

# KIAN FORREAL

JAPANESE TATTOOS ARE MORE THAN JUST THE STYLE OF ARTWORK THEY ARE CREATED FROM. IT STEMS FROM A VERY RICH CULTURE THAT ALSO ENCASES MANY IDEALS ABOUT HOW THE BODY SHOULD BE TATTOOED. EVEN NOW AS TATTOOS GROW INTO WHAT CAN BE VISUALLY ABRASIVE ARTWORKS PLASTERED AN ALL PARTS OF THE BODY, JAPANESE TATTOOING STILL HOLDS TO IT'S ROOTS AS A VERY POWERFUL FORM OF PERSONAL CHANGE FOCUSED MORE AROUND THE BELIEFS OF THE WEARER, RATHER THAN WHAT THE TATTOO MAY PROJECT OUT INTO THE WORLD. KIAN FORREAL IS AN ARTIST THAT HAS FOCUSED HIS CAREER AROUND THE PRESERVATION OF THOSE NOTIONS, WHICH ARE VITAL FOR STABILITY OF TATTOOING INTO THE FUTURE.

**Ok Kian so let's start with something easy, what was it that got you interested in tattooing?**

What made me want to tattoo? I guess it started with getting tattooed when I was young. My dad had a tattoo, and it really wasn't that common back then then in the 70's. I used to draw tattoos on my friends when I was a kid, and I was always getting in trouble for it. I was just enthralled with tattoos, so I made some bullshit homemade tattoo machine and tattooed myself and my friends with it. I was instantly attracted to it and just never let go. Tattooing was just a really magical thing back then and it still is now. It was a lot more underground then, and a lot more risqué and rough and that was the attraction to it. I had various occupations as a teen, but it wasn't until I was about 21 that I got seriously into tattooing.

**Were you a rebel when you were young?**

Haha, yeah I was punk rock as fuck.

**What were some things you did before you started tattooing full time?**

A bit of this and that. I was a private investigator for a little while, construction work and security, stuff like that. I never worked like a real 9 to 5 job though but I was just always doing something.

**Do you consider yourself a craftsman or an artist?**

I think now I consider myself an artist. I used to think I was a craftsman until I really looked at what it was that defined their differences. Those who create with

their head and their hands are craftsmen, and those who create with their head, hands and heart are artists. I'm very passionate about what I do, and yeah we all love money but it's not why I do it. I don't compromise myself for money or compromise my artistic integrity.

**So you started tattooing at 21, what happened between then and you moving to Australia?**

Oh man a lot happened in that time. I started tattooing in a little town in Western Canada on Victoria Island. I had the Huck Spalding Super Special Tattoo outfit #2 with the t-shirt and matching belt buckle, and I had been doing a few tattoos but I didn't like the shop and I knew I had to get out of there. I called a friend who had a shop in Toronto, it was about 5000 kilometres away, and he hired me over the phone and I moved there to work. It was a real hustling street shop in downtown Toronto, and I worked there for five or six years before moving to Vancouver, then back to Toronto for a while and in about 2001 I went to Europe and never went back.

**What bought on the move to Europe?**

I was in a bit of a rut working in Canada. It's like any profession, whether it be photography, tattooing or any other sort of artistry, you get into it for a reason but then the money can take you into a different direction. So you just keep doing what you are doing because the money is coming to pay the bills and you can live comfortably but you tend to loose where your artistic direction originally wanted

to go. That's why I left Canada, I was just working in a street shop tattooing flash every day, and you feel like a whore because you are just tattooing whatever people want you to tattoo on them for money. Back then though it was different to now, you really didn't have too many options. I hooked up with some good people in Europe, and I was learning to make really good needles and that was a big turning point. Prior to having access to pre-made needles, needle making was one of those things that separated artists. If you couldn't make needles you couldn't really do solid tattoos. People take it for granted these days, but back then if you couldn't make a great needle you couldn't make a great tattoo.

