

FEELGOODINK

NICK SCOTT MINGLES WITH THE MULTIHUED AT TATTOONESIA
— POLYNESIA'S BIGGEST TATTOOING CONVENTION.

MAIN PHOTOGRAPHS BY PAUL WESTLAKE

THE SOUND OF A BIBLICAL SWARM of clockwork locusts hums around a tent-shaped, aircraft hangar-sized wooden shack in Pirae, Tahiti. Seemingly oblivious to the malevolent buzz, children wrestle and romp bum-clenchingly close to where a Nordic warrior-type, using a small hammer and the whittled rib of a husky-dog, is tapping an inky cummerbund into the torso of a grimacing youth. Most people here are swathed from head-to-foot in curvy geometric symbolism; those who aren't will be once they peel off the cellophane that's keeping the blood from soaking into their clothing.

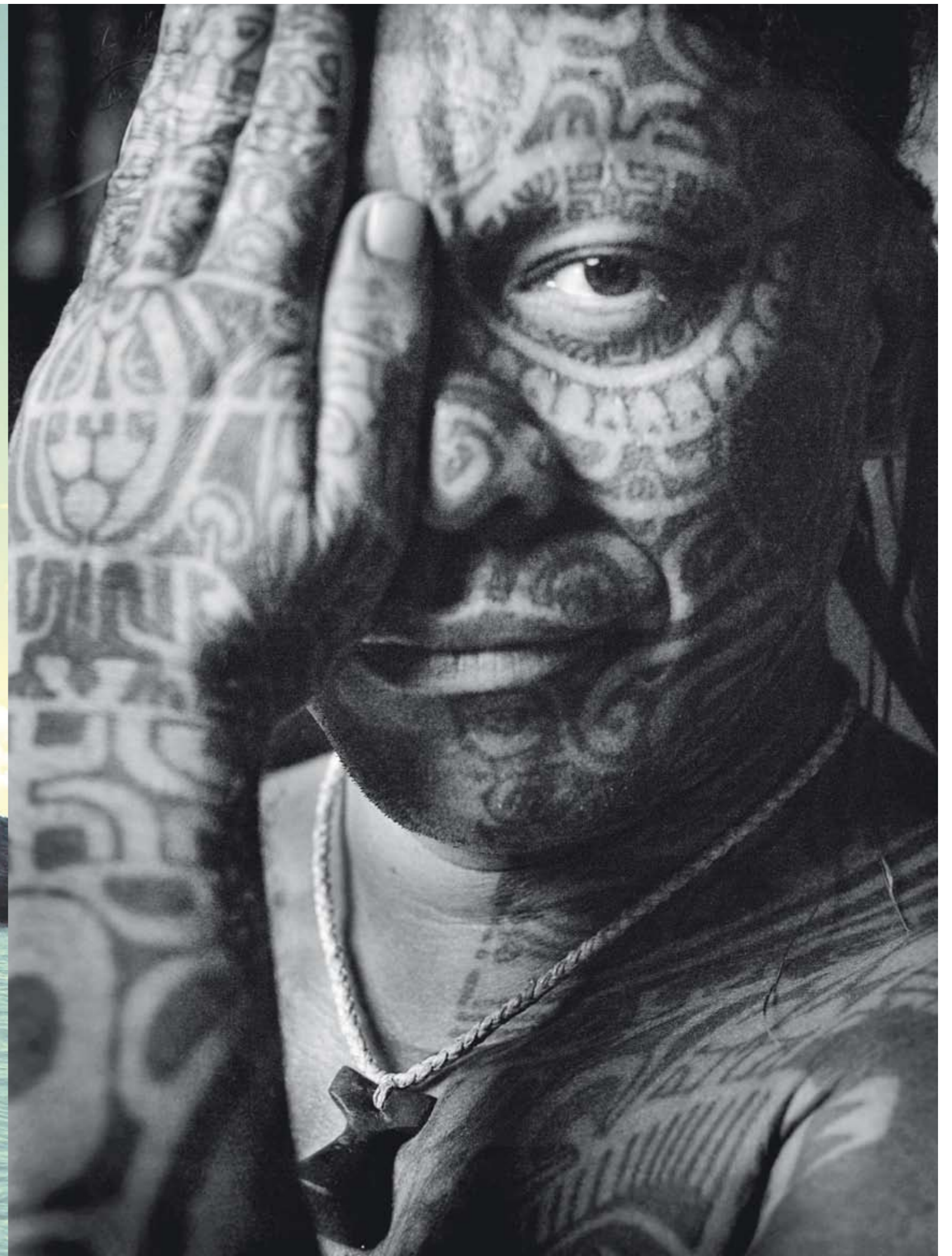
Welcome to Tattoonesia, Polynesia's annual four-day tattoo convention, where 30 local body artists have

congregated along with a dozen from New Zealand, Canada, Hawaii, Japan, England and Denmark to showcase their prowess with the needle.

