



Artist Kirby Lian and his colleagues practise their human art at Utopia Studio in Roxy Square, across from Parkway Parade Mall

# Taking the Plunge

by Michael Franco **Some men turn to sports cars to help them roar through mid-life. Others train for marathons. And still others try to zoom through the mid-life crisis by hitching a ride with a fast woman.**

Approaching my 40th birthday, I turned to the needle.

As its sweet fang bit into my white flesh, my first thought wasn't one of release, abandon or euphoria. It was, frankly, "Holy hell, this hurts." That was followed by "What am I doing?"

When it comes to tattoos, more people at age 40 are having them removed than applied. Girlfriends' names, skulls and crossbones, and Maori tribal patterns all seem more appropriate on firmer, more naïve flesh. Yet here I was, a week after my big *four-UH-oh*, getting inked for the first time.



I had been thinking about getting a tattoo since I was a twentysomething. But it takes me a while to make decisions. Eight years passed before I worked up the courage to ask my now-wife to marry me – and weddings are relatively painless affairs. Plus there's always that *'til death do you part* business. Even death wasn't going to part my body from my ink. Well, at least not right away.

I also tend to change my mind a lot – not a good trait if you're considering permanent body art. Looking at my dietary trends alone, I've been a vegetarian, an Atkins dieter, gone the vegan non-dairy route, tried fasting one day a week, and once drank nothing but lemon juice and water for ten days.

So, I wasn't surprised to find myself having serious doubts the night before I was to satisfy my lifelong ambition to become a marked man.

The tattoo was a stylised Ganesha. He's the elephant-headed Hindu god who's the remover of obstacles and the patron saint of writers. Problem was, there really was only one spot I wanted a tattoo – on the outside of my lower leg.

"I won't do that tattoo for you," said my new friend, tattoo artist Scotty De Silva of Shark Tattoo, who'd I had been interviewing for another story. "Putting a god that low on your body is disrespectful."



That should have been enough warning. But, although I did admit that I change my mind a lot, sometimes I can lock on an idea with the conviction of a Dobermann. So, I visited Utopia Tattoo Studio in Roxy Plaza and met with Donald, a Ganesha fan himself and a tattoo artist who excels in this type of portraiture. After a few back-and-forth meetings, the design was finalised and the date set.

Did I say my mind could be like a Dobermann? More like a retriever. And the night before my tattoo, it kept bringing me one idea over and over again: getting a god's image emblazoned on my body from a religion I knew precious little about was just plain

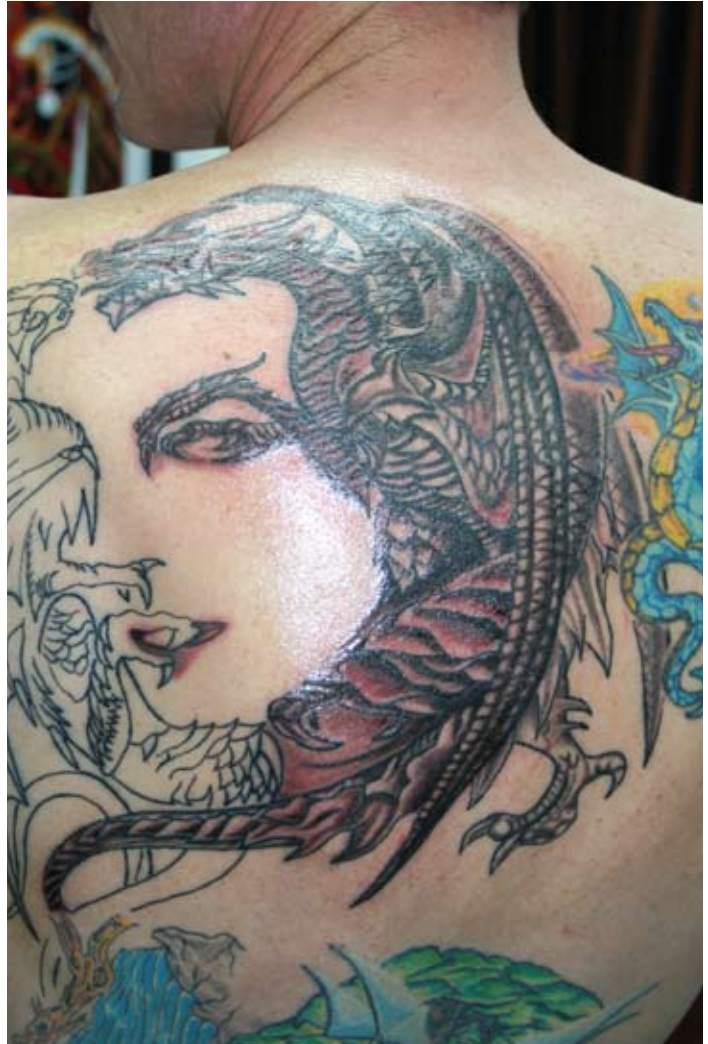


dumb. After finally calming the sleep-depriving beast with some pharmaceutical aids, I rested. But the mental mutt came jumping on my chest and licking my face early the next morning. Or was that just a tightness in my chest and cold sweat on my forehead?