**And this was around 2001?**

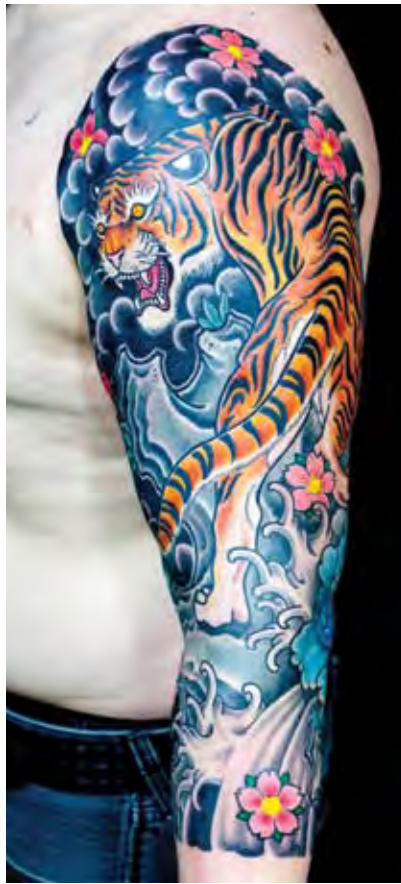
Yeah. After that I went to work with Neil Ahern at Inkadelic in Ibiza, and he kind of took me under his wing... well, I guess I kind of shoved myself under his wing and made him teach me a bunch of stuff. At this time I was travelling between Europe and Australia, then some time in Asia, and I had this big cycle of travelling that went for about eight years. I met a lot of great people and learned a lot about tattooing too. I had a lot of good clients here in Australia, and I was always busy so I ended up staying here and giving up the road. It was nice to settle down after eight years and to have more than two pairs of shoes and two pairs of jeans.

**Where were you working when you first moved here Kian?**

My first guest spot was at Vic Market in







Melbourne with Colin Gower, and then to Inner Vision in Sydney, and also to the Gold Coast with Paul Braniff at Skin FX. That was my first Australian tour. When I came back the second time I went straight to Inner Vision, and when I moved to Sydney permanently I was working there full time where I stayed for about five or six years.

**What can you tell us about where you are working now?**  
There are always a lot of distractions when you are working in a studio with a bunch of other artists, and it just felt like it was time to do my own thing, so I have a private studio in the suburbs now and it's awesome. My clients love it, it's super relaxed and calm and it's been really good for me. Sometimes working in a room with five other tattooers when you are tattooing a back piece on a girl who might be naked or tattooing some guy's arse crack, it can get a bit awkward or weird.

