



DON ED HARDY

[TATTOO ARTIST/PAINTER]

“SO IN THE '50s, IT WAS: THAT'S THE PANTHER HEAD,
THAT'S THE SIZE IT IS, THAT'S THE DIRECTION
IT FACES, AND IF YOU DON'T WANT IT, TOO BAD.”

Education of a tattoo artist:

Mail-order tattoo lessons

Japanese tattoo masters

The Pasadena Museum of Art

Gregory Corso

When Don Ed Hardy left art school with a degree in printmaking in the '60s, he decided not to pursue a career in the academic art world but to practice a form of art that had fascinated him from the age of ten: tattooing. Since then, he has made a name as an innovator (with his fusion of the American and Japanese visual traditions), a shopkeeper (founding the first Japanese-style private studio in America), and a chronicler, with his groundbreaking *TattooTime/Hardy Marks Books*, with titles such as *Music and Sea Tattoos* and *Pierced Hearts* and *True Love: A Century of Drawings for Tattoos*. Along with a few other pioneers, Hardy has pushed his medium past the stereotypes (the biker, the drunken sailor) to a socially accepted form of personal

expression and, sometimes, a fashion accessory.

In the last decade or so, Hardy has concentrated more and more on painting, and recently hung up his tattoo guns—though he continues to mentor the artists at his San Francisco shop, *Tattoo City*. At the same time, he's licensed his work to a designer who has put his images on T-shirts, shoes, and caps. He's even partnered with a company to start a line of Don Ed Hardy temporary tattoos.

I spoke to Hardy by phone while he was visiting San Francisco from his Hawaiian home. The conversation has been edited for space because, as Hardy has been a witness to so much of American tattoo history, he knows his stuff, loves to share it, and, as he readily admits, in the grand tradition of the tattoo artist, he can “bullshit endlessly.”

—Matthew Simmons

I. "ANY COLOR, SO LONG AS IT'S BLACK"

THE BELIEVER: You've referred to tattooing's "unprecedented popularity on a global scale." Can you talk about how it got there?

DON ED HARDY: It's a twofold thing. Part of it for me, along with the formal means of getting the ink in the skin, was the challenge of social engineering—to get people who would be interested in having more unusual tattoos and having more personal tattoos. That framework did not exist. It was stratified into—for lack of a better word—the "lower" orders of society. When I started doing tattoos, the bikers were barely getting them. It was strictly a military thing, and it had been pretty much that way, or definitely a working-class thing, since the beginning of the twentieth century. There were people who had a formal education and responsible jobs and made a lot of money who got tattoos, but it *was* a really risky thing, underground. And what was available was not very artistically done.

So when I got into it, there was this guy, Phil Sparrow. His real name was Sam Steward, a completely amazing person in his own right—he was a writer, he was part of Gertrude Stein's circle, very close to Alice Toklas until her death.

BLVR: He was the author of *Bad Boys and Tough Tattoos*, a sort of seminal work on the social history of tattooing, yes?

DEH: Yeah. That's him. This amazing guy was a teacher of literature in the Midwest, and bailed out of academia to become a tattoo artist. He was the first renegade intellectual that I met in tattooing, and I thought, Well, this guy is not a moron or a wino or a gangster. When I got into it, there were five hundred people tattooing in all of America. There were, like, eight tattooers in Canada. I wanted to create a thing, a context in which people could see that it is an art, and began doing it with the military, offering these guys different designs that I had painted. And I was so gone with the Asian stuff, and people liked to get tattooed with exotic

images, so that began breaking the ice. Myself and about four other tattooers in America—most prominently Sailor Jerry in Honolulu, who was a mentor to us all—began adapting that into the American tattoo vernacular. And then the big leap came after I went to live in Japan and work with a tattoo master there in 1973.

BLVR: My mother recently got her first tattoo. We went down to the shop here in Seattle (Madam Lazonga), and what I noticed was that there were more charcoal figure drawings on the walls than tattoo flash. [*Flash* is what tattoo artists call the designs you see on the walls or in display books in tattoo shops—the generic images that can be customized or put on as they appear.] I was wondering if another part of this is that people with biographies similar to yours—people with (and forgive the loaded term) "fine" arts interests, training, and ambitions—are getting into tattooing as well?

