Zappers and zingers

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Zappers and Zingers

by

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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the influence of tattooing upon contemporary art. I will be exploring different aspects of tattooing and fine art and how they cross over into one another artistically, spiritually, technically, physically, mentally, and mechanically with painting and sculpture.

Tattoo imagery is very important to me as well as fine art. I have been a professional tattoo artist for the last eight years and I have been making artwork since I was a small child. I have grown very accustom to tattoo imagery because I see, draw, paint, and tattoo it almost everyday. I feel that this thesis project will give me the chance to explore and expand on tattoo imagery, where it came from and how it is affecting contemporary art. To the outsider, tattoo imagery can be generic but to a tattoo artist these images have come from a long history that has evolved over the years into what they are today. These images have transformed and mutated with every new generation.

I will be researching how tattoo artists and fine artists are starting to meld into each other’s aesthetic. Many fine artists are starting to draw and paint tattoo imagery, for example the Clayton Brothers, Shawn Barber, and Mitch O’Connell to name a few. On the other hand tattoo artists are drawing and painting more artistically as well as showing works in galleries. Grime, Dan Higgs, and Don Ed Hardy are just a few artists in an ever-growing population. More and more tattoo artists have Fine Art degrees and have gone to art school. Fine artists are getting tattooed and collaborating with the tattoo artist.

This thesis will also delve into tattoo imagery and it’s growth into what it is today, where it came from and how it is affecting contemporary art. One can master tattoo images and their iconography by molding the images into ones’ own personal icons while keeping the integrity of the original image. Don Ed Hardy and Dan Higgs are two examples of tattoo artist that have mastered tattoo imagery. These artists inject their own ideas and meanings into the images original meaning while also drawing from the original energy. I will be expanding my visual vocabulary by harnessing different tattoo images and transforming them into my own. In doing so this will help to enrich my work.
Along with the imagery of tattooing and how it has affected modern art I would like to examine the idea of man working alongside machine to create art. Tattoo artists use their machines everyday to make art. A good artist knows how to tune and modify their machines so that they may apply a solid and bright tattoo. The tattoo artist’s machines are just as important as a painter’s brushes and a sculptor’s tools. As we evolve we invent machines that make our lives more comfortable. An example of this is the invention of the computer. The computer not only makes our lives easier but it is also helping to push fine art in new ways. Technology and machinery are evolving along with us. I will be experimenting with electro-magnetism in sculpture to explore the connection of man, machine, and art.

I will be exploring the possibilities of utilizing tattoo machine components as sculptural and functional forms. I want to examine the potential of a connection between a paintbrush and a tattoo machine. Both objects are held in an artist hand to produce lines and shape. Both objects must be mastered before an artist can successfully produce images. The relationship between these two worlds encompasses much more than just images and machines. This relationship will be the focus of this thesis by focusing on the connection of the evolution of man and machine, the spiritual bond of art and flesh, and the mixture of fine art with an ancient art.
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Introduction

For this body of work I found myself influenced by these major concepts: time travel, rebirth, and the travel of electrical energy through wormholes and black holes. I utilize a bank of images to represent these concepts both physically and metaphorically. For example, the eggs in my paintings relate back to the black hole because I use dark circles in the center and a lighter color on the outside. This configuration can also be seen as tube-like. The black hole relates back to the tunnels I paint and the tunnels relate back to a woman’s birth canal. I believe they can be connected because I see them as similar forms of energy. Energy that travels down a passageway and is altered into a new form. The egg is not only traveling through these passageways but is also a representation of a tunnel. Sperm symbolizes electricity flowing through these channels. Objects go in one end and are discharged somewhere else.

Other contributing factors to my artwork are tattoo images and folk art. My career as a tattoo artist has surrounded me with influential images as well as contemporary and historical tattoo artists. These images surround me on a daily basis and naturally effect my fine art. I always pursue new and original ways to use the classical tattoo symbols as well as the artistic design elements used for them. Bold colors and simple, clean lines are some of the most important elements I enjoy utilizing in my paintings. I have also become interested in the simple and often symmetrical images of folk art, specifically in the designs of Pennsylvania Dutch Hex signs. These bright simple colors are attractive to me and create a natural balance with my other art. I enjoy the historical elements and symbolism in these designs and find them to have a natural flow with the various ways I
choose to paint. These factors combined create a harmony that I find inspirational to my fine art.

