ALEX BINNIE INTERVIEW

by Betti Marenko — IN.SECT.CORP™

BM: When did you start tattooing and what kind of background do you have?

AB: I have been tattooing since 1988-89, so it is about 10 years now. I had a fairly traditional tattoo apprenticeship as I am basically self-taught. I started working by hand, in my bedroom on myself and on a few friends, just using needle and ink. I studied Fine Arts, concentrating on performance and video related activities. After that, and before starting to tattoo, I also worked for a while as a medical illustrator doing anatomical drawings and graphic illustration for hospitals.

BM: Do you see any connections between your art background and tattooing?

AB: No, tattooing was a personal thing. In fact, I was already tattooed before I went to art school. I got tattooed initially when I was 17, but I stopped soon after. As I suppose, I had a glimmering in the back of my head that there was some potential for tattooing, that obviously was not happening at the time. In the mid 80's I started to get seriously tattooed, and to go to tattoo conventions. I consider tattooing an art which is more about enhancing the body rather than making a strong and specific statement. It is purely that: design, form, aesthetic, beauty and the human body, which I consider a very interesting surface to work with or on, probably more interesting than any other surface you may find. Also, I do have a very strong personal call towards tattooing. Because I have always been into tattooing myself. I am a craftsman and a trader. I work on people that want my work and that pay me, simple as that.

BM: Did you have one or more particular tattoo artists who you learned from?

AB: I am basically self-taught, and I have learned from seeing people work. I would say Mr. Sebastian, George Bone, Lai Hardy are those that most influenced me within the English scene, although artistically George Bone is the one that most inspired me, because of his Japanese work. However, there are other tattooists now that I would recognize as influences on my work.

BM: Different tattooing styles. What are your favourites?

AB: I am fairly traditional in a lot of ways, I am not into the so-called "new school", which is more a West Coast skate-centred-art-type look and a more modern radical look. I mainly restrict myself to what I consider the Three main traditional genres of tattooing: tribal work, basically abstract and usually more or less derived from traditional tribal patterns from the South Pacific, Japanese traditional work, which is larger, more overall coverage and more pictorial, probably a pinnacle in what tattooing can reach in terms of technique and style, and what I may call modern traditional Western work as done in Europe and America in the last one hundred years or so. These three areas have some stylistic traits in common. They are usually very clear, very bold, very simple and stylish. My own work is graphic, relatively simple, always trying to work well with the shape of the body. I don't actually have a specific style, as my aim is to try always to create an individual tattoo for that person. What I like, and I hope, is that my work has some kind of quality that speaks through the imagery as being my work as opposed to somebody else's, and also that it possesses some kind of individual energy.

BM: What about tattooing and body modification in general going mainstream?

AB: The trouble with mainstream and tattooing is that it is very difficult to get beyond the so-called shock element or the superficial level, the kind of "oh my god it must have hurt, oh my god it must have taken forever". Most people don't have a familiar understanding of tattooing, whereas they have, say, a familiar knowledge of theatre, or fashion, or film or other popular modern artnorms. Because of this lack of familiarity with the tattooing trade and craft, all they can see is the surface, which, because it refers to pain and permanence, is a mind numbing they cannot go beyond that. Tattooing is a gorgeous and technically very difficult artform, it is wonderful to look at, it is enormously relevant to people's lives, yet it is and it always will be pushed aside as something rather weird and marginal, a kind of freak activity. I'd say that mainstream tattooing is good and bad at the same time. I have been lucky that my timing has been very good. I was a bit ahead of the crowd in the English tattoo scene so the shop is successful, I have been quite successful as well, and I do a lot of nice, big work. All this was not planned though, as I had no idea how popular tattooing was to become when I started to be involved in it. A young kid that wants to start tattooing now, no matter how talented, is going to read at least 3 or 4 years before becoming remotely good as a tattoo artist. It is not easy, and we are flooded with tattooists. As for what I think of the scene and its popularity, I am bored of it now. There are lots of tattoo artists and a lot of magazines. All this has been very much part of my upbringing, but now it has changed and I am not so interested in it anymore. I don't think it's either good or bad. Surely it is good for the bank balance... I am not so interested in money, and I would say tattoo first and money second, but I am aware that I have a relatively nice lifestyle because of tattooing, although this has never been my initial motivation.

BM: You mentioned the two most crucial aspects about tattooing, pain and permanence.

