

See reflections of who wears the art in 'Inked!'

By **Fredric Koepfel**

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"Inked!" a Delta Axis @ Marshall Arts exhibition, is a rare show that combines elegance with funky entertainment — think Greta Garbo singing "Girls Just Wanna Have Fun." Curated by Koan Jeff Baysa for the Shore Institute of Contemporary Art in Long Branch, N.J., "Inked!" examines the influence of the fleshly art of the tattoo on what we risk calling the "fine arts," which throughout the 20th Century became increasingly difficult to distinguish from popular culture.

Part of the titillation here is the association of the tattoo (or its former association) with bikers, stevedores, mercenaries, juvenile delinquents and practitioners of occult sexual rituals.

Leather-jacketed toughs must feel bereft of their fierce reputations now that half the college women, starlets and celebuntants in America have Celtic designs posted on their anatomies. In other words, what was once an underground culture, nurtured in smoky, squalid tattoo parlors, has gone mainstream.

All the better for this exhibition.

The work is almost uniformly interesting, but certainly the star of this show, at least in terms of the size and power of the pieces, is local resident Joel Hilgenberg, a virtuoso of pen and ink whose large works on paper form a sardonic and exhilarating "Guernica" to the decadence of the age. These pieces, "Introduction to Myth" and "I Can Smell the Sorrow on Your Breath," are crammed with incidents, figures and texts, like murals on a Circle of Hell.

Don Ed Hardy, a guru of tattooing in San Francisco, offers four small, iconic, calligraphic panels heavily influenced by Japanese tattoo art: This factor isn't surprising, considering the place that tattooing occupies in Japan's criminal and geisha cultures, but it is surprising that the least interesting of the pieces in "Inked!" come from Japanese graphic artist Anna Tsubaki, noted for her poster designs for clubs in Tokyo.

Many American sculptors of the latter half of the 20th Century used space-age plastics and rubberized materials to create weirdly, comically (or blatantly) repulsive biological-humanoid shapes that challenged our ideas of the natural and the organic.

In "Inked!," New Yorker Amanda Church performs a similar feat in two small oil-on-canvas paintings that squeeze '60s psychedelic topography and the frenetic, balloonish lettering of graffiti artists into vaguely humanoid and energetic shapes dancing in an indecipherable text. I did ferret out the word "people" in the slick toothpaste letters in one of the untitled pieces.

Dominick Lombardi, from Upstate New York, takes the organic notion in a dark direction in the gorgeous ink-on-paper drawings "8 Heads (Series of 1000)," a transformation into thick, dense, curving calligraphy of what the mutant survivors of an environmental disaster might look like. The flat, stark tattoo/comic book influence is obvious, but Lombardi's abstract "mutant" designs turn out to be remarkably beautiful.

The exhibition includes records of three projects that vary from complicated to monumental.

Betsabee Romero carved automobile tires with traditional Mexican architectural motifs, inked the tires — that must have been a job! — and drove them on long, narrow pieces of decorative cloth, creating a sort of Bayeaux Tapestry of Mexico City. Both tires and cloths are displayed in the exhibition.

Steed Taylor's projects also relate to paving. He collaborates with communities to design site-specific "tattoos" for certain roads; featured are large photographs of three of the projects.

The piece in "Inked!" that relates to actual

tattooing is "Skin: A Mortal Work of Art," by author Shelley Jackson, who lives in Brooklyn. She conceived of writing a story and having each word of the story tattooed on a person, who chose where the tattoo would go, though the author selected the word. Only the participants know the complete story, which will not be published anywhere else. As the volunteers grow old and die, the story will change. As a lesson in mortality the construct is fairly obvious, but as a parable about the ephemeral nature of art and art's mysterious relationship to life, it's touching. The residue of the project in this show consists of small photographs and other documentation for one participant.

In a way, art is like a tattoo. Once imprinted on the skin, it's difficult to erase; as the body changes, grows, shrinks, ages, the tattoo changes. And like the tattoo, art reflects the nature both of the person who wears or bears it and the culture that gave it shape.

Or perhaps those thoughts are too weighty for an exhibition that's downright fun.

— Fredric Koepfel, 529-2394

art review

'Inked!'

Delta Axis @
Marshall Arts, 639
Marshall, through
Nov. 26. Call
522-9483.



"I Can Smell the Sorrow on Your Breath," drawing by Joel Hilgenberg