

MARKING THE PAST

New
tattoos
scar



Tattoo artist Robin Prey adorns the stretch marks of her client Rivas with flames rising over her hips.

Body Piercing + Tattooing

By PEGGY TOWNSEND

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After another few days of work, bursting flames of yellow, orange and red will adorn the hips of a young woman who calls herself Rivas. The tattooed flames will be a statement, just like the butterfly inked around Rivas' navel and the Japanese symbols on her arm.

But mostly, the long fingers of fire will be there to cover up something the 31-year-old single mom doesn't like very much: the stretch marks she got during her pregnancy.

What she's doing, Rivas says as she lies on the tattooing table, is turning her stretch marks into art.

She's not the only person transforming their dermal souvenirs.

With tattoos as much at home in board rooms as biker bars, lots of people are heading to local tattoo shops to cover their scars with trailing vines, tribal symbols and even underwater scenes.

Body builders with stretch marks on their pecs, women with mastectomy scars and people who faced appendectomies and back surgeries have turned something they hate into something to admire.

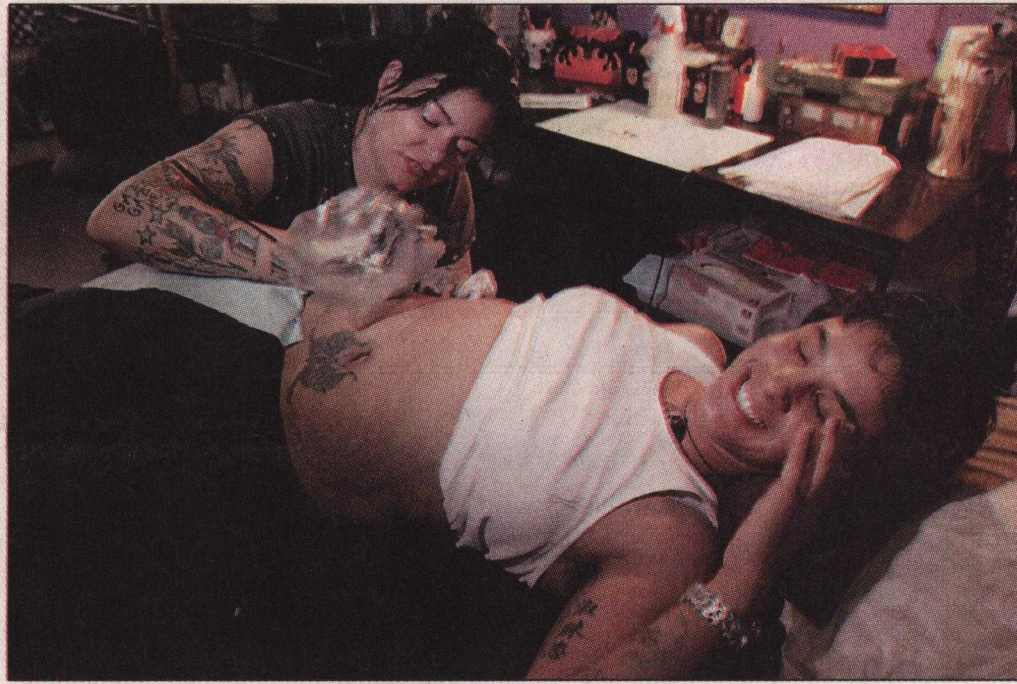
"I think it's becoming the new thing," says tattoo artist Robin Prey of people who cover their scars with something other than clothes.

"It's about getting your self-esteem back. You walk away taller."

The dark-haired Prey, whose own arms are covered with a quilt of tattoos, outlines the flames that wrap around Rivas' hips with a buzzing needle as she talks.

Rivas grimaces slightly and agrees that, yes, beauty does hurt.

But it's worth it to her to be able to look the



Rivas admits that getting a tattoo does hurt slightly, but tattoo artist Robin Prey says the rewards outlast any pain.

way she likes — not like a frumpy old woman.

After her pregnancy, Rivas says, she stopped wearing clothes that exposed her scars. She rolls over to show a trio of marks that look faintly like the scrape of a tiger's claws.

Crop tops, low-ride jeans, bikinis — they were all out.

So Rivas decided to get hot-rod flames to disguise the marks.

"It was to reclaim my body," she says.

"I wanted to feel good about myself again, to turn the stretch marks into beautiful art."

An illusion

Teresa Lane takes a break outside Staircase Tattoo and Piercing on Ocean Street.

She's just finished inking a particularly tough tattoo and needs a few minutes to recover.

Of all the people who came in to have tattoos to cover scars, she says, her favorite was a woman who had gotten a mastectomy and breast reconstruction.

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RIVAS, 31-YEAR-OLD SINGLE MOTHER

Tattoos

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The woman was in her 50s, active and wanted to turn her scars into something that had a positive feel to it, says Lane, a waif-slender blond wearing baggy sweats and bedroom slippers.

"So I did a kite with tails coming down and swirling around her breast over the scars," Lane says.

"It was one of the most rewarding tattoos I have done."

Both she and Prey have had scores of people come in to have their scars disguised.

A back surgery was turned into a wild kind of DNA spiral. A police officer's bullet wound was turned into a sci-fi vision. A vine hid a botched breast enlargement.

"It's all about sabotage, about hiding it," says Prey.

"It's an illusion."

The idea, say tattoo artists, is to let the scars dictate the design

or even be incorporated into the art — although, both say, the scars should not be newly healed.

So when a woman with stretch marks laced across her abdomen came to Prey, she was given a wild tangle of red roses and green vines.

"No one promises you a rose garden," Prey says with a smile, "but I gave her one."

A woman with a long back surgery scar got a flowering vine.

"Look how gorgeous it is," says Prey, showing a photo of the tattoo that climbs across the woman's back. "She can walk around now without worrying about people seeing her scar."

Not everyone will tattoo over a scar, however.

Some tattoo artists refuse to do scars, saying the skin won't accept ink or makes the lines blurry instead of crisp.

But Prey and Lane believe that while there may be minor imperfections in the tattoo, it does what the client wants it to do, which is to hide something they don't want others to see.

"The ink might not hold the crispness and the texture of the scar is always there," Lane says, "but you can distract from it."

"It doesn't make a clean tattoo," says Prey, "but it makes art."

The tattoos can even change people's lives, Prey says.

A woman with tattoos over her hip surgery scars wrote Lane to thank her for "making lemonade

out of lemons," and Prey tells stories of people who came in to hide the scars of attempted suicides and a transsexual who wanted a masculine-looking tattoo changed to a more feminine-looking one.

For them, a tattoo is like an eraser for their past.

Once, Prey says, a body builder who had used steroids came in to get a tattoo.

He had cleaned up his life, was a father now and wanted to hide the needle marks from his younger years.

"I put tattoos over them (the needle marks)," Prey says.

"It was his old life gone."

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