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"Tattoo Nation" Etches Indelible Images

By Tyler Smith

Inside the gallery, the figures gaze outward with intimidating directness, challenging the viewer to accept them on their own terms.

They bear startlingly intricate tattoos that cover large sections of their bodies. The men and women are the subjects of Denver-based photographer Eric Schwartz – members of what he calls "Tattoo Nation."

The exhibit, currently on display at The Art Gallery in the University of Colorado's Fulginiti Pavilion for Bioethics and Humanities on the Anschutz Medical Campus, focuses on individuals with whom Schwartz formed close relationships over the course of several years.

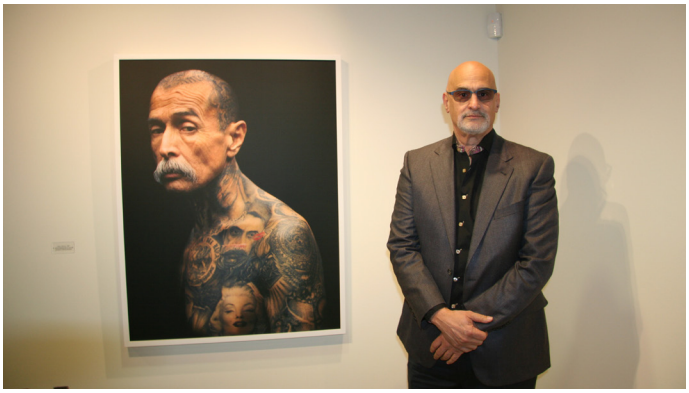
The men and women are links to a style of tattooing, known as black-and-grey, forged by Chicanos decades ago in the prisons of Texas and California. Over time, the technique blossomed from its underground origins, attracting artists who admired its intricacies, expanded on them, and helped to bring tattooing out of the darkness of penitentiary cells and back alleys and make it a fixture in popular culture.

Schwartz explores some of this history in a self-directed film of the same name, which was publicly screened at the Fulginiti Oct. 4.

Before the screening, Schwartz discussed his work and participated in a panel discussion with exhibition curator Simon Zalkind and University of Denver anthropologist Christina Krebs. Two additional screenings of the film are scheduled *(details at the end of this article)*.

Another world. A self-described middle-class guy with a fine arts background, Schwartz said until a few years ago, he didn't gave tattoos much thought.

"I never knew why people got them or that they had particular styles," he said.



Photographer Eric Schwartz with one of his inspirational subjects, Chuco.

But the seeds for his work had been planted years ago when he read the work of Alan Lomax, the folklorist and ethnomusicologist who famously ventured into communities in the United States and around the world to meet, interview and record musicians. He later archived thousands of the recordings he made of indigenous music, including the field shouts, hollers and songs that formed the fabric of American blues and gospel.

"At the time I thought, 'How cool would that be, to discover the true roots of the music?'" Schwartz said.

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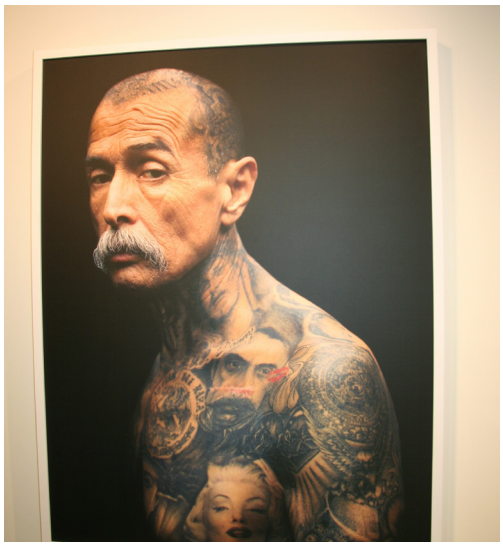
Years later, simple curiosity led him to begin taking photographs of people with tattoos and speaking with them about their motivations. He discovered that many of them used tattoos to tell highly personal stories and to stay connected with loved ones. The stories he heard, of dragons and oriental gardens, of etched phrases and abstract designs, further spurred his interest.



"Chuco Warrior" depicts Chuco shortly before his death.

Breakthrough meeting. He was at a tattoo convention in Pomona, Calif. one day when a man passed him in the aisle, walking the other way. The man's legs were covered with black-and-white portraits, "so beautifully rendered that they looked almost like photographs," Schwartz remembered.

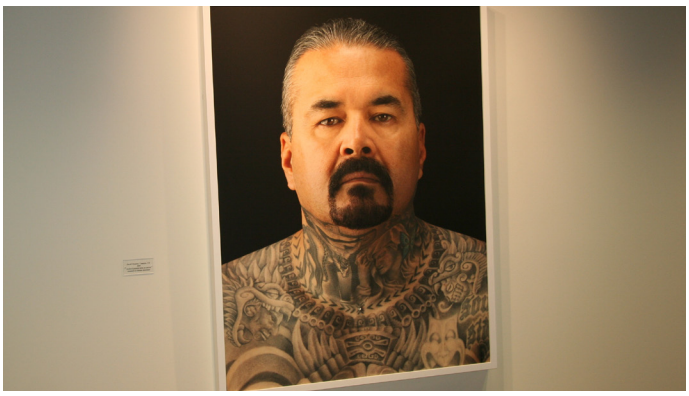
The tattooed individual was a Chicano man Schwartz came to know as Chuco, from Los Angeles. A haunting photograph of Chuco, his upper body armored in tattoos, is among the works displayed in the exhibit.

