



Sen Vanderzalm
Serena Potter

SYNTHETIC MUSES



From skin to gallery

a

Curatorial Statement



Synthetic Muses: From Skin to Wall is a fun yet thought-provoking pop-up exhibition featuring newly commissioned works from more than 20 Naarm based tattooists. Having inked a design of their choice onto a piece of synthetic skin, the content of this exhibition is centred on an inquiry into the meaning of tattoos when the body is abstracted as the receiver and replaced by an inanimate object. The works do not aim to redefine tattooing as a linear practice, but instead recontextualise them to see if these skin adornments can still produce profound visual narratives when presented on plastic. By employing synthetic skin as their canvas, these artists explore what tattoos can signify - if anything at all - when they exist in isolation. Stripped of the body's impermanence, tattoos on synthetic skin take on new meanings, leading viewers on a journey through the intricate lines, vibrant colours, and evocative symbolism that characterise these works.

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As you navigate through this exhibition, you will encounter a rich tapestry of artistic styles and thematic interpretations. From abstract geometries that challenge our perception of form to intricate designs that echo the voices of marginalised groups and cultures, each artwork offers a unique perspective on the intersection of body, art, and identity. Thus, we urge our audience to join us in this exploration of what tattoos signify in this ever-evolving landscape when they migrate from their corporeal sites to the most unlikely of places.



