to go for this." But they're like, "Is this cool? Do people get this?" And I'm like, "Yes, I believe you should get this." And they get it. They just want what's good and what I'm into doing.

They just want good tattoos.

Exactly.

They want a Gucci bag.

Exactly! [Laughs] They want the brand name.

Do you think with the new shop, with Kings Ave. that you've elevated your tattooing status from a Gucci bag to a Louie bag? [Laughs] Have you got to that status yet?

[Laughs] I don't know the status, but...

That's not a real interview question. That was just for me.

All right. Go on. [Laughs]

So you also got to work with Chris O'Donnell when you were at Adorned. How long did you work with Chris?

That's my *Caucasian* right there... Two to three years.

He's a lot of people's Caucasian. Nicest guy in tattooing.

Sure is. Back in the day when we first met he and I would correspond through letters, before e-mail was popular.

Love letters?

No—we would send packages to each other. Love packages. [Laughs] Photos of in-progress tattoos, and completed stuff... just projects we were working on at the time. And we would critique each other through these letters and exchange thoughts and ideas. We built a relationship through that and he eventually moved to New York and started working at New York Adorned. He was the one to persuade me to go over there and work a couple days a week, while I was at Da Vinci's.

How did that work, with Da Vinci's? Because I always thought it seemed like a smooth transition from the outside, when you were working with Frank for so long, and then when you were able to go work with Chris. And you know, steel sharpens steel, and you can only do so much on your own, or with the people you were around. Was that an easy thing to do? To make that kind of transition?

No. It wasn't... Because Frank's feelings were very important to me, I didn't want to do anything to disrupt the relationship, or not follow the proper code of conduct.

So the whole time I always communicated with him. How I felt, the opportunities in front of me and what was necessary to better my future. At that particular time, I don't know if I had necessarily outgrown Da Vinci's, but I just felt like I was stagnant and I needed more. I wanted to grow as an artist and work with people who could help me to really fine-tune my craft. It was hard for both of us. He understood. I think at the time I was working seven days a week, so we agreed that, if I worked for him four to five days, and at Adorned two days, then he was comfortable with the transition.

It's a good compromise. When you worked at any other shops, did you ever get into being a machine guy, or a builder of machines, or like mixing your own pigments... or any of that stuff? Or was it more about tattooing and drawing, and the artwork?

For the most part, it was more about the drawing and art for me. I got into mixing pigments from a pretty young age. Henning [Jorgensen] and Frank showed me a lot regarding the basics of mixing different pigments. But as far as machines, I never got involved with machine-building. I'm not very handy. It's bad. If one my machines is acting up or breaks I grab another one, and if that don't work I go on to the next. I'm terrible with that shit. I should be embarrassed.





What machines do you use?

Nowadays I use a Richard Pinch machine, from Scotland, I use one from Juan [Puente], some (Tim) Hendricks machines and Brian Hibbard builds a nice machine. I've always envied machine-builders and wish I could say I build my own, but that's just not the case.

No. I think a lot of people are like that. But some people are just so into it. I just wanted to bring the point up.

Yeah, I've never had that interest or energy to learn how to...

You're a tattooer... You're not a machine-builder. I think it's a separate thing. And you talked about Henning for a second. That seems like a strange marriage, or friendship to me. I keep making gay references. That's my own thing. Excuse me.

I have that effect on dudes.

You do... I'm attracted to you.

[Laughs]

How did Henning come into the picture for you? As a friend or mentor or whatever...

We first met at the Philadelphia National Convention, in 1997. In '97 I had started my sleeves. I think I was 19. One arm was Filip and the other arm was split between Mike Ledger and Filip. I ran into Henning and he came running over to me, like, "Who did your arms?" and taking a bunch of photos—so we got to talking.

We met again in '99, and he invited me to do a my first guest-spot [at Royal Tattoo in Denmark]. I've been working there twice a year ever since. He in a sense took me under his wing. We have traveled the world together. We have continued to have a very close relationship and I'm a godfather to one of his children. We have a strong bond and I still look up to him in many ways.

He's a great guy. You're lucky to have him. Hey, most people (I would say 99 percent of the people who are good tattooers) have tons of shitty tattoos. How did you avoid getting a bad tattoo? You have a Filip sleeve, a Trevino back, and a Horitomo front. Now is that just because you're wise beyond your years? Or what?