Schwartz showed some of his tattoo photographs to Chuco, who was sufficiently impressed that he took Schwartz into Los Angeles to meet various tattoo artists.

For his part, Schwartz dove into the new world, telling Chuco he wanted to express the story of tattoo artistry through the lens of his camera.

"I said, 'I'm in. I want to photograph you,'" Schwartz said.

History deeply etched. Over a period of three years, Schwartz gained the trust of his subjects and learned about the black-and-grey tattooing style. It emerged from the culture of Chicanos – individuals whose ancestors migrated many years ago from Mexico to what is now the United States. Existing in a shadow world between two cultures, they often lived as outsiders and many were imprisoned. Schwartz learned that they often tied their identities to their neighborhoods.



David Oropeza was another advocate for Schwartz as the artist put together "Tattoo Nation."

"Where you were from was what was most important," he said. "It is part of who you are."

Crude tattoos, long a part of the Chicano culture, gained even greater importance in impersonal prison environments. With limited resources, inmates perfected techniques that included burning paper – sometimes pages of the Bible, prized because of the thinness of the paper, Schwartz said – to a fine ash that they mixed with water, baby oil or toothpaste to make various shades of ink.

"God's Children, San Gabriel, CA, 2010."

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Using delivery devices such as guitar strings, they pricked and stippled the skin with the ink, a painful process that nonetheless achieved lines of extraordinary delicacy and shading that others later attempted to emulate.

"Claudia Perez, South Central Los Angeles, 2012."

The subjects of the tattoos were typically the objects closest to home – names of neighborhoods, daughters, and wives. "They depicted the things they left behind, things that meant something to them," Schwartz said.

With time, the inmates perfected methods of distilling and diluting the ink to achieve greater varieties of shading. They spread the ideas and techniques in letters to one another. With the expansion of the railroad lines, many Chicanos migrated to California, further germinating the black-and-grey approach. What some might have seen as a shortcoming – the lack of color – became its greatest and most admired strength.

The film details the evolution of tattoo artistry that followed the spread of the black-and-grey technique from the barrios to streets in an amusement area of Long Beach known as "The Pike," where shops offering quickie tattoos drawn from templates sprouted in the 1950s and 60s. In interviews, pioneering artists Charlie Cartwright, Jack Rudy, Ed Hardy and Freddy Negrete explain the flowering of styles – some of them remarkable in their power and complexity – that emerged as tattooing moved from the fringes of society to the mainstream to fine art..

Honoring the subjects. But Schwartz's Fulginiti exhibit focuses on the sharp black-and-grey lines etched into the skins of emotionally unadorned individuals. The large photo of Chuco, with his drooping moustache and penetrating gaze, is especially poignant.

"Chuco was well-known and respected in the community," Schwartz said. "He took me seriously as an artist and that helped me to gain the trust of the people I photographed."

An ex-gang member who spent time in prison before reforming, Chuco lived a hard life. By the time of his death in 2008 from liver cancer caused by hepatitis C, he looked much older than his 53 years, Schwartz said.

In Chuco's final days, Schwartz flew to Los Angeles to be with him at the hospital. Schwartz became Chuco's advocate, helping him negotiate the unfamiliar world of hospitals, physicians and medical equipment. Shortly before his death, Chuco referred to Schwartz as his "brother," then asked the artist if he knew what that meant. Schwartz stammered out a confused answer before Chuco stopped him.

"It means I would take a bullet for you," Chuco said.

"Chuco had become my passport to this world," Schwartz said. "I realized what I had come across and that I should follow through with this project."

Following in the steps of Lomax, whose work he called "a touchstone," Schwartz began making video recordings – oral histories – to preserve the lives and the experiences of his subjects and the artists he met. He got assistance in the effort from Chuco's friend David Oropeza, another subject of Schwartz's photography, who also appears in the film.

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"I felt I had a responsibility to tell their stories or they would be lost," Schwartz said. "They were not aware of the influence they had had on society and on the tattoo world." The oral histories eventually morphed into a 27-minute film and finally the 87-minute "Tattoo Nation."

Schwartz, exhibit curator Simon Zalkind, center, and University of Denver anthropologist Christina Krebs conducted a panel discussion with questions and answers before the Oct. 4 screening of Schwartz's film "Tattoo Nation."

As for the subjects of his photography and film, Schwartz said "they are very happy with it. I treated the tattooing the way they wanted it treated – as an art form. It shows where the tattooing came from, and it is respectful."

Additional screenings of Eric Schwartz's film "Tattoo Nation" will take place Saturday, Oct. 12 at 6:30 p.m. and Friday, Nov. 1 at 3:30 p.m. at the Fulginiti Pavilion for Bioethics and Humanities on the Anschutz Medical Campus. Admission is free.

Gallery hours in the Pavilion to view Schwartz's photography are from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday to Friday. The exhibit, which is free and open to the public, runs through Dec. 19.