

anatomy of a rose; it looks like more like a rose. It reads more like a rose. You take a pinup girl; it has nothing to do with the anatomy of a female. It's a complete symbol.

Right.

It's sexier and prettier and there's more information there. It reads like what it's supposed to read like with all this other attendant information there that makes it sexy, that makes it a panther, that makes it a beautiful rose, that has to be a tattoo. That's the whole thing that people don't get, you know?

Well, you got a whole bunch of kids, I've heard 'em say it. But they actually have artists telling these young artists to go look at a real rose.

What for?

Yeah.

I mean people now have learned how to do more realistic roses, you know? There's ones without the outline and all that and they look great. You know, they're beautiful and they've figured out how to do it in a more symbolic type of way. I like some of those things. They're a little too fancy for my own personal taste and what I would want on me. But they're still stylized. They're still not just taking a photo of a real rose and tracing it. You're never gonna do it.

Well I think a lot of 'em... I don't know. I mean you use formulas for roses: 'S's or 'Y's or ovals, right?

Yeah.

And I think that's lost. I mean when I was taught to draw it was the 'S', the 'Y', or the oval. Somebody told me that you taught 'em with the ovals?

Okay, that's another thing. What about people copying your work?

See, here's the thing about this kind of stuff, man —about panthers, roses, reapers, all that kind of thing. They got nothing to do with anatomy. They got nothing to do with photography. They're completely a symbol that has nothing to do with anatomy whatsoever. If you took a picture of a panther and traced it, that panther on the wall right there, looks more like a panther. You could take a picture of a rose and trace it and it looks like a fucking cabbage. But you take the Pike rose that's got absolutely nothing to do with the



"Bob is undoubtedly the best American Tattooer around today. He has been one of the most important currents in tattooing for the last several decades. Influencing scores of younger tattooers thirsty for a bit of what is still pure in this game. His extremely unique style and approach to both tattooing and painting echo each other perfectly. As I have observed, Bob brings so much of his deeply rooted California history to both mediums. His start at the Pike as well as his past in music come right to the forefront of his art. He brings the simplified imagery that is common with old American "street shop" tattooing and blends it beautifully with the rhythm of repetition gathered from a lifelong affection for the blues. See the image and the shape doesn't have to be his, to make it his own. Just as the blues has no easily identifiable author for its songs, but whomever plays it makes it theirs. That rhythm is what Bob has complete control of."

-Josh Arment



With the 'S'. You make an 'S'.

Yeah, and that's lost.

Not if you wanna do a simple, Pike-style rose, it ain't. That's still the basic formula. That's kind of where it all comes off of that, man.

Do you think the Pike... all those were designed to do 'em fast, right? You had 50 guys out the door so you figure the economy of the line, right?

I don't think so. I don't think that was designed just to do it fast. I think it was designed to do it simple and to say what you were gonna say with an economy of space and line.

Okay.

It was designed that way to make a valid statement on the skin to where every part of the tattoo has an equal weight and equal value. The same as the elbow with the fucking panther should have the same value as the face.

With no superfluous flummery where every part of the tattoo has equal meaning, equal weight and equal value of space on the skin.

Okay, well I remember one time you said to me that it doesn't matter if you stand on your head and shoot nails out of your ass, that it's the end product that matters.

Right.

We were talking about Cliff drawing on people. So if that's what it takes... So as far as... Yeah, I always thought and I know you just said something about this, I always thought it was more based in that they had 40 sailors out the door, trying to get 'em done fast.

Well yeah, in those days it was. But it wasn't to compromise how the thing was drawn. It was drawn that way because it worked that way. I mean what they would limit was you would get black shading, red and a little bit of yellow. You didn't put in purple and blue and magenta and all that other shit. They didn't have time for that and they looked great that way.

Yeah, and stand up to the test of time.

