

# Human canvas

Continued from Page 24

Randall didn't consider tattooing as a potential career even after she started getting her own skin inked. (She now has more than 40 tattoos.) In 1986, a famous female tattooist, Juli Moon, looked at Randall's art portfolio and suggested she had a future as a tattooist, but it wasn't until 1991 that she began tattooing all the time.

About 10 years ago, Randall and her partner decided to come to Portland. Within two weeks, she was working at Sea Tramp, Portland's oldest tattoo shop. There, she's not only toughly androgynous, but she displays on the wall a cover of *Just Out* on which her lover's picture appeared.

"No closet can hold me," Randall jokes. "This is kind of the old beaten-down geriatric version of me. When I was in my 20s, I was so androgynous, often enough people were at a loss to figure out what I was at all."

With a sly grin, she adds, "Except for the ones that really needed to."

In 1997 Fish opened her own shop, Medusa Tattoo and Gallery. She's also very out, though she's amused that she tattoos more men than women.

"My strength is doing figurative work. I do a lot of fantasy male pinup-type things on men. Women seem to want more fem. My tattoos aren't as feminine. I don't do as many flowers. I also have a business partner, and she's very feminine, and her drawing and tattoo work is very feminine and really pretty. When someone comes in the door who wants that type of tattoo, I usually swing them her way and vice versa. She's not so much into drawing demons," Fish says with a grin.

Both artists agree that gay people were getting tattoos long before it became trendy.

"Gay people have been on the tattoo bandwagon longer than the straight community," Fish says. For beginners, she notes, "Usually we'll get little leather flags or the gay pride flags or triangles when people are first coming out and expressing themselves. Once someone starts getting a lot of tattoos, usually they just start expressing themselves as individuals and not as a community so much. But I think that's still a rite of passage."

Among gay people, Randall says the most popular tattoos are "things that say, 'This is what I am,' more or less. Double Venus, double Mars, pink triangles, a labris, dominatrixes, studly guys, something that reflects sexuality and orientation...and of course something to piss off the folks. That's a constant."

**S**o, if you're thinking about getting a tattoo, what should you consider?

"Be unique, be original," Randall says. "How many times do you need to see the Borneo scorpion on somebody already? How many biohazards does the world need? Don't we have

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—Fish

yin-yangs coming out of our yin-yangs already? And please, no more dolphins."

She shudders, adding: "I'm so tired of doing dolphins, I've kind of gotten into the habit of saying: 'Oh, you should get a skull. Not enough gals have skulls.'"

One woman took Randall up on the idea, and she drew a skull with eyelashes, lipstick and

a pair of crossed tampons beneath it. "It's beautiful. It's making her a local celebrity. Most people love it, and for the occasional person who's completely aghast, well, that's its own reward, too."

Fish prefers customers with a strong idea of what they want, but many of her repeat customers prefer her to design something. "That's where I get the most freedom," she says.

Both artists have had their share of unusual requests. Fish notes that her most interesting piece was a dragon on a man's forearm, but her strangest job was tattooing flames on a man's penis. "I wanted to do it because I'd tattooed ears, lips, faces, all the taboo places, and I hadn't done that yet. I don't think I'll do it again. It was really hard."

She stops and laughs. "Actually it wasn't hard. It was soft, and that way it was hard to tattoo. 'Cause it's like stretching this endlessly stretchy skin."

Randall's adventures haven't been quite so daring. "I think if somebody really wanted their dick tattooed, they'd probably want somebody who'd really appreciate doing it, and they should go to someone who enjoys tattooing dicks," she says with a wry laugh.

But she does note: "There was the guy who got the flying ass, the enema dominatrix, the holy royal cheeseburger and the Tasmanian Devil as a hooker. And there was an uncut Winnie the Pooh in boots and a leather vest. That's pretty hard to top, don't you think?" More recently, she gave a Herb Ritts model his first tattoo, "a rainbow with a hunky guy in cutoffs standing in front of it and a skyline."

Societal attitudes toward tattooing have changed in modern years, but both artists caution against getting a tattoo simply because it's now trendy.

"You'll probably be seeing laser-removal places at the mall in the upcoming decade," Randall jokes.

Fish adds: "Rather than trendy, I would say it's more 'acceptable.' We have a disposable society, and our culture's really lacking in anything permanent. Part of me wants to think that tattooing is making a mark, something that's permanent."

**E**very tattoo shop is different, but all of them should have extensive safety procedures.

"It's basically the same things a phlebotomist or a dental technician would do to make sure things are safe," Randall says. "It's so much more than just new needles, new gloves. If somebody isn't willing to show you the autoclave or take you through the steps to show you [that] you're not endangering your health, don't walk out of the shop, run." Fish adds that Oregon is one of the toughest states for tattooists to get licenses.

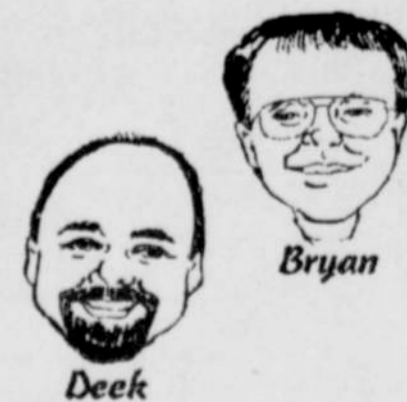
When one comes in for tattooing, Randall warns, "don't show up here drunk. Be well rested. Be reasonably well fed. Don't have been out in the sun all day. Don't be hung over. However minor, what you're doing is going to put a demand on your physiology, and your body will react accordingly. Use common sense."

Continued on Page 27

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