

TATTOO *life*

TATTOO LIFE



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CONVENTIONS

MILAN

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MIKE RUBENDALL

BETWEEN LONG ISLAND
AND "THE BOWERY"
15 YEARS OF TATTOO
ART IN NEW YORK

FLORIAN KARG

REALISM AND GRAPHIC
STREET ART WITH
A GERMAN FLAIR

PAINTINGS
THE 'FOLLIES'
OF CLAUDIA
DE SABE

MUSIC
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THE FILM
TATTOO
NATION



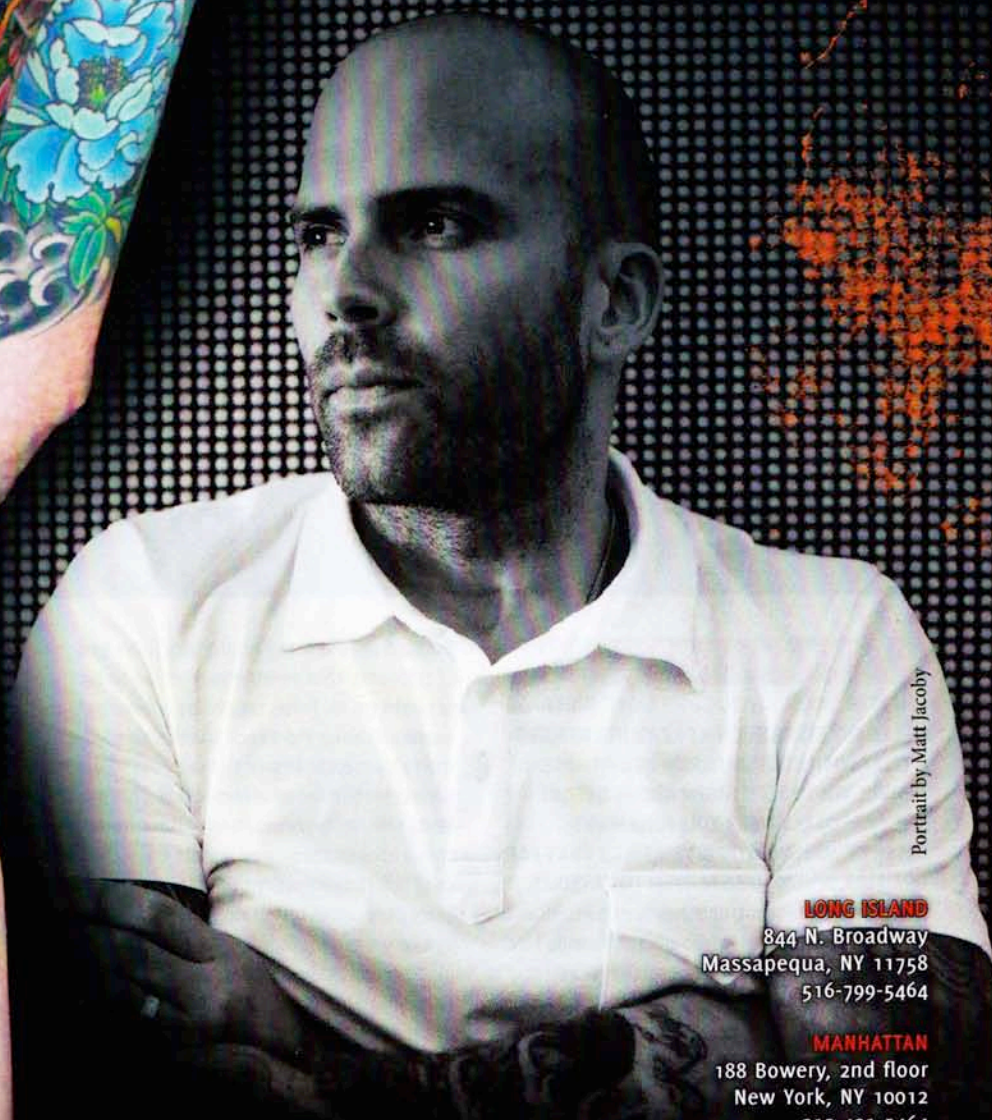


TATTOO ARTIST

MIKE RUBENDALL

MEETING LIFE'S CHALLENGES

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TWELVE YEARS HAVE PASSED SINCE THE LAST TIME WE MET WITH MIKE RUBENDALL AND IN THE MEANTIME THERE HAVE BEEN A LOT OF CHANGES: HE'S GROWN ENORMOUSLY AS AN ARTIST, HE'S BECOME A REAL CELEBRITY IN THE U.S. AND ALONG WITH HIS SHOP ON LONG ISLAND, HE'S OPENED A SECOND KINGS AVENUE IN NEW YORK, IN THE FAMOUS BOWERY NEIGHBORHOOD WHICH HAS A SPECIAL LINK TO THE HISTORY OF TATTOOING. HOWEVER HIS VISION OF THIS ART HASN'T CHANGED ONE BIT, AND HE CONTINUES TO ENCOUNTER DAILY CHALLENGES AND MEET THEM AS ONLY A TRUE ARTIST CAN: WITH PASSION AND LOADS OF HUMILITY.



TATTOO ARTIST

HELLO MIKE, IT'S SUCH A PLEASURE TO HAVE A CHAT WITH YOU! YOU ARE ONE OF THOSE PEOPLE WHO FOLKS KNOW ABOUT BEFORE THEY ACTUALLY MEET YOU. HOW MANY INTERVIEWS HAVE YOU GIVEN SINCE THAT FAR-OFF 1995, WHEN YOU STARTED TO TATTOO?

Far too many to count, and they are still not easy for me to do. I'm extremely happy to do a new interview with you guys since the last one we did together has to be about 12 years ago, (I'm guessing).

YOU CERTAINLY HAD A LUCKY START TO YOUR CAREER, SINCE YOU GOT THE CHANCE TO "LEARN THE ROPES" AT DAVINCI TATTOO FOR 10 YEARS. WHAT DO YOU REMEMBER ABOUT

Fortunate yes, lucky no. It was in an era of tattooing that I was really proud to be brought up in. I was taught by a man by the name of Frank Romano. It wasn't easy for me to persuade Frank to teach me how to tattoo. It took many attempts and several tests until he agreed. At that time, tattooing was a closed trade and artists back then held information very close to their chest. They cherished tattooing, they protected it, and weren't interested in sharing it with just anybody. Most of the time if you were receiving any type of information or tips on the trade from a fellow artist it was most likely misinformation, a tactic used to set you back and slow down your progress. So to have somebody agree to teach you, in those days, you had to have something special. You couldn't be scared of hard work, failure or