You know, that's why a lot of the people –Paul Rogers, Don Nolan and Tom Yeoman, they would outline these guys and get the money. And the rest of them would wait in line for the shading and the color. If they didn't want to wait in line, too bad, come back the next day. That's how they would get the money. Ron Ackers too. Ron Ackers and those guys in Seaport, those ships would come in and you'd have 50 guys there a day, man. And he would outline 'em and Steve would do the shading and the color. Ron would outline 40 guys and go home and Steve would be there 'til five o'clock the next morning, you know, coloring 'em all in.

Right, Todd and Shaw, I read that Shaw said that. When they were younger, he would line and then Todd would shade.

I worked that way with Paul Rogers when we used to work at Ernie Carafa's, Guideline Tattoo in Seaside Heights, New Jersey.

Oh, when you were out east tattooing?

Yeah, I had the honor of being able to work with Paul Rogers for a whole summer, practically.

And was he lining or shading?

No, I was outlining.

Okay and he would shade.

Right.

Okay, I always heard he was a shader. And you used his machines?

Yeah.

And did you like 'em?

Well, yeah. That was the first major breakthrough for me. All of a sudden, my shading and color went from mediocre at best, to excellent because I got a Paul Rogers' shader. Then a few months later, my outlining went from mediocre at best, to

very good because I got a Paul Rogers' outliner. That was as good as you could get in those days. They weren't meant to go fast, they would do nothing but outline and nothing but put the color in.

That's good.

Nice and slow and beautiful.

I'm glad we got that in here

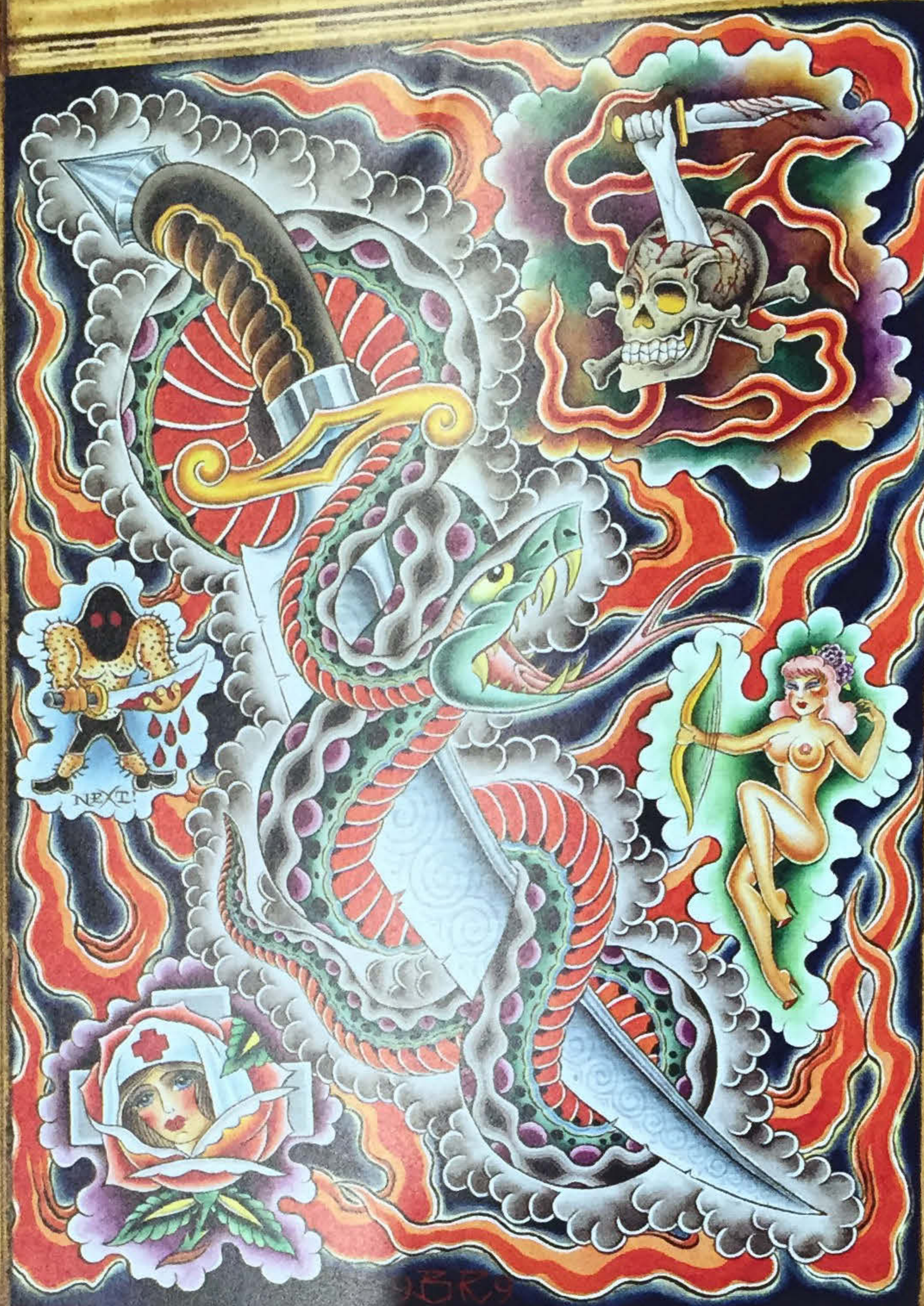
I hear about these guys now, man. They're doing these pieces in three hours and, "Holy fuck, man, that's beautiful." They probably know something I don't know?