**In the Belly of Zorgitron the Red**

When I first started to think about my paintings I wanted to incorporate as many tattoo images as I could. I thought that I needed to use tattoo images in the same manner that I had been using my own images. Bombarding the viewer with so many images at once my goal was to create a sensory overload.

What I realized when I was painting “In The Belly of Zorgitron The Red” was using the tattoo images in their original context took the work in a different direction then I desired. I had stopped using the visual language I had already created and started only focusing on tattoo images. Through this I had forgotten that I originally wanted to combine my visual ideas with an already established aesthetic. I did not want to be consumed by the tattoo images and forget where I had come from in my art aesthetic.

In the painting I started to come to the realization that I am a tattoo artist and that tattooing has already influenced my work. This helped open the creative door for me. Before this point I was stuck on how to incorporate tattoo images. I learned through painting this work that the tattoo influence will just come out naturally and not to force it. I looked at the tattoos and paintings of Don Ed Hardy because for me he was one of a few artists that seemed to internalize tattoo art and make it his own. He has the ability to take images from the past and recreate them into his own. I wanted to be able to do the same,
incorporate tattoo images but recreate them into my own language. As I was idolizing the master I started to look more at folk art and Dutch Pennsylvania hex signs. I put tattooing and folk-art in the same basket. One example of this use includes the birds in “In the Belly of Zorgitron the Red” which were influenced by the swallows in tattoos and the distelfink in folk art. For me these birds translated into the actual representation of a

Hex sign in the bottom left hand side of the painting and the small bird in the birdcage. Another influence on my work is the Clayton Brothers. They are able to meld their own style and meanings with tattoo culture and art, taking tattoo culture and elevating it with a new perspective. The Clayton Brothers’ work is contemporary but at the same time feels old and that is not only because of the way they paint but also because of the history of the images they use.

Images started evolving for me when I took the patterns and lines from tattoo aesthetics and changed them into my own shapes such as the honeycomb pattern on the flowing tubes and the dragon or koi fish scales scattered throughout the painting. The
honeycomb comes from patterns normally seen in a Samurai uniform, Asian tattoos and wood block prints. As I got further along in this painting tattoo art became just another piece of the puzzle, another layer of our culture getting absorbed into the melting pot.

“In The Belly of Zorgtron The Red” for me is a work about finding balance between my images, ideas and tattoo art. I had done many unsuccessful paintings with tattoo images before this one. They lacked any emotion and felt weak. This work was the one that lead me down the path that the rest of my thesis work followed. This work is abstract at times while remaining narrative. It is intended to capture a moment in thought. Ideas are bouncing and vibrating off of one another trying to forge a link right before they all become one. That is the concept I was trying to convey with these images. They seem random but at the same time they have a common link with color, line and content, moving and changing as one image is revealed and another is forgotten.

This idea of all objects relating back to one another became a major influence in the rest of my thesis work. I was taking one shape or form and turning it into another and another until the object is so abstracted from its original form that it became something totally new. For example in this painting “In the Belly of Zorgtron the Red” I have the pink cloud man. The object is nothing more than a pink shape but by bringing in the blue cloud forms, the eyes, and the nose started to transform the pink shape into something new. Then I brought in the sperm-like shape with a mouth and the flat pink form becomes a man. All the shapes used in the pink cloud man come from parts of other forms scattered throughout this painting and the rest of my work. The blue clouds relate to word bubbles and thought bubbles in cartoons which I tend to also relate to banners in tattoos. They all have words inside of them and they all are trying to convey a message. The
sperm-like shape with the circle pattern and mouth relate not only to sperm but also snake-like shapes in tattooing. The black and orange circles symbolize eggs and the egg form also relates back to the black hole idea, the center of the egg representing the black hole. For me I wanted to create a full circle, yes these things are funny and bright but they also play off of one another. There is more to the objects than what is just on the surface, there is a history. The objects grow out of other objects to become what they are now.

In this painting big objects spew out little objects, tunnels travel off the canvas and then back on. I am moving the viewer’s eye outside the canvas with the idea being that this world expands beyond the canvas. The pink paint strokes with the honeycomb pattern are tunnels. The idea of black holes and the transformation of matter have always been a big interest to me because they symbolize the unknown. Things we cannot explain, and struggle to piece together why they are here and how they relate to us. I am relating the black hole to time travel. That is why you see lines going in and out of the tunnel shapes. For me I see the lines that are going into the tunnels more as a metaphor for the idea of time travel. The line is the same as drawing one on a map. Here is point A and here is point B, the beginning and ending points. I do not show the viewer where the beginning and the end are because I like the idea of the never ending.