ready to be challenged daily. I started my apprenticeship in 1995, and I was 17 years old. For me, the beginning years of tattooing were a tremendously difficult time. I was young, naive and really hadn't experienced life much. I was brought up through an apprenticeship where every bit of knowledge gained was earned. It was very discouraging at times, however it was a pinnacle point of my career as well as my life, and I attribute a lot of my success to having understood the concepts behind strong foundation early on. I learned a lot about respect and integrity and what it is to follow a certain code of conduct. I was taught through tough love. At times I felt like I would have a nervous breakdown, but the consistency of moving forward through tough times was crucial in the whole learning process. I had to earn the trade secrets,



business and that I wanted it bad enough to overcome anything he put in front of me. I always felt that as bad as it could get, and as difficult of a craft it was to learn, I was doing the right thing. I was going to be a tattooer by any means necessary.

WERE YOU JUST ANOTHER PROUD YOUNG MAN IN SEARCH OF HIS OWN STYLE?

I remember being hungry back then. I did anything that walked through the door, I knew that in order to get better or to get to a level I wanted to be at, it would require years of deliberate practice, and I was prepared to do that. I didn't really have a style or I wasn't really certain on a particular style I wanted

me. So I was happy to tattoo as many people as possible. I remember getting verbally whiplashed by Frank for doing tattoos for too cheap. I would draw these big custom pieces and offer to do them on people for a low rate just to get that work out there for the world to see, so that hopefully I would be able to do more of it. For a long time I was chasing many styles. I was seeking one that was really right for me, not realizing in the process that I was in fact creating my own style. A style that had my personality, my vision of what I thought was good in tattoos.

SPEAKING OF STYLE, IT WOULD BE INTERESTING TO FOLLOW THE PATH OF

VERY FIRST TATTOOS YOU MADE. WHAT HAS INFLUENCED YOUR JAPANESE STYLE AND WHAT ARE YOU PRODUCING NOW, AFTER ALMOST 15 YEARS OF EXPERIENCE?