Okay, well you want talk about a lot of people have come through the shop since you've owned it and worked here, right?

Yep.

I mean I couldn't even begin to name everybody that's worked here over the years.

Well right now, I have a really great crew, man. You know, I've got Baby Ray. I've



got Charlie Roberts. I've got Bryan Burk. I've got Grant Cobb. I've got Steve Serazio. I've got Norm. You know, pretty much whatever you want, you're gonna come out of here with a world-class tattoo, you know? We don't have to fight over it. A lot of the stuff I don't wanna do, I give it to somebody else. If Ray doesn't wanna do something, he hands it over to somebody else and vice versa. And everybody does real good work and we all get along. The main thing is that you can't just be good to work here -you gotta fit in, you know?

Right.

We're some real fucking assholes here -you know what I mean? We like to fuck with people. You know, if you can't stand taking your turn on the carpet, then we are gonna fuck with you. If you can't take it, you know, there's the door.

Yeah, this crew here is as good as you've ever had?

Yeah, the best I've ever had.

The best you've ever had?

Yeah.

That's good. And this is the most people you've had working at one time, huh?

Well, no. I've had this many here for a long time. You know, there was an Italian fuck that we had to get rid of. He was stealing, you know? He was a really good artist and it was unfortunate that he had such a small heart and such a small brain, you know what I mean?

Yeah, there's nothing worse than that.

Well, I treat my people pretty good here, I think. And I didn't want to admit to myself that it was going on but we finally nailed it down and got rid of it, you know?

Sure, I guess saying this crew –you've been shaping it for a while. Ray's been with you for a while?

Yeah, Ray's been with me for 13 years.

Right. And Steve Serazio has been with you for about six or seven, he is just fantastic; he is like family to us.