Looking up into the night sky I see the darkness of space and realize how fragile and small our world is. We are scurrying around trying to find the meaning of our world, trying to bring order to all the chaos. For me this painting is like looking up into that night sky. There is so much going on but somehow it makes visual sense. I like leaving my paintings open for viewer interpretation. The viewer looks at the painting and wonders how to make sense of all they see. As they look and move from one end of the
work to the other little pieces of the painting start to reveal themselves. If the viewer understands or thinks they do that is fine, if they just find it repulsive that is fine too.

I made this painting 12’ x 4’ because I wanted it to be larger than a human. I did this with one of the sculptures and two other paintings as well. I wanted there to be some overwhelming qualities within the work, as well as invade the viewers’ space. With the sculptures I made them move and make noise, with the paintings I made them bright and intense with imagery all to reinforce this invasion and overwhelming feeling. The idea being that just like the push/pull that goes on in the work, the same relationship applies to the viewers. Making the work big allows the viewer to get lost in the artwork for a moment. When close enough to the painting it takes the viewer out of their environment for a moment.

**Don Ed Hardy**

“Sometimes the content of the picture is a mystery even to the person who made it, and that’s where it gets good and makes creating things worth while. It takes us beyond ourselves and our conscious intentions and moves into the realm of what you could call art.” ¹

“There is no answer to the question “Why do people get tattooed?” any more than asking, “why do people make art?” It’s primal and offers unlimited potential discourse. At its base, as with all other arts, are play, irrationality, and mystery.” ²

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¹ Don Ed Hardy, Tattooing the Invisible man.
² Don Ed Hardy, Tattooing the Invisible man.
Don Ed Hardy was born in Iowa in 1945 and raised in Southern California and is a man that has helped pave the way of putting the word “Artist” into “Tattoo Artist”. He has written numerous books about the history and mythology of tattooing and tattoo art. He is also considered one of the best living tattoo artists of this modern era. He was one of the first westerners to incorporate Japanese tattoo aesthetics and technique into his own tattooing and art. Hardy apprenticed to become a tattoo artist while also studying to obtain a B.F.A in Printmaking at the San Francisco Art Institute in 1967. Don Ed Hardy’s art has influenced many younger fine artists of this generation, such as Mike Giant, The Clayton Brothers, Camille Rose Garcia and many others. Hardy’s out-look on tattooing was never to be content with it’s current situation. He was always one step ahead and thinking about where to take this medium.

Hardy wanted to take the American style of tattooing, which consists of small randomly placed, hearts, daggers, panthers, skulls etc, and present it in a more methodical and planned manner like the Japanese body suits. These are based on Japanese wood block prints. Over the years the art of combining traditional American themes with traditional Japanese themes has become the norm for American tattooing. Hardy’s influence has not only been on the tattoo world but on the fine art world as well. Hardy’s fine art combines various forms of Asian art, American folk art, surf art,
classic and street art. His work is a melting pot of styles. His painting “Conversations with Grampy” is a perfect example of this. It combines classic American tattoos designs with a Japanese wood block aesthetic, while also bringing in hints of abstract color field art and contemporary art. In this work, Hardy makes the classic tattoo design of a pin up girl bending over backwards and adds the elements of a human skull (her breasts turn into the eyes and her feet and hair turn into the mouth) and places her in the center of a mystic sunset. Flying swallows look on as the morphing woman breaths fire on hanging hair and draped cloth. The draped cloth and hair look to have already caught fire. Smoke and flames pour out from this small fire as a line drawing of a deconstructed box floats between the morphing woman and the hair and cloth. All this is taking place while a red

Image removed due to copy right laws.
Ed Hardy
“Conversations With Grampy”
www.tattoocitysf.com
rider wagon and a bottle of milk sit in the foreground. It is as if the objects were onlookers to this surreal sunset. What Hardy is doing here is trying to show that this visually vast encyclopedia of images that tattooing has to offer can very easily and elegantly transfer over into rich, strong, compositions of fine art. The classic pin up girl design from tattooing is taken from wartime ads and artwork from fighter planes and is much more than just a naked woman. It is a symbol of American history, a symbol of a time and place that will never exist again and yet this image can be remolded into something new. The skull signifies mortality and the fear of the unknown while the women represent sexuality and beauty. Now the two have been morphed into something completely different and creates a new marriage of meanings. The woman morphing into a skull is not Ed Hardy’s design but an old tattoo image that he has revisited. This painting is just Hardy’s take on it, and he has had many different takes of this image. The idea of beauty and mortality or beauty and the sorrow it can bring, are two of Hardy’s reoccurring themes. It is a warning about what can happen if one does not watch his or herself. Temptation and greed, youth and inexperience; these are things that are talked about in wise tales and fables to warn us about life. Many of the strangest tattoo designs are warnings of life’s ill fates.

