



# HONG KONG INK

Tattoo Culture and Identity  
Photography by Helen Mitchell



2nd June to 17th June, opening 4pm Sunday 31st May - Northart Gallery  
Norman King Square, Ernie Mays Street, Northcote Shopping Centre,  
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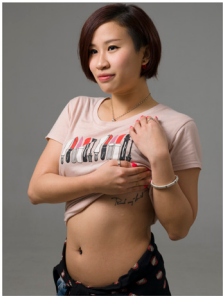
In Hong Kong, tattooing has shifted from subculture to popular culture. This project examines how tattoo functions as an agent of cultural exchange and reflects the tattoo renaissance currently occurring in the Asia-Pacific region.

After an initial photographic survey of Hong Kong tattooists in 2010, Mitchell returned to Hong Kong in 2015 to explore the expanded field of tattoo acquisition in an increasingly diverse client base that new tattoo parlours have established over the last five years.

Mitchell showcases diverse talents and styles of tattooists through a series of portraits that include tattoo clients from some of the best tattooists in the region along with stories from their subjects.



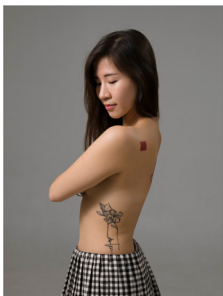
Jayers



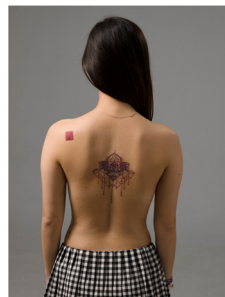
Maggie



Wesley



Cherry



I first met Jayers in 2010 when I came to photograph tattooists, she was apprentice to tattooist Kenny Chin at Solo Tattoo. Jayers also fills guest spots at international tattoo conventions, she rushed over from another photo shoot before her appointment with me wearing a traditional Chinese qipao.

Jayers talked about her father who is a surgeon, being concerned about her new line of work. His viewpoint altered somewhat when she acquired a tattoo on her left shoulder of him performing surgery.

Maggie is a dancer and her tattoo is about heartbreak, hence her desire to have it located as close to her heart as possible. The tattoo says 'read my heart'.

Wesley was born in Hong Kong but emigrated to Canada when he was young and grew up there, his tattoo explores his connection to the art and culture of Asia. The cherry tree leaves are in the shape of Hong Kong and the flower is the Bauhinia, the flower of Hong Kong.

Cherry works as a teacher and a dancer, she delights in talking about her tattoos. The tattoo on her left side combines a flower, rain and a field, these are the elements of her name. The flower is a Hydrangea, Cherry's favourite flower.

Cherry has six tattoos, three by Jayers. She started her tattoo consultation by bringing a rough sketch which Jayers refined into tattoo artworks.

Theo



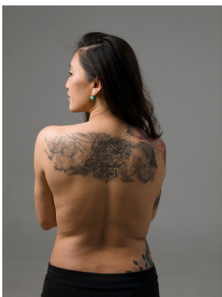
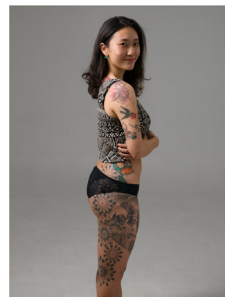
Wenjun



Ignacio



Jayers



Theo talked about how she just came up with the idea of a brush stroke tattoo, it was an impulsive decision but one she doesn't regret.

Wenjun was wanting to make a statement, she thought how she might die without anyone even knowing who she is. Her tattoo singles her out from others in herday-to-day existence.

Ignacio is a chef, the tattoo on his left leg is all about his love of particular vegetables. He brought samples into Jayers' tattoo studio for her to sketch prior to her transferring them to an inked artwork.

Jayers is also a tattoo collector, as many tattooists are, and she has her own tattoo studio Lovinkit in Sham Shui Po. The tattoo on her right leg is from Hong Kong tattooist Wa Wong who works between Mexico and Hong Kong.

Armed with a degree in Psychology, some of Jayers clients say that she can almost 'read their minds'. She has a particular sensitivity to creating work which sits well on the bodies of her subjects; her line work and detail is particularly fine. On her right shoulder she has a self-portrait tattooing a client, she also recently tattooed her father.



