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The Human Canvas: Piercings and Tats at the 2006 Body Art Expo

by Laurel Bentley

Bay Area tattoo and piercing fanatics agree: the body is the original canvas. Talented tattoo artists congregated with loyal body art fans at the Body Art Expo on Aug. 25-27 to celebrate the combination of ink, skin, and surgical steel. From tattoo-adorned to plain-but-considering, thousands of people gathered at the Cow Palace to appreciate the work of artists from Haight Street to New York.

At the "World's Largest Tattoo and Body Art Convention," hundreds of booths featured artists striving to outdo one another at temporary tattoo parlors. Customers grimaced under the artists' needles, while crowds pushed each other and eagerly photographed each spectacle. Dense heat and the perpetual buzz of tools only added to the body art adrenaline rush.

Many, if not most, of the people at the Expo already possessed some form of body art. Some members of the adventurous crowd, like Wade, ventured to get their tattoos done under public scrutiny.

Laying belly down on a white table, Wade seemed grateful for a distraction as his chosen artist inked a tribal design laced with feathers on his leg. This design is supposed to signify Wade's "wild youth" and Cherokee bloodline. He is no stranger to tattoos.

"Two weeks ago I got a tattoo with my son in Maui," Wade stated, proud of his father-son bonding experience. "We got tribal wraparounds."

For other tattoo enthusiasts like Yolanda, originally from New Zealand, her love for tattoo art goes beyond the initial thrill of painful application. Her tattoo, a fantasy spread stretching from shoulders to tailbone, brings her so much pride and confidence that she entered herself in the "Best Back Tattoo" category of a tattoo contest.

"I never had the whole princess, fairy tale childhood, so I was like, 'You know what? I want my fairy tale on my back,'" said Yolanda, grinning as she extended her arm to expose a mythical orange sunset across her shoulder blades.

Monk is an artist based in San Jose whose parlor, 4ZeroEight, specializes in elegant Filipino lettering. He has nine years of experience and bleached hair spiked into long, horn-like pigtails. His crazy look along with his beautiful work snatch the attention of both meandering onlookers and seasoned tattoo connoisseurs.

"I enjoy doing black and grey work, because it shows the true meaning and the simplicity of the art work when you see it without all the color," he explained. Like many artists at the Expo, Mung caters to a unique crowd itching for new and different perspectives on decorative, personal art.

The Body Expo brought artists and enthusiasts together from across the country to celebrate exceptional art, the versatility of the human body, and, above all, the transformation of body to art.



A judge scrutinizes the ink work on a contestant in the "Best Sleeve" Contest.
FOGHORN/ LuLu McAllister

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