That's a good question. In the beginning, I would browse through the Tattoo Time publications and see the work of Ed Hardy, Koranuma, Nakano, and Greg Irons. I remember being blown away but at the time I didn't really understand what I was looking at. I remember traveling to local tattoo shops, even though it was unheard of back then, just to see what everybody else was working on and to maybe understand more about tattooing. Traveling to see Filip Leu in '97, when I was 19, was a major breakthrough for





and tried to apply as much as I could to the best of my ability. I've always really loved the Asian stuff, as far back as I can remember. It lent itself so well to tattooing, the imagery was really interesting and the work really stood the test of time. Traveling to Japan and China had a tremendous influence on my style. Studying woodblock prints and the mythology from that culture also contributed to my style. Japanese tattoo art is based on woodblock prints and other Edo period art, therefore it follows a tradition and there are rules. I liked that about the style. There is structure. Over the years I would buy tons of reference books and reference material and constantly look through them over and over again, hoping for some of it to sink in.

It took me a long time to really appreciate traditional Japanese tattoos and understand what guys like Horiyoshi II and III were doing and why they were doing it. Today I would say my style is more of a contemporary approach to traditional Japanese tattooing. I follow the tradition to the best of my ability, however not being born in the culture is a major disadvantage.

WITHOUT WANTING TO BE FALSELY RHETORICAL, MAY I ASK YOU HOW YOU'VE BECOME SUCH A BONA FIDE CELEBRITY IN THE UNITED STATES?

Ha ha, I'm never good at answering these types of questions. I've never really considered myself a celebrity. All I can tell

you is what works for me. I've always loved tattooing and still to this day there's been zero love lost. I can't imagine my life without it. When I started in 1995, I have to be honest, I never could have imagined I would get to the level that I'm at today, and I'm very fortunate that tattooing has brought me to the place I am now. I create out of the love for what I do, I believe in it. I think that's what makes things truly authentic, when you honestly believe in what you are doing. People can recognize that. I'm constantly working on evolving and stretching myself both personally and artistically. I always try to challenge the status quo and most of all, stay inspired. I would have to say there's something inside me that I can't quite describe but it drives me to not be content with my work and always want more. I'm not saying this is necessarily a good thing, (laughter) some say it's my O.C.D. It's definitely a gift and a curse. However it's helped me grow and excel to the level I desire.

IS THE FACT THAT YOU ARE WORKING IN A SECOND STUDIO IN MANHATTAN CAUSED BOTH POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE CHANGES IN YOUR WORK?

I think with everything in life and in success there is sacrifice. Everything comes at a cost, and it's up to you - what you're willing to do and what you're comfortable giving up. Opening Kings Avenue NYC has been all positive in my eyes. At the same time, I was prepared to take the risks that came along with opening a second location. I have to honestly say that since we've opened the New York City location I've only seen improvement in my own work, in my crew's work and in the shop collectively, no negative changes. I will say that trying to be in two places at once, I tend to spread myself thin at times. However, I have a great crew on board that backs my decisions and really helps to make things work. I need to mention that Grez is an intrinsic part of the operation and with him holding it down on The Bowery, the sky's the limit.

WHY DID YOU MAKE THIS CHOICE, ESPECIALLY SINCE YOU HAVE ACCOMPLISHED SO MUCH SINCE 2005 IN YOUR STUDIO IN MASSAPEQUA, LONG ISLAND? AND WHY DID YOU CHOOSE THE BOWERY, ONE OF THE CITY'S FIRST SETTLEMENTS, WHICH IS FAMOUS FOR HAVING ONCE BEEN THE NEIGHBORHOOD OF SAILORS AND IMMIGRANTS?

It was time to grow. As well as we were doing on Long Island, not being in New York City was limiting to us. For me, NYC is the center of the art world, there's so much energy and life there. We were missing out on many different opportunities, on many different levels. In addition, New York's tattoo scene was in a stale state. We felt that collectively we would be instrumental in redefining New



York tattooing and what other better place to do it than the Bowery. It was a perfect fit for us. It's the birthplace of electric tattooing. It's where O'Reilly patented the modern-day electric tattoo machine and revolutionized tattooing. A profound lineage of tattooers was created on the Bowery, tattoo history was made there and we hope to recreate the same magic that once lived on the Bowery. Kings Avenue is equal parts of past and future. We want our work to depict strong historical connections, combined with a very unique approach. Collectively we want to help to advance the art form and preserve the integrity of the ideas and values that has

WHAT DIFFERENCES HAVE YOU NOTICED IN THE WORK DONE AT THE TWO STUDIOS?

