



Well, I wanna make everybody as mad as I fucking can.

KAREN MITCHELL: Well, I think that's what they expect from ya anyways, Bob. (Laughs)

[End of tape 1, 56 minutes]

All right, I don't know if you wanna tell the 'Black Widow' story first...

I'll tell ya the 'Black Widow' story.

Okay, let's start there.

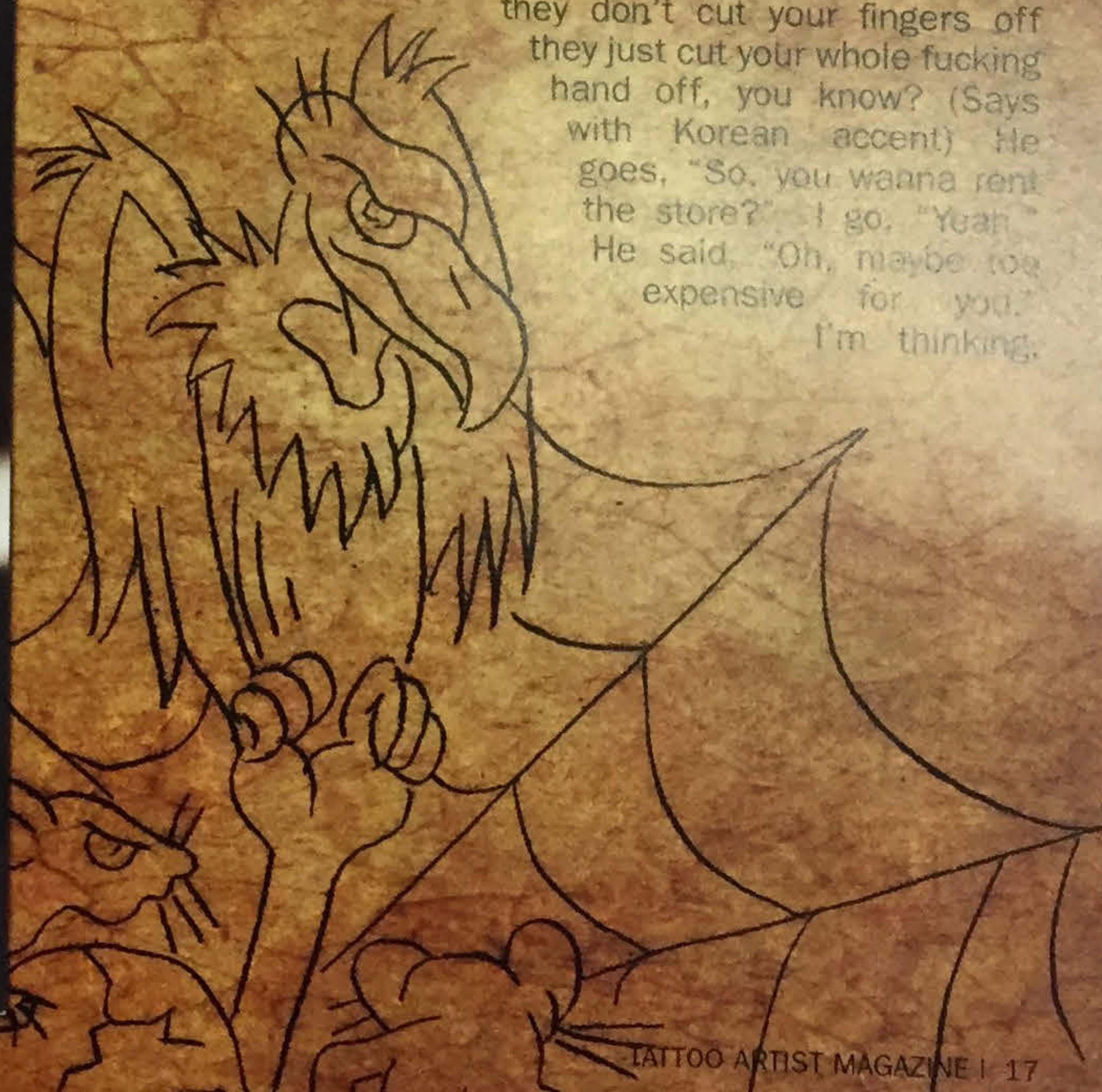
Anyway, I moved back here and I had to move back to my folk's house. Oh my God, that was... After all these years, I left and they couldn't fall asleep 'til I got home because they were afraid they'd have to bail me out of jail like they had to do so many times before, you know? And I was staying at my folk's house and looking for a tattoo shop. So you know, it took me like... I mean I was out everyday for like five months.

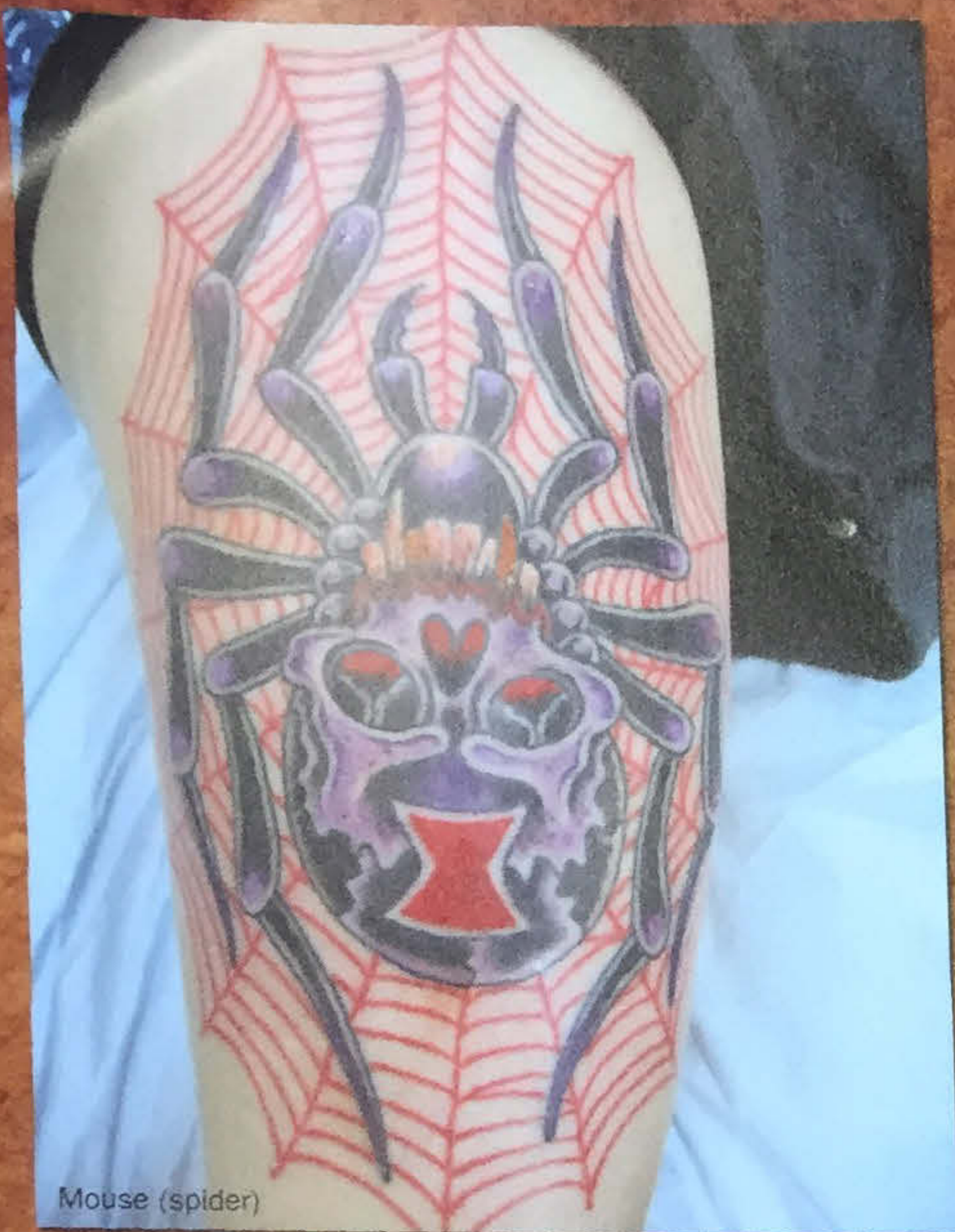
That long? A long time, huh?