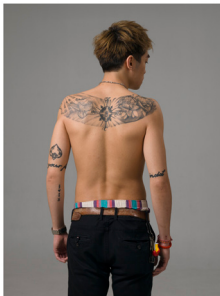


Jennifer and Vince

Isaac



Sonny



Dave

Maxi





Jennifer and Vince run The Company Tattoo, Vince tattoos and Jennifer works in reception. The Company provides a great example of the new style of tattoo studios evident now in the Hong Kong scene that has grown substantially in the five years since my first visit.

Isaac is also a tattooist at The Company, his first tattoo was acquired when he was twenty-seven, to remind him the 'be himself'. His tattoos are also about the importance of family.

Sonny arrived a little early to his photographic session. He doesn't speak English and was concerned that I might not understand what the story of his tattoo was about.

The large monochromatic tattoo on his back illustrates Sonny's relationship with his family. Each family member is represented by points of the compass, these elements combine to give Sonny the sense of them coming together, a wholeness, his belonging.

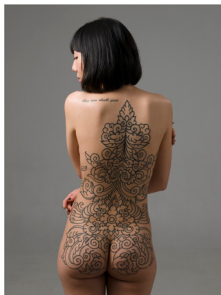
Dave is training to be a tattooist, the tattoo on his arm is about his relationship, how life is more colourful after marriage. The butterfly was done by his colleague James who also works at The Company. This tattoo symbolizes his new journey from graphic designer to tattooist, he started his apprenticeship two months ago. He also has tattoos from guest Korean and Danish artists.

The tattoo on Maxi's left arm is a striking portrait of Edward Scissorhands, the 1990 movie starring Johnny Depp.



James

Jelena



James & Jelena

Jennifer



Vince

James is also a tattooist at The Company. His right arm has a full sleeve and is a cover up. The tattoo on his chest is of a giraffe, he said he got it simply because he likes giraffes.

Jelena's tattoo is from a guest artist visiting Hong Kong. She said she was really drawn towards his decorative style and so she commissioned this back piece.

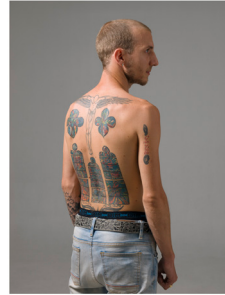
James and Jelena have striking back pieces, together their work illustrates the bond between them.

The Company's Mong Kok based tattoo parlour is a destination in itself, it is a vibrant scene! Equipped with a variety of entertainments, video games, music, and artwork to name a few, this is the sort of place that clients can enjoy while waiting for a consultation or the completion of a friends tattoo.

Bold lines, a graphic sensibility and strong colours define Vince's artworks. The Company also regularly host guest artists and brought a wide range of subjects to the studio for me to photograph.



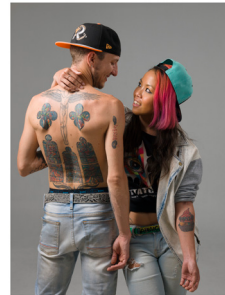
Nic



Pierre



Yuuri



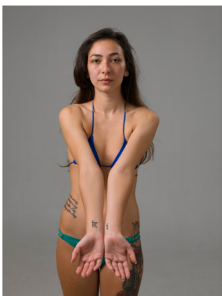
Pierre & Yuuri



Julie



Petra



Nic provides a good example of the new tattoo culture in Hong Kong. In addition to running a successful tattoo studio, Mei Wah Tattoo, offering guest artist spots, Nic regularly attends tattoo conventions around the world. Tattoo collectors travel the globe to get a tattoo by their favorite celebrity tattooist.

Pierre was raised a Catholic and has always been fascinated by church windows. As he is not currently practicing religion, he chose the only church window he knew of that had been designed by a non-Catholic for this tattoo.

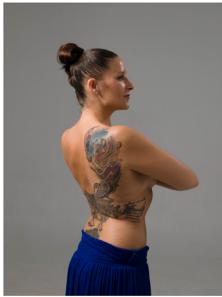
Yuuri's cupcake is for her daughter and has her daughter's name inscribed in the icing.

Yuuri came to the studio with her husband who is extensively tattooed, she was shy about getting her small tattoo photographed but she has such a unique style that her photograph has become one of my favourites.