AB: Pain and permanence are indeed the main things about tattooing. There are not many other instances in our society where people choose to go through a painful process in order to get something positive out of it at the end. Pain is nearly always seen as something negative, something to be avoided. People want an easy life, their aim being sitting and watching belly, kind of going back to a reassuring womb-like sensation of security and comfort. Of course there is a basic human impulse towards this, but there must be other impulses as well, like pain and suffering, and tattooing involves a lot of physical pain. We lead rather pain-free, anaesthetised lives nowadays, and this perhaps is one of the reasons behind tattooing, the urge and the desire to feel something. As for the permanence, this is what really freaks people out. The usual thing that people say to me is "I
have always wanted a tattoo, but I never knew what I wanted to get...and, you know, the thing about ma Alex, is that I am always changing my mind...and I am really worried that I will change my mind...'. Of course you change, like everybody else, but it is not such a big deal. The point is, if you are into tattooing, this does not really matter because you accept the permanence as part of it. I don't know why it is such a big deal for people. I guess they are using it as an excuse not to get tattooed...

BM: The idea of the body being an unattainable place to be preserved in its supposed natural state may play a part in it...

AB: Yes, there are specific bans against tattooing both in the Bible and in the Koran, as being idolatrous, recreating gods image, which is what we actually do...

BM: Is tattooing more of an act of resistance against normalised paradigms of body image, through differentiation of one's body, or is it rather to be considered more as an attempt to belong to a close knitted community, or tribe of similar?

AB: It is a difficult question, because on one side you could argue that people get tattooed to acquire a sense of individuality, by differentiating from the norm, while on the other side you have the opposite, people doing it because they want to belong to some grouping, for instance in the gay community. Some people are nowadays into tattooing as one used to be into, say, punk music, or into a certain type of club, or skateboarding. A while ago you may have had people getting certain tattoos as part of their commitment to specific subcultures. Now you have people getting tattooed because tattooing in itself is precisely what they are into. It is a subculture on its own. Or a hobby. It is also a sign of finding individually, at the same time making themselves part of a smaller system of rules, adopting whatever is required to be part of that specific group.

BM: What do you think of the modern primitives movement and the spreading practice of heavy body modification?

AB: I think I am part of it so I like it. I find it ridiculous when anyone is part of something, always tries to pretend he's not... I have definitely been part of it, I have enjoyed it, and yeah, I am a Modern Primitive. I don't like modern technology that much, and I have all my life secretly fantasised about a desert island on my own, doing my fishing on the coral reef, although I also like watching TV and stuff like that... But I am a Modern Primitive in the sense that I have always had the urge of getting tattooed, pierced, of doing various rituals and performance involving the body. The whole Modern Primitive movement has been trivialised. When I see in tacky magazines somebody from Santa Monica with tons of piercings and wacky tattoos on the back of his neck, sort of playing the Modern Primitives game, I think how sad it is, but then I am 15 years older, so I should not really care... I would be a lot sadder if I was doing that... I don't feel I am very much part of it now. I am getting on with my life.

BM: Do you feel there exists a bond between people who are tattooed, or in other words, what about the idea of a 'tribe'...

AB: Yes, there is definitely a bond. I have made very strong friendships with people because we were tattooed... for instance, Curly that now works in the shop and who I regard as one of my closest friends. We were both getting covered in tattoos in a similar kind of style at the same time. When we were having our ears all stretched up nobody was doing that. Of course now that the scene is so big I don't identify with everybody with a lot of tattoos. Still, you know what it is like. Getting tattoos is not that easy, it costs a lot of money, a lot of time and a lot of pain. There is not any other experience like being tattooed, not because it is any better than other experiences, but because it is a very specific one. If you have got a lot of tattoos yourself then you know what everybody else you meet has gone through, and you share the very same intense experience, even if you may not have anything else in common.

BM: In the past ten years there has been a massive increase in the popularity of all sorts of body modifications. Tattooing, body piercing, and even scarification and branding are now regarded as art forms rather than signs of deviance. What do you think are the reasons behind this cultural shift?

AB: I would argue this point; just because tattooing has become really popular on a superficial level, it does not mean that its basic power has changed, I believe its fundamental power has not changed. And anyway I don't think that tattooing is a sign of deviance...

BM: It has been regarded in that way, though...