DEH: Oh yeah. You know, I can talk about my noble quest with this whole thing, but, frankly, I was finishing up my undergraduate work. I was working at the post office, I had an infant son, I had a lot of responsibilities, and I was on this track to go graduate school and teach. And thank god that my primary mentor, Gordon Cook (who was a great artist, great printmaker and painter), counseled me. He just kept saying, get out of this academic thing. When I saw tattooing—part of it through Sparrow—I would go hang out and have great conversations with him, and got a few tattoos from him. He told me his history. The day that I found out that you could support yourself doing tattoos, I made the leap of faith rather than try the predictable route.

This is now an option for people coming out of art school, or people who just have talent. It's a way to work independently, and be responsible for yourself. That's absolutely what's doing it. That's the format in almost all the shops now. People know that they can come in and ask for specific images. You can go in and commission a tattoo. In the beginning it was: OK, here are the designs, that's what you get. At almost all the shops, the artist either didn't have the creative talent or the interest in doing original work. A lot of the classic American tattooing is cool for what it

is, but the tattooers weren't artists in the sense of inventing original things.

There was this guy Milton Zeis in Illinois who sold tattoo supplies—he was sort of a tattooer and a photographer—and he sold a correspondence course through the mail. Sparrow had written a lesson for it, but he used to say it was about as useful as learning to swim in your living room. Tattooing is

a hands-on thing. I got this literature from Milton Zeis when I was ten or eleven years old. I wrote away from an ad in the back of *Popular Mechanics* magazine—they didn't know I was a kid—and they sent me this stuff. One of them had this pull quote that went, "If you can write or trace, we'll teach you to tattoo."

So in the '50s, it was: that's the panther head, that's the size it is, that's the direction it faces, and if you don't want it, too bad. Like Henry Ford: any color, so long as it's black. For that reason, I faced a lot of resentment in the tattoo world for letting the cat out of the bag. Guys actually come up to me and say, "Well, you really fucked it up for us. Now these people come in and they want this or that." And I'm completely respectful of a lot of hard-line old-school tattooers, and even some of the young people. I respect the tradition, but the art can't just stay there.

BLVR: You went to the San Francisco Art Institute?

DEH: Yeah, I went to the Art Institute from 1963 to '67. I got a degree in printmaking.

BLVR: What was your work like when you were there?

DEH: It was completely influenced by the aesthetic of Gordon Cook, and it was on-site landscapes—going out with a copperplate and sitting there carefully drawing realistic landscapes and still lifes—and it was informed by Asian aesthetics, but it didn't look like Asian art. And Giorgio Morandi, a great Italian painter and print-



Doc Ed Hardy making alcohol-proof tattoos, 1956.

maker—kind of an artist's artist—he's extremely subtle and sophisticated, and a lot of people don't know about him, but he's one of the greatest painters in Italian history. It was kind of a perception of paying attention to the everyday—kind of a Zen thing. That's what my work looked like primarily. I came to the Art Institute wanting to do lithography. I was very inter-

ested in multiple originals and printmaking.

When I was seventeen, I was full of angst. I wanted to be Edvard Munch, so I was going to do these very dark, tormented things to match my tormented seventeen-year-old soul. But I met Cook and it just turned my world around. The discipline of doing that stuff, of paying close attention, was absolutely invaluable and strengthened my drawing and perceptual skills immeasurably. Working with this extremely fine, tight, precise stuff—the leap into tattooing was a natural. And in fact, because I'd paid so much attention to tattooing when I was ten, eleven years old, the overlay of it, the working with black ink, etc., it all made sense to me. It's the challenge of it. I love doing things where you have to get it right because you make the mark and then it's there.

BLVR: In the tattoo world, you're famous for the way you synthesized Western traditions and icons with those of the East, particularly the Japanese. But at the same time, your work is a synthesis of car culture, of surf culture. In other words, you are—artistically speaking—above all else, a Californian. Can you imagine your work being as it is if you were brought up anywhere else?

