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A Lively Art

Where Beauty is Only Skin Deep

Tattooists see their work as art — with skin for their canvas

TERRA Nova Tattoo is not your typical tattoo shop. In fact, according to artists Tatiana and Joshua Golden, Terra Nova, which is housed in Jeff Hillier's Bulkhead Gallery, isn't a shop at all.

"It's more like a studio," said Golden. "You can buy art here, but instead of getting it framed, we put it on your skin."

For Golden and Tatiana, who have had their business at the gallery on Wednesdays, Saturdays and Sundays for "a couple weeks," tattooing was simply a "next logical step" in their work as painters, graphic designers and sculptors.

A glance at Terra Nova's portfolio bears them out. The arms, shoulders and backs they've worked on display anything but the standard anchors and hearts that say "Mom": The two work with Aztec-inspired and abstract designs, multicultural mythological creatures and symbols and individualized variations on the more typical tattoo designs.

Golden's particular leanings are toward American Indian, early Mexican and South American designs, partly because he has some Mexican ancestors, but also because the designs are native to this region "so they are what we all inherit. And the name, Terra Nova, has to do with that, with the idea of this being a cultural art."

Tatiana and Golden see themselves as part of a small movement of artists who are interested in what Golden calls "progressive tattooing" — people who are "wanting to expand the work the way other arts have been expanded," and who have an awareness of the ritual origins and the significance of the work.

"It's only in the last 10 years that artists have started to communicate



GREG PO

Artists as art: Tattooists Tatiana and Joshua Golden are walking examples of their work.

with each other," said Golden. "Historically, tattoo artists have been very closed-mouthed about their work.

"It's really an intimate process, it's an emotional thing," he said, explaining that often people want tattoos to enhance their self-image, to feel powerful or to create a sense of belonging. "It changes all the people involved in it — and in sometimes unpleasant ways. But sometimes it can be a healing experience."

Because of their commitment to making tattooing a positive experience and an artistic expression, there are some tattoos they won't do and some people they won't tattoo.

"For example, a skinhead came in and wanted tattoos on his fingers.

And we wouldn't do it," said Tatiana, adding that while the lack of aesthetic value was certainly a consideration, her real objection was the man's age — 18 — and how it would effect his future. "It could have been just a phase" he'd later regret, she said.

"Because you're changing someone for life, you really have to use basic moral judgment," said Golden.

It's not that Golden and Tatiana haven't done their share of standard tattoos for the stereotypical tattoo crowd. After learning something about the work by being tattooed themselves, working on themselves and each other, they each went to work at what Golden calls "the tattoo

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Tattooists

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college" — Lyle Tuttle's shop in downtown San Francisco near the Greyhound station.

Golden worked for Tuttle three years, paying his dues by paying "too much" for his equipment and figuring out a lot on his own and by watching others in the shop. He "came into contact with the more tribal, universal aspect of (tattooing)" as he worked in the shop's tattoo museum and journal, the *Tattoo Historian*.

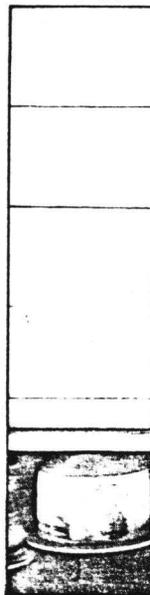
Tatiana worked at the shop for nine months, and while she did a lot of standard tattoos, she'd "try to encourage other things," she said, recalling talking a truck driver who came in wanting the Peanuts character Woodstock into a more unusual Aztec symbol.

And even in the beginning, she sensed that clients came for more than the inked designs. "Some people just wanted the physical contact. They wanted a kind of therapy without knowing exactly what it was."

But the pace of the shop and life in the city was getting to Tatiana and Golden, who had moved there from Palo Alto, their home town.

"We were living on the cutting edge of San Francisco culture and that edge was pretty sharp," said Tatiana. "I'd see people with their eyes just bugged out, taking hard drugs to keep up with the pace. We got really

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So when Nane Alejandre, a Santa Cruz artist, came to the shop soliciting photographs for a tattoo show at the 321 Gallery, Golden jumped at the chance. He did a number of tattoos at the show and during the next month and got a taste of what it was like to do his own work and be his own boss.

The show was also a catalyst in the city council's repealing of a 24-year-old city ordinance that banned tattoo businesses because of the nature of the clientele it attracted.

Interestingly, said Golden, the council never created any regulations once it repealed the rule. Any health precautions a tattoo artist takes are at his or her own initiative, which Golden maintains is pretty strong just because "it's good business."

Golden and Tatiana sterilize their needles between uses, use disposable cups to hold the ink, and wear rubber gloves to protect themselves and their clients from any disease that could be transmitted by the process.

But Golden believes he can provide more than a good design, a clean environment, a "good bedside manner and technical experience."

"When I was working at the shop, I worked on a lot of young recruits — young sailors — who were getting a tattoo because that's what they're supposed to do. Maybe they were going off to deal with Asians for the first time. And here I am, an alternative person, peace-minded, to say the least, working on them, putting myself into the tattoo," he said.

"And every time they look at the tattoo they'll relate it to me, and if he's been accepting of me, maybe he's changed just a little."

— Chels Zabin