The blue swallows in “Conversations with Grampy” are also another classic American tattoo design. Swallows are normally seen as a sign of good luck and started off with sailors during the World Wars. Sailors used to get tattoos of the birds because of their history. Swallows return home to San Juan Capistrano every year without fail. It was believed that a sailor with a swallow tattoo would always return home to his family. Also, if a sailor had one swallow tattooed on him it meant he had traveled 5,000 miles but
if he had two it meant that he had traveled 10,000 miles making him a very experienced sailor.

Hardy has taken the rich meaning of these two tattoo ideas, the swallow and the woman, and has combined them with ideas found in traditional fine art. The draped cloth represents the art of still-life and Hardy has also utilized the known history of Ukiyoe Japanese wood block prints. The red rider wagon, the bottle of milk, and the outline of the unfolded box become an extremely complex and narrative composition of luck, life, mortality, youth and beauty while examining how those things impact the world around us.

This idea of combining many different images from many different resources is something that I have embraced over the years with not only my tattooing but my fine art as well. The more I had to study for an image that I had to tattoo, the more I delved into subject matter, whether it be figuring out why a horse shoe was considered lucky to who a particular warrior was from a Japanese wood block print. I identify with Hardy about wanting to do more with my chosen medium and learn more about it as well. As artists, when we see people coming up with amazing ideas, we think to ourselves wow, they must sit in a closed locked room and pound their heads against the wall to come up with all these profound ideas. When in reality it is because they have studied where these images have come from and in learning about the images new ideas stream from that knowledge. When I started reading about this history of American tattooing and how it began in different seaports across our country and learned of bowerys and pikes my mind began to think about gangsters, rumrunners, sailors, bank robbers, flapper girls, and pretty much every other old 1920’s stereotypical image. Then I started to think about my
grandparents and their grandparents and about the working class and how it was a time of real change. There were still real cowboys, granted they were really old but that is an unimaginable concept to my generation. The history behind something can spawn new imagination and creativity.

In my work “Bird Seed” I also used many different forms of art, such as folk art, graffiti, abstract and color field, along with using type and words. I change what kinds of art history I am using for each work. I do not just limit myself to a set few. One element I wanted to explore in this painting was the idea of clouds. This stems not only from nature but also from tattoos. Different forms of clouds are used in the two styles of tattooing that I like to work with, traditional American and neo traditional Japanese. I call it neo because as stated earlier Traditional Japanese and Traditional American tattooing has started to combine in modern tattooing and it is now being called neo traditional American and Japanese. The traditional American way is very simple, normally just a basic outline of the shape and then just a little bit of shading from either the outside edge out or the inside edge in.

Clouds are normally used for a wide variety things, such as to frame off a tattoo or give it a place to end so when it is on the human body it does not just look like a random floating object. A tattoo should fit to whatever body part it is being tattooed on. A very good example of this is the ball of the shoulder. Clouds are normally used to cap off the top of the shoulder. Since the top of the shoulder is round, the form makes it very easy to follow the contour of that curve. Another good example is when a tattoo is on the forearm and it needs to end before the ditch of the arm. The ditch in tattooing refers to the soft skin that bends between the forearm and the bicep. So the soft edge, depending on
the design can be used to frame off the tattoo so that it can flow nice and stop where the image needs to stop.

![American tattoo style clouds](image)

(Clouds are also used in Japanese tattooing. Normally they are called wind clouds. They have the same basic structure as American style (repeating round shapes) but they are generally black and gray and used in a more rhythmic pattern in the background of an image.