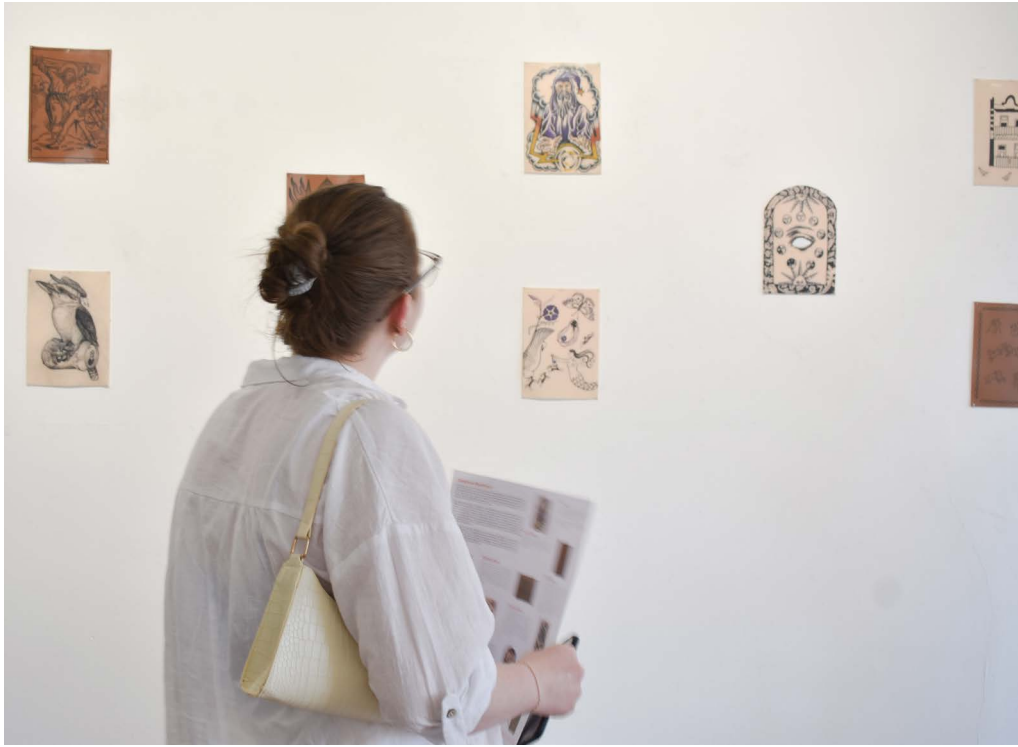
In
Gallery



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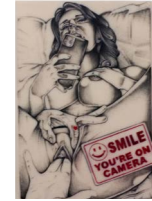
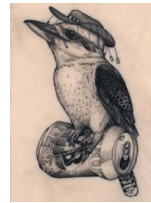
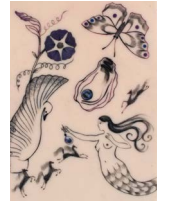
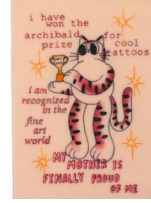
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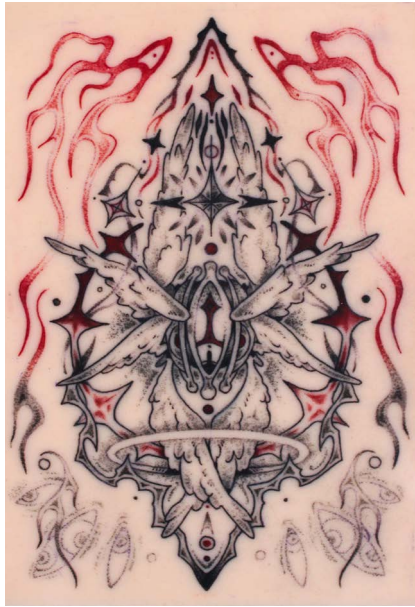


In
Practice



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10



Seven W.

Seven has been tattooing for 2.5 years so far. Mostly doing their own original designs or custom designs as required. It's hard to describe what their styles are. They include everything in their thoughts and events that have happened throughout their life. They like to create designs based on simple ideas but add their own flavours, to show everyone how they see this world. By getting tattoos they can show everyone how they see themselves as someone unique and proud so by getting a tattoo they are able to help others do the same.



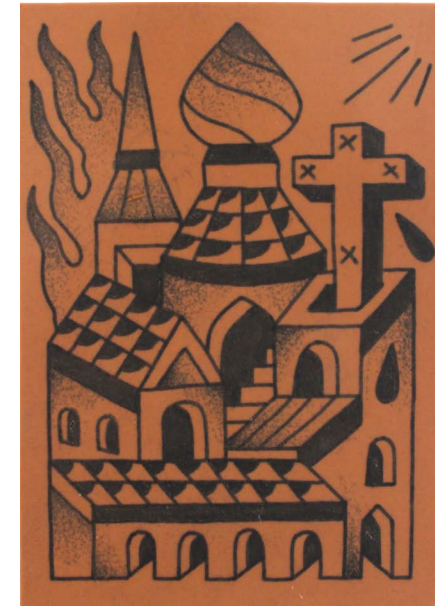
Sam Pearson

Tattooing out of the Scarlet Temple, and apprenticing under Annita Maslov and Aleks Mothra, Sam combined mediaeval woodcuts, Soviet prison tattoos and religious iconography as inspiration to form a unique style of tattoos. Tattoos make them more comfortable and accepting of their body and being able to make others feel at home in their own bodies is very important to them.



Benji Lhaochareonwong

Based in Melbourne, Benji is a first generation immigrant from Thailand (Bangkok/Chiang Mai). Her work, as a tattoo artist, features a contemporary take on traditional tattooing techniques seen in her realism and surrealism pieces through soft and textured stippling. With the absence of representation growing up, it has influenced the drive to include South East Asian features in her current flashes and design work.



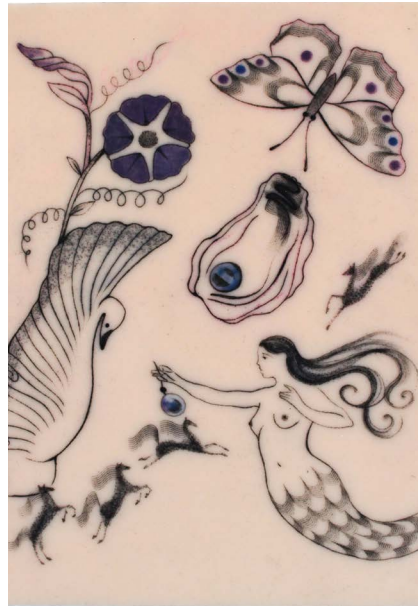
Russell Winter

Russell Winter has been tattooing in Melbourne for the past 8 years and co-owns Sanctum studio in Melbourne. Russell is inspired by artwork and religious symbology from the Byzantine and Eastern Orthodox religions and how their repeated use of images (hearts, crosses, hands, lilies, architecture etc) and style (flattened colour and inverted perspective) has created a language to tell stories and imbue sacred meanings. Russell connects this to the way tattooing has created added meaning to images that have been tattooed throughout history (the rose, hearts, spider webs etc) and tries to use this approach of repetition and style in his own work.