I was trying to rent, but man if you told 'em it was a tattoo shop, you were done. So in the mean time, I think once I started painting flash... I think I painted 22 sheets of flash and cut all the stencils in like a month and a half? I figured once I started painting, I'd have to find a shop. So I remember there was this office on La Cienga, man. It was this horrible like dungeon way down there. This guy said he would rent to me and then he found out, "Oh, tattoo shop? Oh, there's gonna be motorcycle clubs." That scared him and he wouldn't rent to me. Finally, I found this garage next door to where I am now. It was completely torn down, it looked like a bomb had hit it, you know? I said, "Well, this is all I got, man. I give up. I'm gonna move to Fresno if I don't get this shit hole. This is it, man. I give up." So I got the number off the For Rent sign and I went to this office downtown. I walked in this guy's office and he was behind the desk and they had this kind of pony wall and I'm standing there. He goes, "Can I help you?" I said, "Yeah, I'm here to talk about renting a shop over there." So the guy gets up and slams both arms down on the pony wall and his right arm was like cut off at the wrist. I thought, "Oh boy, here we go."

Yeah, yeah.

This must be the Korean mafia, where they don't cut your fingers off they just cut your whole fucking hand off, you know? (Says with Korean accent) He goes, "So, you wanna rent the store?" I go, "Yeah." He said, "Oh, maybe too expensive for you." I'm thinking,





Mouse (spider)

of *Invention* and he also co-wrote *Memories of El Monte*. He was a great singer, man and a very great man. Well, he also worked as a carpenter. So he helped me build the place, you know, Ray Collins. So we started tearing... We had to tear all the old sheetrock off, initially, it wasn't even sheetrock, it was cheap plywood, you know? And after about five or six days of working there we uncovered a whole family of black widows. I don't like to kill spiders but Ray, he stopped and he said, "Well, that's it. No more work. Black widows? I'm not gonna get bit by one of these." And I said, "All right. Well let me go take care of it." I went and got five cans of Raid and soaked the whole front wall with it, you know, bug killer. Well, I came to work the next day and I mean the mother of all black widows, I saw on the ground, it came up from underneath the building outside. And I mean that black widow was probably this big around. I'm not exaggerating. I said, "My God, look at this thing, man." It probably weighed eight pounds, you know? I probably just caught the Guinness Book of World Records black widow, you know? So I'm propping it's feet up... It was dead from the bug killer, you know? And I'm trying to save this thing. But anyway, a board fell on it and we lost it. But from that day on, all I could think about was these black widows.

So we finally get the shop finished and the first customer that comes in wants a black widow spider right here on his head. It's like you tell me, man. Woo-woo. This is getting a little bit scary here, you know? What do they call it? Deja vu-doo, doo-doo-doo? Something like that? And I'm going, "Well, the first tattoo is a black widow? There we go. (Throws arms up in the air) What else would it be?"

[Laughter]

You know, what else could it be? It ain't gonna be no fucking cream puff. I thought, "Man, this is great." At least maybe I can condone the spider's life in some kind of way. You know?

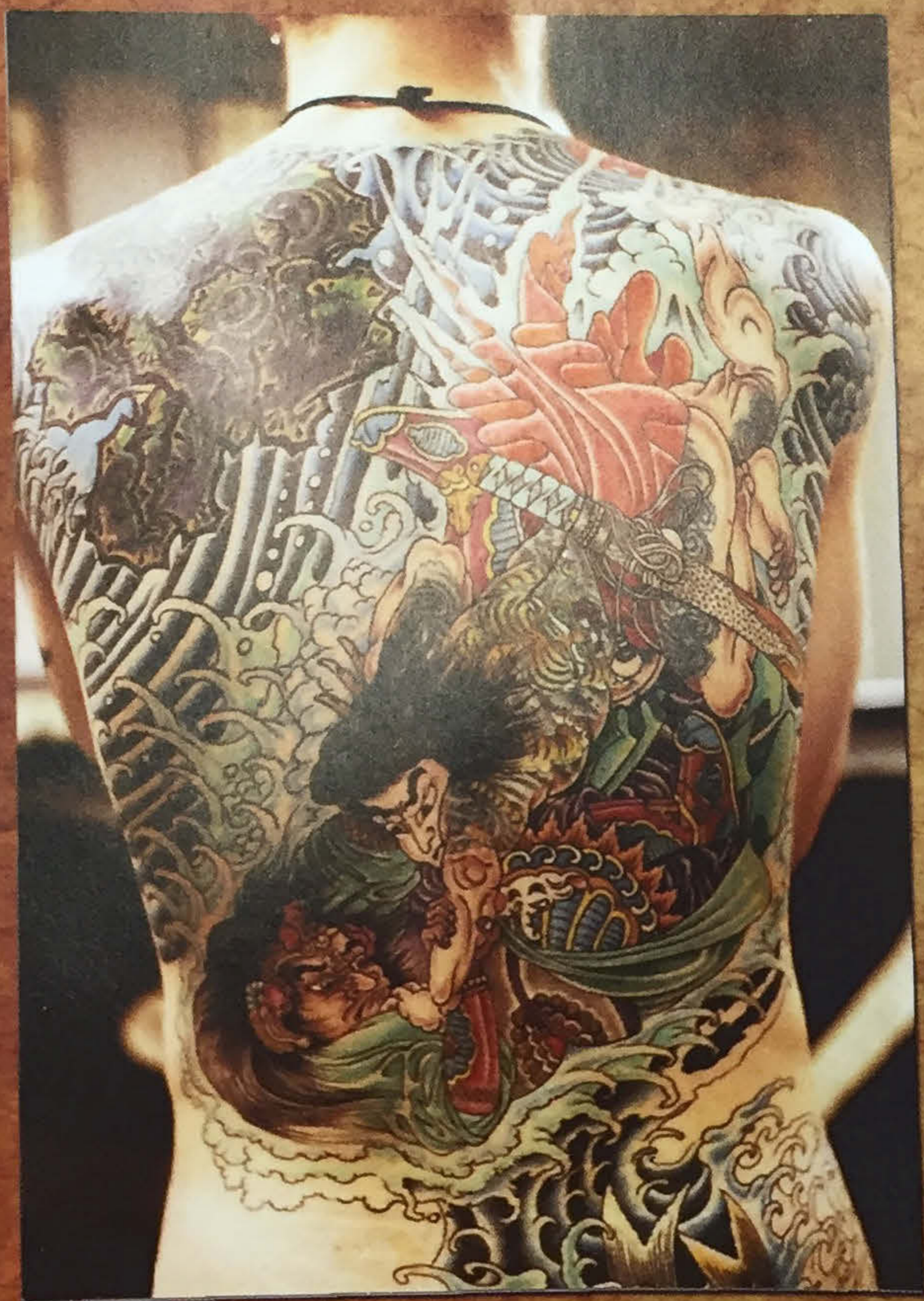
Yeah, sure.