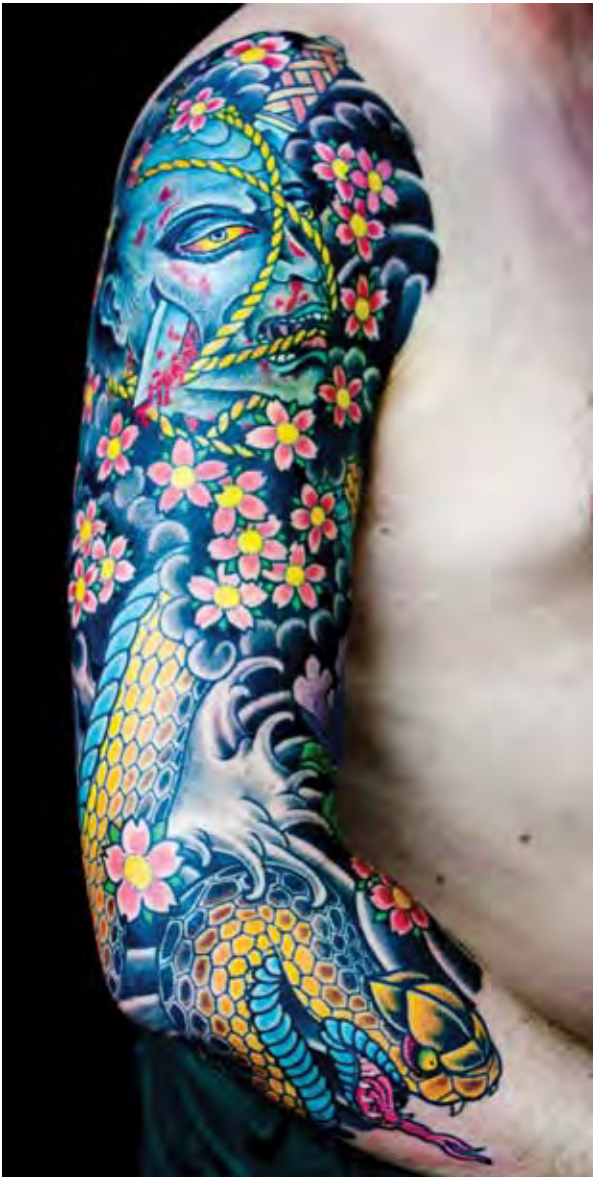
**How do you feel about working by yourself, do you miss the interactions with other artists?**  
I can take it or leave it. I enjoy it when they are good artists, but music in the studio is always an issue haha. I have a

pretty eclectic taste in music that not everybody likes, which means there is always a lot of music I don't like. I talk a lot with my clients when I am tattooing them and it's always better than talking over them, than to another artists or something like that. I have no complaints, I have been here for about six months and it has been fantastic, and I am much more focused and productive.

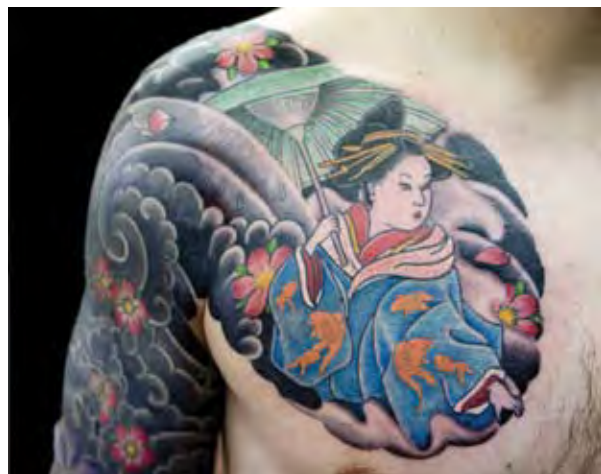
**There have been some old school rules in tattooing that have gone out the window over the last 10 years or so, especially in regard to facial tattoos, how does that fit into your philosophy on tattooing?**  
Face tattoos? No, no way. Hand tattoos I could count on one hand how many of them I have done, but I would only do it on someone if they were fully tattooed. For me I don't believe in that but I mean people can do whatever they want. Tattooing is much more of a private thing for me you know, to be able to cover them and blend into society if you need too. Even as a tattooer, to see somebody with very bold neck or face tattoos is still very confronting and very in your face, so I can only imagine how it is to the average person. I don't think it portrays tattooing

in a good way. Younger tattooers might be saying "fuck you old man" or whatever, and that's fine but let's see if you are still tattooing in 20 years time. People complain because you can't get into a bar or a club in Sydney after 6pm to get a drink because you have visible tattoos but you know, that's the price you pay. The reason these old school guys had those rules in place was to protect the culture of tattooing. But in the end there is no tattooing super power and people can, and will, do whatever they want.