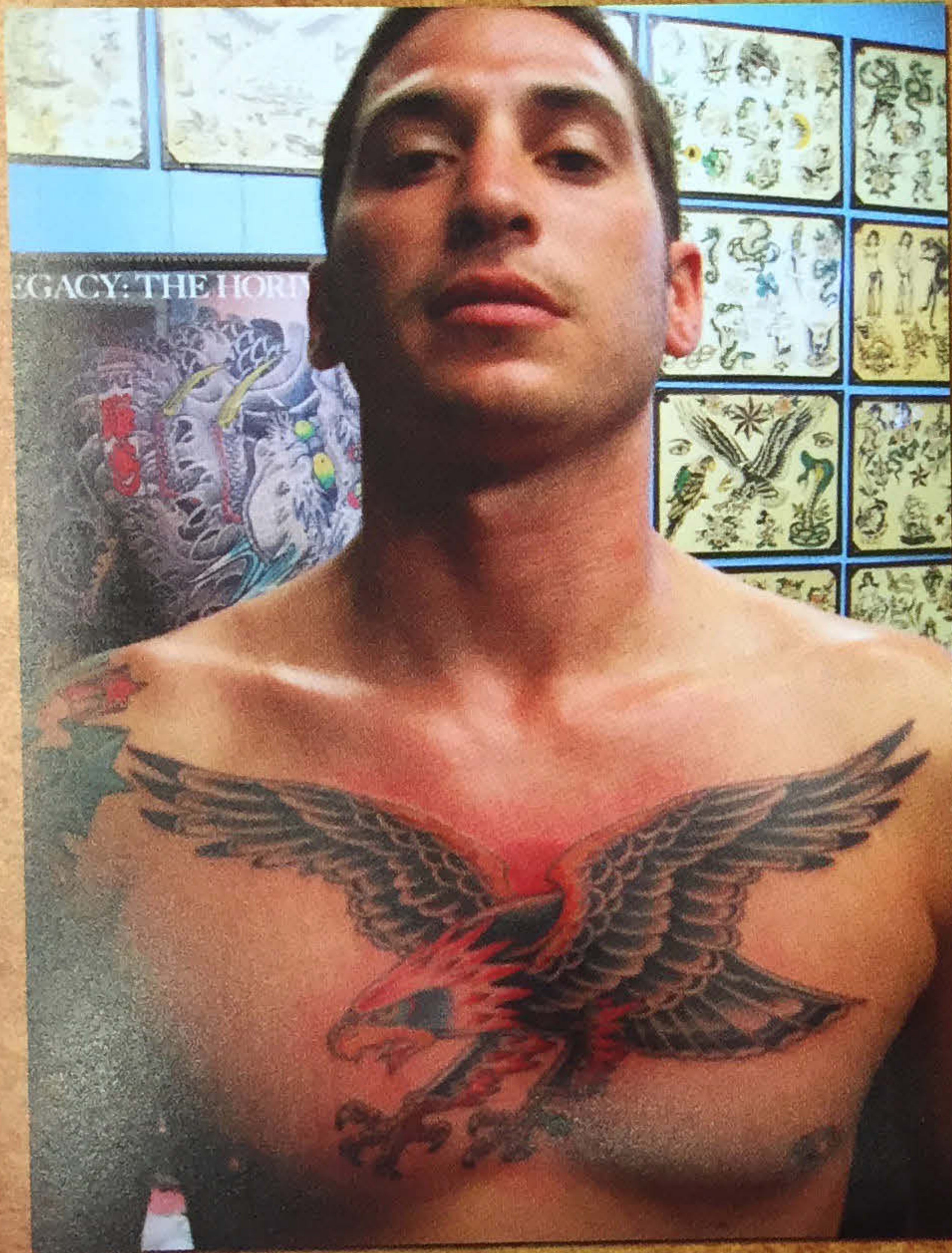
Yeah, and Bryan Burk's been with me for about 11 years or something like that.

Charlie Roberts has been there 20 plus years now, And Bryan Burk, there's been a lot of talk about him lately. He came in fresh, huh?

Yeah. He had a little bit of background. He had done a few tattoos. But I pretty much apprenticed him. And he's one of the first people that I apprenticed where I told him what to do and he did it. And it actually worked. And I felt good about that because then I was able to prove to myself that my method of doing this can actually work if somebody listens. Now Bryan has become a fantastic innovator and stylist. I am very proud of his tattooing.

Listens to you, yeah, sure.