I heard the spider talking and it said, "Okay. You did what you had to do now you're gonna put a portrait of me on this guy's head." You know? All right. Maybe that got me outta trouble.

Yeah, your whole tattoo career has a few of those different cosmic reoccurrences... Tell me about that.

Yeah, well so that's when I really... That's when I first drew that stylized spider that everybody in the world copied and most people fuck it up. They get the legs too close together. It's really hard to draw. It's gotta be done right or it doesn't work, you know? I got one on me here that somebody fucked-up and didn't do it right.

Most of the time they get the legs too close together, huh?



"Well how much could they want for the place, \$400, \$600?" I go, "Well, I make money, man. I wanna rent the place." He says, "Okay, well maybe expensive for you." I go, "Well, it might be but how much you want for it?" He says, "Well, we want \$250 a month." You know? And I'm thinking, "Oh, geez, that much? Well, I'll try. I think I might be able to swing that?" So I got here for \$250 bucks a month. I had to rebuild the whole place, I had to tear all the walls down and all that.

It was bad, huh?

Yeah, I had to redo everything. And an old friend of mine by the name Ray Collins, who was in the original *Mothers*

When I was just a young punk rock kid I first saw a tattoo shop on the pike in Long Beach and when I went in, old man Col. Todd was tattooing some guy's back with a big beast of a man helping him stretch the skin. When he barked at me as to what the fuck I wanted, I quickly got out of there for fear of these unknown pirates and what they might do to me. Fast forward a few years and I am walking down Melrose and seeing all these great tattoos, the likes of which I had never seen before. Well, I just had to meet the guy responsible and lo and behold it was Bob Roberts. Within 5 minutes I knew I was right to wait, this was the guy I wanted to tattoo me and over the next few years I amassed quite a few from him. He was always funny, surley, and quick-witted and, obviously, he left quite an impression on me. Later he even broke me into this mad circus and I have tried to remember many of the things he taught me when I work, both artistically and philosophically. I would later find out that first shop I went into at the pike was the shop Bob started at. Much love and respect always to Bob!

-Frank Harrison

They fuck it up. I mean it's like Japanese kanji; it has to be done a certain way. It's so simple, that people fuck it up. They take it and they think they can just wing it, but it's really very highly contrived.

When was that?

I opened up here in May of '82.
Right after the first convention on the Queen Mary.

Did you go to that?

Yeah, I went to that.

Okay, so you went down to the Queen Mary. I know that wasn't the first convention but it was like the first real big one. That seemed to be a real milestone. A lot of people refer to that one. Did you work there or did you just go down there?

No, I worked there. I had to work at all of 'em. I couldn't afford to get home if I didn't work it.

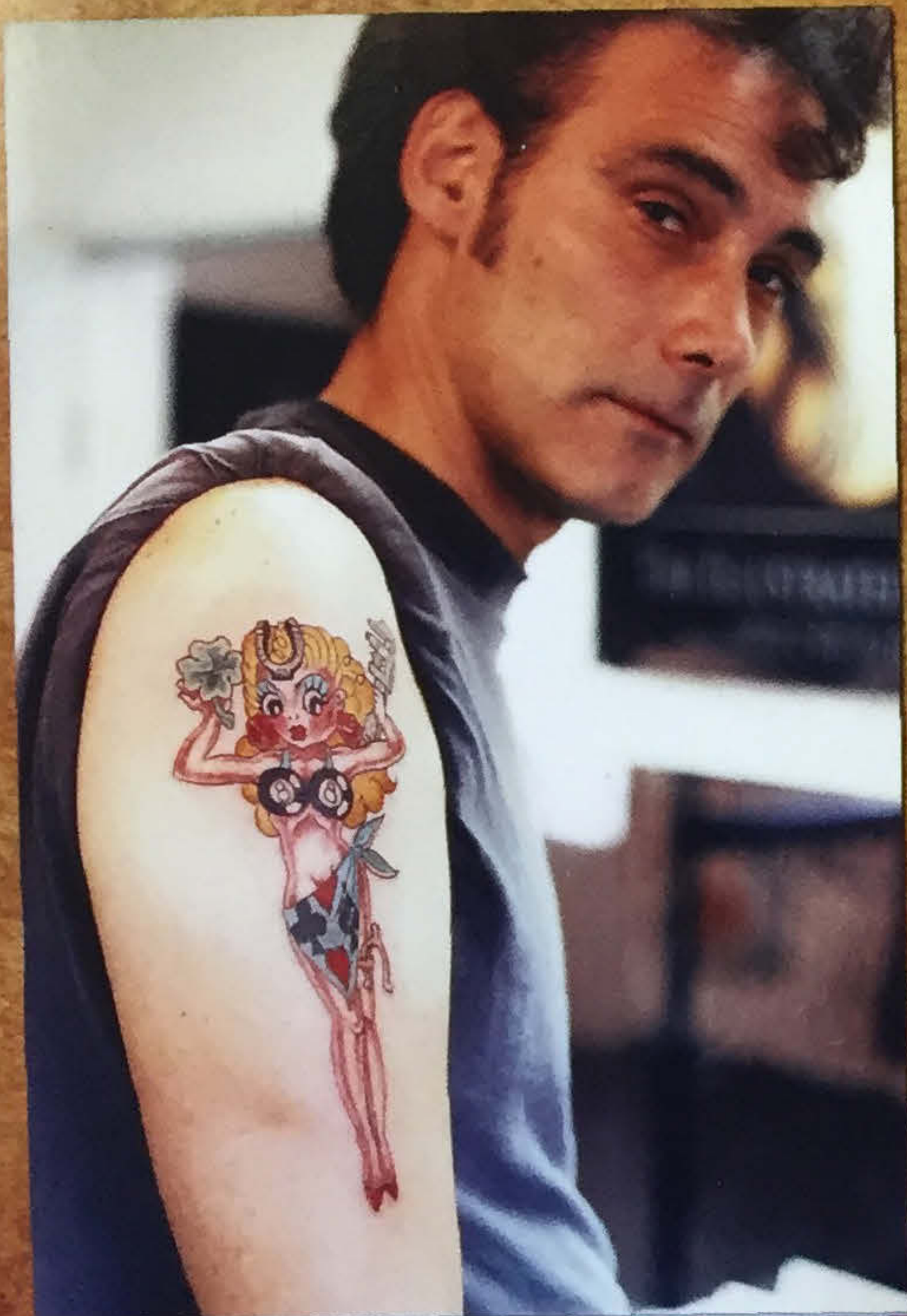
Yeah, Bob Shaw and Col. Todd... Everyone was at that one. Was tattooing changing then?