I'm not sure how I had enough foresight to be patient and get the right people to work on me. It was something I couldn't just settle on. In 1997 when

I had the idea to get a tattoo from Filip, everyone thought I was crazy for flying to Switzerland for a tattoo. I didn't think it was a big deal, because I felt like, it's there forever and I hope to learn a lot from this experience. I know it sounds corny and cliché, but...

No. I'm jealous of your tattoos.

You have one shot to make it right. For me the permanence of a tattoo was a heavy thing and I wanted to make a smart decision. I remember as a kid looking through magazines I'd always admired Filip's work, it always had a tremendous impact on me. I saw what could be done with tattooing and, first and foremost, I wanted to go out there and see what he did different from what everyone else was doing to get the results he was getting, you know?

That was a big part of the reason why I had him do my arms, because I wanted to watch him; I wanted to see it done right. However, at the time I think it was too early in my career to pick up what he was *throwing down*. I could have soaked up more knowledge if I had waited to make that trip later in my career. Well, who really knows how things would have turned out? I do know it still gave me a whole different mentality and perspective on tattooing.

Yeah. Watching Filip is not like watching other people tattoo.

Exactly. It was brilliant to see. He has the ability to make the client who's wearing the tattoo look like they were born with it.

When you get to sit and watch somebody tattoo for that long, or get tattooed by somebody like Trevino, all the hours you spent with Trevino, or all the hours you spent with Filip—was there something else imparted? Like the work ethic that those guys have? Just the straight warrior shit that those guys do? And do you take that on? When you're sitting with them for that long, do you discuss a burnout factor from working that hard?

No, I don't believe in *burnout*. I think you can work through burnout periods. I think we all share a common factor; we create this out of love, not for money, or fame—well, I'll speak for myself. And the constant, deliberate practice of tattooing everyday, it pays off. I have adopted a weird belief system. I don't believe in failure, or burnout. I just feel like you can program your brain to do anything. Your brain is like a computer. If you think you're going to burnout, you're absolutely right—you're going to burnout.

Yeah, like Trevino can sit and tattoo for 12 hours straight.

Yeah, exactly. That guy's a machine.

So you think it's a state of mind?

Yes, I think it's 100 percent a state of mind. Absolutely.

I like that. It's a good concept. Kind of touching on the same thing, you were talking about doing it for so many years, and what you put into it is what you get back, so when did you start to feel like, "Okay, I don't suck anymore?"

I think it's a 10-year marker. I feel like you can never be content with your work at any point of your career, and you can always grow, but I felt at 10 years, that's when I was finally getting the hang of it. I felt confident in what I was doing and started coming into my own.

All right, cool.

It's the hardest fucking thing.

I always used to tell people, at five years, you don't suck, at 10 years, you're okay. And then after that, you can talk-the-talk.

That's a good rule of thumb.

So, do you have five kids now?

[Laughs] Well, no, no. Almost three. I have two girls and I'll have another one, a boy in two weeks. That makes three kids in three years.

So how does that come into play? How does it work with kids and businesses? Because you're not just tattooing anymore, you have two shops that you're responsible for and a family. What changes?

Well, you gotta make compromises and sacrifices. Something around you has to suffer. So, whether it be your family life, the time you put into art, or your time socializing—something's gotta give.

I'm at the stage where I need to pass on some of the responsibilities onto others. I have a lot of good people around me, I have Grez running the show in New York City. I'm very fortunate to have him and the rest of the team on board with that project. On Long Island I have a great group of really good guys, and of course I have a very supportive wife.

It's a very difficult thing to juggle, but all these people play a major role in being able to juggle it all. It's never something I really think about, you know, you just gotta put your head down, motor through it and fucking work. Otherwise you could never achieve what it is that you're striving for.

That's it. Do you change up hours or days for your kids now? Or are you pretty much just sticking to your schedule?

I did need to make some adjustments. I still tattoo five days a week, nine hours a day. However, I wake up at 5:30 in the morning now, just to be able to handle all my commitments and cram everything into a 24-hour period I had to extend my days. I'll hang out with my kids in the mornings, I'll try to put in as much time as I can with the family because I never feel that I spend enough time with them. I'm always feeling guilty about that. I don't really go out anymore. I don't see too many friends... socializing seems to be completely cut out of my life. Which is a sad thing, but there are priorities and I just physically can't do it all.

