

Shealynn Murphy  
Senior Thesis: Photography  
Mary Baldwin College  
Fall, 2011

When most people think of the beauty of the human body, they think of the classic nude figure; pure and untouched but by the hands of humanity and creativity. We think of the dancer, the art model, the delicate curve of a woman's hip, the deep creases in an old man's face. Now, think of the beauty of the human *world*. What comes to mind? Architecture? Painting? Technology? Whatever it is, it is likely something created by humans. Our world is made of things we have imagined and made true. Anything we create can be called art because it is a manifestation of our ideas. There is a human drive to create. We create life, we create language, we create the world we surround ourselves with and we call it beautiful.

So why is it, then, that the human body is so often only considered beautiful in its unaltered state? In today's world it is uncommon to find someone whose body has not been touched by a creative hand and yet the unaltered and pure is still seen as the high example of human beauty. Things as simple as hairstyles and makeup application are products of creative thought and a human desire to flaunt our status as self-aware individuals. The more extreme side of this exists in more permanent forms of body alteration and modification. These include plastic surgery, piercings, implants, and the item I have chosen to focus on: tattoos. Tattoos have been part of human culture since its earliest years, and yet it is only now garnering a status as "normal" in the Western World, and in many other cultures it is still considered highly taboo.

Tattoos become a part of our bodies in a way that few other forms of body modification manage to do. A piercing or an implant may be intertwined with our body inside or outside, but it still remains a separate object. Tattoos become a part of us over time and not only meld with our skin, but move with our muscles and grow as we grow over the years. Many studies have

been done on tattoos, often taking a personal approach, focusing on the meaning of each piece, or an anthropological approach, focusing on the cultural practices that surround it. My goal in this project, however, is to focus on the relationship between tattoos and our bodies.

As far back as human culture can be studied, evidence of body modification has been found. Mummies, burial remains, and antiquities dating back over 5,000 years show evidence of body piercing, tattooing, and even structural modification of the body, such as wrapping the soft bones of an infant's head to give the skull an elongated shape. Every form of body modification known today can be found in our past. Then and now, the alteration of the human body has served a purpose. Often it is to mark status, note allegiance to a group, or provide permanence to a piece of the past. In traditional Maori culture, boys have their face tattooed at puberty. Symbols placed at certain locations on the face tell the boy's rank, position, marital status, the ancestry of his mother and father, and more. In Japanese history tattoos were often related to the Yakuza, one of the world's oldest groups for organized crime. These elaborate and colorful designs were worn as symbols of allegiance to the group, and as identification if they were to die in battle and have their possessions stolen from their body. In American history, sailors popularized the art of tattooing by collecting tattoos on their travels as mementos of their travels. In today's modern culture, we still tattoo for these reasons. Today's tattoos show names and faces of our children and our lovers, they memorialize events and people from the past, they show camaraderie within groups, and they bring the ideas within us to the surface of our skin.

When a tattoo is new it is novel and bright. It appears on the skin like a raised scar and fades like sunburn as it sinks in and settles. Over time though, the novelty wears away, the tattoo becomes a part of its owner. To the person with the tattoo, that art is now a part of what they look like. If it is taken away, the body looks strange and foreign. Like emptying out a room in the house you've lived in for years.

Over the course of this project I've discussed this idea with the participants and have been met with almost total agreement. As excited as each person was to be presented with a

chance to show off the artwork on their skin, they each admitted a certain level of accustomedness to its presence, laughing at the suggestion of how their body would look without it.

This project was not all full of what I expected. In fact, in the beginning there was not even a space to execute it in. When I first broached the idea of a photo project in a studio setting, I assumed I would need a large amount of improvisation, as I was not aware of any space on the campus designated for such endeavors. I was then lead to a room in the back of our painting studio filled with projectors, boxes, and dust, and told this was the room I wanted. That was where the project started. It was several weeks later that the room resembled anything like a studio, but through a group effort the room was cleaned, painted, and organized. Supplies were ordered, equipment was assembled, and carpet was laid. By then it was already a number of weeks past the date I had been hoping to start the project, so shooting began immediately. Most of the participants are students and friends and family of students. The photos are all shot on a solid white backdrop to emphasize the lines and shape of the body and the skin. Many people compared this style with the works of Richard Avedon, but while there are similarities in the philosophy, the purpose is quite different. Being familiar with Avedon's work, I did think of his style when planning my series. The white backdrop, in both his and my photos, is used to put focus on the subject and avoid the context of a setting. The difference though, is that Avedon's photograph's focus very much on the person. The focal point is often the face and one of Avedon's most popular philosophies was that he felt that a good photograph could truly capture the essence of the subject.

These pictures are about the relationship between our bodies and the art that we make of them and on them. Faces are omitted purposefully to avoid context. In these photos it is not important who these people are, nor is it important why they got these tattoos. Not in this case. While yes, surly these markings all have meaning and stories, that is another project entirely. Here and now we are not looking for stories, we are looking for beauty.

## References

*Richard Avedon*. The Richard Avedon Foundation, 2011. Web. Nov 2011.

(<http://www.richardavedon.com>).

*Role of Tattoo*. Skin Stories: The Art and Culture of Polynesian Tattoo. Pacific Islanders in Communication, 2003. Web. Dec 2011.

(<http://www.pbs.org/skinstories/culture/role2.html>).

*Skin & Bones: Tattoos in the Life of the American Sailor*. Independence Seaport Museum, 2006.

Web. Dec 2011. ([http://www.phillyseaport.org/New\\_Exhibits-Tattoos-Skin\\_and\\_Bones.shtml](http://www.phillyseaport.org/New_Exhibits-Tattoos-Skin_and_Bones.shtml)).