

Telling Stories on the Body:

An interview with tattoo artist Sage Ricci

Featured Artist

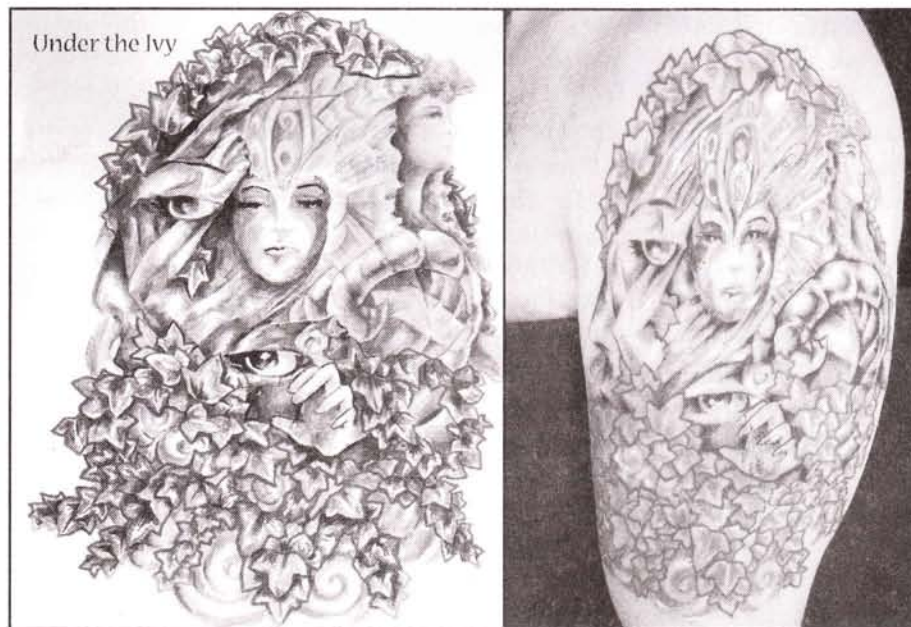
For our final Featured Artist of the volume, Ellipsis is proud to present Sage Ricci, a writer, painter and tattoo artist based in Portland, OR, who discusses how working with the body as a canvas alters everything about art. Take a look at his website (www.sage-ink.com) for more examples of his work.

ELLIPSIS: On your website you state that “each tattoo is a story, a piece of the unconscious made solid in flesh.” Do people come to you with ideas, or even full designs? How do you determine what story the tattoo should tell?

SAGE RICCI: The process of working with a client to determine ideas and a finished design is different for each client. Yes, some people come with a fully realized idea and I

just need to tweak the design a bit to make it more tattooable. Most of the work I’m doing these days is larger pieces that the client will have a basic idea that I develop into a finished piece. I work by appointment only in a private studio space, and the first appointment is always a consultation over coffee or breakfast or whatever. Sometimes the idea is vague and we need to hone in on finding a visual metaphor for the essential story of the piece. I have my sketchbook with me and we talk about the ideas and the deeper meanings behind the impulse to mark the body permanently. I listen for keywords and descriptive phrases that get repeated. I try to find out what’s happening in the person’s life, why the client needs this particular tattoo at this point in time. I ask lots of

questions. Sometimes the process can take some time arriving at an idea for a visual. Sometimes it hits instantly. When we feel confident enough that I have a starting point to work from, I go back to my cave and draw on the walls until I have a couple of developed ideas to show. This whole process tends to be more of a conversation. I see myself as a facilitator for the vision of the client, so the client



Art makes the transition from drawing to finished tattoo.



is ultimately creating the story. Sometimes the story is unformed or unfinished and I have to draw the vision out a bit. Then I get to interpret that vision visually.

E: Body art seems like an explicitly collaborative form in that the medium itself is alive, conscious. How has this influenced your experience as a tattoo artist? Does it affect your sense of freedom as an artist? How does it set the tattoo apart from other visual art?