In regards to my painting, I wanted to take the shape of these tattoo style clouds and figure out a way to have the same kind of rhythm as the Japanese style with the more basic approach of the American. Saturday morning cartoons also influence the forms in my paintings as well. That is how I came up with the image vomiting up rain. The vomit creates a rhythm in the composition by bouncing across and out of the work. By taking this form and combining it with the repeating pattern of the raindrops a new idea is placed into a pre-existing one. The old idea of the rain cloud now combined with mine produces, for better or worse, a new history for the image. This is an idea I try and
explore often in my work, taking an old image and trying to give it a new face. I also like the fact that this image can be taken in

many different contexts, such as, “since they are puking green rain, is it acid rain?” giving the viewer a more political view changing the outlook of all the rest of the images in the work to a more political standpoint. Or someone could see them as just characters puking and say this guys is an idiot. Either way it is great for me because it is letting the viewer use their own imagination to make up a meaning and a story for that particular image, thus affecting the outcome of each individual image afterwards.

Also in this painting I have the big green bird with an erection shooting his furry pink friend across the painting. On the surface this just seems like I am trying to be funny
and gross but my real meaning behind this was much more complex. Birds are used a lot in tattooing, such as the swallows I was talking about earlier. A lot of tattooing has to do with tradition, images are put together a certain way and have been like that for a long time. This bird I am using was a combination of a few different birds and other elements of tattoo tradition. For example, in the birds belly there are poppies, diamond shapes and rope. Then for the birds wing I used traditional scales seen in the dark red center of the top shoulder of the wing. These can be found in traditional Japanese dragon designs and traditional American eagle designs. Also the feathers of the wings are styled after both the traditional American and Japanese bird feathers. On the head of the bird I have used the scaling pattern normally used around a traditional Japanese snakes mouth in a tattoo design. This pattern is in yellow on the top of the birds head placed around a rosette like pattern based off of Dutch farm hex signs. Now on to the erection (drum roll). The erection is included for a couple of reasons, the first being that we see nude women in paintings, movies, magazines, you name it all the time. Not that I am complaining, don’t get me wrong but we hardly ever see naked men. Not that I want to see naked dudes all over the place but I think that when you see a penis, it has much more shock value then a vagina or breast. I think as a culture we are so used to seeing nude women that when you throw a penis in the mix all of a sudden, people are offended or think it is purely sexual. Second, I put the erection in the painting because there are Japanese monsters that have massive erections that are normally seen in tattoos on the under side of the inner arm on Japanese people with full body suites. It is normally seen having sex with a female and is a good luck sign for fertility. So I did not just place an erect bird in my painting to be controversial. The pink fuzzy guy shooting out of said erection also has roots in tattooing.
When I first started painting these fuzzy little guys I was basing them off of snake designs in tattooing. I thought about how with snake tattoo designs you can have them coiled up and springing into action and how that would be cool to combine with something a little creepier such as a hairy worm like guy with an ugly face. I started using the guys to break the border between the painted surface and the wall space surrounding it. I stopped thinking about just painting in the square panel but off the edges. Then visualized the twists and turns that would occur before the worm reappears on the other side. This is what really started to give my paintings much more rhythm and movement. So the hairy sperm is a part of that idea. The sperm also relates back to many other symbols in my paintings.

**Clayton Brothers Rob and Christian**

Rob and Christian Clayton better known as the Clayton brothers have had a huge impact on my work. Their post-modern folk art is the combination of twisted childhood fantasy and everyday life enhanced with rich textural patterns and color. The two brothers work as a team but they rarely work on a canvas at the same time. Instead they work intuitively off of one another’s’ marks and let the work grow from their collaboration. Rob and Christian use many different elements in their work but a major influence is tattoo imagery.
“They are said to create artworks together on an intuitive basis but seldom work on a canvas at the same time or discuss their projects until they are complete. Playing off their "unspoken synergy", they take turns inventing, adding to and editing each piece. They draw inspiration from their immediate environment.”


The Clayton brothers are a perfect example of modern artists being influenced by tattoo art. For example in their work “You Play, You Pay” they make use of many traditional tattoo images such as the Shamrocks, the banner that says “pay up” (because no tattoo is a tattoo without a banner!), and the bottle with a heart in it. Both of these images are used in tattooing a bottle of booze and a human heart; the two images are just
not normally together like they have it. Not only is the heart in a bottle but they also have a sacred heart which is a religious icon used in tattoo imagery. Other tattoo references used are the cross bones behind the sacred heart and the stars and dots. The combination of small stars and dots is known as sailor dust. They were traditionally used as filler in the remaining open skin between a patron’s tattoos so that it may fill in the area or areas creating what is called a “sleeve” in modern day tattooing.