I jumped out of bed much earlier than I'm accustomed to and surfed the internet for the terms "Ganesha" and "tattoo", eventually stumbling upon a site that intelligently discouraged combining the two. My tattoo appointment was in two hours' time and I was as unsure of getting it as I had been twenty years ago. But a decision had to be made, so I sat down to meditate – a bit out of my nature. The instant I sat down and crossed my legs, the soon-to-be tattooed spot on my leg pressed into the ground. Not a nice way to treat a god. So I called it off.

Fast-forward several weeks to the night before my next tattoo attempt. I had designed a new one, involving a yin-and-yang symbol, one that is important in my life. No Hindu gods, no meditation, no cold sweat – yet.

As I tried to sleep, my cognitive canine returned with health worries. *What if the needles*



**Clockwise from top:**

*If you can dream it up, artist Scott De Silva of Shark Tattoo can ink it*

*You might howl in pain while getting your tattoo but in return you get a lasting piece of wearable art like this tribal wolf from De Silva*

*A tattoo like this is known as a full back-piece and would take several visits to the studio to complete*

aren't autoclaved as they should be? What if the equipment wasn't wiped down the night before? And what about the ink? What the hell is it even made of? Back to the internet.

My advice? Stay clear of computers in the hours before a tattoo. With very little probing, it is possible to unearth heaps of information about the evils of tattoos from medical sites, religious groups, and even the sites of tattoo parlours themselves, trying to discredit the practices of their competitors. I found out that tattoos were considered such a health risk that they were banned in New York City until 1997. Also found out that people with tattoos are nine times as likely to get Hepatitis C as uninked folks. And discovered that no one really knows what's in tattoo ink or what it does in the body.

After another restless night I woke up and – marched myself to the tattoo parlour! This was my mid-life crisis, dammit. Time to let go of the worried, anxious germ-freak and become more daring, adventurous, and balanced. It was yin and yang, after all. Time to do something truly uncharacteristic and offload some of that heavy caution as I sped down the other side of the age hill.

Kirby, an artist at Utopia who specialises in tribal designs, made his preparations and reassured me of the absolute cleanliness of everything that was going to touch or pierce my skin. The doubts that had been nipping at my heels for weeks began to recede. As he set to work changing my body for all time, I suppose I did indeed begin to feel a sense of release, abandon and euphoria because I, and the needle, were finally taking the plunge. 🐼



## THINK BEFORE YOU INK

### Before

Singapore has hundreds of tattoo shops. To find one that suits you, visit several and ask to see the artists' sample books. Note how you feel in the shop. The place you settle on should make you feel at ease. Also look at the cleanliness of the shop. You'll get an impression by looking around, but also ask the tattoo artist to explain his sterilisation process. The gun heads should be autoclaved (a process of sterilisation) and your artist should be willing to open fresh needle packages and inks in front of you on the day your masterpiece is created. The Singapore Tattoo Club site on Facebook is a great spot to seek advice about artists and the entire tattooing process: [www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=6564952310](http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=6564952310)

### During

As hard as it might be, get a good night's sleep before your tattoo. Eat well, as some people get light-headed during the process. Bring along snacks and an MP3 player, and wear clothing that will make the tattoo spot easily accessible. A sweater or light blanket is also a good idea, as you'll be lying still for a while in an air-conditioned room. Getting a tattoo definitely hurts, but it helps that once you get used to the pain, it doesn't get any worse.

### After

Your tattoo artist will coat your tattoo with ointment and may also cover it with a bandage, which should be removed two to three hours after the appointment ends. For the first five to ten days, it is critical to keep the tattoo moist by applying a skin moisturiser or ointment several times a day. It is also important to keep it clean by washing the area lightly with soap and water – but no scrubbing! Within ten days or so, the tattoo will have formed scaly patches that will itch like crazy, but eventually fall off leaving behind the healed and sealed tattoo. Avoid swimming and direct sunlight for at least a month after the inking but feel free to expose your newly decorated skin any other way you want!

*The author's result, after twenty years of deliberation.*