

# Tattoo Stories



Exhibition Publication by Helen Mitchell

# Helen Mitchell



Access the audio narratives by downloading  
a simple QR code reader on your smart  
device and scanning the codes

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## Tattooists

Jayers Ko  
Nic Tse  
The Company  
Craig Breach  
Erin Chance  
Rod Dawson  
Roger Ingerton  
Matt Parkin  
Dean Parkin  
Brent Ryan  
Taupo Tatau

**BELLEVUE GALLERY**

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475a New South Head Road  
Double Bay  
NSW 2028



**hEAd ON**  
photo festival



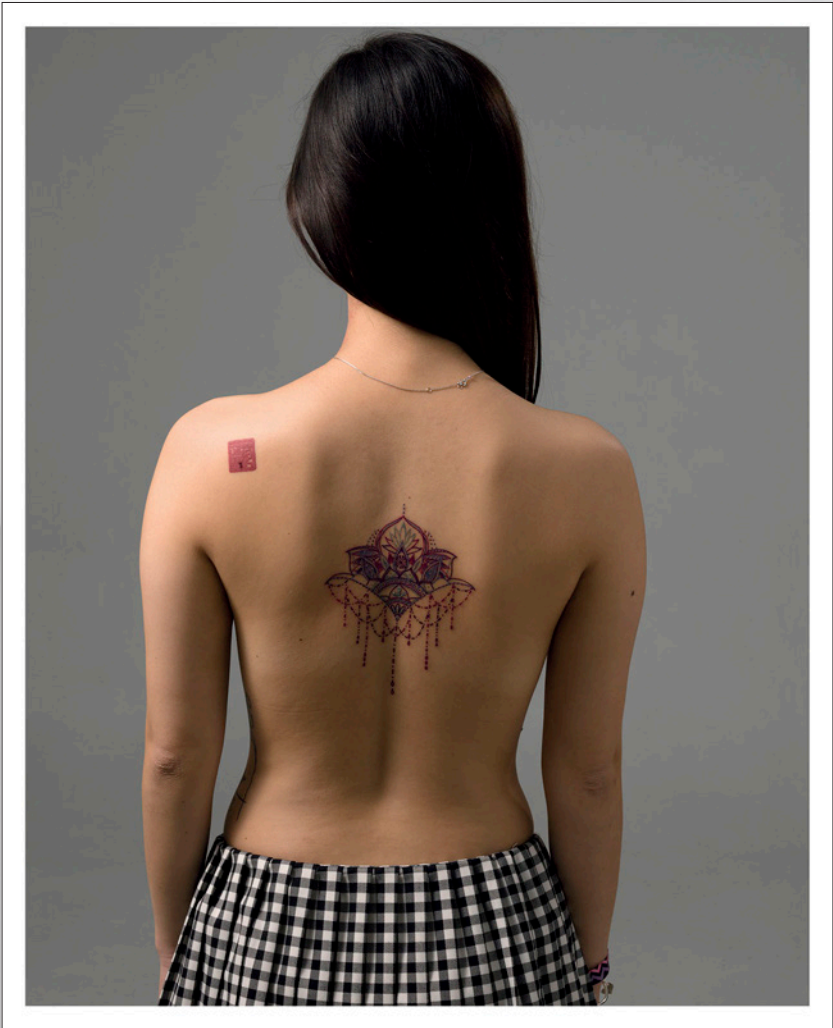
Jason K





Danni





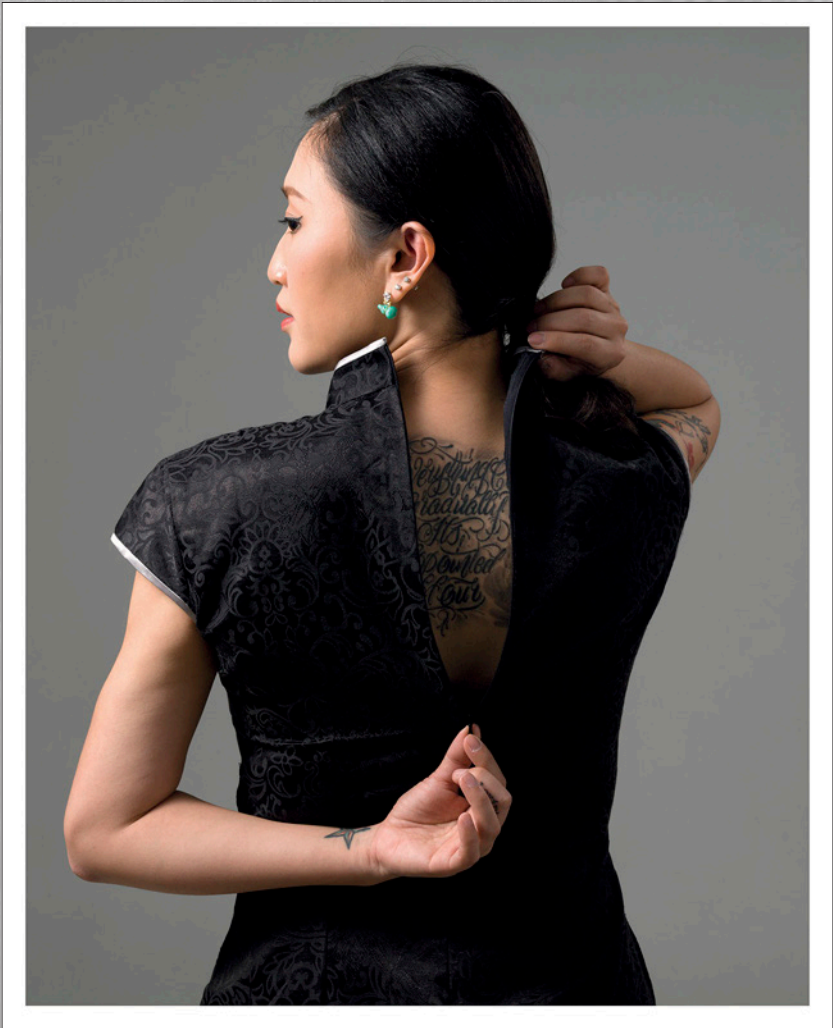
Cherry





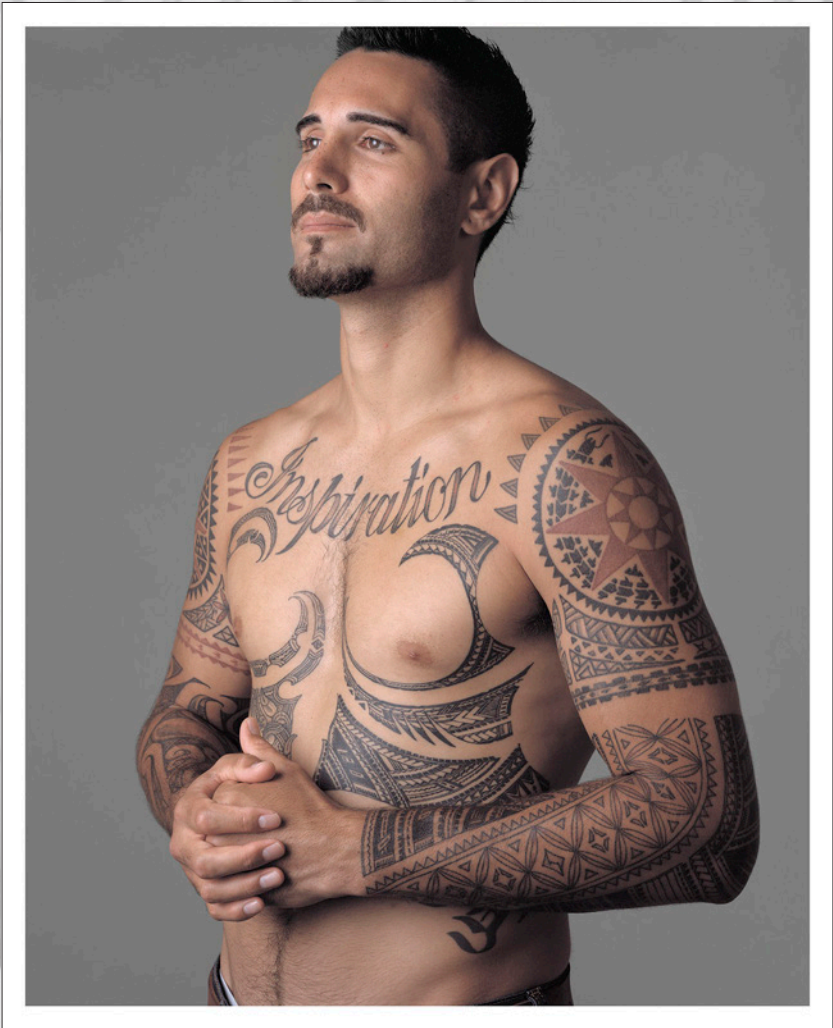