AB: Yeah, but only for a short period of time, about the last 200 years, and only in the West. In most of the world for most of human history it has not been regarded as a sign of deviance at all, rather as a sign of great honour and acceptance. Even though tattooing has been banned by the Bible, I would never say that body modification is a sign of deviance. If we assume that, then I don't think that the overall perception has changed much within Western culture. It has been somewhat sanitised by the popularity, but only slightly. It is considered acceptable just to show it, but the shock effect still persists... We think tattooing is really popular, but it is only a little bit so. All in all it is still a minority thing, and we are still a tiny minority of people really. When you work in a tattoo shop I do, you get the impression that all the world is lined up and covered. Then you go out in the streets here in London or even somewhere like New York, and it is rare to see a sleeve. If you see one you stop and talk with the guy... Even now, that there is a lot of press about tattooing, it still retains that taboo element, which is why so many people are interested in it.

BM: Do you find that a lot of people are attracted to tattooing because of its taboo fascination?

AB: Yes. Although I'd like to think we have a better than average clientele in our shop, I'd be foolish if I thought they are all animated by what I can call pure motives, whatever pure motives are... Different people have many different reasons to get tattooed... Let's say that there is a pure aspect and an impure, corrupted one. At its purest tattooing is pure expression of the self, liberation of the individual spirit, in our culture anyway. Nevertheless, for a lot of people it is about panicky neurotic things like the end of paranoia of not being cool enough to fit in...

BM: What are the pure motives you are referring to?

AB: For some people getting tattooed responds to a quite deep psychological need and they use tattooing, unconsciously, as a
Method of spiritual healing. I don’t want to get too hippy-dippy because it is not what I really am, but I do understand some of that way of thinking. Spirituality is a personal issue and tattooing may or may not be related to it. Tattooing is basically an art form, a medium like painting or silk printing or batik, but which happens to use human flesh. However, tattooing is also an act which maintains strong psychic representations and which does actually heal and cure to a certain extent. It is a very powerful thing to do, so much so that people who get tattooed may feel more like themselves in this way. I did not feel entirely like myself until I got tattooed. I had to fulfill an urge that has been very strong for quite a lot of my life. Now, although I am not entirely covered, that urge is basically gone. However, people who feel in this way are not more than 15% of those who come to the shop. The majority is not like that, most are getting tattooed for social and/or fashion reasons.

BM: How do different people experience being tattooed then? What are the motivations in decorating extensively one’s body?

AB: I’d say that tattooing is compulsive and if you get used to it, once you get beyond the pain and the permanence effect, which doesn’t really take that much, getting heavily tattooed becomes easy. On a superficial level it is not more significant than acquiring an extensive record collection, and even for those who are into it at a deep level, often motivations are not that conscious. Nobody says “I hate my body, I always hated it, so I am going to get tattooed, and that will make me feel better.” Nobody says that, but I can see it in some people. It is not always a positive thing. It is not always a way of reclaiming the body, rather the opposite, it can be a way of destroying it, blocking it out, removing it from themselves.

BM: Would you tattoo somebody if you felt that this could be the result?

AB: I have never met anyone who deliberately got himself self mutilating tattoos to the point of fucking himself up, but I think that a lot of people get heavily tattooed as a way of resolving some personal issues and attitudes towards not only their body, but their life in general. The body becomes the visible aspect of something much deeper. I am aware of it in others, because I am aware of it in myself, so I can pick it up, and those who I tend to like more, or to relate to more, is because of this connection. As a tattoo artist you are dealing and working closely with people under high emotional pressure. Tattooing and getting tattooed can be quite emotional for them and for you. You do get to see a certain side of people that is usually hidden, and as a tattoo artist you have to deal with it, basically not taking it on board too much, because it can destroy you, stressful as it is.

BM: Tell me more about the interaction between tattoo artist and tattooed.

AB: Clients want of course a committed attitude, but it is difficult to maintain that all the time. You can’t handle massive emotions all the time. They dry you up. Sometimes I feel that people demand too much from me, and you don’t want just the money in exchange. Sometimes you want something else. I personally need some time off. Body, Mind is a job that breaks and burns out a lot of people. Not only are you dealing with a lot of very deep emotions in people, also you need to concentrate hard, as you can’t make mistakes. Clients expect a lot from you, maybe for you it is the second tattoo of the day, but for them it is a lifetime experience, so you can’t be casual about it.