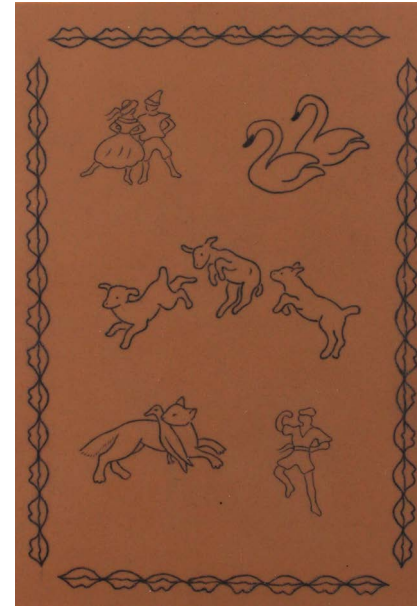
Paul Martin

Paul has been tattooing now for roughly 10 years and still has no clue what's going on... But they think that's what they love about art and being an artist because they are constantly learning, finding out what works for them and the freedom to explore different mediums. He always had an interest in art before he started tattooing but having this job really pushed him to get better and challenge himself. Like most, he wasn't very good at drawing (or tattooing) to begin with, but doing it everyday and getting to work with people he loves and respects has massively helped. They got a good chance in lockdown to paint a bit more and have sold a few pieces privately. They would like to focus more on painting in the future.



Corilee Swan

Corilee's tattoo career began in Portland Oregon in 2017. They immediately found the process of tattooing puzzling in with what they felt was lacking in other mediums. Tattooing provided Cori with a collaborative and social aspect that feels rare in other art forms, along with the feeling of gifting something physical and emotional to her client each session. The themes in Cori's work reflect what has always inspired her: nature, ancient cave paintings, vintage art and queer bliss. Cori continues to practise in Naarm for the foreseeable future.



Kits

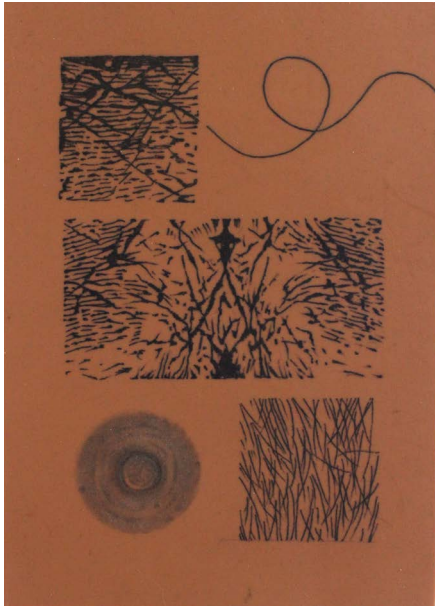
Kits Tattoo is a hand poke tattoo artist based in Brunswick, Melbourne. Their work embodies contemporary style designs with a playful and naive edge, brought to life with minimal, clean line work.

