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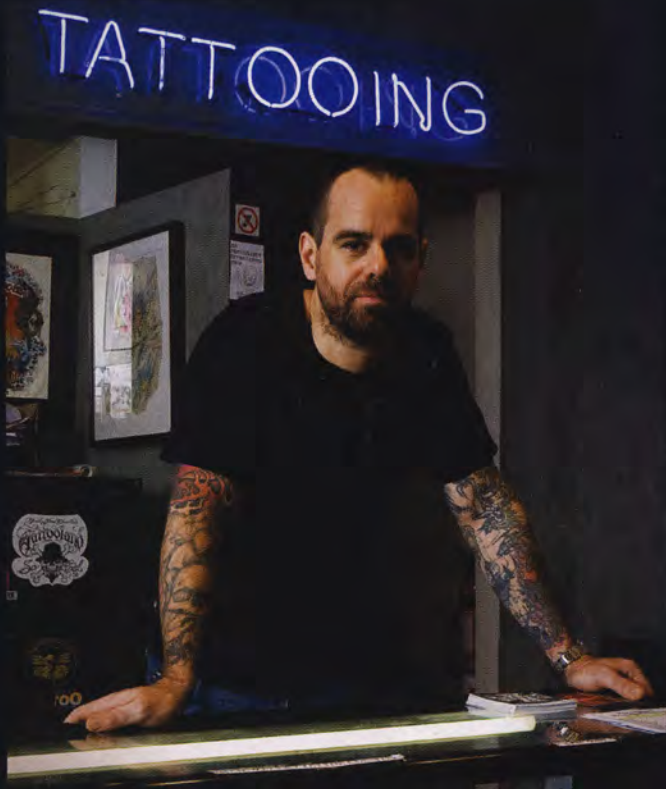
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A HOT TOPIC THESE DAYS it seems is the question of why established tattoo artists are unhelpful, rude and downright nasty to wannabe tattooers. I mean they get really upset when the art of tattooing, with all its secrets, rituals, suppliers, references, ethics, procedures and tricks.... all that stuff isn't just handed over to whomever asks for it. Say again?

What other business or trade can you expect to just walk in off the street and say "Hey! I want to learn how to be a _____ will you teach me for nothing"? Not too many will be helpful, especially not an underground industry peopled with hard-nosed characters like tattooing.

I mean really, would you ask your neighborhood drug dealer on where to get and how to sell dope in this neck of the woods?

You may think these opinions to be arrogant, elitist or self-serving or whatever; they probably are, but that doesn't change the fact they are relevant to most working tattooers today. A tattoo person who opens the door to help anyone who comes along is either a con man looking to make you pay or a charlatan that has nothing to teach and needs his floors swept daily.

Established artists work their asses off to get where they are, mostly on their own with little or no help from anyone else. We all struggled and found our way in and there's no way in hell that we're sharing or giving away that knowledge easily to all-comers. And on top of that, tattooing needs to be protected, but more on that later.

Most places, if you walk in and ask for either supplies, needles, ink etc... or for an apprenticeship or just ask how to be a tattooer, the quick answer will be a finger pointed toward the door. The long answer will be something along the lines of "Get the fuck out" and a boot up your ass.

Tattooing is not a profession full of brotherly/sisterly love, caring and sharing; it's not a holiday camp where we sit around doing crafts together and it's certainly not for the weak-minded. It's a dog eat dog business at every level where the untalented biters are ridiculed, the hacks are paid out on and the cream rises to the top.

There is no faking being a good tattooer – either you are or you're not – and other tattoo artists can tell pretty quick which one you are. And so while there is a level of camaraderie amongst us tattooers it really only goes as far as your portfolio and your work ethic. A hard working tattoo artist will most likely help out another hard working tattooer whom he likes, but would not help out a lazy crappy tattooer even if he does like them.

If we regulate our behavior so much amongst ourselves, then how do

Inked Australia's resident tattoo advisor Kian Forreal on the rise of tattoos in Australia



KIAN'S PHOTO BY MATTHEW LOWDEN



you think we feel when someone outside of the circle comes along and wants in with nothing to show for it? No free lunches! It takes years and years to get good at tattooing, taking lots of shit from both mentors and clients alike, and for someone to just come and ask for that knowledge with their hand out? Well, it's downright insulting.

And also, who has time to teach? If you're busy tattooing, and have something worth sharing with the world you are probably putting in a lot of hours. How are you supposed to balance that with teaching a newcomer the trade every time one comes along? The answer is you can't.

In my experience, the truth of it is that most of these people given the opportunity would not bother to learn all the way through to the end. After six months or so they think they know it all, they tell their 'master' to take a hike and they go and open yet another dodgy tattoo shop somewhere down the road from a respected tattooer who has spent years cultivating a business, building people's trust and making nice consistent tattoos on the locals. You only have to look at a few Australian cities to see what I am talking about.

And that new shop with the pimply-faced scab vendor can fuck that up pretty quick if he does things wrong. On top of that, who is going to willingly share their business with you and perhaps lose clients permanently to your new shop when you decide you've had enough of cleaning tubes and toilets and making needles and think that you're ready to go it alone? Not too many people, that's who.

Tattooing itself needs to be protected from outsiders. Maybe even from you. An amateur tattooer in a licensed shop spreads around a staph infection to his young clientele, for instance. This makes the news and suddenly tattooing is once again in the spotlight in a negative way, parents are calling for legislation, the council wants to regulate, everyone's clients are worried about getting sick and no one wins. Or perhaps just an amateur pervert who is trying his hand at tattooing and giving the ladies a hard time? Or scummy operators ripping people off? Or tattooing drunks? Or using cheap and nasty supplies...? The list goes on. The bad apple spoils

the bunch and it really doesn't take much to tarnish the name of tattooing. A lot of folks in power hate tattooing, lets not make it any easier for them.

Even the good press that we get in the mainstream newspapers and TV view us with suspicion and contempt; there are never positive stories in the news about tattooing. And for this reason it is important to keep a lid on what is said and not said publicly about our business. The established generation of tattooers are the gatekeepers of tattooing and will pass it on in good time once we've had our share and we have found the right people to continue the tradition.

If you come into a tattoo shop with no visible tattoos, no book of drawings, an attitude that says "The world owes me something" and ask for an easy doorway into the circle then you are definitely not the person to carry on the tradition of good tattooing. If, on the other hand, you get heavily tattooed, build a rapport with an artist of achievement, work your ass off developing yourself artistically and otherwise, then the tattoos gods may smile upon you and grant you access. But only if you deserve it. ☪

Kian Forreal is a professional tattoo artist with 17 years international experience and who specialises in traditional Japanese tattoo work and script lettering. He has worked all over world and has studied under some the leading tattoo artists of today. He is based in Sydney at Inner Vision Tattoo in Surry Hills. His website is: www.kianforreal.com For information on Laser Tattoo Fading and Removal please visit www.fadeyourtattoo.com