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Senior Project

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YABBA DABBA TATTOO

The Beginnings

To put it simply, my senior project was to put together an art portfolio. I wanted to fill up a full portfolio case; a standard physical portfolio should be at least 20 pieces. The idea was to do any type of art, adding and replacing old pieces, until I had a decent amount of pieces to show. This idea was not at all hard for me to come up with. I've wanted to use this senior project as an opportunity to use for my future career since I first heard about the assignment 4 years ago!

I have always wanted a profession that had to do with some form of art. Whether it was acting, film, comic book writing, tattooing, or simply sketching, I was interested. I was not by any means naturally talented at drawing when I was younger. As I worked on my art skills, I became a perfectionist. This makes it pretty hard to show off my art, even when others encourage me that it is well done. But every so often, I have an effortless spark of inspiration and my best skills seem to possess my body. This leads to making pieces that I show off for even years after they're complete. Eventually, I make enough of those special pieces to bury the ones I used to feel proud of, as my skill progresses. I wanted every piece in my portfolio to be like this, but in a

set amount of time it was very difficult to produce many of them. I'm proud of every piece I include in my portfolio, however some are definitely better than others.

My exploration of different arts throughout my life soon led me to the art of tattooing. I have loved the aesthetic of tattoos for as long as I can remember. Specifically alternative, dark, rockstar inspired tattoos. I can't remember exactly when I made the switch in my career path from art in general to specifically tattooing, but it was around the time that I was about to leave middle school. I went on a trip to visit some of my family in Massachusetts that year. I have always had a connection to that part of my family and the area they live in, despite not visiting that often.

My Uncle Eddie and I had met before, but by this time, I was old enough to visit one on one with him. He wasn't heavily tattooed or particularly into them, but when he found out I was thinking about becoming a tattoo artist in the future, he immediately introduced me to a TV show he liked to watch. It was a reality show called "Ink Master." Tattoo artists compete in challenges over the course of weeks, and one by one they are eliminated until one wins. I was obsessed with it! Throughout the trip, I would draw and he would color in a coloring book while we watched this show. We also visited his favorite art store and he bought art supplies for him and me to use. I decided then that I would definitely pursue this career. A couple years later, he passed away. I got my first tattoo dedicated to him, based on one of the colorings from his book.

There have been moments in my artistic path that I have wondered if this is really the right job for me. For one, I'm not good at sticking to deadlines, at least for school work. Every time I tell someone associated with the body modification community I want to pursue tattooing, they tell me I should be drawing every spare moment. And as a perfectionist, what if I mess up a tattoo on someone?? A lot of thoughts and doubts sometimes come into my head: *am I drawing enough? What if I show an artist my portfolio and they actually think my art is really bad? I can't imagine myself being as good as some artists out there.* But I figure if I really want to succeed, I will. It will definitely be a difficult path, but any career art will be difficult, so I might as well do my favorite kind of art. Many of the artists in the industry are insanely good at what they do, but many are also not. I'm sure most people have seen a botched tattoo. This may be a bad mentality, but I think to myself, if they can make it, then I will definitely be able to. But of course, I will continue to work until people say my work is "insanely good" too!

I don't quite know why I've had such an interest in art in general. I could make up some elaborate philosophical answers on how it helps me express myself and my feelings. Or I could say doing art relaxes me and is something I can always sit down and do. But the truth is, I just like the way it looks. I respect people when they give a long philosophical answer when asked the same question, but I've really never felt the need to try to define "art," why we do it, and why I like it. We are constantly asked that question, "what is art?" And honestly, I don't care. I genuinely hate it when people slap some philosophical meaning on it, or say "If whoever made it says it's art, it's art." I'm just there like, ok cool, why did we need to discuss that? It's like trying

to define love, it's pointless! Just enjoy it if you can, and if you can't, who cares! Just like everything else that has ever existed!