JasonL





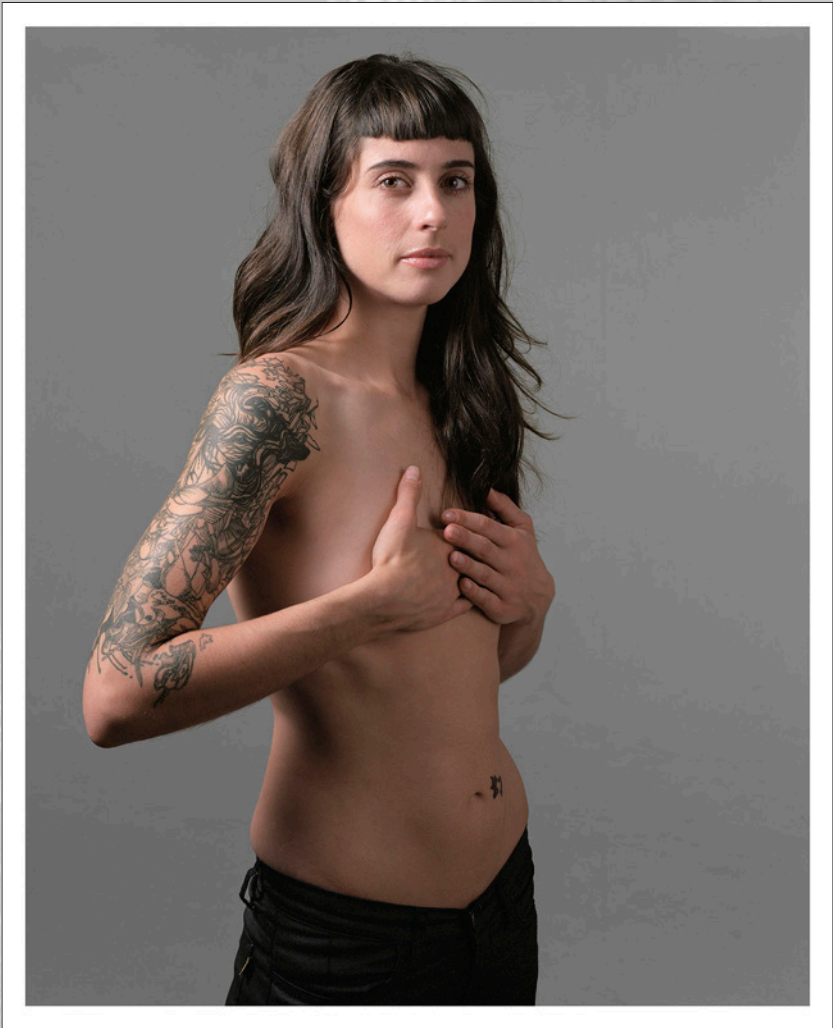
Jayers





Rua





Alex





James & Jelena





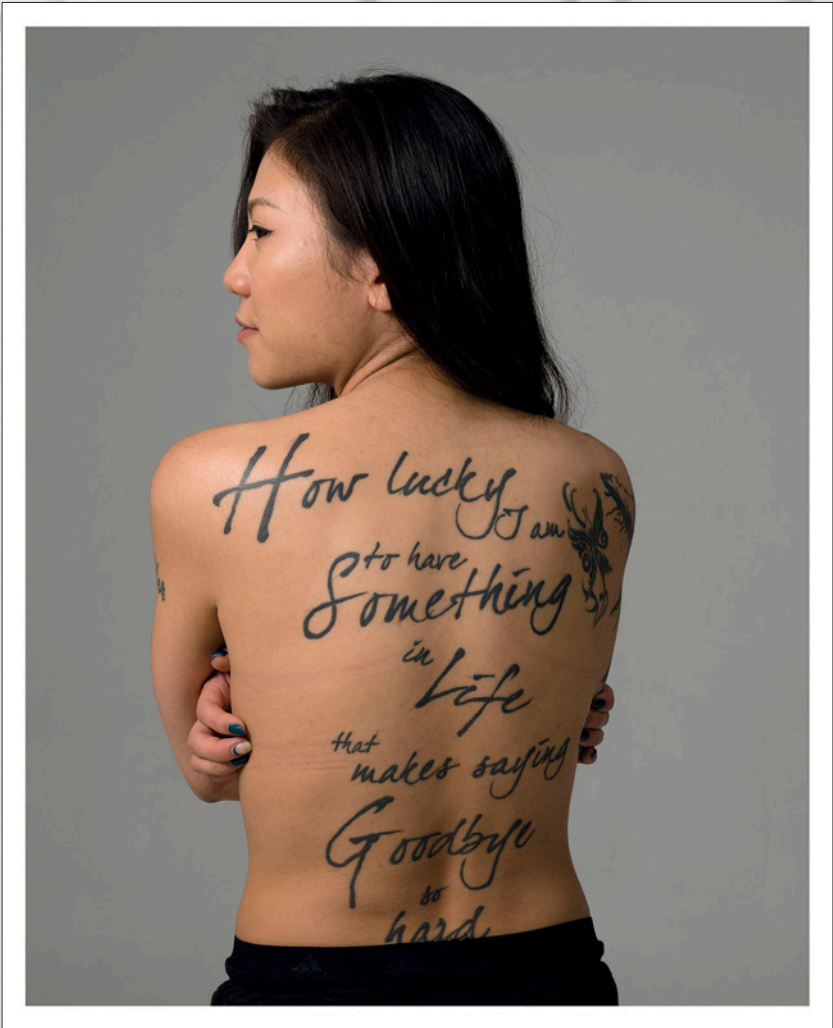
Caitlin





Nate





Wolf





Faithe





Stanley





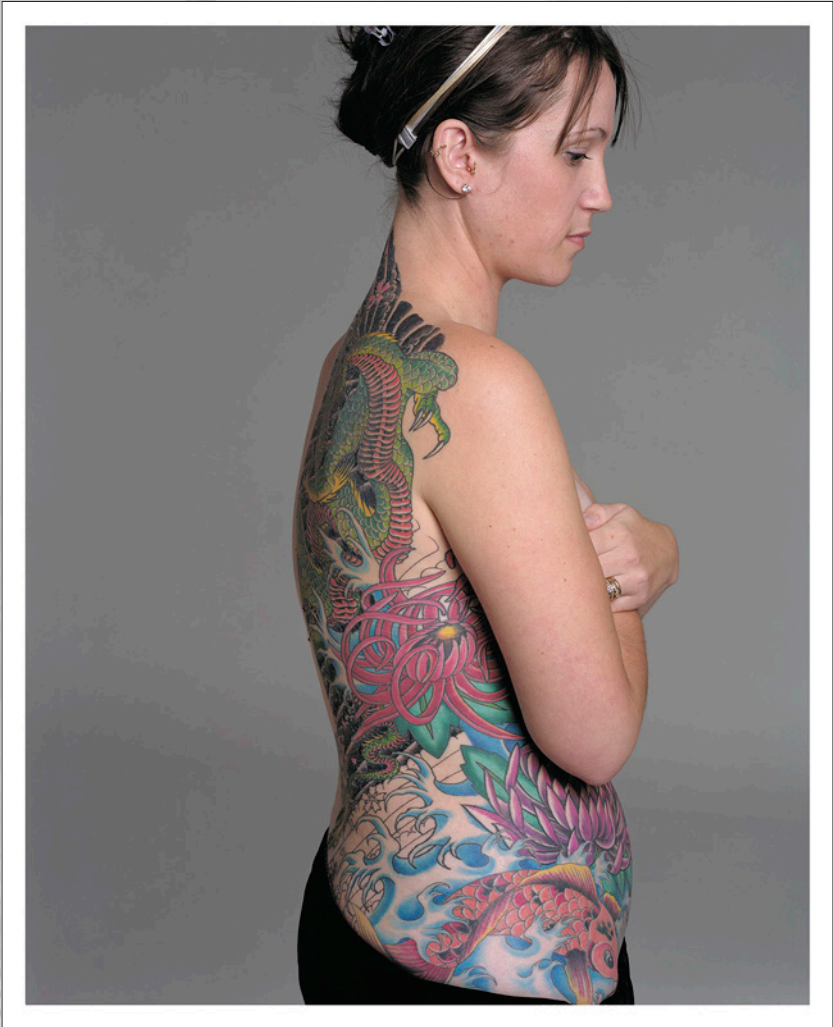
David





Wesley





Heather





Marea





Theo





Nic





Ruby



For as long as I can remember, I have wanted a tattoo. This investigation around tattooing was provoked by personal interests and experiences as a much younger person. As a Pakeha or European New Zealander, I have grown up envisioning myself to be part of the wider Pacific, and as such feeling connected emotionally and physically to the cultures and influences swirling around me.