As international events go, this one is freakishly non-sequitrial. Amongst the tattoo parlours, one curtained-off stall has posters showing close-ups of human bodies on which jam-jars are suctioned onto bulbous boils. The proprietors, Christian Mooraa Masseur Traditionale, claim they can cure headaches, backache, cramps and what translates directly from French as "womb troubles". There are men present with just ten per cent of their original skin colour showing, and Sumo-style hair-buns held in place with shark's teeth, but they're wearing nylon

sports vests and washing down chicken burgers with Coca-Cola. There are enough body-piercings here to alter the orbit of the moon, but the home-made jewellery booths, art displays and even a charity stall — each tattooist has submitted an artwork to be sold in aid of underprivileged local children — conspire to give the whole thing an unthreatening, almost village-fetey kind of air.

Why is that so astounding to me? Well, I'm no stuffy conservative, but let's face it: attend a tattoo festival in Sydney, New York or London and you expect to be surrounded by bikers, über-goths, ex-cons and speed-addled neo-Sid Viciouses. Even in a post-Beckham age where dermal pigmentation is riding the >





CULTURAL LINES: two of the dominant styles at Tattoonesia are Polynesian designs, which have straight-line geometric patterns due to the comb tool originally used, and Maori illustrations based on the spiral.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY TIM MCKENNA.

crest of a revival, the tattoo remains taboo. Going for a waitressing job in a snazzy CBD hotel? Cover up those arse-antlers, girl. Meeting potential in-laws for the first time wearing a t-shirt that shows Celtic daubings all over your arms? Get ready to see her daddy's blunderbuss.

History, though, shows this to be a skewed Western perspective. Numerous early cultures adopted some form of body art, independently of each other. Ainu tribes in northern Japan, would tattoo women around the mouth, in order to create a permanent smile — a symbol of beauty. Early Arctic explorers encountered Inuits decorating each other's skin by pulling thread through it. In ancient Egypt, priestesses, princesses and dancers were all embellished with spiritual, statutory or sexual proclamations, respectively.

But tattooing as we know it in the Western world started in South-East Asia. Amongst the cultural luggage that pre-Polynesians bought with them when they spread westward (starting about 6,000 years ago) from there to populate the Pacific islands was a method of tattooing involving a comb with needles, carved from

last century when tattoos were a symbol of rebellion against the French colonisers. Now, it's considered to be taking pride in your cultural heritage. It's the most permanent statement of self-identity you can ever make."

Once the practice arrived in Europe, original Polynesian emblems and their meanings made way for those from Western culture. To indulge in some crass but necessary oversimplification, symbols of timeless concepts such as wealth (shells) protection (sharks' teeth) and growth (winding arabesques) gradually made way for the temporal concerns of modern life such as patriotism (eagles), foxy support (rabbits) and crass nincompoopery (anything on a Spice Girl).

Has rampant bad taste exasperated the present-day disdain for tattoos that those prudish missionaries originally brought home to the West? Maybe. Either way, Polynesians are nonplussed. "Local people come to the booths of international artists," says organiser Jerome Levy, "look at their books, and they're just not into their drawings." He gestures to a stall belonging to a green-haired female Londoner in

sadistic rat astride a sharpened miniature pogo-stick remains a valid one. We're talking 120 skin punctures under the skin, per minute, each just half a centimetre apart. With larger shapes, artists sketch an outline, then fill it in with parallel lines. Like mowing a cricket pitch with a whipper-snipper, it takes hours. Eight, in fact, for a basic Chilli-Pepper style armband.

"You know it's going to hurt, so your body produces endorphins, natural painkillers," says Colin Dale, an artist born of Danish parents in Canada. "Your mind then tells you, yes, this is hurting you, but it's not killing you. You can get anaesthetic creams, but these only last about 45 minutes, and you're always rubbing them off along with the blood, so the pain's getting worse and worse, whereas it should be getting easier."