**Why do you think these kinds of highly visible face and neck tattoos are so popular at the moment?**  
It's just a culture that we are living in these days where people feel they need to get that attention or recognition to stand out from the people around them. On TV you see all these young rock stars or motocross riders have tattoos on their hands and necks but what they don't think about is that these people are millionaires. They don't have to worry about stuff like getting a job, and then all these kids emulating them, and getting as many tattoos as they can as quick as they can and as cheap as they can just for the sake of being tattooed. Which they will regret,







guaranteed, every single fucking one of them, it's just the way the culture is now. Nobody put a lot of forethought into what they are doing, and as cheesy as it sounds we all have a responsibility as tattooers to protect tattooing.

**What sort of effect do you think social media has had on tattooing with things like Facebook and Instagram?**

I was thinking about that the other day. Since the age of the internet it's been weird, because before it, you couldn't really see another artist's work unless you went into a tattoo shop or a tattoo convention. Now you can lurk the internet and see what somebody has outlined three minutes ago, so I think in a way it can desensitize you to what it is. You see ten new back pieces on your news feed and by the end of it it's just another back piece. In Japan it's all about hiding your tattoos, and showing it on occasion and that's what gives it its power.

**You mean it takes away its impact when you are bombarded by it constantly?**

It's like a girl who runs around with her tits out all the time, put a t-shirt on once in a while and we can still see that they

are special haha. But I'm as guilty of it as everybody else, we all want that attention and recognition for our work but I've been really conscious lately of how much of my work I share so when I do share something, it feels more significant. I didn't get into tattooing to be the fucking homecoming queen, we started off like pirates, and now it seems like it's some sort of social club like Glee where we stroke each other's heads and pat each other on the back for every drawing you do. When I was growing up if you couldn't fist fight, there was no way you could be a tattooer. Not that the old way is better, but that's how different it is now.

**Do you think in regard to the popularity of tattooing, that the pendulum will swing back the other way and it will again become something more of a sub-culture and go back to being a little more underground like it once was?**

It's hard to say, but you can never underestimate the stupidity of people, and all it's going to take is for some pop star to get a face tattoo and for it to be accepted and it just starts escalating again, and then neck tattoos are going to look conservative. You know, it wouldn't be

that bad, but the main thing is young people are covering themselves with shit tattoos but there's is no real way to stop that, so I just try to stay in my place and not let the circus side of things affect me.

**Kian what was it that made you so drawn to the Japanese style of tattooing?**

Just the power of it and the history that surrounds it. The infinite possibilities with the design and composition of each tattoo, and the story's that you can tell with it that all have very significant meanings which a lot of people are concerned about these days... I'm not trying to shit on anybody else but for me it is the only real timeless and classic style of tattooing that has been around since before everything else, and I'm sure it will remain that way. I have seen styles come and go, and fads come and go but it will always remain. You can gauge when it was that people were tattooed by what they have tattooed on them. You have a tribal armband? Well that was 1996 to 1999, or you have a tribal sun around your belly button? That was 1993 to 1994, or you have a fucking owl sitting on a book? That was 2006 to 2008. You look at a Japanese dragon sleeve, it could be from 1850 to 2050. As





I get older the tattoos stay the same, my technique gets better or my tattoos might get tighter but my ideals stay the same. I mean it's all good to be tattooing severed zombie heads all day when you are 20 but is it really what you want to be tattooing when you are 40?