DEH: No, I am completely a product of my native California environment, which spans my early years in coastal Southern California and my move to San Francisco when I was eighteen to become immersed in the Bay Area social/artistic milieu, specifically at

the San Francisco Art Institute. So my childhood years of exposure to beach culture, growing up at the beach and relating to the waves as primary nature connection, combined with the hot rod and Kustom Kar culture that blossomed in the mid-'50s, tattooing, West Coast jazz, early rock and roll—all melded into a powerful, visceral free expression. This was also impacted by my early exposure to Asia. My father took a job in occupied Japan when I was six [in 1951], and began sending home all kinds of souvenir items from there: silk robes with embroidered dragons, porcelain, weird Japanese comics, etc. I was riveted by this stuff. A few years later when the Beats gained big exposure, some coffeehouses opened in our area and I got a copy of *Houd*, Corso's *Bomb*, other City Lights publications, and became interested in their take on Eastern thought and their general wildness. It all fits together. The roots culture that developed in California in the 1950s and '60s has profoundly impacted the world today and replaced a lot of the old, tired Eurocentric patterns.

II. THE COMMODIFIED LAPDOG OF THE RULING CLASSES

BLVR: Let's talk about a specific piece of work. Among the multiple references in your painting *Another Day in Paradise* are pot-bellied Japanese devils, Westernized Hell (the Dante's *Inferno*-esque burning city), and possibly even a nod to the label for Little Devil Firecrackers. All this makes me wonder about your relationship to pop art. Do you think you are in that tradition as well?

DEH: Yes, not so much specifically mimicking the methods of the seminal pop painters, but in using popular imagery. Those guys in New York were reacting to the dominant art-world rule of abstract-expressionism and wanted to get back to some kind of quotidian visuals that, in their own way, when you emphasized it right, possessed powerful formal visual qualities. Mainly it was in opposition to the snotty cant that grows up around any art movement, the preciousness and elitism that is necessary to build and sustain a high-end economic market. The old "we're rich enough and smart

enough to understand this stuff and therefore better than you." Well, fuck that. I'm not a populist so much, or an opponent to "high culture" and intellectual pursuits in general, but I resent the abusive appropriation of art when it becomes the commodified lapdog of the "ruling classes."

Also, in terms of pop sensibility, my whole life has been a balance between classical formal education—both in terms of the tools of a medium and the history and philosophy of art—and its resonance in the visual culture of our daily lives. In about 1962, the great curator Walter Hopps, then director of the Pasadena Museum of Art, put on a show he titled *The New Paintings of Common Objects*. It combined works by West and East Coast artists, Warhol, Lichtenstein, Ruscha, [Joe] Goode, [Llyn] Foulkes, et al. That show title more accurately reflected what that whole movement encompassed, it wasn't just about comics or soup cans. Those guys all knew what they were doing and it rocked the world.

BLVR: When you were in this community of like-minded artists while you were tattooing, you were painting too, right?

DEH: No, I didn't have time to do my personal art. For twenty years I just tattooed. I began tattooing in sixty-six on my back porch. Under Phil Sparrow's guidance, I put some tattoos on over at his shop—on myself and my friends. Then I was tattooing art-school buddies on my porch and I got into it, and it took up all my time, whether I was painting flash or building shops, and that segued into designing tattoos for people. My drawing time was spent doing it, and it wasn't until I made this crazy move to Hawaii in eighty-six... I got over there and I thought, My god, maybe I could take time to do some of my own art.

Every year it was a New Year's resolution to do some art for myself. And then I'd slide back into the work. I was glad to be that busy, but the intensity of being in the tattoo world really took over everything. I kept in touch with the art world, I had some friends and I'd see their shows. I'd go see significant museum shows. It wasn't like I had dropped completely out of high culture

and just related to tattooing.