You know, He not only listens to me but did what I told him. Some people like to draw tattoos and some people are just going to do it because they like to do it. I just like to do it and I just did it. And the more I did it, the more I learned how things go



and the more I learned how things went, then I could start to do my own little ditty with 'em. You know what I mean? But I made sure that I respected these things for what they were. Oh my God, where did this come from? It's life is within the tattoo world and it's almost worthless any place else. You know, these things, once they become tattoos, then they become *alive*. And that's what they're drawn for. That's what they're supposed to be and that's how they work. And other people don't realize it. You know it ain't Frazetta, you know? It ain't got enough detail. You know, they wanna start doing their own thing and I told 'em no. I said, Look, just do 'em. Just trace 'em and do them the way they are for right now. Don't fuck 'em up. Because with all your cute ideas, all you're really doing at this point is just fucking 'em up. You know, I've had people get mad at me and walk out the door. They'll say, "Oh, look at this." And they show you all this stuff that they've drawn. I'll say, "Yeah, that's great man. You can draw and you can do all that stuff you want. I don't care. But if you want to learn how to do tattoos, I don't want to see that stuff. You know, that ain't teaching you how to be a tattoo artist. That's teaching you how to be a painter, if you want to do that."

Some people love these designs and they're interested in 'em. They're like gold and that's the way it's always been to me, you know? I can't get enough of it. I'll go through everybody's drawers trying to find stuff. I've got no qualms about it at all. I'll go through their wastebasket. I don't give a fuck. I'm stupid like that, man. I don't care about getting caught.

Sure, I guess like you said, it's the end result that matters, right?

I've got more... I've probably got a stack of stencils –when they used to make paper stencils? You know, every day I worked with Ed Hardy, I went through his fucking trashcan. I picked out everything I could and I still got 'em. (Laughs) They're right in that drawer right there.

Yeah, man. I'm sure a lot more people do that and they just don't admit it.

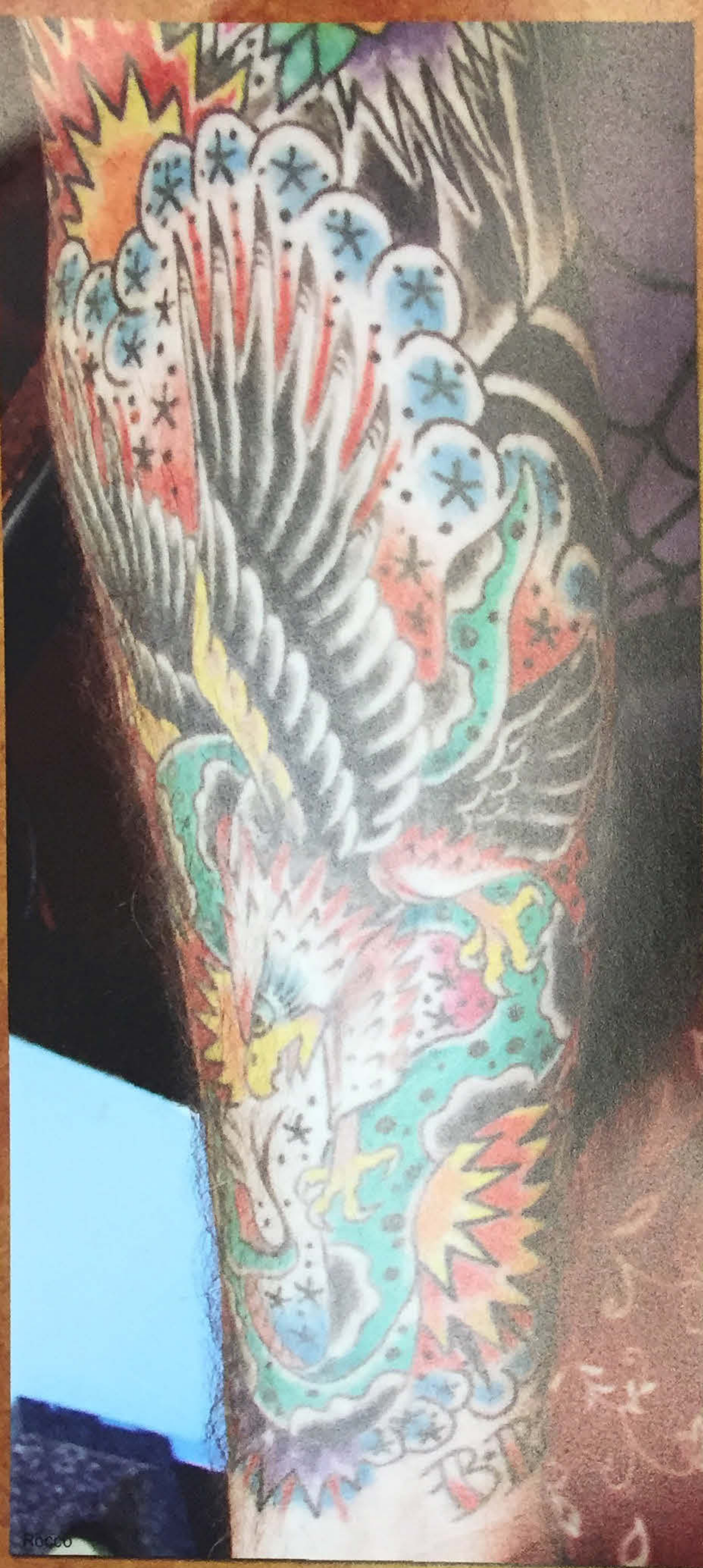
If I had to pull 'em out of a hairy gorilla's ass, I don't care. To me, that's what being a wealthy tattoo artist is, man. The more stuff like that you're aware of within a certain medium, the brighter your mind is going to be.