Kits centres consent at the forefront of their practise. Clear communication, comfort and minimising pain is at the core of their work



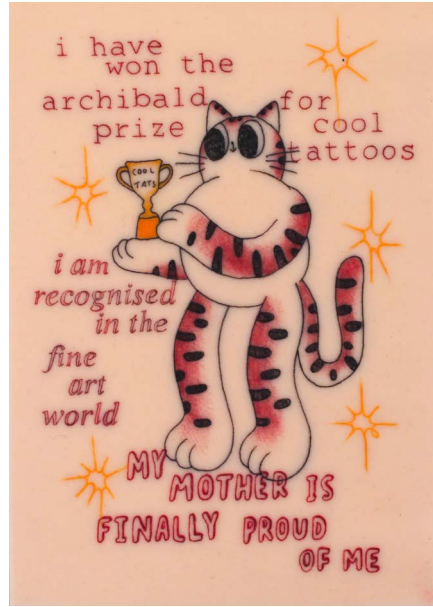
Grace Audrey

Grace has been tattooing since 2016. Prior to this completed her Bachelor of Fine Art at RMIT in 2015. She is currently influenced by a mixture of cartoons/anime and Christian religious motifs. Floating between playfulness and timeless imagery Grace also paints on clothing, canvas and occasionally enters the 3D world. Grace's tattoo apprenticeship taught her the skill of tattooing as a trade and as such can tattoo various styles. She is currently tattooing full time in Fitzroy at Sanctum Studio.



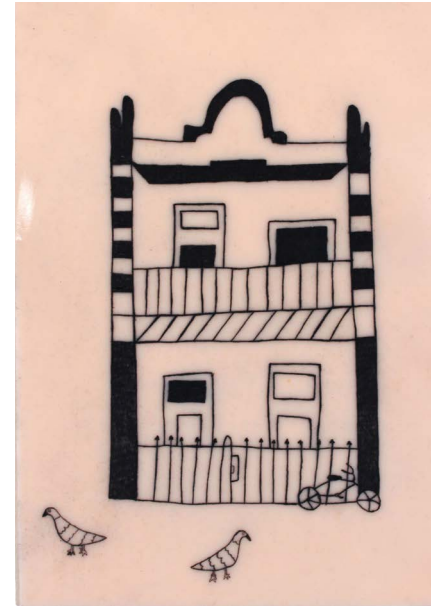
Nandini Sathyamurthy

In 2015, Nandini began her tattoo career as an apprentice in a studio based in Chennai, India. The following six years they continued to move away from commercial tattooing and made their practice exclusive to friends and family. To them, tattooing has become a love language. It is a ritual that they wanted to share with the people they knew well and cared about. She has been finding ways to redefine the practice and experiment with it and began defining tattoos as memories of courage, love and loss. Migrating to Naarm in 2022 as a student, she shifted her interests to writing about tattoos.



Germ

Germ is a tattooer and artist originally from Brighton/UK, living in Naarm since 2007. Their work features bright blended colours and cute weird animals; exploring themes of identity, vulnerability, gender, mental health, queerness, self-discovery, and coming to terms with the concept of existing as a human. Their work is a celebration of colour and joy, with a focus on reclamation of the body and decorating our transient vessels with our identities. Their tattoo practice is devoted to helping their clients access the healing and transformative power that is possible within tattooing. Germ's work is inspired by the weirdness and queerness of nature, the internet, memes, zines, and punk and queer culture."



Hayde Nizard

Originally from France, Hayde arrived in Australia in 2020. In 2021, in the middle of the bush, they realised that their drawings needed a different support, a different way to express themselves. This is when they started their journey as a self-taught artist, when they realised that tattooing would put them in this little bubble that they've been looking for forever. For them, tattooing is more than having it on you for the rest of your life, tattooing is allowing someone to express their creativity on you, it's the trust around the moment, it's the small talk to get to know the person's story better, tattoo has a meaning or no meaning, so for them the most important meaning is the one you give it in the end.



Bill Jukes

Bill is a Naarm and Dja Dja Wurrung based tattooist who is a queer and neurodivergent woman working in an inclusive space. Themes of interest to tattoo include: childhood nostalgia with a twist, gore, death, feminine/soft florals, Satanic imagery, the creepy or morbid, coverup designs, and bold lines. Infatuated with the imagery and social phenomenon of tattooing, she includes its historical and various cultural shifts through her commitment to maintaining the craft of producing and drawing her own designs by hand, painting and drawing both flash and custom pieces - using pen, ink and paper - rather than seeking out more modern digital alternatives.



