

VF BODY PIERCING & TATTOOING RP p.1

# Tattoo artist looks to open shop outside Watsonville

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IT MAY NOT be long before a trip to Monterey or Santa Cruz will no longer be necessary in order to get a tattoo. Vernon Machado, erstwhile framer, currently in plumbing, wants to put out his shingle.

Some might ask why it took so long for a such a shop to open in the area. Others might simply ask, who needs it?

If you find yourself in the latter camp, go to Machado, the man behind the plans for Unlimited Imagination, a tattoo and body-piercing shop he hopes to open in about a month in Orchard Park.

First and foremost, the multifaceted Machado will tell you that tattooing is an art form.

"I've always been an artist," he says. For the Watsonville native, tattoos became an extension of his longtime love of drawing. Plus, doing tattoos relaxes him.

Machado wanted to open his own business for a long time, but he said he was always moving around too much. But he's married now, about to become a father and ready to start digging in, first with the tattoo parlor, then eventually adding a haircut business and steamcleaning service. He said he felt the tattoo venture would be the easiest to get off the ground.

From the legal aspect, it would certainly seem so. Machado will be operating on county land, and there are no health licensing or inspection

requirements for tattoo or body-piercing shops in the county. The business will just have to comply with the building's use permit. At this point, no use permit has been issued for the office at East Lake Avenue and Holohan Road.

"The state, over the years, has looked into licensing tattoo parlors," said Dr. Ira Lubell, Santa Cruz County health officer. "But it was always felt that would drive them underground."

He said to date there has never been a reported case of hepatitis or AIDS transmitted at a tattoo parlor, adding that the only problems have occurred when tattoos are done at home or in prison.

See TATTOOS page 3 ►



Mike McCollum

Vernon Machado displays his first tattoo.

VF BODY PIERCING & TATTOOING RP p.3 5/14/93

# Tattoo artist hoping to set up local shop

► From Page 1

In addition to tattoos, Machado's shop will sell original hand-crafted work and will offer the newest in pop fashion, body piercing. Machado said he expects to be able to open his doors sometime next month, and he's looking forward to getting a real tattoo gun.

He has been using an instrument he made himself, using a mechanical pencil, guitar wire and a Walkman motor. While there are special dyes manufactured for the purpose, Machado most often uses India ink.

From the time he was a boy, Machado said, he has favored "graceful figures with a lot of shape," such as roses. He also liked to draw girls — the naked type — a preference that got him suspended from Moreland Notre Dame School when a nun discovered some of his work.

Undaunted, he continued with his art, eventually getting into doing etched glass. Another tattoo artist saw some of Machado's etchings and urged him to try his designs on the human body.

For Machado's first attempt, he chose his own body, adorning his left forearm (he's a righty) with a combination face and spider web. His body has since become a canvas bearing 11 tattoos, one an intricately worked dragon covering a good third of his back.

There's at least one more to come. Over his heart is tattooed "Linda," which was fine for the five years Machado dated her. But he's been married to Rome for a year now, and plans to cover the name with some additional art.

Machado was introduced to the art of tattooing 12 years ago, and he has stayed with it. Five years in jail for car theft offered a lot of time to practice. Over the years, he crafted designs, improved his technique, followed trends.

"A lot of people think the only people with tattoos are ex-cons or drug addicts," he said.

Not so, says Machado, a recovering cocaine addict himself. He has been clean three years now, he said. From Machado's perspective, tattooing has be-

come much more acceptable in the past few years, thanks in part to the popularity of hard-rock music. He said it has become a lot more common to see tattoos on "white-collar" skin these days.

Across the board, the most frequently asked-for tattoos among men are women's faces. According to Machado, the "Mom in a heart" classic has pretty much gone out of style.

Women come to him, too, asking for butterflies or roses, or a special Pegasus figure Machado offers. But women tend to want their tattoos etched in places that can be concealed — backs of shoulders, inner thigh or beneath the "bikini line."

One of things Machado likes best about tattoos is that one aspect that probably prevents most people from ever getting one: their longevity. Removal with lasers or surgery is possible in some cases, but for most people, tattoos are now and forever. This is a plus for Machado, giving him something he can count on.

"I'll never lose them ... they'll be with me for life," he said.

But he's an adult who knows what he wants, he said. He prefers not tattooing people under 18 years old — "too young," he said.

If Machado's observations are correct about the newly adorned, his business will provide a return clientele. His experience has shown that a fellow who finally decides to get one tattoo on an arm will wait about two weeks, then come in for a second on the other arm, "to be balanced," Machado said. And it can become addicting, he said, his own body testimony to the claim.

But, be honest, Vernon — doesn't it hurt?

Machado says no, that it's more of an annoying sensation. What hurts is the other service Machado will be providing.

Below his "Linda" tattoo is a ringed nipple he pierced himself. Yes, it hurt, he conceded ... "but only for a minute." He said nose rings are common, and that the latest craze is tongue piercing. He said he will pierce any body part on anyone 18 or older.

# Laws run gamut from old to nonexistent

Trying to get information about existing tattoo laws is more painful than getting a tattoo.

The problem is not so much that there's not a whole lot on the books, but that bureaucratic personnel apparently aren't aware that there's nothing on the books and give incorrect information.

Locally, there are no laws prohibiting or regulating tattooing (or body piercing) in the city or county of Santa Cruz. In fact, throughout the state, only a handful of jurisdictions have any

laws addressing the potential health hazards involved in getting and giving a tattoo.

Watsonville simply outlaws the practice. A 1962 ordinance prohibiting tattooing by anyone other than a state-licensed physician was enacted at the request of the county, which also adopted one which it subsequently rescinded.

Long Beach is among the few California jurisdictions with tattoo laws. Its Municipal Code includes an entire procedure manual devoted to tattoo parlors, covering everything from

clothing to be worn by operators, inspections, instrument sterilization and care, and reporting infections. The names and addresses of every tattooed customer are kept on file for a year.

All permit applicants in Long Beach must submit a picture and also need to show they are free of jaundice and hepatitis, according to Steve Le Cheminant, with the Long Beach Department of Human Health.

"We want to know who we are dealing with" when they apply for this type of business, he

said.

San Diego County and National City also have similar regulations on tattoo business applications, operations and health standards, but their laws are so old they also require that "adequate cuspidors must be furnished" and cleaned daily.

The state Food & Drug Administration is involved only so far as monitoring tattoo dyes and equipment, at least those manufactured in California, according to Pat Kennelly, a Food & Drug inspector in San Jose.

—Judy Brill