Okay. Anything else?

Well, yeah. I'd like to say that it's my pleasure to finally see that these guys have picked up on the old-style of stuff and it's coming back around. And these guys are doing their own thing with it and there's just so much beautiful work out there, man. Where it was 15 years ago, people were trying real hard and they were getting good equipment but they just didn't know how



Bob Roberts Brian Burk and Horiyoshi 3



Charlie Roberts, he's got technique that he's been developing in the last few years that I've never had in my life, I mean his application is absolutely impeccable. You know, that's one of the things that years ago, I was known for. I mean working with Ed Hardy; he was always a thousand times the innovator that I ever was. And he was a thousand times the innovator than probably most tattoo artists are now. That's why he left everybody in the dust. He was one of the most prolific innovators because he knew how it went, man. He had the foundation and he was very good at just being able to draw stuff and just to remember stuff out of his mind. Hey, remember that? And he would draw a panther and a dragon and all that stuff. He had it all memorized. Me, I couldn't do that if somebody held a gun to my head. I'd have to look at the picture, but I could draw it. But now, man, Jesus, these kids are doing beautiful work. And the most important thing is that they're doing art that's tattoo art. It has foundation, it has roots, it has a place. It's a valid statement and it's just beautiful, man. It's just beautiful to see, you know?

Right. Yeah, you were always known for your application. Everyone I've ever talked to...

Well, yeah. And I prided myself on that, you know? Now maybe it's not as great as it used to be. (Laughs) You know, my motor skills are... I think I sniffed a little too much glue when I was a teenager, you know? But I still do what I do, you know? But if I don't feel I'm comfortable with it, I don't do it anymore, you know?

What about retiring? You don't see that, right? I mean you live for this, right?

Well, yeah. It took me too long to learn it to just throw it away, you know? I'm semi-retired right now. I come in three days a week.