Bob Shaw had a booth there and everything. You know, all the new school stuff started happening then. A lot of people didn't like each other, you know? A lot of people were intimidated by the one needle stuff. People would say, "Oh, that shit won't hold up more than a couple years." They were all intimidated -thought it would replace everything. It was like, "Geez, that fine-line stuff, that's like old-time stuff." Me, I was always good at detail. So the first thing I did was pick up a single-needle and all of a sudden, I could get all this stuff in there. It took me twice as long to color the fucking thing.

Right.

And then I started realizing, "What are you doing here?" It was like, "What are you gonna do if someone wants an eagle back piece? You gonna outline it with a single-needle, for Christ sake?"

Sure.



You know, you do it the right fucking way so that's what I started doing. Basically, New York City got me out of that habit, the all single-needle thing. You know, these guys wanted American-style tattoos. They didn't want Japanese-style. They didn't want portraits. You couldn't give that stuff away.

Right, they wanted color.

I mean the whole thing... People ask me, "Where do you think this is going? And, What's gonna be the next big fad? What do you think the next big thing is gonna be?" And you know, that whole concept, it's a mistake. What most people don't realize is that if you're an artist, to be an artist, you go buy a canvas or some paper and paint and you're an artist. But to be a tattoo artist, you're not a tattoo artist unless you got people that are getting tattooed. So what dictates trends is what those people wanna get. It's what the customers come in the door and want. You know, that's what keeps us all where we are. That's what dictates what's going to be happening. Of course, when we do art and we do what we do and we put it out there, if people get it -great. You know, if they don't, you better figure out something else out. That's what's important -who's getting these tattoos, not who's doing 'em. We can only do what walks in the door and what they want. You know, there's a lot of people that come in and want stuff that I don't like and I don't wanna do but I tell 'em, "Look, it's your arm. You should have it any way you want. You see that door? You can walk right out it and go down the street and you can find somebody that's gonna fuck you up. But it's not gonna happen here." And then sometimes I've done stuff that I thought was crap and I didn't really like it but it turned out that they were right and it really, really worked. I've had to reevaluate myself and think, "What the fuck am I doing here? Without them, I m nobody." So I have to be very careful about how I talk to people and what they want. I mean I used to have to do everything, Celtic, tribal, portraits, all that crap. I would do it the best I could. I wasn't very good at it but I had to do it. I had to pay the bills.

Well, I don't know about that. Everything I've seen you do was fucking great. Okay, so you're over there, you're next door and you're getting like two or three a week. At that period, the Hollywood scene or something jumped, and you ended up really taking off.



Charlie Roberts (snake head)

Yeah, well something happened. Me and Charlie Roberts (Bob's son) were working and it went from just being very fucking slow, man, to all of a sudden like 30 people a day getting tattooed in there. I mean Charlie would work from noon to four in the morning on punk rockers, rock 'n' roll people.

Right.

It was just all of a sudden, just from one day to the next.

Well, the rockabilly guys and all that, Joe, they started wanting that traditional...

Yeah, I tattooed Brian Setzer and Slim Jim. I did that Stray Cats logo on them back in New York City.

You did that in New York? That's where that happened?

Yeah, they weren't even a rock act back then. They were kicking around New York. It was Brian and the Tomcats, Brian and the Kingpins, Brian and the Bloodless Pharaohs, you know? They got these tattoos and they said, "Well, we're going to England and we're gonna try to see what happens over there." I said, "You're going to England? You got a place to stay?" He said, "Oh, yeah. We're sleeping on the floor in the manager's office." I thought, "Holy Christ, these guys are going to England and they won't have a pot to piss in over there. These poor guys..." Three weeks later, Ed Hardy sent me a fanzine from over there: *STRAY CATS!* you know, *Big in England! The biggest thing ever!* You know, they hit it big. On their first album, they had that 'Stray Cat' face that I drew up on about 12 different items and you could order it. I went to Europe after that



Family Photo:
Fanessa, Ava, Bob, and Charlie

and you'd go into stores there and there would be all these bootleg t-shirts and items with the Stray Cats face on it. Somebody made \$10 million dollars off that design I drew and I got \$60 bucks!

Yeah, yeah.

So anyway, I was here and for nine and a half years, I was there. (Points to old garage spot) I did pretty good there, you know? I never got rich and I never will but for some reason, I always made it by. After nine and a half years, there was a guy here that made custom guitars and he moved out. This place sat empty, they wanted so much for it. I think they wanted \$4000-\$5000. Nobody would rent it and they finally gave it to me, so I've been here ever since.

You made the move. Yeah, at the time when it was still there, it was known around town to come to you for color more than the guys who were known for doing single-needle and stuff. But I saw portraits that you did; you did one on Flea, that bass player and that was *smokin'*. I mean as far as that goes, you don't need me to tell you this, but as far as versatility, I think you were always real versatile.

Well, if it was a recognizable person like Jimi Hendrix, Elvis Presley, you know, there were certain things you had to do. But if somebody brought in their kid or their old lady, you know, it ended up looking wrong, I don't draw portraits, you know. I just make a stencil off a photograph.

Right, right.