I recall as a very young child visiting the National Museum in Wellington and being, in equal measures, fascinated and repulsed by the Mokomokai or collection of tattooed heads of early Maori chiefs. While the practice of traditional Maori tattoo or Moko falls outside of the scope of this research, the viscerality of these tattooed heads had a profound influence which I still recall today. Later in my teenage years, I attended university extension art classes with a number of adult students. One of these was Roger Ingerton, a tattooist on upper Cuba Street in central Wellington, Roger first tattooed me in the 1980's.

I also developed an interest in Asian culture when I studied design at art school. In an introduction to Japanese wood block prints, specifically the work of Katsushika Hokusai, I was led into an area of visual interest that still continues today. In a separate encounter, I came upon Japanese tattoo images from my father's descriptions of shadowy, Mafia type (Yakuza) warlords who inhabited post-war Japan sporting full-body tattoos.

In the late 1980's, around the time I had my first tattoo, the industry in New Zealand was undergoing a 'tattoo renaissance'. This renaissance paralleled events from previous decades and has since been discussed by anthropologists who first identified dramatic changes in the nature and practice of tattoo in 1960's American culture. In this renaissance, tattooing transitioned from an activity associated with sub-cultures, to a popular culture activity. The transition from having numbered 'tattoo flash' designs on the wall of the tattoo studio to a culture of commissioned artworks negotiated between tattooist and client illustrates this transition.

There are several other signifiers of this change; including an increasing presence of tattoo on celebrity wearers, in television and film and more visibility in everyday life. There is also a change in the status of the tattooist who is more often educated, perhaps in art or design, and has a professional profile. The relationship between tattooist and client becomes more instrumental in the process of acquiring a tattoo by contributing to the personal curation of tattoos.

Tattoo is rapidly becoming a global language that transcends cultural boundaries. Conventions for tattooists and their clients have become increasingly instrumental in the dissemination of this global tattoo phenomenon. Tattoo conventions are nothing new, the first convention was staged in Houston Texas over forty years ago in 1976, but research reveals that in the following calendar year, over 900 tattoo conventions will be held in venues across the globe.

While researching this 'new tattoo culture', I came across a seemingly endless number of men and women, who had tattoos. What was interesting to me, was that each of these tattoos had a unique story. The majority of people I spoke to had stories to offer backgrounding their tattoos, these stories varied from celebrating a significant life changing event to marking a traumatic personal experience or remembering a loved one. I'm neither sociologist nor anthropologist; my training is in art history and documentary photography. I originally intended the outcome for this work to be primarily visual but sociological underpinnings of the topic require that I also pay attention to the stories and narratives that I've been documenting.

In my initial exploration of tattoo culture in Hong Kong in 2010, I contacted tattooists then arranged to meet and photograph them. At the time, there were only a handful of tattooists making custom designs for their clients. Many of the tattooists I visited still had tattoo flash on the walls of their shops, they came from a range of cultural backgrounds including British, South African and Chinese locals who were born and bred in Hong Kong. I met two female apprentices in different parlours that I visited, both are now practicing tattooists, we have met again in subsequent visits.

My return visit to Hong Kong provided an opportunity to engage and photograph the clients of these tattooists. In comparison to my previous visit, I was struck with how quickly the tattoo culture has transitioned from the back street to the high-street in this city.

While observing the evolution of this dynamic culture, the focus of my research would consistently return again and again to the subjects and their individual stories. Photographing and curating shows from both New Zealand and Hong Kong in the same year, provided an opportunity to directly compare and contrast my work in these regions. The sociological differences and comparison between these cultures provides a way to identify and contrast the uniqueness of any one culture through the medium of tattoo.

The sheer depth of unique tattoo narratives is an area that I have been constantly interrogating alongside the visual elements of my work. This exhibition publication reflects the current positioning of these stories and will provide reflection as my understanding of the relationship between photography and narrative continues to evolve. Tattoo Stories connects two cultures by comparing similarities and differences in tattoo culture in New Zealand and Hong Kong through an edit of twenty images, ten from each region and the use of narrative audio elements accessed through QR codes in the exhibition publication.



Helen Mitchell's current research practice in photography focuses on narratives about the 'tattoo renaissance' within contemporary New Zealand society. Her images engage with questions around the construction of personal identity and cultural exchange. This image exploration combines studio portraits with documentary photography and interviews with tattooed subjects. Mitchell explores how the customized body functions to transform and reinforce a sense of identity, individuality and to provide a record of personal experience. More recently Mitchell has expanded her research on tattoo into the Asia-Pacific regions.