When the choices are family or work, your friends get cut down. I think that's fair.

It's that simple.

Of course. So you were saying you have a good crew working in Long Island and you have a nice set of people lined up for the City.



How do you feel about tattooers doing two days here, and two days there, and jumping from shop to shop? Are you a fan of that?

I'm not a fan, but if they're jumping from Massapequa to New York City between two Kings Avenue shops, I'm cool with it.

[Laughs]

Otherwise, I think it's a situation that has potential of not having a good ending, to be honest.

I agree. I just wanted to see where you were at with it, because I know that to a lot of people, especially in New York and Brooklyn, that's just a commonplace thing. People come into the shop and they're like, "Hey, I want to work here two days a week."

I guess in a unique situation anything could work, with the right people and all. I just never felt it was a good idea or made too much sense.

I don't either. I don't really see the point in it. Anyway. So after all this time working on Japanese things, bodysuits, sleeves, and all that, did you ever get to go work in Japan?

I did. Henning and I took a three-week trip in 2003. That was the first and only time. We worked in Osaka and Yokohama.

How did you like working in Japan?

At the time it was difficult, because of the lack of communication. It was tough to prepare drawings in advance because they would kind of just spring a half-sleeve on you, the morning-of, or a couple of hours before your appointment.

I'm the type of guy who wants to put in his homework, and spend some time on a drawing. Otherwise, it was cool. Everything was amazing. The food was amazing, the architecture, the temples—the overall trip was amazing. Really great experience... But working there was a little tricky.

No desire to go back anytime soon, to work?

Well, no, not now, since the radioactivity.

Oh, that would deter you?

That would deter me, yeah. I think it took me until now to have the desire to go back. I'm ready for it now. I'm more mature, more focused and I think

I know the right people that could really make a difference in my travels to Japan. It would be a good time to do it again.

Yup. And there are other shops you can work at too; you can work different places. I think it's something that people need to do, but like Adrian [Lee], [Matt] Shamah and [Chris] Trevino, those guys go every month. So god-bless them, but I can't do it. I've made that trip probably like seven times, and I hate it every time. It beats the crap out of me.

My wife would hate me if I did that.

Oh yeah. That too.

It's bad enough that I only raise my kids for 15 minutes every day. [Laughs]

That's why you married a good woman. You don't have to worry about it!

For sure, I couldn't manage with out her. [Laughs]

So how do you feel about tattooers who become painters, and then painters who are becoming tattooers? Do you think it's a blurred thing, or is it one or the other? Can they both live in harmony? Can you give time to both those things?





I think going from a tattooer to a painter is an easier transition than from a painter to a tattooer because I feel like, if you're an established painter, your work might not necessarily lend itself to tattooing, and you might have habits, or procedures that apply to painting, but that won't apply to tattooing. I think there's a difficulty with understanding the rules and laws of tattooing when you're a painter. But like Timothy [Hoyer] can paint his ass off *and* tattoo his ass off. So it depends on the person and their abilities.

Yeah. That's what I was driving at. Like Henry [Lewis] too and Timothy... and Shawn Barber is doing good at tattooing, and he's a great painter...

I think there are people that can pull both off, but from my own brain, I don't see how you can do both those things at the same time. It just seems like so much work. But if you can pull it off, that's good stuff.

So after doing so much large-scale tattooing, do you ever just beg and pray for a single-point tattoo to come in for you one day when you're in the shop?

I do. That's why I enjoy doing conventions so much, because I don't like to take on anything bigger than a baseball. Something I can start and finish. It is a nice change of pace.

Just knock it out. It's the best.

Yeah, that is the best. It's definitely a treat.

You don't think it's the best when you're trying to do big stuff.

I love doing large-scale work. It's just that so much goes into making one of those tattoos, when a client comes in for a smaller tattoo it's refreshing. I look forward for that client to come in. I'll even squeeze people in if I know they're gonna get a two-hour job.

Like a skull on a calf? All day. And I'll kiss you when you leave.

I live for that shit.

