

vals in freak shows. Contemporary body modification still retains some of this stigma. However, the sight of a tattooed arm or a pierced eyebrow has become pretty normal around Eugene.

The lower back used to be a favored place for women to get a tattoo, but these days “the ribs are the new lower back” says Sens of the latest tattoo trend.

Eugene has at least six tattoo shops, and there are several more in Springfield. In 2006, 36 percent of people ages 18 to 25 and 40 percent of those 26 to 40 were sporting at least one tattoo, according to a study released in January 2007 by the Pew Research Center.

## BODY MODIFICATION IN EUGENE

“We’ve had to work hard to get off the strips and out of the carnival,” says Georg Birns, owner of High Priestess Piercing and HPP Ink in Eugene, as well as four other piercing studios. Birns and other tattoo and piercing shops have struggled for acceptance of their lifestyle and of their profession.

Tattooing and body piercing are strictly regulated professions in Oregon. In order to pierce in Oregon, the “technicians,” as the state calls them, must be at least 18 years old with a high school degree or the equivalent and show evidence that they have received training in basic first aid, blood-borne infection control and aftercare procedures, according to the Oregon Health Licensing Agency. Piercers learn the techniques through apprenticeship.

To be licensed to tattoo, an artist must complete 360 hours of training from an Oregon licensed “career school” or show two years of full-time tattooing or four years of half time from another state.

Some tattoo artists have a problem with the use of tattoo schools in Oregon. “I like that they have regulations and licensing,” says tattoo artist Anji Marth, slender and dark-haired, with bluish dots tattooed over her eyebrows, “But I have never known a shop that will hire a person who learned in a school.” Marth and others say the system creates more bad artists than good. Bad tattoo artists are disparagingly called “scratchers” by others in the industry.

The nature of tattooing demands the one-on-one training of an apprenticeship, she says. “The grain of the skin on every human body is different.”

An artist needs to know how far into the skin to allow the needles and how many needles to use. Tattoo artists use a machine that allows needles to go up and down



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about 3,000 times each minute. An artist might use a grouping of three needles for a fine outline and more needles, in groupings from five to seven, for broader lines. Sometimes a single needle works for very delicate designs. Using the wrong needles or puncturing the skin too deeply can ruin a design or even cause scarring.

In order to really learn, Marth says, tattoo artists need individual attention. It’s a profession that affects the clients deeply, “The rest of someone’s life, how they feel about a part of their body, depends on you.”

The dedicated artists, she says, will leave Oregon to get educated elsewhere, then come back.

## THE HISTORY OF CONTEMPORARY BODY MOD

While tattooing has enjoyed a steady, if sometimes subcultural, presence in American society, body piercing and other contemporary modifications came out of the gay S/M leather scene in the 1970s.

The experiments of a group of men who came together in that scene and called themselves the T&P Group (tattooing and piercing) led to the body modification styles found in Eugene and across the U.S. Key members of the group were Jim Ward,

founder of the first piercing shops, a chain called The Gauntlet, and Fakir Musafar. Musafar is known as the father of the “Modern Primitives” movement.

Their innovations included developing a specialized form of jewelry that won’t tear the skin — the now ubiquitous barbell jewelry and rings with beads. And of course they experimented with piercing different areas of the body. One of their slogans was, “If it protrudes, pierce it.” This included everything from penises to eyebrows.

Thanks to these experiments, modern piercers never use a piercing gun, which they say is unsanitary and leads to problem piercings. Instead, piercings are done with a large hypodermic needle that slices the skin, with the jewelry butted up against the end to aid insertion.

The T&P Group also involved Richard Simonton, who grew up in Seattle, owned the Muzak franchise for Southern California and funded much of the early experimentation on body modification.

After Simonton’s death, Ward and Musafar had a personal split, but both continued to pierce and engage in body modifications. Although Ward’s Gauntlet stores no longer exist as a chain of piercing stores, many former Gauntlet “master piercers”

give training seminars across the country.

Musafar puts on Fakir Body Piercing and Branding Intensives — seminars on how to pierce and how to perform human branding, which he likes to call “the kiss of fire.”

The Association of Professional Piercers, an “international health and safety association” that advocates for piercers and disseminates information via their webpage ([www.safepiercing.org](http://www.safepiercing.org)), recommends training seminars in addition to apprenticeship as part of becoming a professional piercer.

Musafar’s modern primitivism is as much concerned with ritual aspects of body modification as it is with how it looks. Modern Primitives are people who live in contemporary, developed nations who imitate “primitive” cultures in their body modifications. They often focus on creating rituals when they pierce, tattoo or scar.

One controversial ritual performed by Musafar and other modern primitives is a reenactment of the Plains Indian tribes’ Mandan Sun Dance ceremony. In the version of the ceremony performed by Musafar, he pierced his chest with large hooks and pulled against a pole for several hours.

This ceremony is similar to a “suspension.” In a suspension, which practitioners say is quite dangerous unless done correct-



GEORG BIRNS



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