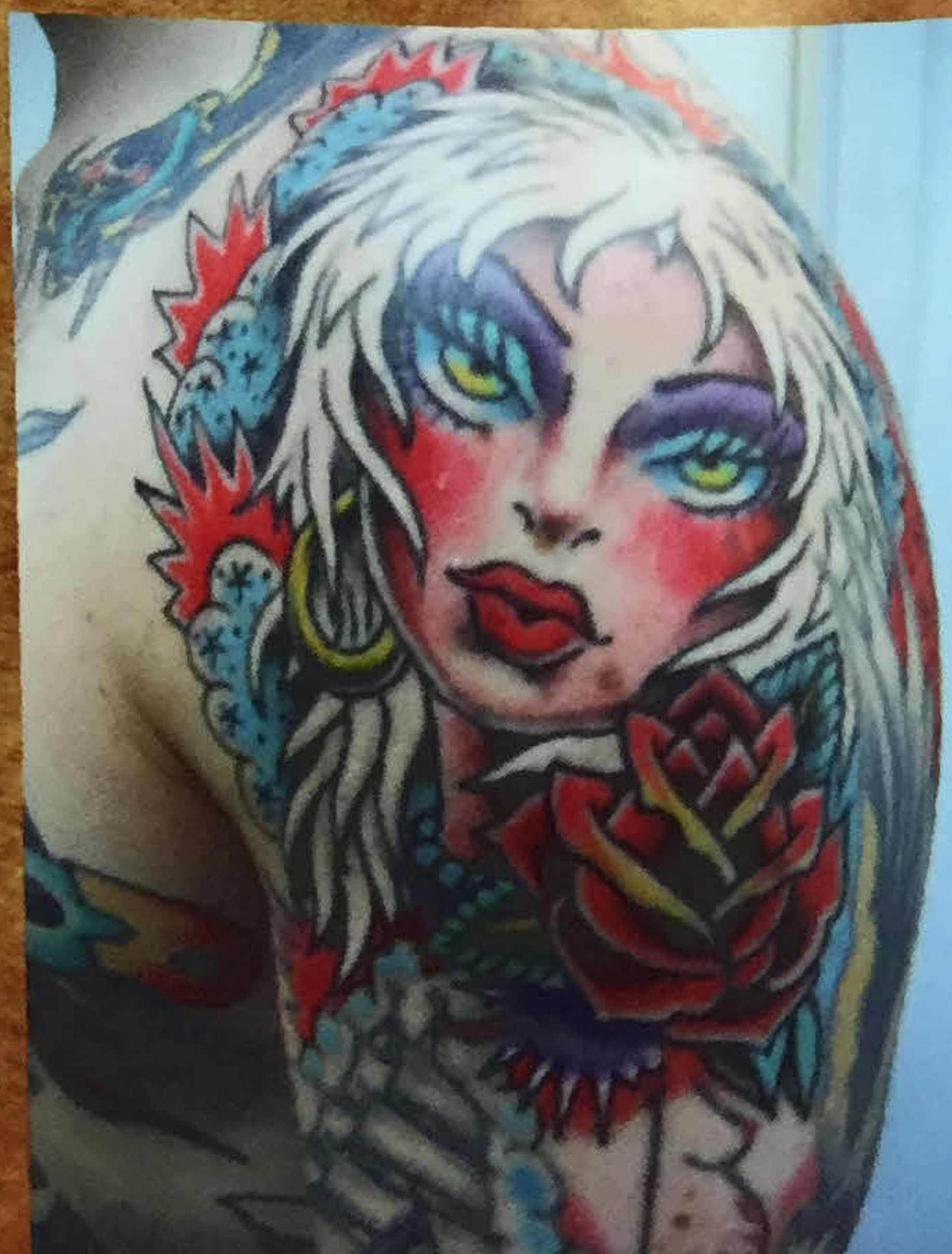
So I wasn't doing very good at it and I stopped. I didn't do any for a few years unless someone wanted one and then I did it. Holy Christ, man. I said, "You know what? This is the end of this."

And that was basically it for doing those? When's the first time you went to Japan?

1991.

That was your first trip out there?

Yeah, Ed Hardy kept telling me, Man, you need to go over there. I said, "Well, yeah but they know who you are. What am I going to do? Go to Japan and hold up a sign on a piece of wood?" You know? "Hey! It



s Bob Roberts! Come get tattoos!" I wanted to go over there, but I didn't know how. So it was about six-seven months after that I started having this crew of Japanese kids coming to me. They were all here like two or three times a year and they'd sit down and get a big arm piece, you know? It would have been plenty for me for one day but you'd bandage it up and they'd get up and walk over to the wall and go, "Okay, now I want this one." I'd say, "What? Do you mean next week?" They'd go, "No, now." And I'd put it on them. So they came out of respect and after about a year and a half, I told 'em, "Listen, I wanna come to Japan and work." Ed was telling me I could make some money over there. They said, "Yeah, okay." They were all for it, you know? They set me up and I packed my tattoo shop into two suitcases and I flew to Japan. I was on the plane like, "Man, I gotta be outta my fucking mind. What am I doing here?" Well I got over there and I was booked solid for fucking weeks, man.

You were swamped over there, huh?

Yep.

Were you doing American-style? Doing your thing?

Well, I was doing whatever they wanted. Yeah, I did Japanese flowers, you know? All of it.



You built a relationship with artists over there, right?

Well, yeah. These guys Daishi and Shinji –I think like after the second or third time I went there, they wanted to learn to tattoo, you know? So I'm going, "Oh, man. Here we go." So I would always come there with a bunch of photos of my flash. I'd have my flash –it was in a book, you know so people would have something to look at. I just went, "All right. Here. Here are some tattoo designs, start painting 'em up. Trace 'em. Shade 'em and let's see what you can do." I went back there six months later and man, they had 12 sheets of flash immaculately painted. I mean it just blew me out of the fucking water. It was better than I could do. So I went, "Holy fuck!" I didn't know what to do, man. So I was like, "All right, keep this up and I'll be back." I went back another six months later and they had 25 more sheets of flash. So, I finally hooked up a tattoo machine and I said, "All right, put tattoos on each other's legs." So they did it and they never looked back, you know? They worked together for a while and then they all got mad at each other. I had a couple of shops with Kato for a while and then that folded up. Now Daisi and Shinji have a shop in Tokyo together.

How often were you going out there? Often?

I was going out there once or twice a year.

Were you staying for a month or two at a time?

Well, usually it would be like two weeks or sometimes three weeks. I had a wife and kids and I couldn't stay too long. I would go to Japan and basically just work for two weeks.

Sometimes I would get a day off and go some place but mainly I went there to make money. I went there to work. And after a while, man you couldn't make that kind of money and I stopped going there. But I mean that was like ten years straight that I was going there.

Now that brings up another thing I wanted to ask about painting. You were oil painting before you were tattooing. So when did you start painting flash? Immediately?

Immediately. I mean you see it here, you know? That sheet of flash –I did it in like 1975.

Were you studying Bob Shaw's flash?

Oh, sure.

'Cause the switch –I mean oil painting is such a different medium than this.

Oh, 'sure. I could understand the designs. I just had to learn how to make 'em look like tattoos. I would shade 'em and color 'em. Back then at the Pike all they wanted





Steve Serazio

was a tattoo that was just like the wall. What you did, I mean, at the Pike you would have guys coming in there that you tattooed the day before with three of their friends. They got the guy with the tattoo standing in front of the design on the wall going, "Okay, there's the red. There's the green. Okay, there's the blue. You got the blue. (Points to flash, then to arm) *OH!* Wait, it's got purple!" And they would want you to fucking put in that little burst of purple. They wanted it just like the wall. So that's how you did it. Now people get all fucking creative. All this new school shit. They limp-it all up with all this extra fucking garbage in there that you don't fucking need.

Yeah.

It's just limp-wristed fucking garbage. Fucking space goop. Who the fuck wants to look at that? Not me. I mean you take a bunch of zeros and you add another hundred zeros, what-ya got? Zero.

So you think copying those really help set the tone of your tattooing?

