

Tattoo Nation

ERIC SCHWARTZ

October 4 – December 19, 2013

Opening Reception

Friday, October 4, 3:30 - 5:00 PM

Discussion with the Artist, Curator, and Professor of Anthropology, Christina Krebs

Friday, October 4, 4:30 PM

Screening of *Tattoo Nation*, directed by Eric Schwartz

Friday, October 4, 5:30 - 7:00 PM, Gossard Forum

Additional screenings of *Tattoo Nation* will take place in the Gossard Forum on Saturday, October 12 at 6:30 PM and Friday, November 1 at 3:30 PM

The Art Gallery

Fulginiti Pavilion for Bioethics and Humanities
University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus
13080 East 19th Avenue, Aurora, Colorado 80045
303.724.3994
Map and directions at: www.coloradobioethics.org

Gallery Hours

9:00am - 5:00pm, Monday - Friday, all events are free and open to the public

cover image:

David Oropeza and Two of His Sons, Compton, CA, 2009,
Archival pigment print on canvas



Center for Bioethics and Humanities
UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO ANSCHUTZ MEDICAL CAMPUS

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God's Children, San Gabriel, CA, 2010
Archival pigment print on canvas



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A tattoo is more than a painting on skin: its meanings and reverberations cannot be comprehended without a knowledge of the history and mythology of its bearer. Thus it is a true poetic creation, and is always more than meets the eye. As a tattoo is grounded on living skin, so its essence emotes a poignancy unique to the mortal human condition.

– V. Vale and Andrea Juno, *Modern Primitives*

Embellishing the body with elaborate and complex tattooed designs was a highly developed form of religious and mythic practice in many civilizations throughout the world for millennia, and the practice is enjoying a revival among a number of indigenous and tribal cultures today. However in the west, until the late 20th century when tattooing began to emerge as a signifier of global youth culture, the “inscribed body” was almost always perceived as a marker of “outsider” status, of social deviance and cultural marginality – simultaneously fascinating and repelling. At the same time, becoming tattooed can serve, as it has since the inception of the practice, as an initiatory rite of passage, a symbolic ordeal through which one gains inclusion into specific communities and cultures. Tattooing has multiple levels of meaning – physical, social, religious and personal. Becoming tattooed can be seen as a reclamation and re-appropriation of the body, an affirmation of group identity and solidarity, a spiritual “manifesto” proclaiming the bearers’ deepest beliefs and aspirations, and an iconographically compressed form of autobiography – a pictorial narrative inscribed on the geography of the skin. The tattoos’ permanence can also be understood as a declaration of commitment within any of those contexts – loyalty to self, community, family, God.

Eric Schwartz’s photographs focus on a style of tattoo artistry – “black and grey” – that initially flourished amidst the Chicano *pachuco* gang culture of Texas and Arizona and migrated to the barrios and prisons of California during the 1940’s, ‘50’s and ‘60’s. Originally done by hand with a sewing needle dipped in ink, the form – while it retains many of its traditional symbols and motifs – has evolved into levels of dazzling aesthetic inventiveness, elegance and technical refinement. However, separated by a world of cultural distance, the virtuosity and genius of this art-form has been largely overlooked by the dominant hierarchic circuit of critics, curators and institutions that drives much of the art-world. Chicano tattoo artists couldn’t be further away from that cultural milieu. So instead of attempting to squeeze these artists into some acceptable art-world narrative – including any infatuations with “diversity” and “multiculturalism,” Schwartz has devoted himself to understanding how these artists and their clients understand themselves and their tattoos and to the significance of the tattoo as social and cultural discourse. An especially interesting development in this regard has been the prominent emergence of ancestral Aztec and Mayan references and motifs – an indigenous current that strongly roots Chicano tattoo culture to the American continent and unifies it to the larger Pan-Indian movement.

Schwartz spent a number of years securing the trust of his subjects and that trust palpably radiates from these portraits – a mutual trust that negotiates and bridges tremendous cultural, ethnic and class divides. This meant that Schwartz was required to be as exposed and vulnerable to his subjects as they to him. Their connection is direct, lucid and clearly genuine. Looking at these portraits we are permitted to get as close as possible and stare for as long as we want – an opportunity rarely available in ordinary public life where we abruptly look away once our gaze has been detected. In this case, the full experience of Schwartz’s portraits begins when we realize that our gaze is being unflinchingly held and returned. This experience is what makes these portraits works of art. This is also where the humanity and heroic dignity of these people becomes available to us and for us. Having established, with skill and sensitivity, a trustworthy “holding space” or “container” for his subjects, the largest part of Schwartz’s job was not to compose, contrive, manipulate or persuade, but to simply get out of the way. Schwartz pares away conventional portraiture’s codes of presentation and minimizes its contextualizing strategies and devices. His subjects appear to be in control of their own representation and its meanings. Long after we have turned our gaze elsewhere we remember what it feels like to look at them.

I’m grateful to Eric Schwartz for his unstinting generosity in giving me access to this exceptional body of work. Over the course of many conversations, Eric also shared with me the story of his history with this project and with the remarkable people who exhibit, on their skin, a form of consummate artistry, pictorial narrative and social document.

Earlier this year *Tattoo Nation* – a documentary film that Schwartz conceived and directed – was released. The film provides – with a lot of heart and soul – the social, historical and cultural context in which the black and grey tattoo emerges and evolves. I’m happy to have secured Eric’s permission to show it at the Fulginiti Center for Bioethics and Humanities as a cinematic extension of this exhibition.

Many thanks – as always – to Dr. Therese Jones, Acting Director of the Fulginiti Center for Bioethics and Humanities for her steadfast support and her wisecracks. Thanks to Debra Demosthenes of the Robischon Gallery who responded to all of my requests (demands?) with her characteristic humor and promptness.

Simon Zalkind, Curator

All photographs are courtesy of the artist and Robischon Gallery