It's been a unique opportunity for all of us having 2 studios. All the artists with the exception of Grez rotate between New York City and Long Island, this way all the artists have the opportunity to work with each other in two different atmospheres. It never feels like there are two separate shops, it's basically the same artists traveling between two different locations with the same goal to improve our art. The vibe is positive, the energy is high and there is great harmony between all the different personalities.... I know, it's rare. We feed off of each other

so it helps us to grow. Having the Manhattan studio also gives us the opportunity to have more guests to collaborate or exchange ideas with. It keeps things fresh, as well as helps keep the work at the shop evolving. Since January I've had the pleasure to work alongside my long-time friend Chris O'Donnell. He's built a private studio in upstate New York and accommodates his city clients at Kings Avenue part time. It's been a while since we worked together and it's great to have him back. He has brought so much to the shop and has been such a positive dynamic.



GAINED OVER THE YEARS, HAS ANYTHING CHANGED IN HOW YOU CREATE A TATTOO?

I can't say that much has changed in how I create tattoos. I still go into it with the same enthusiasm. The one thing I will say that has changed is my taste in art, and how my experience has helped me to see things more clearly. I'm more particular now, there's a very specific way I want my work to look and I'm able to do things more deliberately and confidently as the years go by. I'm more disciplined than I was when I was younger. I'm in tune with myself enough to know what I need to do or what adjustments I need to make in order to achieve what I want to achieve in my work.

ARE THERE ANY CHALLENGES LEFT FOR YOU IN THIS LINE OF WORK?

I'm still challenged by tattooing every day. It's something that I feel never gets easy, there are too many variables. However I am interested in exploring other creative avenues and have been pursuing other artistic disciplines. Whether it's fine art, fashion, photography or something else, it's all about being inspired and being around people who inspire me. It's funny, because tattooing is my true love, my all-time favorite art form, and I find myself seeking outside inspiration through staying creative with other mediums to spark new emotions, which I incorporate into my tattoos.

It always comes back to my roots of tattooing and finding ways to make it challenging for me.

YOU HAVE ALSO EXPLORED OTHER SUBJECTS, FOR EXAMPLE YOUR BEAUTIFUL FEMALE FACES OR CLASSIC TRADITIONAL SUBJECTS. ARE THERE ANY SUBJECTS YOU ARE CURIOUS ABOUT NOW, THAT TICKLE YOUR FANCY?

Nothing comes to mind as far as subjects that I haven't explored or am curious about. I'm fortunate enough to have a great clientele that allows me a tremendous amount of artistic freedom. They trust me enough to experiment, take risks and pursue different ideas if that's what's needed to have that one-of-a-kind piece they are looking for.

AS YOU GET OLDER, HAVE YOUR PRIORITIES CHANGED, ALONG WITH YOUR HOBBIES?

Absolutely. It's not just about me; I have major priorities and major responsibilities. I have two families now: I have a wife, three beautiful children and I have my Kings Avenue family. Both of them consume my life and I'm obligated to provide for both. It's been an unbelievable ride and I've been so fulfilled in these recent years. There isn't much time for any outside distractions or for inviting any type of negativity into my life. I've learned to really cherish life and really maximize my days. I've learned a lot about time, how to manage it and how valuable it is, it's one of the few things in life that you can't get back. I make an effort to focus on the good and do things that help me to live a full life. Granted, it's hectic at times, but I love the hustle of it all. I feel great juggling many different things at once, to the point that I feel lost or unproductive if I'm not.

IF YOU CONSIDER THE CURRENT INTERNATIONAL PANORAMA, WHICH TATTOO ARTISTS DO YOU FEEL MORE AKIN TO IN TERMS OF HOW YOU EXPERIENCE THIS WORK?

Many of the artists who are close to me. Pretty much the same guys that I've been tight with from the beginning of my career. I'm still super close with Henning, O'Donnell and obviously Frank and the DaVinci crew. I stay in touch with the guys from Black Heart, Grime from Skull and Sword, Taki from State of Grace and Tim Hendricks. Brian Bruno and Chad Soner are doing big things. There are still a lot of guys I look up to and that I think are doing really great things, too many to mention at this point. I tend to stay connected with "the code followers", the guys that share similar interests and values, gentlemen, just straight up honest people. It's a rare breed these days, but I'm fortunate to know some solid gold dudes through tattooing and I'm proud of that.