

John Devilman's Tattoo Grue

Written by Tony Flores

Saturday, 24 April 2010 06:23



Tattoos are a form of expression that express individuality, but also demonstrate their wearers' predilections and tastes, allowing them to bond in much the way horror enthusiasts do. "Seeing what can be done with tattoos these days, thanks to them being accepted into the mainstream, people are getting more creative with their desired pieces," skin artist John Devilman says.

The melding of tattoos and horror is a fairly recent phenomenon that has sparked a creative revolution in both communities. "Horror tattoos are always popular," Devilman says, "because they can be sexy, nostalgic, intimidating and fun. And even as tattoos become more and more mainstream, they're still a bit more rebellious. They can also be a kind of litmus test as to who fellow fans of your favorite cult movie may be."



There has been a resurgence of both fright fare and tattoos in the last decade that has led both to become more commonplace and accepted in "normal" culture. Conventions around the country (including Fango's own) are frequented by fright fans riddled with tattoos. Both passions are now perceived as lifestyles, and the inked images represent a way to connect the body and favorite films together. "I know many horror fans who've used tattoos to help express their affinity for such films," Devilman notes. "It speaks more clearly and more faithfully than any Pinhead shirt or a trowel signed by Kyra Schon might."

Devilman's Zombie Tattoo shop in West Hollywood is helping bring together this form of art and the affection for all things scary, and the artist also tatted Fango fans and even staff, including this writer, at our Los Angeles convention last year (pictured here). "We thought it would be a great chance to promote our shop," he says of the event. "I mean, where better than FANGORIA to represent Zombie Tattoo? We knew that most of the people who would attend would be just like us and relate to our work and our shop's direction. It was such a fun convention, and we felt right at home with all the other horror fans there."

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Like many, Devilman found his way to Los Angeles with hopes of landing an acting gig, but it was his artistic talents that garnered him a secure foothold. "My sworn brother came from Shreveport, LA and told me to come live with him," Devilman recalls. "He said that he had talked to this guy who owned a tattoo shop out there about me and my artwork, and that guy would be willing to take me in and show me how to tattoo." Having nothing to lose, Devilman took the chance, figuring tattooing "would be better than flipping burgers. So three weeks and a speedy, makeshift apprenticeship later, I was tattooing."



A string of odd occurrences brought the establishment into existence—fitting for a shop called Zombie Tattoo. As the legend goes, the place's two owners thought up possible names and threw them into a hat. The discovery seemed pretty unique, and it was fortuitous that they found themselves in West Hollywood, of all places. "Some psychic to the stars suggested to the owners' wives that they find a place here—that it would bring them great fortune or some such mystic stuff," Devilman says.

For his tattoos, Devilman draws inspiration from many different avenues, implementing aspects from various artists into the detailing of his work. "My line quality, I'm sure I get from Vaughn Bodé of Cheech Wizard fame," Devilman notes. "When I was younger, I was in love with his comics work. My insane detail was a bit of my own until, after seeing my work, a friend suggested I take a look at Geoffrey Darrow [HARD BOILED, BIG GUY, RUSTY THE BOY ROBOT]. I took some influence from him in high school and have since adapted it to suit my personal style.

"As far as art that I like, I'm currently falling back in love with old monster magazine art—Basil Gogos' [of *Famous Monsters of Filmland* fame] stuff especially," he continues. "I also like some of the 'Stories of Real Men'-type magazine art that has commandos door-kicking some Nazi compound as they're about to set upon a buxom, young, near-naked beauty with a ridiculous instrument or arcane method of torture. As for comics I draw inspiration from, CONAN has had a pretty good run, with the art being a blend of sketch and fine painting. I also enjoy the art Jae Lee does on the DARK TOWER: THE GUNSLINGER series. Storywise, 100 BULLETS, FABLES, Y THE LAST MAN, EX MACHINA, CONAN, INVINCIBLE and THE WALKING DEAD are the titles I currently pick up."