"Pain is a paradoxical exchange between the client and the artist," adds Thierry Pirato, who will go on to win the "1st Class: Leg" category this year. Behind him, a burly middle-aged man copes with the torture of having his left nipple turned into a shark's eye by twiddling his beard

"WHY WOULD I PAY FOR A SENSATION THAT FEELS LIKE HAVING MY SKIN PLOUGHED BY A SADISTIC RAT ASTRIDE A SHARPENED MINIATURE POGO-STICK?"

bone or shell and hafted to a wooden handle. The needles were dipped into a pigment made from the soot of burnt candle and mixed with water or oil before being dug into the skin.

It was Captain Cook and his crew who first encountered Polynesian people with geometric and floral designs on their bodies, and took the word 'Tatau' — a Tahitian word meaning 'to mark' — back to Europe. Two of his crew also had their own tats done, probably in a spirit of amorous, rather than anthropological, camaraderie: the local women would not touch men with unmarked bodies. (So there you go — hundreds of years of nautical tradition all stemmed from a couple of blokes trying to get laid.)

Safety regulations have long since banished most of the more archaic tools — combs, mother of pearl- and tooth-based implements and the like — to museums, but the symbolic nuances of the early Polynesian settlers' designs remain preserved. "Tattoos indicated status in society, sexual maturity or genealogy," says Tricia Allen, a Polynesian tattoo specialist and Doctor of Anthropology at the University of Hawaii.

"Naturally, European missionaries, when they arrived, thought it a sinful glorification of the flesh, and the practice was clamped down on. There was a resurgence of a rebellious kind late

her mid-Twenties. Hung on her wall are typical Western designs — vikings, wolves, skulls and Christian iconography montaged with pulp-fictionesque women smoking in hotpants. "As well as originality and technical skill, Tattoonesia is judged on how the design fits the canvas," adds Trisha Allen. "Whereas in America, people put something here, something there, another thing here — you end up with this hotchpotch. A bunch of buttons with no relation to each other or the human form."

VISITING TATTOONESIA was originally meant to involve investigation via participation. Despite lots of medical advice to the contrary at home, I wasn't to leave this event without at least a small tiki indelibly etched on one buttock, illustrating my worldliness, pain threshold and journalistic tenacity all at the same time. Then I got to the entrance and heard that lingering, minacious whirring sound. The door staff stamped my right wrist, my eyes watered and I knew then I'd be trying to get under the skin of body art in an utterly non-literal sense.

Cowardly? Probably. But the question of why I'd pay AUD\$100 per hour for a sensation that feels like having a patch of skin ploughed by a

into a Confucian point. "Taking it away would make the process trivial."

Pirato's not alone in relishing the bond between giver and taker, so to speak. "With all persons I tattoo, I like to find out what is good about them, then create patterns corresponding to his life," says Isidore Haiti. "Sometimes, there are people and a current doesn't pass between us, so I am less inspired. Sometimes, nice people arrive and we talk for three hours — then, I am more inspired."

Given this relationship, the pain, the symbolism and the finite amount of space the human anatomy offers up for expression, the pressure on the artist can be huge. "I've met many great visual artists who cannot tattoo," says Dale, "because there's something different about drawing a line you can never erase. It's a mental state which is sometimes hard to come by. Plus, there's no such thing as a tattooing school."

Another reason for the pained expressions on display today? It's certainly another motivation for me to keep my canvas blank. But if body art's your thing, and you're after integrity, style and authenticity, forget walking up some arbitrarily chosen staircase in Kings Cross: the smart man's destiny might be half way across the Pacific. **GG Tattoonesia 2008 takes place in mid-November. www.tattoonesia.blogspot.com**

ILLUSTRATED HISTORY



A tattooed Polynesian slave is brought to London. Unfortunately for his money-seeking owners, **Giolo, the Famous Painted Prince** dies of smallpox on arrival.

[1066]

The body of **King Harold of England** is identified after the Battle of Hastings from the name of his queen tattooed over his heart.



The heavily tattooed remains of a Bronze-Age man are found on an Austrian mountain. **Brad Pitt** will get "Otzi the Iceman" inked into his left forearm 16 years later.

[1769]

Captain Cook records the word "tatau" on arrival in Tahiti. Two of his seamen came back with tattoos, starting a long association between body art and nautical living.



Johnny Depp gets his Winona Ryder tattoo changed to "Wino Forever" following the couple's split.

[1991]

Mattel releases Butterfly Art Barbie, a doll with washable body art.



[1994]



Geeks at the **Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute**, New York, propose the idea of changeable tattoos based on hair-sized nanotubes embedded in the skin to display an image.

[1999]

[2008]