Almost every element in this painting has been influenced by the tattoo culture. It is a wonderful thing as an insider in tattoo art to see the Clayton brothers melding their own style and meanings with tattoo culture and art, enriching it with new life and a new perspective. Bringing the outsider into a new world that is not only of the Clayton brother’s creation but is of a deep cultural and historical one as well. The Clayton brothers’ work looks very contemporary but at the same time feels very old and that is not only because of the way they paint their images but also because of the history of the images themselves. I have done the same in my work “Old Fake Snakes”.

In my painting “Old Fake Snakes” I used the traditional image of the American eagle because it is not only the symbol of our country but also honor, truth, justice, and freedom. The eagle in my work has its tongue hanging out of its mouth to symbolize that he is old and not mentally stable. I changed the colors of the eagle because I wanted more of a farmer’s folk art feel to the bird. I put the start of a rosette on the bird’s stomach for love and peace. This painting pulls images and references from American culture then regurgitates the information mixed with my personal approach to the concept. The rosette comes from the Dutch Pennsylvania hex signs as a symbol of luck, love, and happiness.
This work came about because I was thinking about the history of our nation’s culture. I have part of an Indian teepee and an olive branch infected with small pocks. As I was painting this work all these images started to come together. I was only thinking about how it must have been to be alive when this country first started to come together and what those people would say if they saw their country now. I’m pretty sure they would want to kick our asses. Anyway, the eagle has its tongue hanging out to represent how, as a culture, we act now. What better way to symbolize a nation of slackers than by using our own national symbol?

This is where I think the common ground lies between The Clayton brothers and myself. We both take symbols that are already known symbols, like the American eagle,
or a Shamrock, and then we inject our own thoughts and values into the image. Letting the viewer say “Hey I understand this image, but wait, that is not what I’m used to seeing it used for.” When this happens it hopefully makes the viewer want to explore more into what these images really mean. Go home look them up, read about them, and then that leads into learning about other subjects related to the topic.

The idea of combining the traditional meaning and history of symbols with my own artwork is one of the major elements in my thesis works. For me I love reading about tattoo history, the artists, the locations, the era, the look of the time, and I especially love looking at historical tattoo Flash. Flash is the bright colored sheets of ready-drawn designs that are usually 11x14 and hang on the walls of tattoo shops. I love looking at the old tattoo flash because it is like a time warp. It lets you see what designs were popular at a particular time in American culture. It also gives you a small look at what it was like back in those days. These old designs, for me, are like going in to my grandparent’s basement and finding old tools, knick-knacks, toys and photos. I feel a special bond to classic American tattoo imagery because when I think about tattoo history I think about the working class men, soldiers, Navy seaman and sailors. I think of the traveling circus, and hard-working people. I guess why I fell in love with tattooing and the images is because tattooing to me always seemed like an honest living. I can create everything I need out of nothing and make money without depending on others. If I need a machine, I make it. If I need needles, I make them. If I need pigment, I make it. I like the idea of the crazy old man out in his shed making magic and that to me is tattooing in its simplest form.
Tattoo images are as deep rooted in our American culture as the traditions and customs that were brought over with our ancestors. The shamrock and the horseshoe offer good luck. A ship with a banner that reads, “homeward bound” gives sailors and Navy men luck on the sea so that they could get home safe to their families. Women holding snakes, add an element of the erotic, like the women snake handlers from the circus. Images carry many different stories with them giving them a mysterious magic. This magic carries with these images and builds up more and more power as the years pass.

The Tattoo Machine and the Paint Brush

The tattoo machine is a pretty simple device consisting of an electromagnet and a moving arm on a spring that sits above the coils, much like an old doorbell. The tattoo machine got it start when Thomas Alva Edison invented his battery powered rotary stencil pen in 1876. Samuel F. O'Reilly then modified Thomas Edison’s machine in
1891. Samuel was the first person to patent a tattoo machine device. Samuel O’Reilly traveled to the United States and took an apprentice name Charlie Wagner. During this time Thomas Edison patented a new stencil pen that ran off of two electromagnetic coils and vibrating reed that sat over the top of the coils. When O’Reilly died in 1908 Charlie Wagner took over his shop and patented a new tattoo machine design based on O’Reilly and Edison’s machine ideas. This was the foundation for the modern tattoo machine. Then in 1929 Percy Waters patented the tattoo machine design that is basically what people think of when they think of a modern tattoo machine.