SR: Well, I'll just be up front and say that tattooing can be an incredibly draining profession and also deeply enriching due to the close collaboration with the client. Many of my long-term clients have become close friends because of the intimacy of the work and the trust that has grown between us. What an incredible thing to mark someone's skin with art for the rest of their life. It creates an intense and creative dynamic when it is working well. When the dynamic is off between me and a client, and it can be off for a variety of reasons,

from artistic mis-match up to and including philosophical incompatibility and "irreconcilable differences." If the vibe is off between us, it can take a lot of energy in the actual tattoo session. The tattoo artist not only needs to be able to come up with the right image, to apply it with cleanliness, craft and skill, but also to be dealing with a client who is potentially in a lot of pain, and potentially not dealing with that pain so well, and a shop situation that can be chaotic and busy.

For me, what has happened as I've grown in my nine years of tattooing is that I've learned to maximize and foster the positive dynamics and minimize the distractions. It was why I left the shop I worked in Seattle for five years. It was an incredibly busy shop and we were expected to keep clients moving through and making as much money as possible. I think that kind of experience is valuable for a beginning tattoo artist; I got a lot of time in skin and learning what makes a shop that works. But I needed my own space eventually. A private space where I

could make my own schedule and work very closely one-on-one with people. I needed space to talk about art and art movements, to talk about reasons for getting tattooed and personal ritual. The clients that I have had over the years have found me generally because I'm not your run of the mill artist. I am fascinated by ritual and theatre, by magick symbolism and energy work, as well as art history and tattoo history. I try to have no judgments on the work a person wants to explore with him or herself. My only boundaries on imagery are that I won't tattoo gang symbols or hate symbolism or words.

The fact that tattoos are permanent (or as permanent as your body is anyway) makes getting a tattoo so psychologically charged for both the client and the tattoo artist. God, it can be nerve-racking sometimes. But that energy is so potent and real, getting a tattoo is so important to the person getting tattooed, it mingles with the pain and endorphins. The potential for emotional release or ecstasy or bliss or anger or catharsis can be like hitting a jackpot. I actually get high from tattooing sometimes. When I first started tattooing it was every tattoo. Now it's all about the connection between me and the tattoo and the client. The more we are in synch the stronger the buzz. Hah! Better living through ink.

E: In the past you have worked in several other visual art forms. How have these

informed your practice of body art? Do you continue to pursue other visual forms?

SR: I feel fortunate to say that I've been a working artist my whole adult life. I started out as a scenic painter in New York City and a mural painter. I was in school at the time in New Jersey, studying art, theatre and literature. All my professors were working professionals in the City who took me under their wings and got me jobs so I could afford to stay in school.

I'd mix paints and do window displays and write poems on the train home at night. It was all very romantic somehow, but it was hard work. It feels like everything I've done has influenced my work. It's kind of overwhelming if I stop to think about it. I moved to Seattle in the early nineties to work for a production company as a charge painter. It was glitz and feathers, the casino business and I learned about really designing, and lighting design too, and I had to learn how to mix colors exactly from the designer's models. Faux finishes. Sign-Painting. I designed rock posters for local bands. I went back to art school for a couple



years. Looking back, it's amazing how all along I was really training to be a tattoo artist. I burnt out on technical theatre and wound up meeting the woman who taught me how to tattoo. I stopped everything else for three years and just tattooed. Right away I could do it. Maybe not with any finesse or sophistication, but I knew how to use the machine and I knew my own artistic tastes and I had a lot of



Another look at the transition from one canvas to another: A brushstroke tree (left) becomes a tattoo (right).

friends who already loved my work, so I started out tattooing doing a lot of custom work and unique designs.

Right now, aside from tattooing, I am doing a lot of drawing and ink paintings. Tattoos can be so intense and focused I like to do looser more expressive work. Charcoals and messy splashes of ink and watercolor. I've never let myself go too abstract, I was trained figuratively so I'm really enjoying trying to be abstract and messy when not working on someone's body. I think it's really important for a tattoo artist to have at least one other medium to explore because skin is the ultimate in an unforgiving medium. I'm itching to do some paintings again, figures and surreal landscapes, but I am working on a novel and writing for me takes up a lot of the same energy as painting, so I promised myself I won't start any paintings until the novel is finished.