Well, sure. It was copying 'em and it was also learning the correct way that this thing should be shaded, you know? Like there's certain things that you can't just fucking do what you think, you know? Like a panther—that thing has to be shaded a certain way, man. It's either right or wrong. There's no two ways about it. There's no in between. If you want to get a little creative, there's a certain way it's gotta be done. It's gotta be right, you know?

Right. And then painting flash and painting paintings... I know you were painting before, but I mean there must have been some point where you started doing flash?

Well, yeah. The point came to where I just got sick and tired of drawing stuff the way customers wanted, you know what I mean? They would come in here and they wanted a dragon. They wanted the face off of this

one and the claws off of that one, the scales off of this one and the tail off of that one. And, "Not too much red. A little more magenta, please. And don't make him so mean looking. Can't you make him with a little smile?" You know? "Yeah, we can put on some lipstick and put a pussy on down there too." I mean like, "Oh, sure. Yes, sir. Anything you want." I had to make money and if that's what people wanted, all right. If it was feasible, I did it whether I wanted to or not. But it just got to a point where, Man, I'm gonna take these things and start painting it up my own way. It was like all of a sudden, *POW!* It was freedom!!!

Yeah.

So that's what I started doing and I really enjoyed it so I started doing more of it. I did it for me, not for somebody else. You know, I started just doing art that I enjoyed doing, not because I had to, not because I had to make it look like how somebody else wanted me to fuck it up. You know, I could fuck it up my own way. So that's what I've been doing ever since. But the guys coming up now, I mean they're so fucking good, they make these fucking tattoos that I never could... I mean I used to pride myself on application, you know? I used to be pretty damn good at it but Jesus Christ, what these guys are doing now; it just blows me out of the water. You know, the old guy can still paint pictures.

KAREN MITCHELL: You put on a damn good tattoo. Yeah, Bob.

Still rattling cages a little bit, you know?

Yeah, sure. But you've said this before; that they all have the best equipment... I asked you that before about it and I think the terms you used was, "to build a runway for these guys." But now, they're starting with the best inks, the best...

Well, yeah. They got the best machines and they know where to get all that stuff. They got ready-made color, ready-made needles. Fuck, I used to make my own needles. Every week and a half I used to have to make all these needles—I would solder 'em myself, file 'em myself. I didn't have no fucking ready-made fucking needles.

Right, right. That changed a lot of things... pre-made needles...

Plus, they can go to a newsstand and buy five fucking magazines. They can see all the best work all over the world like right there, right now. You know, they're gonna start out looking at that stuff. That's where they start from. That's why so many guys are so phenomenal these days. You know, 15-20 years ago; a lot of these new

guys were crap. It was just absolute fucking dog shit, man. I mean they didn't know how to put 'em on, they didn't understand the designs. It was just crap.

Right.

You look at these guys now and it's like, Jesus Christ, man. These guys are pretty fucking good, man. You know, they've been tattooing for three years and they're fucking phenomenal, you know? It's good to see.

It's good to see, yeah?

Fuck yeah. You know the thing is, so many people... nowadays, tattoos have become so widespread it's like you go to the liquor store and you get a pack of cigarettes, right? You go to the gas station, you get gas. Well, these people think that if they go to a tattoo shop, they're gonna get a tattoo. Where, unfortunately, a lot of 'em are just getting fucked up. I mean really fucked up to where what these tattoo artists need is to have their thumbs cut off -most of 'em, a lot of 'em -less now than before. But they make all these health department regulations about -what do you call 'em, *Blood borne pathogens* and all this fucking stuff?

You walk in these guys shop and the place is fucking clean, immaculate, you could eat an egg of the fucking floor. They're up to the health department's specifications and they wear a complete prophylactic bodysuit to put a tattoo on somebody, and

the work is absolutely fucking horrible! So what they need to do is start regulating some of these people's fucking artwork. That's what they need to do. Usually it's the "scratchers" that are screaming the most about wiping out the "scratchers."

Right.