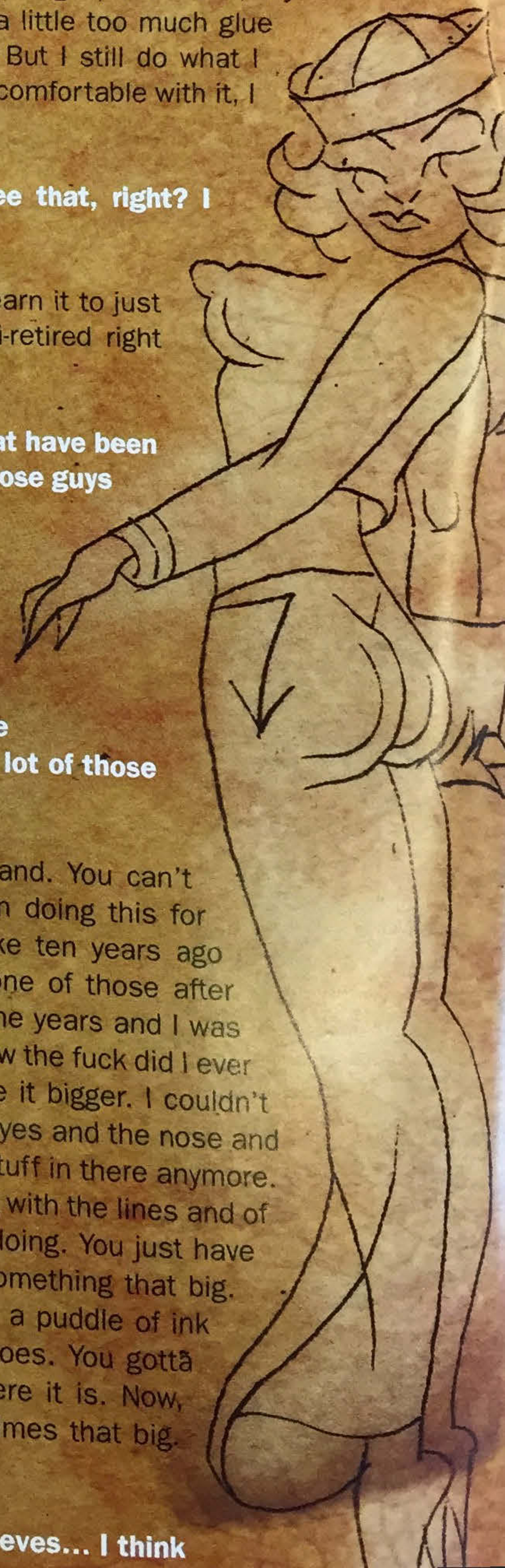
That's more than a lot of people that have been tattooing as long as you. A lot of those guys don't even...

Ed stopped, you know?

Right, a lot of... J.D. Crowe, he doesn't wanna know anything about it. And I don't even think he tattooed as long as you did. But a lot of those guys...

What happens is, you lose your hand. You can't do what you used to do; I've been doing this for 37 years straight. I mean even like ten years ago -that dragon on the wall... I did one of those after not having done one for eight or nine years and I was fucking that thing up. I thought, "How the fuck did I ever even do this thing?" I had to make it bigger. I couldn't put all that teeny little stuff in the eyes and the nose and the whiskers. I couldn't fit all that stuff in there anymore. You know, I can't do it. It was timing with the lines and of course you can't see what you're doing. You just have to know how it goes. You know, something that big. You can't see it -you're doing it in a puddle of ink and you just have to see how it goes. You gotta feel it and you wipe it off and there it is. Now, I can do it, but it's gotta be five times that big. (Laughs)

You also said -your formula for sleeves... I think



stuff went, you know? They didn't anchor themselves to that foundation and then do their own thing. They were just fucking stuff up, man. They tattooed pretty good but the design was horrible, you know? And now, geez, these people... There's just been such an influx of old school American designs... You know, it's real hard to be American or European or a different nationality and really be able to do like Japanese work in a correct way, there are people like Henning Jorgensen, Bryan Burk and Trevor McStay that have really done a lot of copying and have finally been able to come up with their own fluid, beautiful style of that type of work. And you know, I just take my hat off to 'em. I just think they're fantastic, you know? And Mike Wilson, Bert Krak and Steve Boltz and Eli Quinters, they're doing the Americana and it's just fantastic what they're doing, man. I mean it's just so good to see what these guys are doing. And my son

"Bobs the shit!!! coolest guy I ever worked with. Other than his cock-blocking he is a pleasure to be around"

-Steve Serazio

you said to me one time, it's doing five big images compared to doing a bunch of little ones -five big ones and then a background.

Yeah. That's pretty much the way I would do things now, you know, as compared to the one continuous Japanese design, it breaks up all around your arm but it's basically one design with flowers or background or whatever. I don't do that no more.

Okay, anything else? You good?

Yeah, I guess that's enough bullshit for now.

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