The machine modernized tattooing and made it possible for artists to tattoo faster and more consistently. The tattoo machine is both simple and complicated. There are not numerous parts however they can be configured in hundreds of different ways. Different angles and different lengths make all the difference in the world. Tattoo Machines operate on very low voltage that comes from a power supply. The power supply converts regular electrical current from the wall in to DC current. A foot switch is plugged into the power supply and that is what controls the tattoo machine from turning on and off. There
have been many advances in technology with tattoo machines just in the last ten years. There are more tattooists building their own machines. With so many builders, advances in this technology have come at a faster pace. Modern machines are becoming more efficient. Different frame shapes along with spring and coil sets are becoming standard for different applications. Coloring, shading, lining, and detail work all call for a different style of machine set up.

The tattoo machine took the place of hand poking, which made the process take longer and cause more pain. The electric tattoo machine made it possible for the tattooist to apply more complicated designs into a person’s skin. With the old hand poking technique the precision was just not possible when it came to outlining a tattoo. In Japan the hand poking process is still practiced by many amazing tattooists and it is called Horimono. This ancient style of tattooing has been passed down from master to pupil for centuries. Many of the Japanese tattooists have replaced the old hand poking technique with a machine when it comes to outlining a tattoo but still use the traditional application for the color.

The Tattoo machine is a funny device, because it is an extension of the artist’s hand but it also a completely separate thing. Unlike a paintbrush that is just a static object and does not move unless the artist moves his or her hand, the tattoo machine is oscillating on it’s own, it is controlled by the artist’s hands but the marks it makes are part from the artist and part from the machine. There are other factors involved besides just the machine, the needle configuration used, the speed of the machine, and the cycles of oscillation. The tattoo artist must master the machine and control the marks it makes. In this aspect the tattoo machine is very much like a paintbrush.
The tattoo machine has had a major impact not only in my tattoo work but in my fine art as well. Figuring out what makes these machines work has been an ongoing affair for the past five years of my life. Along with making art, I also get much enjoyment out of experimenting with the different components of a tattoo machine. The love for the experimentation has led me on the path to figuring out what else I could make the machines do.

Early on in my thesis work I made a couple of sculptures that dealt with the concept that even though I control the tattoo machine, in a way it is more a shared relationship. Like stated earlier the tattoo machine moves on its own, yes it is a controlled up and down movement, but it has some give to it. Different factors create different results. One of the factors is the flow of electricity to the machine. There are a couple of points that go into this, first, the raw current that comes out of the plug in the wall and going into a power supply that turns that raw current into DC current, and second that DC current going into the tattoo machine. Now if I wanted to get more in depth I could go on to say that the DC current going into the tattoo machine is turning into released energy that is being transferred from the machine to the needle and from the needle to human skin. Could that energy possible convert back to stored energy in the person getting tattooed? So the use of electricity alone is a major factor in the end results of the tattoo, the cleaner the flow-the smoother the machine works. So what I was trying to achieve in my first couple of works was the idea of making objects used for painting that worked along the same lines as the tattoo machine so that there would be this shared extension between machine and artist.
So all this came together very rapidly after I combined the device with the art tools. I could really start seeing what the similarities were and what the differences were in the tattoo tools and the painting and drawing tools. With the machine the device can be tuned and made to operate in a controlled manner and the same could be said for a paintbrush, pencil, or pen. The difference between the machine and a paintbrush or pencil is that the machine makes the brush or pencil move on their own before a human hand even lays a finger on it. So it would take some time and practice to figure out how to control it. Once the object has been mastered and becomes second nature to the artist the tool and the artist converge and become one. This is where the machine and paintbrush are similar. It takes time to master and be able to perfect the marks they make.