It was kind of like I'd been put in neutral. Then when I reanimated myself, I realized I'd become dependent on people coming to me wanting tattoos. I'm in the studio, I've got the paint, I've got the space to do it, but what am I going to do? And I was really crippled.

BLVR: The contrast between the two worlds that you've worked in is made clear in a documentary in which you appeared, called *Stoney Knows How*, about Leonard "Stoney" St. Clair, an old-school tattooist. Tattooing isn't only a commercial art, it's a publicly practiced art, and an artist benefits not just from having drawing skills but also from having the skills of a bartender. First, I was curious if that's true in the East. And I was also wondering if you're enjoying the privacy of the studio.

DEH: Oh, of course. The big thing is that tattooing is a collaborative thing. It's a commercial art. It's a job. Someone comes in and they say, "I want this thing," and you're responsible to give them what they want. When you say the East, do you mean Asia?

BLVR: Japan, yes.

DEH: In Japan, it's very private. With traditional Japanese tattooers, it was like going to a painter's atelier and commissioning a painting. There was a tremendous amount of respect and a tremendous amount of formalism among the traditional tattooers. There is interaction with the client, but essentially they work completely privately. That's what encouraged me to open a shop that way in San Francisco with a studio in the back of an office building. You had to know where it was. You had to have an introduction. And then the artist would weigh whether or not they wanted to take on the tattoo. It was a very different thing.

The bartender thing is a great analogy, though. The great American tattooer Bob Shaw—real character, great tattooer in the folk tradition, and a totally charismatic guy, a real hipster—he used that line: "If you can't blind 'em with brilliance, baffle 'em with bullshit." That carny aspect of it is crucial to tattooing in the West, and

I loved it. That's what attracted me to it. It's also what wears you out, because you get to know things about people. I know far more about way too many people than I ever wanted to know.

III. "THERE ARE CERTAIN PAINTINGS OF MINE THAT I THINK, MAYBE I DON'T WANT THIS ON A SPOON SET OR A MALT SHAKER."

BLVR: The stereotypical upright, motherly critique of why you shouldn't get a tattoo is that they're permanent—which, of course, because tattoos fade, isn't entirely true. Some of your older paintings, such as *Haptic King of Sweden* and *Save Your Face (D.I.Y.)*—two works that mimic the way tattoos in skin fade—and on up through a painting like *American Beauty* from 2002, seem to be about issues of permanence and impermanence. And you've been working with acrylics on acid-free archival paper, which, as far as the materials go, suggests a desire for permanence.

DEH: I don't have issues about permanence of art. I do stuff that looks old often just because I love that fog of history that settles on this kind of work. I just use acrylic because it cleans up easily. I don't have any particular aim to make art for the generations. In fact, people get upset with me because archival stuff doesn't mean anything to me. I mean, it'll be here or it won't. I won't care; I'll be dead.

And I do love the fact that tattoos die off. You can only get so puffed up about this thing, because you're not going to be fucking Leonardo or anything. This tattoo is going to be gone in *x* number of decades. It's too bad when they go away. I'm sad to hear about it for the person that I knew, and sad to a degree, like, well, shit, that one is in the ground or burned up now, but that's just the way it is. People are too high up on permanence and history and stuff. Respect history and learn from it, but I don't by any means do this stuff to be around.

BLVR: Here's what I found really interesting about your recent paintings: the pieces with images obscured be-



Das Ed Hardy (left): Happy Trail, 2007. 36" x 24". Sui ink on paper. (right): King of Punk, 2007. 40" x 22". Sui ink on paper. Images appear courtesy of the artist.

hind swaths of ribbons. In a tattoo, a ribbon acts as a carrier of information, an annotation to the image. They tend not to be the focus. What the paintings seem to do, by removing the text from the ribbons and putting them at the front, is suggest an evolution in your art away from the explicit kinds of meaning that you see in your earlier work. People ask what an abstract painting means, but an abstract painting probably only "means" something visual—it is what it is, and seeing it, not explaining it, is the point. Am I right? Are you moving away from "meaning"?