E: Is your approach to writing stories similar to your approach to tattoo art, or similar to

your approach to visual art in general? If not, how does it differ?

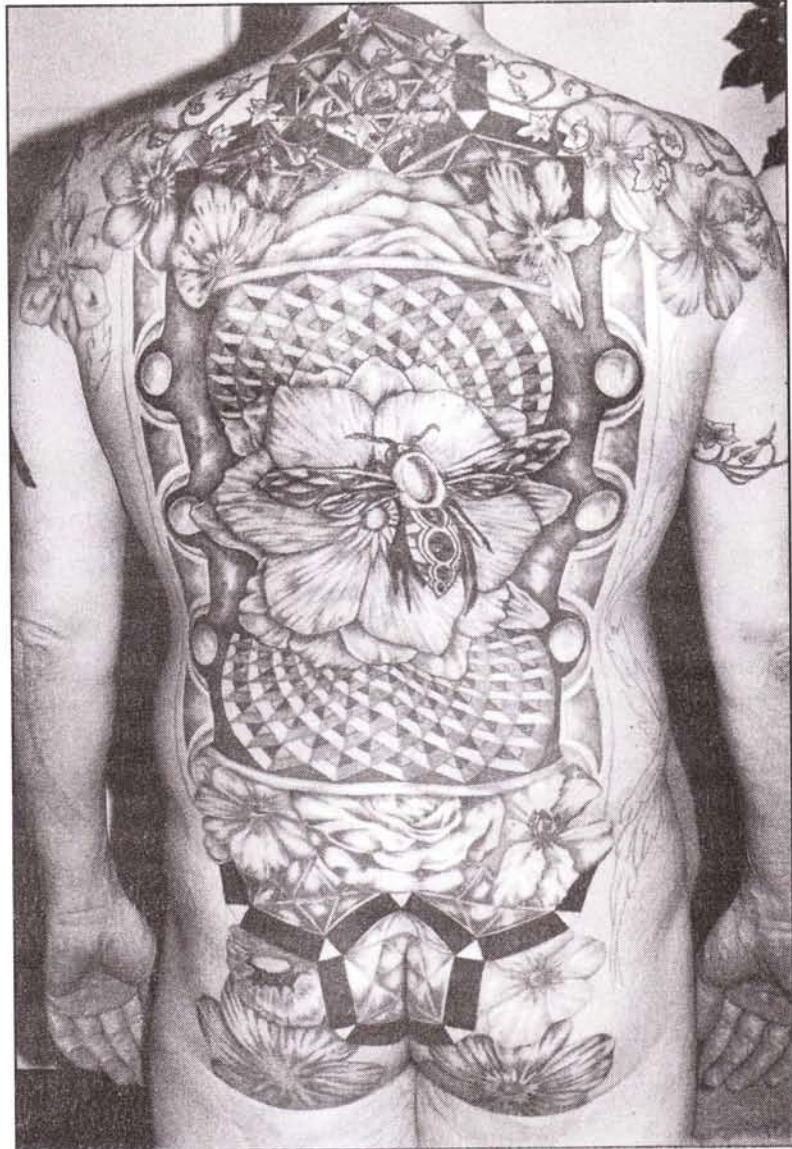
SR: My approach to tattoo art can be very formal. I am trying to run a business and for me to do that I have to keep certain boundaries with myself and my clients. I would say that for the actual creative part of the tattoo process, the point where it's me and my music and my pencils sitting at my art table working out a design, it is very much like writing. I can play and get it wrong, I can erase or I can totally just be in my groove. Before I write I stretch out, I do yoga, I dance, I take a bath, whatever it takes to put in the time, get my ass in the chair. I know if I sit there long enough, the story will reveal itself and I can lose myself in the process. Natalie Goldberg (*Writing Down the Bones*) is a writer that also paints. I asked her once how she does it, is she torn between writing and painting? She responded that her painting is her beautiful pleasure, she allows herself the luxury of her hobby, but her writing is where she knows she can't run away from herself. I

was jealous when she said that. I HAVE to write. I HAVE to draw. I am constantly challenged by both. Fortunately my drawing is something that's enabled me to make a living. But creatively, I think the difference between the writing and the tattooing, is that the tattooing process itself, apart from the drawing part of the tattoo process, has to be somewhat formal in order to maximize the safety and comfort of the client and myself, and to do quality work.