BM: You mentioned before fashion as a reason that some have to get tattooed. How fashion and permanent body decoration can be related?

AB: I don’t think there is any connection between fashion and tattooing. Some fashion people have appropriated tattooing in their fashion collections. In common with many art forms fashion appropriates what it sees around and incorporates what’s current and hip. I am not putting it down, but I get slightly pissed off seeing my work on Jean Paul Gaultier tops, I am not talking about influences here, I am talking about exact copies.

BM: That’s exactly how the fashion system works, assimilation and digestion of inputs...

AB: Yes, and we have to accept that. We also copy styles of tattooing form other cultures, don’t we? There is an argument for instance regarding Maori or Japanese traditional styles I am copying, so I cannot go too mad over Jean Paul Gaultier copying, plus I think he has more respect than others, he has been around for a while, and he’s tattooed.

BM: Do you see tattooing as a gender biased experience?

AB: Worldwide tattooing has been used by both sexes fairly equally, but if you look at those places where there is a strong tattoo tradition, you will find that women often get more heavily tattooed than men. In New Guinea for instance, virtually only the women get tattooed, and there are a lot of places like that around the world. Of course men get tattooed a lot as well. In the west, no matter what they say, men get tattooed more heavily than women, I have done more back and full sleeves on men than on women. While a man may get full sleeves for relatively frivolous reasons, a woman may get a little ankle tattoo for the same reasons, but if she is going for the back-piece or full sleeve, it means she is pretty serious about it. In our culture a woman doing so is stepping even further outside the boundaries of acceptable behaviour, compared to a man getting heavily tattooed, as tattooing is still seen as something fundamentally deviant. It is not considered feminine, it is considered male and often associated with criminals. For women it has even more negative connotations, as popular imagery associated it with prostitutes and drug addicts. However, women are actually better than men at taking the pain.

BM: There is a growing number of artists who are focusing on the body and its manipulation – a body as a site of resistance, catharsis, pain, as a place to become almost transcendent – and the role played by modification practices is crucial. What do you think of the current cultural obsession with the body?

AB: I do notice that there is an obsession with the body, an awful lot of art around the world is very body oriented, and the tattooing, piercing and body performance scene is a part of it. Think about the Sensation show at the Royal Academy. Almost every single artist, apart from Rachel Whiteread, was dealing with the body, and when you see Damien Hirst using animal bodies you know that what he would really like to do is use human bodies...
BM: Body decoration practices feature heavily in the work of some body art performers, like Ron Athey. What do you think of this contamination between body decoration and performance?

AB: I don't think there is any connection, although people go on about the idea of tattooing as a performance, I don't really agree. I consider performance as an hobby of mine, I did it at art school, most of it involved the body and stuff like broken glass, rotting flesh... horrible stuff really... I decided to become a tattoo artist rather than a performance artist, because I hate the-fucking art world. I am not into spending money on grants, I am not into kissing the ICA's butt.

BM: Tell me more of your collaboration with Ron Athey and the performances you have done with him.

AB: I lived in LA for a while, tattooing. Ron was having problems getting tattooed because he was HIV positive and I did not have problems with it because I had already tattooed friends with HIV. So Ron and I became friends and I tattooed him. At that time he was still a go-go dancer in club Flick, the place where the LA Modern Primitives scene started, in the mid-80's. I didn't know anyone like that in London, so I thought "Who are these people, just all like me, with no hair, big earplugs and a lot of tattoos? Wow, Great! Somebody who wears dressers!" I was a bit of cross-dresser myself, just for a laugh, because it really freaked people out... a lot of tattoos and a dress? Ron started soon to get more serious about performance and I became involved, also because of my previous experience. He has a personal history to tell, which is rather interesting and which pulls in deeply a lot of people. I believe that's the reason why Ron is such an important figure. There is some kind of message coming through him, a message that the audience can recognise and respond to. I don't see his work as being controversial, not to me anyway. There is a lot more than that to it. It does happen that the language of bodies he uses is controversial, but language is a tool. The stories and the messages he is telling are more universal than that.

BM: What can you see in the future of the tattooing scene?

AB: I don't know how big it is going to get. I don't believe tattooing will ever become an acceptable cultural practice, and those who think that are just kidding themselves. It will always remain taboo and outside the boundaries. I expect there is going to be more of it, but it's not going to get any better in standards. Very few people involved in tattooing truly care about the art and its developments. We are going to see an awful lot more tattooing around, and most of it will be completely shit.