I think when you and I were coming up in tattooing, it was a closed business. You know, people had it much harder than we did, but we still came up in a closed business, where no one wanted to share things and no one told you anything and you had to work for it like you talked about with your apprenticeship. Now that there are so many venues for this, and so many TV shows and all that, do you think the biker-fantasy-magic of a tattoo shop is being lost? And it's becoming too sedate and normal?

Yeah, I think the mystique is gone.

Do you miss it?

I do miss it, and I'm glad I was a part of it. But like everything else, it's gotta change. I'm not into the television show. I don't bash any of the guys who are in it, some of them are my friends, but it's not for me. It's definitely made tattooing more accepted and people think they can relate more to it, and they think they know what it is to be a tattooer or get tattooed.

Television made that possible, and it makes tattooing look a lot easier than it really is.

And fast.

And fast. Exactly. They don't show the time you put in to get to that stage, and they don't show the behind-the-scenes shit, all the hours of preparation, drawing, and hustling, and sacrificing and constantly obsessing about tattooing. They are only catching the end result, the final product and hopefully the rewarding part of our jobs.

The hours that you spend before the cameras are rolling.

Absolutely. I feel like it's kinda like a bunch of magicians showing the world how to pull off all of those cool magic tricks they have learned. There will be a ton of really excited people, a ton of people wanting to be magicians and a relatively small part of the population of people who are really angry with the idea. At the end of it all, the *magic* is lost.

With the television thing the choice not to do that is a difficult one, in terms of financial gain, or popularity, or if you have the rock star in you that wants to come out, or a fame bug. Your choice to not do something in that vein and just tattoo, is that a personal choice because of how you feel about tattooing? Or is it more just that you don't want to live on camera, or be that person?

Well, it's a combination of both. I feel like everything comes at a cost. The money would be phenomenal, and it's a good vehicle to promote the shop, and everything else that goes along with being on television. Yeah, it's great... but I just love tattooing too much.



I feel like my tattooing would suffer, I feel like my family life would suffer, and you know, at this point in my career, I think I'm respected enough by my peers that it would be a bad look for me. Also, it's just not in me to do television. I'm not good on camera, I'm not good in the limelight. I'm more of a private guy. I want to focus on the things that I value and make me happy; being on a reality TV show would not allow me to do that.

Who are some of your favorite tattooers that aren't your contemporaries? They can be living, dead or just older guys, like from when you were coming up. Who did you look up to, traditional-wise, Japanese-wise, et cetera?

When I started tattooing, those *Tattootimes* were lying around the shop, so obviously Hardy and Greg Irons were a big inspiration to me, because at that time, there wasn't much to really look at. There were magazines, but it was few and far between that you'd actually see a cool piece in one of them.

But the *Tattootime's* series were packed with crazy shit, and Deutsche was in there—so I'd have to say, Deutsche, Greg Irons, Hardy, Horiyoshi. I remember Frank would take me to go see the other side of the spectrum, the local guys. Polito, and Pete Giaquinto, Ronnie D. Those guys were just char-





acters, and they don't do it for anything else but tattooing and to put food on the table.

They were real people, real guys, no nonsense. They were just cool, and I learned a lot from them and people like them. Maybe not so much about art, or tattooing but just about life in general. They were just good solid people, the type that you would want to surround yourself with.

I agree. Pete and those guys are throw-back guys.

The *real deal*. Yeah.

You just opened up the new shop in Manhattan (SoHo) with Grez at the helm. Are you elevating the old tattoo shop into something of your own creation? Do you want it to be more of an open atmosphere? What's the basic idea and aesthetic behind the new shop?

Well, it's an open loft-space style set up, and as far as the neighborhood, it's in The Bowery, so it's still got a bit of the uh...

The grossness?

Yes, the grossness. It's cleaned up quite a bit. The shop I think still has a tattoo feel, but it's a little more elegant than a traditional street shop layout. We created an atmosphere where we felt most comfortable and creative. I never wanted to have another tattoo studio, but I've always had a little bit of resentment, not being in New York City.

Me too.

I always felt like I missed out on certain opportunities, like I wasn't in the heart of it all. Grez had always wanted to be in the city and he was on my case about it... it's just a unique opportunity.

If I didn't have Grez I would have never gone forward with this. We share very similar outlooks on things and have common visions and goals. We just want to be a part of something bigger, there are a lot of great tattooers in New York, and I think collectively, we could redefine New York City tattooing.