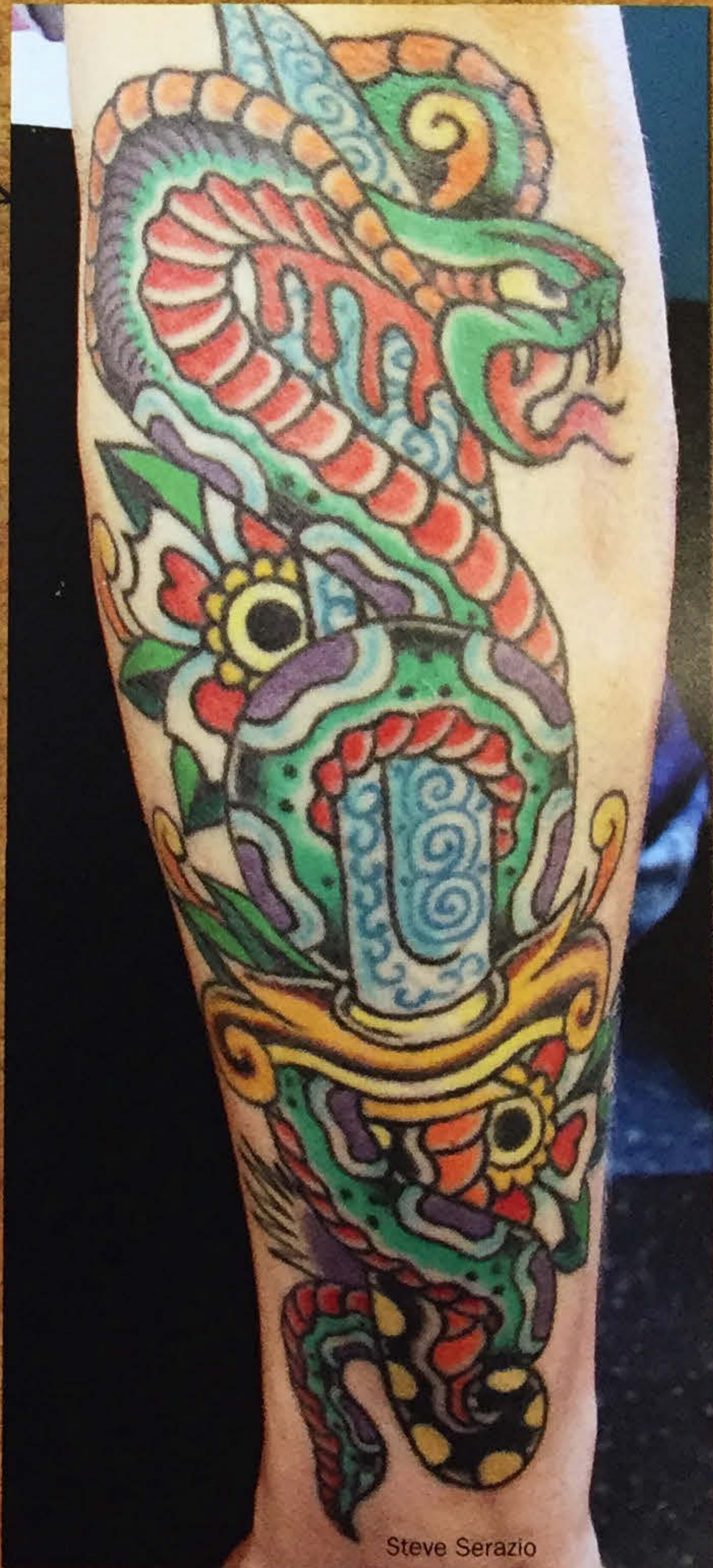
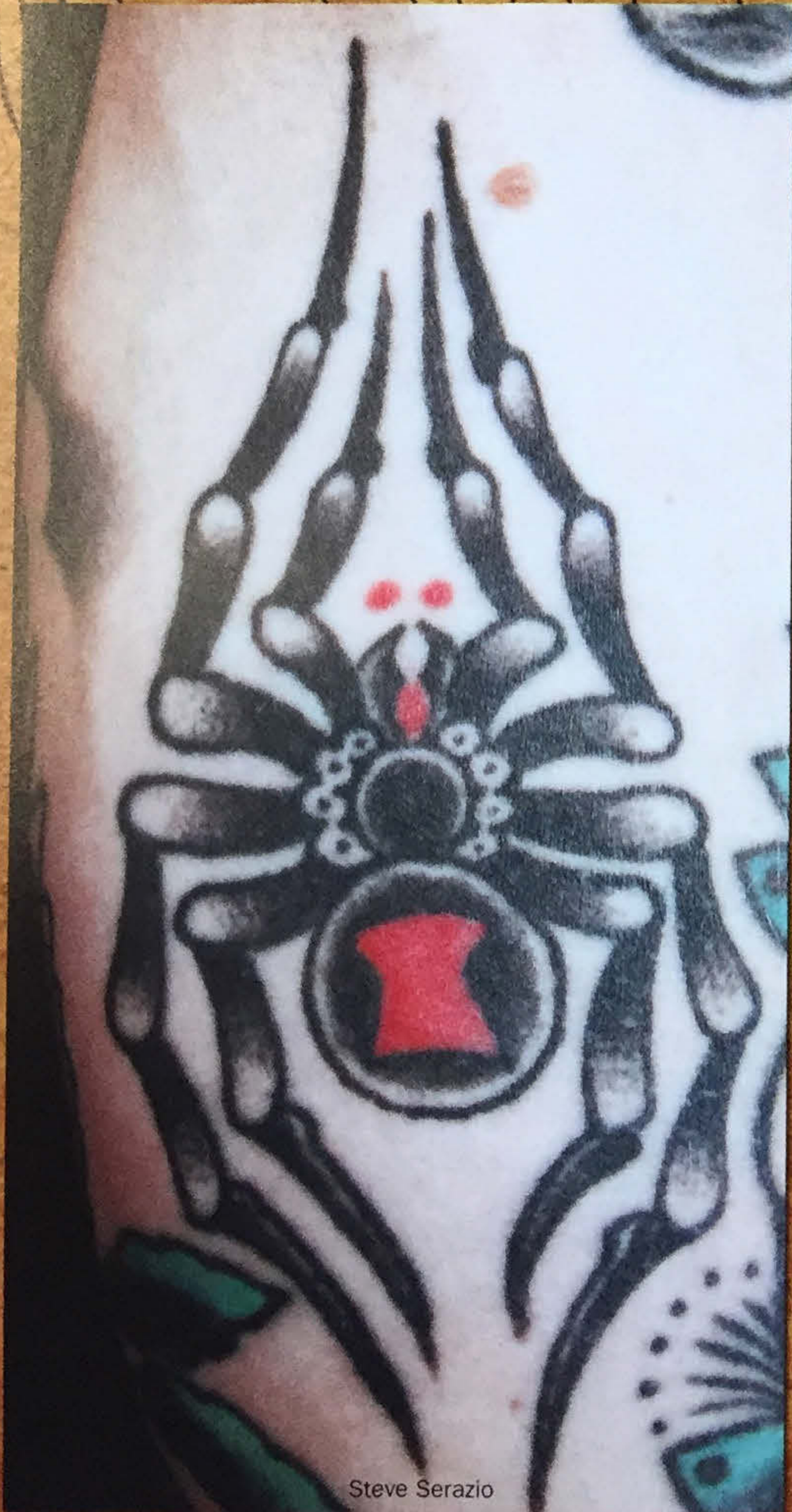
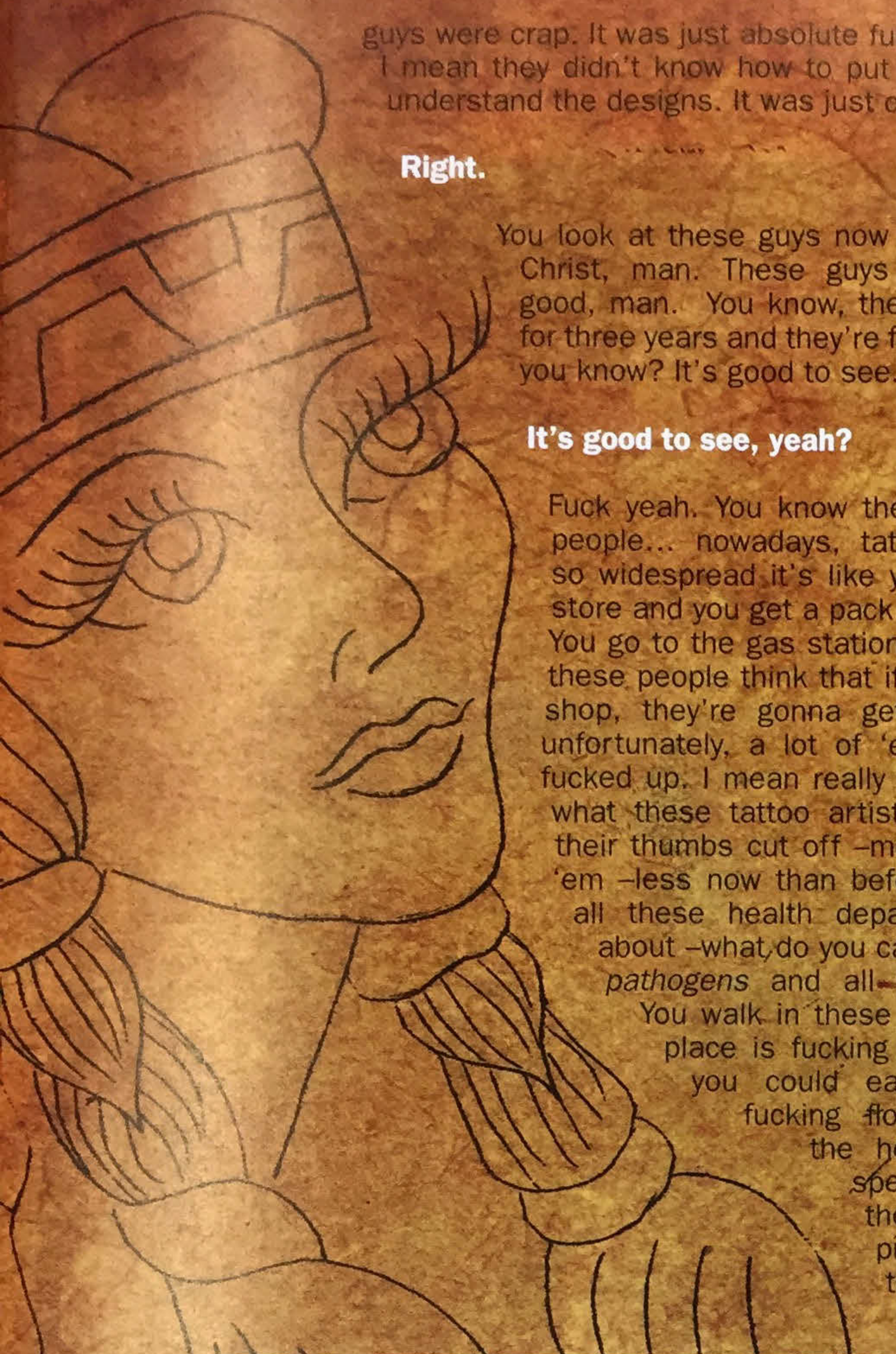
They're "scratchers" them-fucking-selves. That's what bothers me the most -to see a good looking girl that walks up to Hollywood Boulevard somewhere and they tell 'em how great they are and then they sit down and fuck this girl's arm up. You know, then they get paid for it and tell her, "Oh, it'll look better in three days when you take the bandage off." You know, people got this absolute piece of fucking garbage on 'em that they paid good money for, and in good faith they walked in there and at least expected to get a fucking mediocre tattoo. That's what needs to be regulated.