Sen del Rio

Sen is a tattoo apprentice that leans towards an illustrative blackwork style based in Naarm/Melbourne. They have been in their apprenticeship for just over a year and have been tattooing since February. Tattooing to them is unlike any art form, they get to help people become one with art and they can't express their gratitude and love for not only the artists and clients but the craft itself. It's something they wish to bring nothing but their best and can't wait to see where it takes them.



Teddy Benson

Growing up in Townsville North Queensland meant Teddy's first exposure to tattooing was through 'Tattoo Nightmares' and 'Ink Master'. Their first tattoo was by an angry hyper-masculine man who got mad when they asked to move the stencil. After moving to Naarm in 2020 they were shocked by the care and consent each tattoo artist put into their practice. The more tattoos they collected, the more they fell in love with the art form and the community. To them, tattoos are a way to transform the body into a collection of self-curated art and a way to feel less dysphoric in their skin.



Vivian

Vivian's tattoos feel nostalgic, like something you have seen in children's books or old dictionaries. She focuses on techniques like cross hatching and the use of dots to create unique textures. Her work is inspired by mythical creatures, everyday objects and artworks from both eastern and western cultures. Vivian is currently tattooing at Hidden Moon.



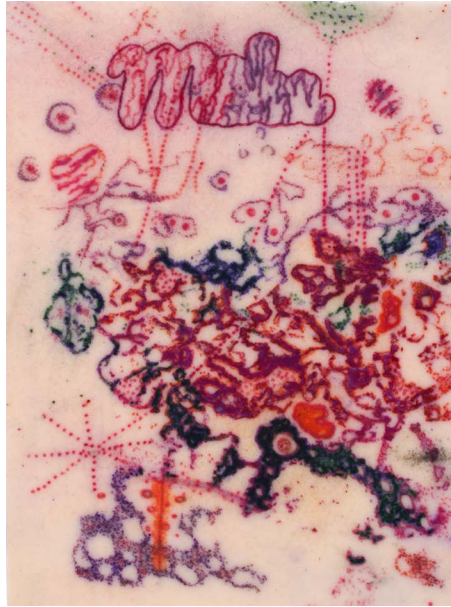
Jack Tucker

Jake is a tattoo artist working out of Apparition Tattoo in Bendigo, Dja Dja Wurrung Country. Bold and colourful, his work is heavily inspired by American traditional aesthetics covering a wide range of subject matter but most notably icons of pop culture.



Jake Hicks

Jake is a tattooer and contemporary artist located in the regional Victorian city of Bendigo (Dja Dja Wurrung land). They specialise in traditional tattooing, solid line work with bold colours, specifically Japanese style tattooing. When they aren't tattooing they draw stylised nudes and pornographic realism. Zine, a German art magazine that specialises in provocative and erotic art from around the world. They unapologetically love what they do, even when other people don't. They hurt people for a job, draw smut in their spare time, and are just an all round bad influence that enjoys helping people disappoint their parents.



Mika Corkill

Tattoos to Mika are about connecting the self to a moment in time, like physical conduits of memory. To them, tattoo design is interpretative in terms of aesthetic quality and they really enjoy breaking down the fundamentals to create experimental tattoos.



Kimi

Kimi is a first year tattoo apprentice based in the Naarm cbd. Tattooing to them is a form of expression whether it be through making their designs and in terms of what tattoos they choose to get. For them, tattoos don't always need to be something super deep or meaningful all the time- it can range from something sentimental to you, to something fun and silly that you're interested in!



Nadine Guerra

Nadine Guerra, a trained designer and independent artist, delves into artistic expression through watercolors, canvases, murals, and tattoos. Her wellspring of inspiration lies in nature, women, and animals. To Nadine, tattooing is more than ink on skin; it's a canvas for self-expression, a journey of transformation, and a fusion of art and emotion. With over 7 years of experience in the tattoo industry, she has the privilege of crafting unique and profound designs for her clients. Her abstract art, often with psychedelic elements, as well as delicate and minimalist pieces characterised by fine lines.