On the other hand, tattoos specifically can carry a deeper meaning to me. You can find a way to get a tattoo for a million reasons. Maybe you want to memorialize your child, your pet, your uncle. Maybe you want to show your deep connection with a song lyric, a coordinate, a date in time. Maybe, and this one seems to be controversial, you just like the way something looks! I believe getting tattoos on impulse isn't bad. I used to think all tattoos should have a deep meaning, and so far all of mine do, but I'm no longer one to judge if someone gets an ice cream cone because why not? It is the one of the rudest things to me to insult someone's tattoos. You are insulting their decision making, their body, and their connection to the meaning of their tattoo. I won't judge anyone who doesn't want to get a tattoo either, except those who judge people solely on the fact that they have tattoos.

A lot of people have an argument that one day, you may regret your tattoos in the future. I agree with the philosophy the singer Lil Peep has on this. In one of his "tattoo tours" he says, "If you're thinking about it, do it and if you like how people look when they're all covered in tattoos then you should be covered in tattoos. Wake up every day, and like, look in the mirror and be like holy shit this is, this is sick" (GQ and Åhr, Gustav). Tattoos are memories, and whether you end up regretting them or not, they're who you used to be. When I interviewed tattoo artist Nick G for my I-search last year (The Effect of Tattoos), he told me the only tattoo he regrets getting is the name of his ex girlfriend. Keep in mind, this man is covered in tattoos

from his feet to his face. Coincidentally, my dad somewhat regrets a tattoo he got of my mom's name, which is his only tattoo! He got it less than a year after their first date and before they even got married, and now they have been married for over 25 years! He loves my mom and doesn't mind at all having her name tattooed on him, but he says he wouldn't get it if he had to decide now. I think this is why my dad is wary of me getting tattoos, though he's sort of given up at this point.

A final note I'll throw in about tattoos is that to me, they are the ultimate way of being an individual while also belonging to a community. People get millions of different designs, each individual in one way or another, but the one thing tattoo lovers have in common is the commitment of getting a tattoo. Wanting to personalize your body is something I've always related to. You can do this through clothing, piercings, or if you want to get really crazy, various implants. I've just found tattoos to be the most unique and personal. This is another common misconception by those who dislike tattoos, "they're not unique because everyone has them." These people don't understand that the tattoo itself is not unique, it's the design and process that creates a unique memory with you forever.

The Process

To become a tattoo artist, I need a portfolio to showcase my art. It's a tradition in the tattoo industry to be an apprentice of a seasoned artist before you really get into your career. The apprenticeship is not required, but it is frowned on by most of the community to dismiss it. People who tattoo without first doing this are called "scratchers" by many. To legally tattoo, you

don't actually have that many requirements to fill. This can make it very dangerous if you don't go through proper, hands on training with a tattoo artist. A risk that comes with getting a tattoo is contracting a bloodborne disease. However, with correct training on the artist's part, this scary possibility is easily avoidable.

It's not easy to get an apprenticeship, a lot of seasoned artists don't want to take on the responsibility of teaching someone who knows virtually nothing about the industry. It's not just a matter of responsibility, it's a huge time commitment. Apprenticeships are generally a year, but can last anywhere from a few months to well over a year. The apprentice "graduates" whenever the artist feels they are ready to become independent. There are different stages in the apprenticeship process; Secretary-like duties, drawing tasks, tattooing on fake skin, and finally tattooing on people.

Which brings me to the process of making my portfolio. Originally, I wanted to have a



set schedule in which I would do 1 page of tattoo flash (eg. the picture shown on left) and one bigger piece (e.g. a painting). I thought this would help me stick to a schedule, and have many pieces at the end to choose from. But as I said before, good, portfolio worthy art comes few and far between. Overworking myself was not a good idea in terms of the quality of my art. I decided early on that this wouldn't work well. Instead of starting by drawing every day like I'd planned, I gathered all of my

previous sketchbooks and artwork and picked out the best pieces first, and then the decent pieces. This helped me get an idea of how much more art I needed to make.