I am not only being entrusted with the client's tattoo and skin, but with their health. That's serious business. My writing is so internalized and the tattooing is so externalized. They balance one another.

E: Is there a particular tattoo or body art project that stands out to you? Something that perhaps caused you to change your approach, or presented obstacles you had not before encountered?

SR: I am blown away and honored by the trust that my clients show me. One of my clients found me after seeing one of my paintings in a gallery in Seattle. He gave me his entire back to do whatever I wished. I was floored. He wanted no say in what I was going to tattoo on him, and furthermore, he didn't want to know why I chose the design until we were finished. What do you say to that? I mean, what an honor, whatever doubts I had about myself I had to let go of real fast. It's intimidating really. Another client loved Kate Bush. He brought me every album she ever made, including all the rare



This client didn't want to know what he was getting until the design and tattoo were finished.

B-sides and stuff only released in Europe. He had an autographed photo of her and letters she had written back to him. He was ape-shit over her and he loved my artwork. He wanted me to paint a painting while I listened to her music and whatever I came up with was to be his tattoo. I painted something that wound up being an illustration of various elements from her songs. He hated it. He wanted my own

artwork, not an interpretation of hers. He just wanted her to be my muse for his tattoo. So I did it again. Treated it like I was designing a backdrop for a Kate Bush Concert. He LOVED it. We just finished it.

Something similar happened with an ink design I did this spring. It started out simple enough. Amanda was graduating from grad school and for her PhD she wanted a tree of life tattoo on her lower back. We decided to go for an ink-wash look, that the tree would be made up of brushstrokes of black and gray ink like an old Japanese brushstroke painting. I must have painted 30 of those trees over two weeks, throwing away each one, I just kept overworking them and they looked forced and unnatural. I was starting to get really frustrated because it just wasn't working right. Finally I focused and loosened up and dipped

my brush and just painted it in a few minutes, every line just flowed, it was very Zen. Astounding that it was so easy once I found that place in myself, hit the groove. Like how you can write a sentence sometimes, just type off something really smart or poetic, and then you re-read it and go "Did I really just write that?"

E: What are your immediate and long term plans for your shop and your art? Is there a specific project you would like to undertake in the future?

SR: Right now I've got a few really big pieces in the works. Two back pieces and 3

sleeves that I want to get finished and put in my portfolio. The immediate plan is to stay very small and keep developing the clientele I want to work with. I eventually want to find a larger space and start taking on apprentices. I love to teach, and I have a lot I feel I could pass on to the right students. My idea is to build a stable of unique and talented artists working in a friendly non-threatening space. Tattoo shops

can be so strange, the interpersonal politics, etc ... it's why I started working for myself. That's not immediate though. My shop is still getting on its feet and I have to be very careful not to get so caught up in the business side of things that the artwork suffers. Besides I've got this novel to finish (laughing).

I have so many projects I'd like to do. Where do I start? Okay I love superheroes, been a comic book junkie since I was a kid. I want to do

a sprawling epic comic book superhero back piece, a million colors, comic book special effects, etc...

I want to tattoo someone head to toe with all the meridians for Chinese medicine and acupuncture, color-coded for the specific meridian lines and points.

I want to do a series of paintings, nudes and still life, and also some abstract stuff. Start exploring on canvas again.

I have a fantasy of tattooing an entire novel, in pieces, on many, many people. It would need to be a hell of a novel, *Finnegan's Wake* maybe, or *Moby Dick*, or *Sometimes a Great Notion*. •