21



Curran James

In 2012 Curran began a tattooing apprenticeship and has been working as a professional tattoo artist for over 10 years. His work reflects his Indigenous background, storytelling and his love of nature. It often combines neo traditional design, black and grey realism and koori carving patterns. My tattoo work as a whole, feeds me as an artist because it is a dialogue between myself and my client. Even more so when it comes to my own style that directly speaks to my aboriginal culture. The clients community and elders as well as my own all play a major role in that dialogue. A story if you will.

22



In
Theory

*Excerpt from thesis *Bodies of Curiosity: Tattooing as a Curatorial Practice**

Nandini Sathyamurthy

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Synthetic Muses: From Skin to Gallery

Nandini Sathyamurthy

Tattoos as “artwork” are not foreign to the white cube space, with many museums and galleries in the past having curators invite this unique medium into exhibition spaces. The “artwork” here moves with its owner, so curators have either used surrogate mediums such as photographs to document and display a tattoo on a person or have resorted to even having a living model seated in this space as a tableaux vivant. In both, the tattoo is sidelined by the reaction and criticism surrounding the feat of just simply having the medium present in a white cube. Synthetic Muses surpasses this distraction of de-contextualising a tattoo by making it the very focus of its curatorial concept.

From skin to gallery walls, the exhibition invited tattooists to tattoo designs on synthetic skin which were displayed on the walls of Unassigned Gallery. From start to finish, tattooists followed their usual procedure and used materials, as they would for their clients, to tattoo on fake skin. Here the tattoo does not exist on paper, a video or on grafted human skin and the process used to making these tattoos are authentic in its production. Is it still a tattoo without its corporeal context? The curators for Synthetic Muses left this question open-ended and left it to viewers to decide. But what was truly unique about this exhibition was the use of synthetic skin. A surface most tattooists would have used during their days as an apprentice to practice on has now been promoted in its status from just a practice tool to an artwork of its own. Not only does this draw the question of “Is this tattoo on fake skin to be considered an actual tattoo?”, but also shifts the status of the tattooist to tattoo artist.

As one of the participating artists, I engaged with a surface that is devoid of any life but claims to be “skin”. In a commercial setting I offer a service where to a certain extent I collaborate with the client to decide design, placement and colour scheme. My client is my muse but here, and true to the title of this exhibition, my muse here is synthetic and lifeless. So it was quite interesting to see the various approaches taken by each tattooists, now tattoo artists, to conceptualise a design or a composition without any corporeal context. In mine, I chose to celebrate this displacement of a tattoo and my practice by making a familiar surface centric to my composition. Often we have seen tattoos imitating body parts, skin tone, hair and texture within the cosmetic industry. There the tattoo is not art but a substitute for what the body is missing.

By rendering patterns from palm prints, hair and even a nipple in greyscale, I toyed with the concept of transforming the value of skin inspired patterns from prosthetic to aesthetic value. Perhaps my work had been successful in delivering this concept and even if it was not, I credit both curators, Sen Vanderzalm and Serena Potter, for materialising an exhibition that I feel has made a significant contribution to a niche discourse surrounding curatorship of tattoos, that has the potential in making a larger impact in the approaches used when curating contemporary art from its conceptualisation.

Artist Statement

Curran James

My tattoo work as a whole, feeds me as an artist because it is a dialogue between myself and my client. Even more so when it comes to my own style that directly speaks to my aboriginal culture. The clients community and elders as well as my own all play a major role in that dialogue. A story if you will.

I could not in good conscience tattoo something like my preferred work without that dialogue. So instead, we are left with only monologue.

Always was, always will be.

A power statement that to myself, conveys the ideas of blood and bodies, as well as country, is somewhat hollow when those elements are removed. As hollow as commercial brownwashing. Appearing to be supportive of Black, Brown and indigenous and People of Color while not implementing anti-racist and/or BIPoC empowerment in their own business.

Contract

Germ

'Affirmation' Germ, 2023, \$300

What is a tattoo without a connection between artist and client? Without a relationship, a history, or a future? What is a tattoo without ceremony, ritual, emotion? Without symbolism, identity, without blood, without bonds? What is the tattoo without the body? How do we bind what has been unbound?