DEH: My intent has always been to have the "mean-

ing" embedded in what the work is, its intrinsic presence. The "subjects" are just handles to get people to look at the picture. Of course, in the Asian tradition, the idea is to convey the essence of the subject (tiger, mountain, wave, whatever) beneath its apparent physical form. But all this stuff is just a way to convey some kind of mystery of existence, to provide some kind of reverberation of whatever it is that animates the whole rodeo. I recognized tattooing as the most volatile, transgressive ("impolite"), and underdeveloped visual medium in the world at that time. It was a great challenge to make this work.

And tattooing is a commercial art. The client asks

for a specific thing, so the subject or content of the medium is what you see, or its apparent meaning. When I could get back to making art for myself, not on commission, I could emphasize my intuition. Most stuff I do is totally spontaneous, no prep drawing or thought. I'm just drawing from a huge image bank developed over fifty years, bringing up the words and assembling them into new sentences.

The pieces with the ribbons, which I began doing in early 2006, have to do with my fascination with ribbons and phrases, words of commitment that are so much a part of Western tattoo tradition. Beyond that, I love the ribbons that are so prominent in northern European art of the sixteenth century, Dürer's time. Often, series of fantastic ribbons appear there as a pure visual trope, devoid of words. I studied this art deeply when I was learning to etch in the early '60s and just integrated it with other recognizable "meaningful" images. It presents some kind of mystery to me and is an endless formal possibility.

BLVR: Tattoo images are folk images, for the most part.

DEH: Yeah, the classic stuff, the iconic stuff. The polite word is *appropriation*. But most of them are stolen from somewhere else.

BLVR: Folk art and high art both allow for a sort of appropriation. Were you at all reticent to license your work to commercial ventures in that respect? Some commercial art ventures are less tolerant of appropriation, the folk art or high-art system. Was that an issue that you were thinking about?

DEH: Of course. The way it went down was my Japanese partner saw an article about a show of my paintings in *Juxtapoz* magazine. He contacted my partner in L.A.—they had already been partnered up in a clothing venture—and he wanted to see if they could use some of my images. He liked them because they were Asian-based but very different. He responded to the paintings. And I liked what they were doing. And then Christian Audigier saw it, and he had just left the whole Von Dutch thing, which was a huge

monster—ironically, based on the work and persona of a very important car painter and a guy who was one of my heroes when I was a kid. Christian's a marketing genius, and he approached me. What he was really into was what he called the vintage tattoo designs, the stuff I painted for sailors and marines forty years ago. And so, to me, these were just iconic folk images, anyway. A lot of them were just things that were in the repertoire of American folk tattooing that I repainted. There are certain paintings of mine that I think, maybe I don't want this on a spoon set or a malt shaker. A lot of people in the tattoo community are furious with me for this, saying, "Ed Hardy is selling out." It's usually from young guys who are carrying some kind of torch, and I say, "You weren't even around, you don't even know what this shit was, and if I hadn't done what I'd done, you wouldn't know tattooing. Give me a break." These images have been out of the bag for a long time. And, Jesus Christ, I'm sixty-two, and I'm thrilled to get royalty checks. I've stopped tattooing, though I'm still mentoring my shop. I have a brilliant crew of people there. But for me not to have to tattoo, and to focus the majority of my time on my personal art—that to me is like my golden retirement.

BLVR: Someone told me they saw a picture of Elizabeth Taylor in a Don Ed Hardy cap.

DEH: Do you know [Asian/pop-culture magazine] *Giant Robot*? Martin Wong, one of the owners, emailed me recently. He'd been to a Burning Spear concert, and the lead singer had an Ed Hardy T-shirt on. Everyone is always telling me about sightings—so-and-so on TV, Hulk Hogan. I don't know anything about the fashion world, and I honestly don't know much about contemporary pop culture. I did get to meet Queen Latifah in the Ed Hardy store in L.A., and that was cool because I admire her.

I try to distance myself from it. Christian lives in that world, and he said, "We'll make you a big star, and you'll ride in limos and—" And I said, "No, you'll just leave me alone and send me the checks so I can paint and deal with my family and have my life." ★