Julie's butterfly tattoo is a tiger butterfly, she got this for personal strength. The two roses represent the relationship between her and her daughter and the feather is a reminder to 'keep things light'.

Petra's tattoo on her hip and leg represent her love 40s and 50s retro; the diners, the movies. The script on this tattoo is a memorial for a friend that passed away some years ago, it reads "Love is how you stay alive even after you're gone". The script is a Robert Frost poem that Petra studied in school, it stuck with her.

The alchemy symbol; Jupiter, and the moon; is a tattoo her partner Adam also shares and the tattoo on her left wrist is a tattoo shared by survivors of abuse or self-harm.



Alethea

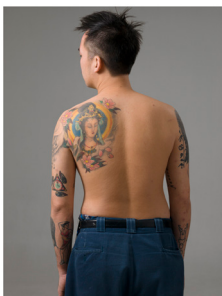
Godfrey



Matthew



Au Ka Ho



Jason Kui



Alethea's tattoo is a cover-up of an old tribal piece from Ricky and Pinky who were old school Hong Kong tattooists and have recently retired. The scales represent her birth-sign, Libra. The old fashioned clock face is about how time waits for no-one and memorialises a friend who died. The quoi carp are about resilience and being able to endure.

Godfrey's tattoos are light-hearted, they are supposed to look like someone doodled on his arm with a pen. In two of the tattoos his name and the word 'stupid' are spelt backwards.

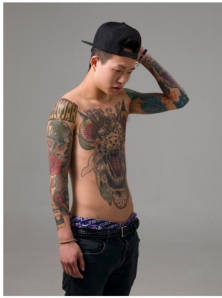
Matthew is an artist, he created the design for the tattoo on his right arm himself.

Au Ka Ho's tattoos are all about his passions; his first love, his taste for metal music and for Kung Fu.

Au Ka Ho's also described how the left side of his body represents his feminine side.

Jason is a well known Hong Kong musician, he plays guitar. Nic started tattooing him five years ago, he began by covering a small piece that had been done in the USA which Jason wasn't happy with. He wanted to add to this and liked the American style imagery. The tattooed house, graves, and cemetery gates relate to his interest in 70s and Ozzy Osbourne style hard-rock music. The imagery also comes from the little shop of horrors, he also has the American flag and a one dollar bill as tattoos.





Alden



Chun



Jason Lim



Wolf



Stanley



Nic

Alden talks about getting the music box on his stomach covered by the tiger, his choice of artworks has changed as his taste has evolved.

Chun has the iconic Hong Kong Star Ferry on his shoulder, he recently added a rope that winds down his arm to an anchor below. The anchor also resembles an upside down yellow umbrella, symbolic of the Democracy movement.

Jason's red roses on his right arm represent "the perfect ten", how important family is to him and is ten years old. The blue roses on his left arm relate to when he went to Indonesia as part of a disaster relief effort in the wake of the devastating Boxing Day Tsunami, each of the seven roses represent a body that he carried from the wreckage. The angel on his left shoulder watches over them.

Wolf's attitude towards the world is larger than life, she has a variety of tattoos to match. The script tattoo on her back is a favorite quote from Winnie the Poo.

This is Stanley's first tattoo, the yellow umbrellas are inspired by the 2014 sit-in democracy protests in Hong Kong involving mass civil mobilisation and disobedience. This protest became known as the Umbrella movement or Umbrella revolution. He wanted a Japanese style of tattoo integrating this symbol, it's a revolutionary tattoo.

Clearly Nic has a serious tattoo collecting addiction. Despite almost all of his body covered, he looks at the few remaining spaces and expresses how empty they look. He says that when his children see old photographs of him they ask "where have all the tattoos gone?". The rabbit is for Nic's son who was born in the year of the rabbit and the snake on his back is for his daughter who was born in the year of the snake.



Harris

Harris was my fantastic photographic assistant at the PASM workshop's photographic studio. His tattoo is by Jodic, a tattooist I met and photographed in 2010 who, at the time, was working for Tattoo Temple. She now has now set up her own studio in Causeway Bay. The tattoo is to remind Harris to always be himself in any circumstances, and to think before he reacts, it is made up from old Chinese script.



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