The Re-Binding: The Contract of Sale.

The Purchaser of this Tattoo, upon completion of the Sale, hereby enters into this Agreement.

1. (a) That The Tattoo becomes a part of The Purchaser's body, absolutely and completely, to the full extent of all laws, meanings, inferences, and Sacred Bonds of Skin.

(b) The Sale of The Tattoo is complete and final, and The Tattoo must be treated as if any other body part, and may not be resold, gifted, granted, bartered, exchanged or transferred in any way, under any circumstances.

(c) That The Tattoo remains and is considered a part of The Purchaser's body, until which time section 2 (a) applies.

2. (a) In the event of the death of The Purchaser, The Tattoo may be permanently disposed of alongside the body of The Purchaser, by means of (a) incineration or (b) burial.

(b) Ownership of the Incinerated Remains of The Tattoo may be transferred to The Purchaser's next of kin (or closest queer friend), upon which this contract terminates automatically.

3. That this document does constitute a legally binding Agreement in perpetuity between The Artist and The Purchaser. This Agreement may not be altered nor terminated, by The Artist nor The Purchaser, nor any other party, in any way, at any time.

In witness whereof, the parties have set their hands and seals to this Agreement as of the day and year below written.

Signed By:

The Artist GERM

The Purchaser _____

__/__/20__

Materiality and Storytelling in Synthetic Muses

Sen Vanderzalm

As someone with a substantial number of tattoos (though this is an arbitrary line), they have been subsumed into my everyday. What started as a way to connect to my heritage, only getting inked with designs that resonated with my life experiences, later also became an act of decoration, where I would choose works I liked aesthetically and not necessarily for their conceptual meaning. So, to draw connections between the ink on my skin, I like to consider something beyond visuals and the meanings I impart on them. What do I remember about getting the tattoo? Was I late to the appointment? Did it hurt more than others? How was the healing process? What did a conservative family member have to say about it? These stories and the exchange between two people are what is of interest to me when considering tattoo culture. As such, I aimed to apply this same rationale through the process of the exhibition. I am not interested in defining tattoos, as it's like trying to categorise a Bjork song – there are far too many interpretations. What I am interested in though, is a tattoos ability to remain relevant through thousands of years of culture as a ritual, mode of communication and signifier of identity.

Thus, when contemplating the ties between the works in Synthetic Muses, aside from their form, the notion of storytelling and materiality intrigued me. The skins themselves were a soft plastic texture, as if they were strips shaved off an oversized, pliable mannequin. A far cry from real human skin. This foreign yet tactile element made them spectacles on the white gallery walls. Neither painting nor sculpture but somewhere in-between. As such, it was interesting to see how each artist engaged with their piece of skin. Some delicate and gentle, others producing holes in the limp surfaces and not from a lack of trepidation but as evidence of years spent working on a different medium. This notion surprised me. How can human skin, easily sliced by a piece of paper or burnt by the sun, fare better under a needle than a material that can take 500 years to break down and even then, never fully disappears? The resilience and durability of human skin is thus something to be marvelled at. A worn and creased surface that carries the physical remnants of our experiences, the skin can be seen as a visualisation of memory. With this notion in mind, we can view the body as a site of exhibition, with tattoos as signifiers of a person's identity.

When buying the synthetic skins for this exhibition, we found that most available on the market were fair toned. Due to this, it was imperative Serena and I disrupted this white hegemony to respect and represent a practise steeped in cultural significance for many peoples and cultures. However, when you inspect the works in the exhibition, a curious transformation occurs. What should ostensibly be a reflection of various skin tones, instead becomes just a display of coloured pieces of plastic. As such, in our attempt to combat whiteness as the default, this notion falls short when the body (as receiver) is not present. Without a live model, this absence naturally creates a separation from race. Thus, the skins perform as a simulacrum for racial diversity, a contrived yet necessary effort that is so far removed from being what it is trying to represent. This dilemma was perfectly exemplified in Curran James' artist statement for his work 'Always Was Always Will Be'. In his statement, he reflects on his belief that the exchange between two bodies when tattooing is integral to his practise and without it, "we are left with only monologue".