I think of New York as a whole, the last few years, as coming into a San Francisco 10-years-ago kind of a thing.

Yeah.

And I think a lot of people feel that way. But I think when you have the opportunity to start something from scratch, where you're not coming into a shop, and you're not handcuffed by someone else's ideas and aesthetics, you get create something of your own. Do you feel like you and Grez have created your ideal work environment with this studio?

Absolutely. It's on the second floor, semi-private. It's on the corner of Bowery and Spring Street with full windows facing both streets. It's an open space, so I feel like it's kind of a convention-style feel. It's super high energy but really relaxed at the same time. It's tremendously motivating working with this group of guys in this environment.

We have guest artists rolling through pretty regularly and that's always very inspiring. It's very different from the

Massapequa location. Massapequa has individual rooms for each artist, and it's one-on-one with the client, so at the end of the day sometimes we haven't seen each other for the entire time, you know? Both spots have their pros and cons.

I like an open floor.

Me too. You get to interact better. It's a way lighter mood and more social in a sense.

And you can act like a group of dicks, rather than just one dick at a time.

Exactly.

Okay, so these are gonna be short quick ones, not about tattooing so much, but just to give us an idea of who you are as a guy.

Oh no.

Don't feel pressure. These are just little windows into you. You keep it close to the vest so I gotta open you up. So what's your idea of perfect happiness?

Perfect happiness. I'm still trying to figure that out.

Not in a grand scheme. Just a perfect day. What's your perfect day? Lou Reed song. I have it tattooed on me.

Just everything going exactly the way you visualize it; a day where everything falls into its perfect place with everything that you are involved in.

I'll take that! What's your greatest fear?

Fear of failure.

Who do you most admire?

My mother.

Love that answer. All right. We're gonna get deep here. This is beyond tattooing. Are you ready?

Ready.

What trait do you hate in yourself?

My inability to articulate my feelings.
[Laughs]

[Laughs] And what is a trait that you deplore in others?

I would say, over-confidence.

Cockiness. You hate a cocky guy. So now that you're not 17 anymore, and you've worked very long and hard, what is your greatest extravagance? What do you indulge yourself with? In a material sense?

Clothing.

Such as ties!

I'm big into fashion nowadays.

And you're looking good.

Thanks. It makes me feel good.

What would you say is the most over-rated virtue?

Chastity.

So not your greatest, happiest imaginary day... but for real, when do you think in your life you've been the happiest?

Today... I'm the happiest I have ever been in my life right now, present day.

What word or phrases do you overuse? For instance, Todd Noble's answer would be "sick-ass."

I use "sick" a lot.

"Mint?" You still do that?

No, I don't use "mint." It's gotta be "sick." Yeah. "That shit is sick."

"Dude." I'm big with "dude." But "sick." Okay.

"Get sick wit' it."

So what do you feel is your greatest achievement?

Besides my children?

No. That's them. That's it. That's a good one. If you could have some talent that you don't already have—not like a super power—what would it be?

Um. Talent. Well, as far as super-humanness, I wish I didn't have to sleep, because that's a giant waste of time. But talent? I wish I were extremely intellectually gifted.

But that's something you could work on with time.

But not right now. I'm too busy. I got shit happening. I got shit going on.

What's your current state of mind?

I'm a firm believer in the power of positive thinking. I feel if you plant good seeds and do the right thing it all comes back to you in a very positive way... Karma.

Karma, all right. What's your most treasured possession? Materially speaking.

What would I be crushed if I lost? Fuck, this is tough. There are too many choices. I got a lot of shit. I've got a great collection of original art.

So artwork.

Or how about, Kings Ave.?

You have insurance.

All right. Fine. We'll go with art.

What would your motto be?

"There's no substitute for hard work."

You know what that was? A home run.

Upper decks?

What do you find to be the most important trait in your friends?

Loyalty.

How would you like to die?

In my sleep.

And the final question is... what would your gravestone say?

Civ, what are you doing to me?

There's you, in a nutshell. Last words. What would you have them say if you could write it?

Made a positive impact.

Perfect.

.....
kingsavenuetattoo.com
Manhattan
188 Bowery, Floor 2
New York, NY 10012
212-431-5464