KAREN MITCHELL: Yeah, they think that when they see a license that you know what you're doing and that has nothing to do with knowing what you're doing at all.

Right. It's just so they're not giving somebody fucking hepatitis. They don't care. They fuck 'em up and nobody cares about that.

Well it goes back to what you said about it's easier to get a diagram to a fucking atom bomb. I mean there was a reason that people were more close-lipped back then. The cat's so out of the bag now that some guy can do a little crayon drawing and he fucking buys some kit and he's... I mean, don't you think that's part of the problem?

Well, I mean the reason back then was that these old-timers were so tight-lipped... I mean they really felt that it's taken them all their life to learn simple shit about soldering a needle, about making stuff that you would never, ever figure out. But it's taken them 25 years to learn and where did you earn the right to learn what this stuff is? You know, you haven't earned that right, you know? That's the way they looked



I first got tattooed by Bob in Denver at the 1979 National Convention. The tattoo was a woman's face off a sheet of flash for which he won an award. What attracted me to the design was the face had a striking resemblance to my wife. I was impressed with Bob's intensity and total focus on his work with no wasted energy. When I heard he was living in New York about 1980 or 81 I decided to take the train from Philly and get more work done. It was my ritual each week during the winter to get to his place at about noon. Looking back I probably should have had a large coffee for him when I arrived. I usually woke him up, he was involved somewhat with the music scene at the time and kept some late hours. Over time he covered my chest, shoulders and back. I am glad he spent some time back east, it worked out in my favor. Thanks for the great work Bob.

- Jerry Redds (Carolina Red)

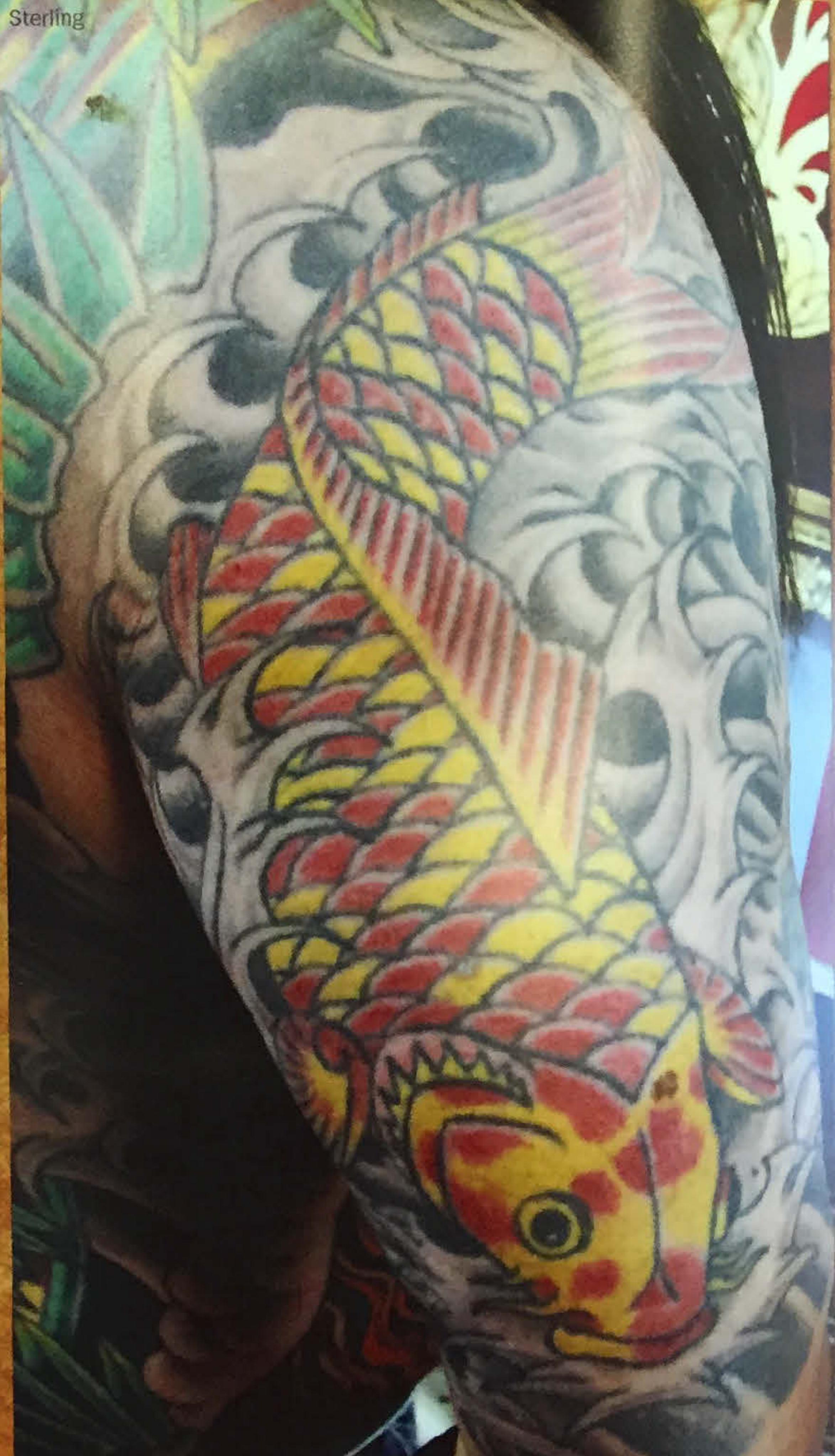
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