The positioning of tattooing as a conversation, where the exchange of knowledge and culture can only occur when there are two entities involved, speaks to the enduring nature of tattoos as a vessel for human connection and storytelling. In essence, the abstraction of the skins from their human origins takes a radical departure from traditional tattooing practices. The material exchange between two people seems to serve as a better way to explore the medium than aesthetics and the simulated diversity our show aimed to embody, while necessary, remains just that—an imitation. Thus, these artificial skins prompt us to contemplate the complexities of representation, identity, and cultural significance during a time that frequently defaults to the familiar, challenging us to consider what is lost and gained when bodies become plastic, designs stay static and the conversation is one-sided.

Uncharted Ink: Reflections on Identity, Art, and the Cultural Tapestry in 'Synthetic Muses'

Serena Potter

Wall" exhibition, my mind was a tempest of contradiction and fascination as I tried to develop my own understanding and feeling of tattooing and the body. Hailing from Malaysian heritage, I was taught to revere the sanctity of traditions, particularly the tacit principles that regard the body more as a sanctuary for the soul than a medium for personal expression. Tattoos, within the perimeter of my cultural lens, were akin to exotic art in a gallery — admirable, captivating, but not something to transpose onto myself. Despite my skin remaining a blank canvas, it felt imbued with its own legacy — a silent homage to cultural conservatism and an inherent state of being. In the midst of our traditional norms, my mother's discreet tattoo stands as a quiet rebellion. Her choice to embrace this art was groundbreaking, defying our cultural expectations, but for her, the tattoo is not mere defiance. It carries a deep narrative, a meaningful story whispered through its permanent lines. She champions the right to self-expression, advising that body art must come from deep reflection and genuine personal resonance. This perspective, however, leaves me conflicted. Her support empowers me, yet I'm caught in an internal tug-of-war. Synthetic Muses for me is a look into a journey through the implications of altering not just our skin, but our heritage and identity, highlighting my inner debate between upholding traditions and the yearning for personal expression.

The experience within the exhibition was, thus, nothing short of disorienting. Observing tattoos, those intimate heralds of individual journeys, abstracted from their living canvases and displayed in isolation, instigated profound reflections in me. These synthetic skins, each narrating its unique saga, stood as bold assertions of autonomy and identity — concepts I realised I had been contemplating from the peripheries but had never plunged into. I've harboured a secret admiration for tattoos, a longing even, enchanted by the prospect of adorning my own skin with reflections of personal epiphanies and aesthetic appreciations. However, an invisible tether seems to hold me back, a blend of cultural reverence and an unspoken adherence to preserving the 'original state' of one's physical self.

My appreciation for the artistry of tattoos — their detailed intricacies, vibrant palettes, and profound metaphors — battles with an inner reticence. There's an irrevocability to tattoos, a perpetual alliance to a specific moment, belief, or inspiration. This permanence is daunting, almost discordant with the human condition's ever-changing nature, where perspectives and allegiances are in constant flux. It poses an existential quandary: can a single instance, a solitary piece of art, bear the burden of representation for a lifetime's journey?

Curating "Synthetic Muses" has cast these contemplations in a new light. By severing the tattoo from its human bond, the exhibition allowed me to perceive each piece as an autonomous work of art, rather than an extension of an individual. This liberation was revelatory, adding layers to my comprehension and empathy towards these detached narratives.

In the aftermath, I find myself cradling a nuanced respect for the world of tattoos, recognizing them as both deeply personal and universally resonant, static in form yet dynamic in interpretation. The experience with "Synthetic Muses" has undeniably enriched my perspective on this art form and its intricate dance between culture, identity, and personal expression. And while uncertainty about imprinting my own skin lingers, the exhibition serves as a poignant reminder of the diverse avenues of storytelling, and possibly, that the body is but one of countless canvases.





Designed by: Azul Bermudez