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It takes a certain kind of person to work in a horror tattoo shop, and Devilman is definitely up to the challenge of holding down the position, as he's more than happy to share his affection with like-minded customers. "I grew up on horror movies—the good, the bad and the ugly," he says. "Given the name of our shop, I've had the opportunity to do tattoos that come from the minds of fellow genre fans. They're always way more fun than putting a tramp stamp of some soon-to-be-ex-boyfriend or tribal armband on someone"—and more original, for that matter.



Devilman proves his horror-fan mettle when he names his favorite films, which include titles from all over the spectrum. These include the first and third NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET films, EVIL DEAD II and ARMY OF DARKNESS, along with SHUAN OF THE DEAD, PUMPKINHEAD, ALIENS and John Carpenter's THE THING. Devilman also has a multitude of further ideas for tattoos that seem to draw from everywhere and anywhere. "I want to really do a BLADE RUNNER piece, some Frank Frazetta stuff, Dr. Herbert West, Vincent Price, Sloth from THE GOONIES, Al Bundy, Burt Reynolds, Freddy, another Beetlejuice, Predator...shoot, the list goes on and on, but you get the idea."

As for the basic question of why horror is so appealing to him, he offers a very recognizable, honest answer: "I think monsters are amazing. I still remember when I was in second grade, all the kids in my class would have me draw their monsters fighting Freddy or Jason or something. I always hung around older kids because I was too young to watch those types of movies, but they would have them and we'd watch GHOULIES or TROLL or something, and I'd get to see all this gore and chicks with their boobs showing running and screaming from a really rad bogeyman. What about that *wouldn't* appeal to a youth?"

In addition to the horror tattoos the Zombie shop is known for, Devilman also creates a diverse array of other artwork. "I do a lot of portraits, horror or otherwise," he says. "I've had a string of people coming in asking me to draw them pinup girls from scratch and make them look realistic; that's always a challenge." Some of his favorites among these have included a Gogos-esque rendition of Frankenstein's Monster, a Barbarella back piece and Ash from EVIL DEAD II.

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Speaking of portraits, Devilman has one other recurring, and especially personal, theme he has recently begun. "I'm going to start tattooing myself on as many people as possible," he reveals. "I've already got another tattoo artist to have my face inked on them, and a few others to agree to get my lovely mug on them somewhere as well. I also tattooed my phone number on an old boss, and I've promised him that I won't ever change it because of that."

Even though tattooing is a demanding job, Devilman always has fun with it, in part due to his customers. "One client is a really good guy who enjoys joke tattoos," he explains, "and he had me conjure up a tattoo with a bunch of sad dinosaurs in the style of Don Bluth's LAND BEFORE TIME congregating around while a meteor crashes down above them with a banner that says, 'God Doesn't Believe in Us.'" Devilman even runs a special promotion, "where I give free tattoos away on April 1. The catch is, it's got to be a design I want to give. The person can decide not to get it, but then I just go down the line until I find someone who'll want it. From this, I did my 'chickenf**ker' tattoo and another one that was a cute rubber ducky with a banner over it stating, 'I watch you masturbate.' Good times."

Zombie Tattoo itself is riddled with accoutrements that any horror aficionado can appreciate. "Our shop's got a lot of zombie toys, movie props, posters, etc. Our financial outfits worn by zombies from SHAUN OF THE DEAD, RESIDENT EVIL movies, some of the gas masks and replica guns—it helps the whole horror vibe of the shop. I love it."

And for anyone reading this who is thinking about getting a tattoo, Devilman has a piece of advice for you. "Sometimes, people just come in wanting anything. They haven't really thought it through, and I'll usually try to convince them to put a little thought into what they're getting, or else they'll end up with something they'll regret." Once someone has chosen a piece that they want for sure, Devilman is enthused to oblige. "If it's something that I really want to do, that's when I want to tattoo them. Or if they tip well!"

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