

'Every tattoo comes with a story'

Four female artists tell of tattoo empowerment, dealing with stigma and odd customers before the Singapore Ink Show

Sabine Chen

More than 160 international and local tattoo artists will take part in the inaugural Singapore Ink Show, which runs from today to Sunday.

The event is the latest here to focus on tattoo art. The Singapore Tattoo Convention and Singapore Tattoo Art and Culture Show were held in 2009 and 2010 respectively.

While the body ink industry is still dominated by men, female tattoo artists are no longer a rarity. The Straits Times speaks to four local female artists who will be at the show.

1. Anthea Tan, 26, tattooing since 2014. Graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts from Lasalle College of the Arts

How does one learn to be a tattoo artist?

You have to be someone's slave first. It's kind of like a lousy internship.

Who is one quirky customer you have encountered?

I tattooed this guy who wanted the word "word" on his arm in my handwriting, in blue ink, because he wanted it to remind him of the word of God. He was definitely crazy.

What does your family think of you being a tattoo artist?

I guess they don't have a choice as I'm a good daughter and make my own money. But I think they initially weren't happy about it as they wanted me to be something better, like a doctor.

I'm not good at studying and I've always been into art, so they gradually accepted my choice. Before I came out to them that I am a tattoo artist, I was struggling with them not accepting my tattoos. They said things such as "You can't get married" and "How are you going to find a job?"

My mum still scolds me occasionally, saying, "That dress would be so nice if you didn't have all those tattoos."

2. Lin Yu Shan, 29, tattooing since last year. Graduated with a diploma in Visual Communication from Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts

What are some difficult places to tattoo?

The breasts are a difficult place because when you're tattooing, you have to stretch the skin as flat as possible and that area can be quite bumpy or fleshy.

Do you think tattoos empower people?

I think tattoos give people inner strength and confidence and help people get through difficult phases in their lives. I've done many tattoos where there are scars on the skin from self-harm and they can be quite sad to look at.



Galaxy Tattoo 2's Louise Ong (above) and Traditions Tattoo Collective's (below, from left) Anthea Tan, Lin Yu Shan and Lee Wai Leng will be at the inaugural Singapore Ink Show, which runs till Sunday. ST PHOTOS: DESMOND WEE, LAU FOOK KONG



Some of them get tattooed to cover up their scars, but many do it as a reminder that they shouldn't hurt themselves anymore.

Sometimes, I feel like a therapist because clients tell me the stories behind their tattoos. Every tattoo comes with a story.

Who are the customers you dislike working on?

Customers who do not trust your ideas. Certain things work well on paper, but not on skin. Ink shifts on skin because we're made of organic matter and this means that getting very small tattoos is unrealistic.

We always tell customers, "Go big or go home" to encourage them to get tattoos that will age well.

I also try not to do hand and foot

tattoos as they fade really fast and are very painful.

3. Lee Wai Leng, 44, tattooing since 2015. Apprenticed under Lionel Ng of Traditions Tattoo Collective

What do tattoo artists practise their craft on?

We tattoo on everything. We ink pomelos, bananas, pig skin and, of course, volunteers.

What is your opinion of tattooing as an artistic medium?

I think this medium is unique because it is permanent. It requires a lot of trust between the artist and the customer, which creates an intimate bond. In that respect, the artist has a responsibility to do

VIEWIT / SINGAPORE INK SHOW

WHERE: Hall 404, Suntec Singapore Convention & Exhibition Centre, 1 Raffles Boulevard

WHEN: Today, 12.30 to 9pm; tomorrow, noon to 9pm; Sunday, noon to 8pm (advance ticket holders get to enter 30 minutes earlier)

ADMISSION: \$30 to \$35 (one-day pass) and \$70 (three-day pass)

INFO: www.sginkshow.com

justice to the art and how it can appear beautifully on the customer. That requires a lot of artistry and technicality.

Where do you get your influences from?

I'm drawn to artists who do a lot of botanical work. Artists I like include Chicago-based tattoo artist Stephanie Brown and Matt Lambdin, who tattoos for True Hand Society in Philadelphia.

4. Louise Ong, 33, tattooing since 2010. Apprenticed under Niccku Woo of Galaxy Tattoo 2

What has been your scariest moment on the job?

I've had customers who love their

tattoo after it is completed, but text me the next day to tell me they hate it. That's the scariest thing – when you receive a text from your customers saying they're not happy with their tattoo.

It's very difficult to cover up a tattoo. If the customer really wants to do it, I will try to fix it for him and we have to draw up a design that's bigger than the original. However, the old tattoo can still be seen up close.

Where do you get your influences from?

I love Japanese art. I like the *baku*, a mythical Japanese dream-eater.

Just last week, I got a centipede tattooed on my butt.

The Japanese believe that the centipede moves only forward, so this reminds me that no matter how hard it is, I have to keep moving forward. I can't give up now.

What kind of comments do you hear about the many tattoos on your body?

On the street, people point at me and take pictures. Sometimes their kids talk about me – it's not nice.

Once, I took the train with my French friend, and she told me afterwards that three French people were talking about me the entire journey, saying things such as "She's gone too far. She has way too many tattoos".

Even my neighbour has asked my mother how she could let her daughter get so many tattoos.

csabine@sph.com.sg