

Skin Scribe for the Tattoo Tribe

PAUL ANDREW gets up (a little too close) and personal with the eX.

THEY SAY a picture tells a thousand words. A tattoo tells ten thousand more. Not only does a tattoo hurt, it dances, breathes and screams out to people like no other image can. Behind every pulsating tattoo are tall tales and true. Behind every tattoo is a tattooist who creates the intricate skin-pics that breath life and vibrancy into these private stories, proverbs, tributes and anecdotes.

eX de Medici is a Canberra based visual artist and one of Australia's most respected tattoo auteurs. She defies categorisation from both the tattoo establishment and the contemporary art scene. Her mercurial approach to storytelling and image making is anarchic and deftly transgressive. During April there is a superb survey exhibition of her career highlights since 1996.

eX resists the conventional boundaries of narrative, photography, performance art, tattoo art and installation. She says, "Tattooing fascinates me because it defies Judeo-Christian beliefs about not marking the flesh, the idea that our body belongs to the church or the state. Tattooing ourselves is about resistance to this idea." eX adds, "The work since 1996 looks at Howard's repressive term, what I call the fascist years, and I draw comparisons with Goebel's idea about corporatisation and Hitler's Germany. It's pretty full-on".

While eX worked as a commercial tattooist during the 90s, these days her reputation as a tattooist attracts private clients she describes as "hard core suits" and explains, "People like Sydney gay icons Jeff and Joe who are completing full body tattoos." This cult following of hardcore tattoo aficionados love her unique graphic and conceptual repertoire that is dark, macabre, tribal, erotic, mystical and spectacular. She works with her clients like a magical biographer. Her role and constant challenge is to conjure a creative spin that people wish to tell on their own biceps, calves, torso, butt, cock, breasts or anywhere that tens of thousands of needle pricks can permeate and where a reader can delve or inquire.

Her tattoo clients leave her studio satisfied with terrific, terrifying and telling tattoos. They love her kinky inky insignias and the encrypted skin she conjures. The William Yang photo pictured depicts Melbourne gay



eX tattoos Michael McMahon
Melbourne 2002
Photograph by William Yang

activist and film producer Michael McMahon, as one of eX's many clients. As a tattooist, eX has the rare privilege not afforded to her and many artists when working with traditional image making genres. Her works are demanding, they beckon on the streets, to passers-by, to inquisitive audiences who want to hear what the tattoo has to say or to solve its symbolism.

Also included in the exhibition are the ethereal prints made from the blood on clients flesh from the thousands of needle punctures. She calls them, "the detritus of tattooing, like blood swabs, these are very poetic things which fascinate me. I love the shapes that blood forms."

eX has a career as a visual artist which long precedes her tattoo years, she explains,

"I was an anarchist and doing photography and performance installations in derelict houses around Canberra and I was big on photocopy art in the early days, which then was a way to do large scale photographic work which wasn't too expensive," and she adds, "I have over 3000 photographic portraits, many of my subjects are tattooed."

The exhibition comprises over 65 illuminating works including drawings, paintings, photographs, colour laser prints, photocopies, blood swabs and frottage. It provides an extraordinary insight into the intersections of a visionary's mind and a rare look behind the scenes of tattooing.

A magnificent series of highly detailed watercolours of insects and their microscopic world that she produced during a seven-

month residency at The Australian National Insect Collection is included in the survey. She says proudly, "in art, this form is not considered art, which is always an attractive reason to get curious."

This quotable quote sums up her passion for resistance and intervention. This is a breathtaking survey exhibition, which will appeal and inspire anyone intrigued by the extraordinary, the extreme and the possibilities of the body.

eX de Medici @ MPRG (Morrington Peninsula Regional Gallery), Dunns Road, Civic Reserve, Morrington. (03) 59 75 43 95. Open Tuesday - Sunday 9.00am - 5.00pm, til Sunday 23 May