From working with the mechanics of a tattoo machine I started to move away from the idea of the machine making art and more towards mechanically moving art. I started looking at the way the tattoo machine moves and it’s components and started
making wood objects that have moving parts. The first object I made was a crude box that had a plexi-glass window that would show two machines inside. There was a foot switch that came out of the box and when stepped on would make the two machines make noise. I made a long piece of metal that came off the machines and would scratch against a sheet of tin. The box had a light inside so that it would interest the viewer to look in and then when they pressed the foot switch it would startle them. What I learned from this crude sculpture was that people liked it. Just the basic mechanics of it made people want to know more. People looked in and saw something moving and wanted a reason for it. So I started to think about what would be a good reason for making things move and a number of reasons came to me. First off it is just plain funny to see what peoples’ reactions are, second I found that it seems to make people feel a little more comfortable with the art; “Oh you can touch it”. A lot of the time people come into a gallery space and feel intimidated by the environment and the art. “I better not make any noise or go too close to anything” I wanted to draw people in so they would let their guard down. In this way people will be more willing to take things in from their surroundings. Third I wanted to combine this sort of folk art idea along with a “home-made” feel with the paintings. So what better way to do this than to combine my tinkering with electronics and painted wood? I thought about painting boxes and having moving parts in them but after a while I thought that I could take this idea a bit further. What took me a while to put together was how I wanted to combine the mechanical parts with the painted wooden panels. I finally came up with the idea for my thesis sculptures when I found an old wooden figure that I had made and then painted. After I found the wooden figure and combined it with the machines the sculptures just came together.
The first wooden figure I made was four feet tall and was a nude male. The form was made up of found wooden objects such as chairs, desks and tables then constructed the same way I would construct my panels for painting with wood screws and glue. To start I would nail and screw different wooden pieces together and just let the form take me where it wanted to go. By creating the sculptures in this manner it was much like painting. The wooden male figure when finished was painted like one of the characters from my paintings and had a tongue that would wag at the viewer when a foot switch was stepped on. I made one more sculpture in this manner that was bigger and a female. This sculpture was also nude and had breast that would flap when a crank was turned. Although I liked how these works came out a couple of things that I did not want to hit on came up. First, since the sculptures were complete human forms with legs, arms,
hands and feet they weighed a ton. Additionally due to the fact that they were also nude and the man had an erection and the women had saggy breasts some people thought that they where derogatory towards women. This was not anywhere near what I was going for. What I was trying to achieve was a look and a feel of outsider art meets crazy basement experiment. What I was really aiming for with the male figure was confronting people with sexuality and how it is used in paintings and all other art forms but sugar coated and I wanted to see what peoples reactions would be to something more confrontational. This male figure would only work if the viewer turned him on by pressing his foot switch. So when I got the chance to be able to display the sculpture in a gallery setting the reactions where quite different then what I was expecting. Almost everyone laughed and smiled, which was what I was hoping for but I was expecting more of a “how dare they” type of reaction. What I took away from these sculptures was that a viewer interaction was something that I wanted to play with more and that pushed me to figure out more functions for the sculptures. The female sculpture enlightened me to the fact that I did not have to use just electrical devices but I could use human driven devices as well, which sounds stupid now when I write it but at the time when you are enveloped by things, the simplest thought like “hey I can make the sculptures move anyway I want to” seems distant. Although I could make them move any way I wanted to, the challenge was to make them move using electromagnetism because that is what powers the tattoo machines.

The final sculptures I created to be more like a weird form of furniture. Instead of having arms and legs and being made to look human I referenced the characters from my paintings. I did not limit myself by trying to tone down the patterns and designs, instead I
embraced them. I built the figures lighter so that they could be moved and transported
much easier. How I did this is by building them like tables, with four thin legs instead of
heavy 2x4s. I also used lightweight wood that I purchased instead of found objects. I
started finding all sorts of nifty lightweight moldings and bobbins, which gave the
sculptures the same feel as the paintings. Also breaking the wood and not giving it a
polished clean-cut finish helped in the raw end product.

These sculptures were an extension of my art that I had not ever explored and I
found that I really enjoyed making. It was half crazy guy in his basement making weird
inventions and half high-end art. The challenge of figuring out the electronics and
mechanisms was something that I found myself really loving. Thinking of these things
made me more creative in the process because I was taking myself out of my comfort
zone. This is something I do in my paintings, which I guess in it’s self is my comfort
zone, but trying this with things that I am not really familiar with from the start is a whole
different concept. Working with paint and different two-dimensional mediums is
something I am comfortable with so experimenting with them is easy. Working with
electronics and figuring out if this wire when soldered to here will make this motor turn
on and off by this homemade switch, like I said is a whole different area to explore. The
more I worked on my paintings and sculptures the more I realized that being out of my
comfort zone is what pushes me to take my art in new areas. The constant push and pull
of almost destroying and then bringing a work back to life from the brink of destruction is
what art is all about for me.
Conclusion

This body of work successfully expresses my intentions and expectations. The process of creating the work allowed me to refine the skills and ideas I already possessed and also afforded me the freedom to experiment and confidently pursue new challenges. I forced myself to go further with my ideas and influences and feel I have thrived in the process. I continue to use similar elements in my other fine art endeavors. These positive experiences have not only influenced my fine art work but also have allowed me to freely pursue new ideas in my work as a tattoo artist. As a completed body of work I am satisfied with the process as well as the final outcome.
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