Tattoo U
An ambitious multimedia project gets under the skin of students at Florida Atlantic University.

by Colleen Dougher
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Earlier this year, David Ullso heard from a friend that people on Florida Atlantic University’s Boca Raton campus were shooting photos and videos of students walking to share the stories behind their tattoos. Curious, the criminal justice and sociology major went to check it out. After learning about the project Stories on the Skin: Tattoo Culture at FAU, Ullso invited up his left sleeve for photographer Z. McCarthy-Koppisch and talked about his tattoo of a pink rose and a needle filled with a green substance. The image, he explained, represents the 18 years’ worth of treatments, including chemotherapy and intravenous immunoglobulin, he received for a lung condition caused by an unexpected immune response to a particular fungus.

“Needles were something I was always around, but also something how good something could still come out of it, which is juxtaposed by the blue rose.”

In late 2009, Jaffe, who recently retired but continues working on projects, teamed with Karen Leader, assistant professor of art history in FAU’s Department of Visual Arts and Art History, and McCarthy-Koppisch, a senior designer for FAU Libraries, to create a project around tattooed students.

Leader designed a 72-question survey titled “Tell Us What You Think About Ink” that included basic questions about the subject’s tattoos, gender, class, race and religion. The survey also asked the respondents if their tattoos make them feel special, discriminated against or regretful. Of the 871 respondents with tattoos, the top reason students cited for getting them was to commemorate a life event. This past February, Leader, McCarthy-Koppisch and Jonas McCarthy, a student majoring in fine and media studies, hit the main thoroughfares of the Boca Raton campus with a sign that read, “Show us your tattoo!” Their goal was to document students’ tattoos and the stories behind them. Leader asked questions Jonas Videbæk and McCarthy-Koppisch photographed, but in a way that focused more on the tattoos than the tattooed. “We didn’t want (the photographs) to be about the student,” McCarthy-Koppisch says. “We wanted it to be about the art of the tattoo.”

But the photographs, initially shot over the course of six months for archival purposes, evolved into Student Body Art: the exhibition part of Stories on the Skin, which opened May 21 at FAU’s Wimberly Library. “I knew McCarthy-Koppisch was an artist and a graduate of our program,” Leader says. “I wanted her to have an artistic role. When she proposed a photographic exhibition, I said, yes, but we needed to do more photo shoots and she needed to be more than a documentarian. So she started conceptualizing the photographs in the university setting, picking up bicycles, water bottles, soda machines and textbooks. The work now has this whole flavor of this being part of the university. These tattoos and their stories and the bodies are part of this culture.”

McCarthy-Koppisch says Stories on the Skin reveals much about FAU students and how perceptions of tattoos have changed over the years. “Twenty years ago, it was taboo to have a tattoo up and down your arm, and now, it’s more acceptable,” she says. “Not totally accepted.”

“I have tattoos all over my body,” she adds. “But you don’t see them in my business world because if I were to walk into a meeting with donors who are giving us a lot of money, they would look at me, even though I’m the head here. I look at that with all the tattoos.”

The books-on-bodies concept seems appropriate for the Jaffe Center, whose collection includes books artists have made from their arms, hands, tattoos and other materials. These aren’t books you’d read on a Kindle, which Jaffe argues does not represent the future of books. ‘Kindle is like having your product without something going into it,’ he says. ‘It’s like having a baby without sex, but where is the fun? So our books are fun, or they make you think a different way. We’re offering something more interesting, exciting and beautiful.

I don’t think the book is gone,” Jaffe adds. “The book is changing and needs to change in order to continue to exist.”

Z. McCarthy-Koppisch

Soledi Real, a graphic design student and one of McCarthy-Koppisch’s photographic subjects, says tattoo subjects “need to be more open there and open Stories on the Skin will help change negative views of it. She sees the work as a way to expose 25 percent of her body to her permanent collection “instead of having it up at my house, I just have it on my body,” she says.

Her collection includes a replica of an Audrey Kawasaki painting (“Hakone no 99”) and a lyric from the famous song “Paper Dolls” (“palm will not eat the water on flowers”). She carefully considers each collection, explaining, “Ultimately, it’s a bigger decision than getting married, because you can’t just get divorced; you can’t just erase it.”

De Real is one of 13 students who submitted written story about their tattoos and related experiences for the project. The plan, Leader says, is to workshop the stories into a series of unfinished and hold a poetry slam or coffeehouse-style performance. The event will be filmed and featured in a movie that will also include archival photographs and video work.

Leader has taken what could have been strictly an academic study of tattoos and established what she calls a “student-led creative project.”

“I’m an historian, so supposedly I’m supposed to write some book or long scholarly article about tattoo culture. And maybe I’ll do that. But I’ve always thought of this as a creative project,” she says. “I always imagined this was, ‘Yeah, we’ll gather some data and do some analysis.’ But I wanted to really treat the concept of the books on bodies and stories on skin seriously and really explore it.

Student Body Art will be on display through Aug. 18 at the Wimberly Library at Florida Atlantic University, 777 Glades Road, in Boca Raton. Visit Studentsbodyart.org.

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