



Inking the deal

On the brink of his 40th birthday, **Michael Franco** finds out what it takes to get a tattoo – and be a tattoo artist – in Singapore



Art by another name Use your body as a blank canvas for creative expression

When I told my wife I wanted something involving pain, bare skin and a man for my upcoming birthday, she didn't even blink.

I'd been talking about getting a tattoo for at least 20 years, so when the time finally came to put some ink where my mouth was (well, a little lower), it wasn't at all surprising. My quest to become a marked man led me first to a meet-up with the Singapore Tattoo Club, a Facebook group with more than 250 members. They sent me down the well-lined path to discovering the top local tatt artists. While all skin artists tell you they can do any style of tattoo, they are listed here with the work they truly excel at...

Richard Bahadur, Body Décor Tattoo and Piercing #04-22 The Heeren, 260 Orchard Rd (6235 3744, www.bodydecorattoo.com). If there's a godfather of tattooing in Singapore, it's Richard Bahadur. He is the son of Indra Bahadur, or 'Johnny Two Thumbs', who first brought the art of mechanised tattooing to the city in 1950. Although he began at 14 under his father's tutelage, inking wasn't his first calling. 'I wanted to do something different, but my dad saw my report card and said, "Maybe you should be a tattoo artist. You like colours."'

Having been behind ink guns for 40 years, Bahadur fittingly specialises in old-school work. He left the Johnny Two Thumbs shop – Singapore's oldest tattoo parlour – earlier this year to open Body Décor with two women: Valerie Yang, a specialist in fantasy and black-and-grey work, and Kim Chong, who's adept at tribal designs.

Surprisingly, Bahadur remains tattoo-free himself. 'My father always told me that I couldn't get a tattoo until I was ready,' he says. 'I guess I'm still not ready.'

Scott de Silva, Shark Tattoo Studio Level

2, 38A Lorong Mambong (6284 7287, www.sharktattoostudio.com). Although largely self-taught, Scott de Silva is probably the closest thing Richard Bahadur has to a disciple. One look at his portfolio clearly proves that learning from a master has its benefits. De Silva specialises in cover-ups – not something many artists relish as it can involve melding their own style with an inferior one. In his hands though, your ugly old tatt will be transformed, like a worm into a butterfly (literally).

Kirby Lian, Utopia Studio #02-95 Roxy Square Shopping Centre, 50 East Coast Rd (6346 1541, www.angkongthiam.com). When asked about his speciality, 49-year-old Kirby Lian says: 'I like to create something that involves the lifestyle of my clients. For example, I like to use their name or horoscope to create individualised designs.' Equally adept at colour and black and grey, Lian has been tattooing for seven years and is eager to see the Singapore tattoo scene continue to evolve. To that end, he is organising the very first Singapore Tattoo Show (9-11 January 2009) at Singapore Expo Hall 6. Utopia also features Donald Kwek, known for his colour work and Japanese designs, and apprentice Deborah Tan, who specialises in new-school needle work.

Joseph Siow, Visual Orgasm #03-19 Parklane Mall, 35 Selegie Rd (6336 5884, www.visual-orgasm.com). If your tastes veer towards the dark side, Joseph Siow is your man. His early influences included a good dose of heavy-metal art, which is evidenced in his excellent executions of skulls, demons, claws and other beautifully gruesome images. He's also comfortable with portraiture and tribal designs. His clientele trusts him inherently, often letting Siow freehand his work onto their skin without seeing a design first. Fellow inker Deon can handle your new-school needs, while Leslie specialises in Japanese art, and MH, the apprentice, can give you a spot-on tribal design.

Elvin Young 37 Joo Chiat Terrace (9798 9140, www.elvintattoo.com). Young is something of a tattoo counsellor, and waxes philosophical about his artform: 'For some people, tattoos are like therapy. They want to feel that

physical pain to overcome the emotional pain.' Working out of a vibrantly designed home studio, Young likes to get tattoo designs straight out of the minds of his clients. 'I want it really from their words,' he says, 'because the thing is, when you come in with a certain piece of work, you can actually be caught in that piece of art and your imagination is restricted from going further.' He excels at both human and animal portraiture, his stunning black-and-grey designs taking on near-photographic quality.

Jerry Tan, Sacred Needle #04-87 Far East Plaza, 14 Scotts Rd (6734 0046). There are many tattoo parlours on the fourth floor of Far East Plaza, but when talking to the local body-art community, this shop – helmed by Jerry Tan, who's been inking for nine years – always gets more mention than the others. Unlike Young, Tan prefers his clients bring in a design; his black-and-grey work is among the best in the business. Also operating out of his shop is Yus, who specialises in Japanese designs. On getting a permanent piece of body art, Tan says, 'The thing about tattooing is that it's quite addictive. Once you have one, you'll come back for more.'

Designs on your body



A glossary of tattooing

- **Old school** Think drunken sailors: skull and roses, pin-up girls, hearts, daggers, banners with names in them. Usually simpler designs using basic colours, especially red and blue.
- **New school** Tends to be fantastical and extremely colourful, ranging from stylised anime-like images to outer-space themes. Often done by younger artists.
- **Cover-up** Any tattoo that obliterates or changes an old one – usually for the better (see 'old school').
- **Black and grey** Tattoos executed exclusively with black ink applied in varying shades to often create a 3-D effect.
- **Tribal/Celtic** Geometric designs usually executed in black ink, and inspired by traditional patterns of Nordic, Polynesian, Maori and other indigenous groups.

Pricing note: The more complex the tattoo, the more you can expect to pay. In general, artists charge around \$50 for a consultation and preliminary design work (excluding Elvin Young, whose consultations are free). In some cases, if the tattoo is small, that will cover the application of the tattoo as well.