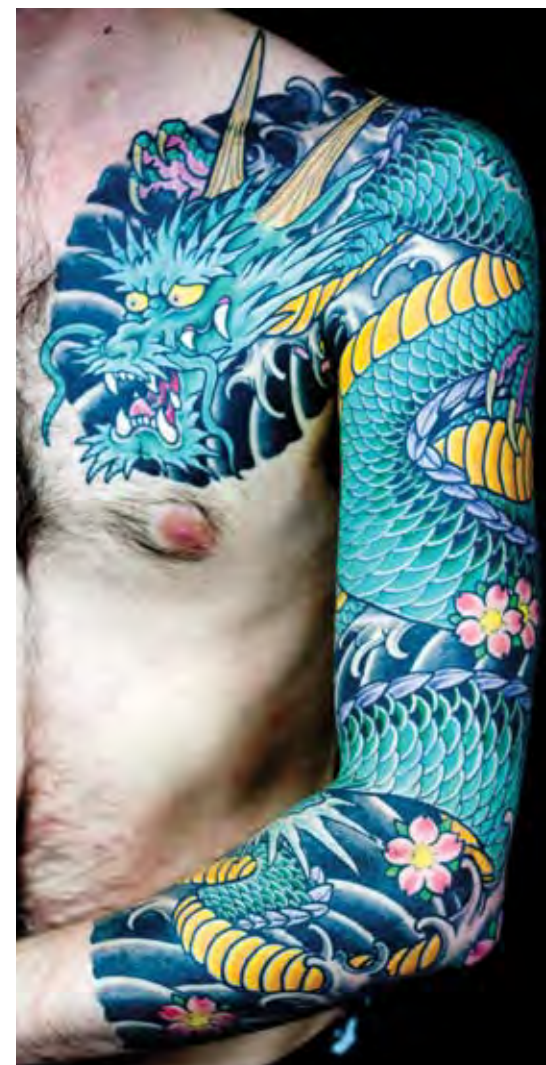
**What do you want to see in your own tattooing into the future?**  
I just want my tattoos to be better, tighter and cleaner, expanding on what I already do and just focus on my style. The problem with looking at other people's work too much is that they influence the way you do things, and you start changing the ways you work, even if it isn't the direction you wanted to go in. I have an idea in my

head of how I want my tattoos to be, and I want to stick to that and do it is clean as I can. Essentially that's what makes a good tattoo right? It can be the simplest design, but if it's clean and tight it's all you need. I try to avoid too much detail and flashy gimmicky stuff in my tattoos, I just want it to be simple and nice, and let the tattoo speak for itself. I think a lot of people forget that the whole idea of a tattoo is that it lasts forever, that's its whole selling point right? So why don't people think about how the tattoos they are getting are going to look in 20 years' time, and if they are still going to like it in 20 years from now.

**Did you think about how your tattoos**

would look in 20 years when you were young and getting tattooed?  
I can't say I was thinking about how they would look in 20 years, but I was always very conscious about not doing anything stupid like getting my hands or neck tattooed even when I was young. You close a lot of doors for yourself by having tattoos that you can't conceal whether you like it or not, and I know we all think we are born to loose when we are 18 years old and that we will never get to 30, but you do turn 30 eventually. We all judge people on what they wear or what they look like or even how they cut their hair, so if you have some tattoo on the side of your fucking neck you can't expect not to be judged by other people.





Tell us who are some artists that have influenced you as a tattooer?  
I've worked alongside Trevor McStay in Melbourne a couple of times, and Henning Jorgenson in Denmark, Greg Orie in Holland, John the Dutchman in Canada, Aaron Bell in Seattle, all the guys at Invisible NYC in New York, Neil Ahearn at Inkadelic and Paul Braniff. They are all guys that have influenced the way that I work, not necessarily as an artist but it could have been the way they run their shop, or the way they run their lives. Some had a great work ethic and others were

great with people, I was just picking up different things as I went you know, and they are all guys that I respect as people. From getting tattooed by Chris O'Donnell and Mike Rubendall, those guys I respect a lot, and obviously Japanese tattooers like Horiyoshi III, Horitoshi, Horimatsu, as well as some Japanese tattooers that are no longer alive now whose work you can still see in books like Horiyoshi II, and guys that really left their mark on tattooing. What makes me respect these artists is that they are people that work hard. They aren't just messing about

tattooing two hours a day three days a week, anyone can do that. I got tattooed by Horitoshi a couple of years ago, and he has been tattooing by hand for 53 years. He had a 12 hour day to tattoo us, and his apprentice was getting tired just from hanging out, and here he is at over 70 years old. I can only hope that when I'm 70 there are people that still want to get tattooed by me.

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