BM: However, the increased visibility and popularity would have an influence on the overall perception of the body, in terms of its normalised image. In other words, if more and more have a radically altered body is this going to affect what is considered a "normal" body in our system of cultural representation?

AB: Getting tattooed is an option open to everybody. I don't think that tattooing is going to change the fundamental way in which people perceive their own body. There has always been tattooing, and quite a lot of it at times. There have been waves of popularity like the current one and before, for instance during the 20's, when people started to get Japanese tattoos.

BM: What about placing tattooing in the context of what seems to be happening now, where we have an increasing availability of ways of reshaping the human body...

AB: ...like plastic surgery and implants, you mean... Well, these are incredibly minor events, they attract a very limited audience. All they do is make big headlines, the press loves it... Orlan is a fool, she is a sensationalist fool. I don't take her seriously. She is just a good self publicist, a public performances artist. I don't know how she manages to get funds... she probably gets some kind of grant, more likely she has a rich and perverted husband who really gets off on it... She is part of that whole art scene I am not interested in, as it is ultimately pretentious and not real. Orlan does not change anything. She is just making a fool of herself in public, I am afraid. If she wants to do that, and certain people want to discuss her at dinner parties, including myself, fair enough... I don't think she is causing any fundamental shift in the way we perceive the body. In terms of that, the back page of the Evening Standard advertising plastic surgery is having more of an effect on the public perception of the body... Her work is pretentious and pointless, why anybody want to have horns, apart from shocking and showing off to people? Tattooing has got a long and noble history. It is a cultural practice that has been going on for a long long time, almost as long as the human race, and it will continue for a long long time. It is deeply embedded in our unconscious mind. If God wanted us to have horns he would have given us horns, and if your answer to that is "if God wanted us to have tattoos, he would have made us as such", I tell you that's why our bodies react the way they do when you put ink in the skin! Getting tattooed is a fundamental part of being human. Tattooing is a phenomenon cultural practice, spread worldwide, and it goes back at least 7000 years, according to the records we have. It is universal. It is crucial to the human condition, while having horns is frivolous, superficial and bit silly... unless you are like Eminem and you work for the Jim Rose Side Show Circus. It will never be a big thing.

BM: Tell me about the shop you own, INTO YOU.

AB: My partner Teena and myself started the shop in 1993. After being in the States for a couple of years it was clear to me what was going to happen in London, so I thought about starting a tattooing and piercing shop which would be the kind of place I would have liked to go to. I had in mind the ultimate tattooing and piercing shop, a friendly place where tattooing and piercing were treated as equals, and also a meeting point for like-minded people to hang out. It has been growing ever since. Now we have a permanent staff of tattooists and body piercers, plus visiting artists from all over the world. I consider it a kind of workshop, we have two or three young tattoo artists who come regularly to learn, brush up their skills and generally soak up the vibe. Although we do mainly custom work, it is a walk-in shop, where people can find a lot of artworks and related stuff to look at. It is a way for people to tap into it and see what's going on within this culture, without necessarily being committed to it. We do a lot of press and media work as well. I regard it as one of my jobs, partly because if I were not doing it somebody else would, but also because we do know what we are talking about, thus we can offer a good image to the media. We are dedicated and passionately believe in what we do. Obviously we are also a commercial shop as we make our living out of it. In this sense I am a bit of a conservative, I
believe that good art should work for itself, that's what I say to Ron, to have his work paying for itself, with videos, music... if you sell, you are commercially viable and you have more control of what you do, because you do what you like and not what somebody else tells you to do... Public money would be better spent in rehousing the homeless, improving the hospital and education systems, rather than indulging art ideas through funding.

BM: Do you consider your clients as a walking, living, breathing work of art?

AB: Yes, and I love seeing them, especially when it is summer and I can look at all these big pieces I made moving around, from different angles. I adore it. That's what it's all about... I am a tattoo artist and I love tattoos. It is a fantastic artform.

PHOTO CREDITS:
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PAGE 123: TIM, PHOTO BY ASHLEY.
PAGE 124: RON ATHEY, PHOTO BY JEREMY CHAPLIN.
PAGE 121 (TOP): ALEX BINNIE AT WORK & ALL OTHERS PAGE 125: PHOTOS FROM ALEX BINNIE ARCHIVE.

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