I also had an idea to do henna designs on people. The point of this was to start setting up my schedule as a tattoo artist might have. I had a signup sheet with 20 slots, about 4 “appointments” a month. For every date set, I would have a consultation similar to a tattoo consultation. Getting the main idea of what they wanted, where they wanted it, and how big they wanted it. I would trace the area they wanted it on to make sure my drawing was the right size. I wanted to have my design ready a week later to show them, and then do the henna as soon as it was possible. There were a lot of errors with my setup that caused it to fade out of existence. One of them was that I had to track down everyone that signed up. I should’ve made it clear that they should come to me when it was their day, and it would’ve worked out better for both me and the “client.” Another issue was that most of the underclassmen didn’t even know what they wanted. I was sort of like, why did you even sign up? Unfortunately, this is something I will have to deal with in my career, but hopefully not as much as I did in this project. If I decided to do this again,



it would be upperclassman only. Finally, it was just too time consuming with little product that I could actually use. I wanted to do at least a couple people, but then corona hit, so I decided to scrap this idea. Though I did end up using a couple of the

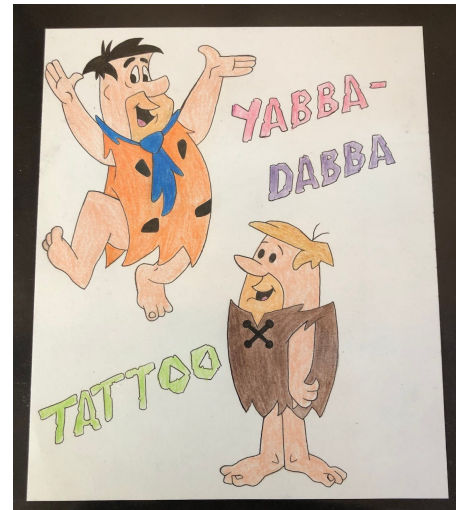
designs I did in my final portfolio! The Navy SEAL Logo pictured here was my first design of this idea.

So my new idea was just to make as much art as possible, without having a specific schedule. It ended up working pretty well. I'm the type of artist to not make any art for a month and then come out and do nothing but make art the next month. So sometimes, I wasn't feeling very productive, but it ended up giving me enough pieces to work with! By a couple months in, I had enough art where I needed to start putting it all together in a professional layout. After working with my mentor over apprenticeship week, I was set to finish it up. The best part about this project was that a portfolio is constantly changing, so it's never really "done." This process of my senior project helped me build a full base for future artwork to replace old artwork, which is the most time consuming part of making a portfolio.

And as for the title of my project, I've never actually seen the Flintstones, I just think it sounds cool.

Apprenticeship Week

For my apprenticeship week, I worked with Christian Nolan, a tattoo artist at Buddha's Palm in Sebastopol. I originally wanted to find an artist who had a style similar to what I want to pursue, American traditional tattooing. This style features bold lines with a limited color palette. I first reached out to Aaron Hodges, a tattoo artist at Lost Coast in Sebastopol. Though he said he



wanted to work with me, he already had two full time apprentices! I ended up getting a tattoo from him instead. After reaching out to a couple other artists who understandably declined, I met with Christian. His style is much more “hippie,” and has more motion than I usually like, so I was hesitant at first. One of the first things he said when flipping through my portfolio was “I don’t like traditional.” Luckily, this ended up making my apprenticeship week much more beneficial than it would’ve been with a traditional artist.

Over the course of five days, Christian and other artists at the studio gave me tips on my art, professionalism, and making it in the industry. I had duties similar to that a full time apprentice would have. I organized receipts, answered the phone, greeted clients, and occasionally swept the store. When I wasn’t doing logistical tasks, I was working on art tasks that Christian gave me. He would say something like “draw a lotus with waves and smoke coming out of it, and an OM symbol coming out of the smoke, designed for a forearm,” or “make a traditional eagle holding cherries for a chestpiece.” I would show it to him and he would give me tips on how to make it look more pleasing, until finally it was finished. He taught me techniques in drawing, such as building up a design with colored pencils, starting with the lightest color and building up until you can get a clear outline. I also learned how to turn a drawing on paper into a design suitable for a tattoo. Using negative space, I could cut out parts of the drawing to take away time I would have to spend on the tattoo. He gave me assignments that lined up with his hippie style and some that lined up with my traditional style.



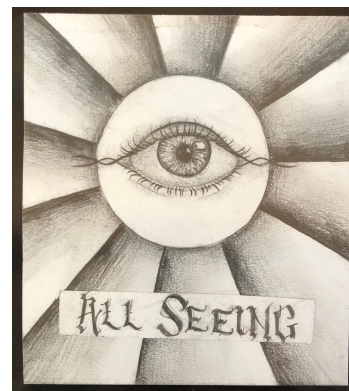
These are the two assignments mentioned side by side, both using a layering technique to complete. A xerox machine will only detect the darkest parts, and transfer that onto a stencil.

Another artist at the studio, Ian Harper, who I hope to soon get a tattoo from, showed me a tip to speed up the drawing process. He liked to make a small sketch within a couple minutes and then blow it up to the size needed to work off of. Vince Garcia, the most talkative of the bunch, gave me a tip to draw lines farther apart when making art that is designed to be a tattoo. This allows there to be a type of negative space as previously mentioned, and as a result the tattoo continues to look good as time goes on. The placement of the tattoo is another element that separates a drawing from a tattoo design. The piece must flow correctly with the body.

Most everyone in the studio also gave me tips on the industry. Having the right connections, doing the art for your client, and presenting yourself according to the desired tattoo artist's style. In regards to doing the art for the client and not yourself, Christian's different style of art helped me the most with that. At the beginning of your career, you need to have a versatile

style, so you get as many clients as possible. When you build a name for yourself, then you can do whatever you like to do, because clients will come no matter what.

Presenting yourself professionally and according to the artist you want to work with is the most important information I learned. For example, if you go into a hardcore biker style studio with pastel hippie tattoos, you might not be very welcome. If you go into a hippie studio with huge face tattoos, you might not be welcome there. In the tattoo industry, professionalism is extremely important.



Christian helped me turn my portfolio from a collection of art to a polished presentation. Small



tips, like having a business card, or not crowding a page, went a long way. Another tip was to start the portfolio with my best and most eye catching piece to grab the attention of whoever's flipping through it. Christian thought the piece shown above of the all seeing eye was a good opener, though I've since made

more eye catching pieces. These were the most essential lessons to take my senior project to the next level.

Where I'll go From Here

Staying in California would be a safe option to start my career, as the industry is vast and tattoos are a popular thing here. However, I plan to move to Massachusetts for reasons unrelated to tattooing. The industry is going to be equally as good and equally as difficult to get into anywhere. If I stayed in California, it would be similar to a music artist moving to Los Angeles

or New York City to get big. There's more demand and more resources than in other parts of the US, but that causes more competition and drama to sprout. This is another thing that's going to be anywhere, and I don't want to run from competition. I want to bring an addition to the industry to a place that is not as well known for its tattoos as the west coast.

So after I move, I'm going to find an artist I admire who's willing to take on an apprentice. I enjoyed working with an artist who had a different style than me and I learned a lot more than I would have with a traditional artist. However, I think it would be a better choice for my career to go with someone who is as fond of the traditional style as I am.

Eventually, I hope to own my own tattoo studio. In the meantime, I will continue to build my portfolio and replace outdated artwork with fresh and improved versions. This project will never really be "done." At least until I change my path and stop making art, or die before then.

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Harper, Ian

Hodges, Aaron

Malz, Edward (Uncle Eddie)

Nolan, Christian

My Artwork

