

## Tattoos in American Visual Culture by Mindy Fenske

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Patricia E. 'Iolana (University of Glasgow)

I ought to begin by making a confession: I am a member of the community Mindy Fenske is critically evaluating in *Tattoos in American Visual Culture*. Fenske is intrigued by the stereotypical cultural stigmas pertaining to bodily aesthetics that have prevailed in American culture. Accordingly, Fenske begins *Tattoos in American Visual Culture* with a historical journey of the 'deviant' misnomer that continues to be readily applied to tattoo enthusiasts, tracing it back to the ancient Roman practice of tattooing criminals as an outward sign of their crimes against society. This practice continued in countries such as Australia, Russia and the Soviet Union (p. 15-16) thus concretizing the antiquated perception of tattoos as a signifier of social deviance. Fenske states:

The act of tattooing criminals, the continual cultural association between criminal bodies and tattooing, and the simultaneous belief that tattoos are the expression of the self, all eventually lead to the belief that tattooing itself is a sign of a criminal mind. (p.16)

Despite the discontinuation of this practice, this antiquated perception continued in the United States largely perpetuated by scholars and sociological investigations citing that prior to 1960 the groups of individuals associated with tattooing were relegated to the following categories: 'bikers, convicts, sailors, punks, and juvenile delinquents' (p.16). However, a significant shift occurred during the 1960s and 1970s as members of the following groups joined the tattoo subculture: New Age, ecology, feminism, middle-class men,

self-help groups, and adherents of newly emerging Goddess religion (p.17). This shift was significant in two ways. First, Fenske cites the writings of Margo DeMello who observed that

Middle-class America reinvented tattooing from a practice of desecration to one of decoration...tattooing was recast as a means to express one's identity and spirituality (as opposed to an expression of deviance). (p.56)

Secondly, Fenske notes that the academic approach to analyse these communities changed as there came a shift from largely historical, cultural anthropological and psychological modes of inquiry to more (though not exclusively so) ethnographic, sociological, and critical cultural approaches' (p. 17-18).

*Tattoos in American Visual Culture* also traces the various performance forums that are intrinsically connected with the tattoo culture in the United States. Fenske begins by examining the sideshow, freak show, and circus environments in which the tattooed body was exhibited. This performance environment was historically established on the borderlands between proper civilization and the fringes. This hinterland area has continued to be the location for sideshow venues, performers, and the member of the tattoo culture. Fenske notes that social class stratification is used to delineate who and what shall be considered as belonging to proper civilization. In this case, the permanent marking and bodily embellishment was a considerable factor:

Social class is assigned to a body, therefore, by how its visual performance enacts social norms of purity or pollution. Within the context of the late nineteenth century U.S. culture, physical exposure and conspicuous self-display became signs of lower-class delinquency. (p. 53)

During this time, there was a clear delineation between the ‘pure’ and the ‘polluted’ members of society. This hinterland continues to contemporary times in the form of the tattoo convention. Usually located on the borderlands of proper civilization, the tattoo convention segregates its participants from the general population in a reversal of social norms. For inside the tattoo convention, where bodily modifications are the norm rather than the exception, the visual performer is accepted as the ‘pure’ members of its society, while the un-inked or casual onlooker is seen as standing outside the norm and, even perhaps, ‘polluted’. Fenske argues that contemporary use of tattoos in America has ‘the performative capacity to actively disrupt and destabilize social and cultural norms’ (p. 4).

Nowadays, tattoos permeate American popular culture. Fenske evaluates a number of advertising campaigns which prominently display tattoos. She begins with analyses of three significant campaigns. In her first analysis, Fenske cites a Tampax print advertisement in the early twenty-first century which utilized the post-World War II icon Rosie the Riveter. In this advert, ‘Tampax was there’ (p. 85) is prominently tattooed on Rosie’s forearm. This advertisement is compared to the decidedly masculine Marlboro Man of the 1950s whose initial appearance in print advertising depicted him lighting a cigarette and brandishing a tattoo of an American Bald Eagle prominently displayed on the back of his hand (p. 88). In a more recent advertisement for UnJammer Lammy (a rock and roll based video game) a woman’s bare torso is depicted with the tattoo ‘THERE’S A NEW ROCKSTAR IN TOWN’ tattooed around a pierced female navel (p. 96). These companies are not alone in their use of tattooed bodies in contemporary print advertisements. Design houses such as ‘Mossimo, Calvin Klein, Guess, and Polo have all

utilized tattooed models in their magazine advertising’ (p. 76). This marked shift is significant as it denotes that tattoos have now become what Fenske calls ‘faddish signifiers of counterculture status, rebellion, and sexuality’ (p. 99).

In her closing analysis, Fenske examines the use of tattoos by ‘modern primitives’ who seek to modify their bodies through a ‘supernatural agent’ (p. 118) or as an expression of one’s ‘interior subjectivity’ (p. 119). These ‘modern primitives’ may be tattooed to denote tribal community membership or to claim spiritual individuality. In direct opposition of the origins of tattoos, a contemporary tattoo collector now ‘controls and assigns meaning’ (p. 56) asserting one’s individuality, identity, spirituality, or counterculture status.

In writing this monograph, Fenske is addressing both an academic and non-academic audience. Her analysis begins with a ‘theoretical account of agency through performance ... [and] how agency emerges within specific discursive and image formations’ (p. 4) by examining the rubric of performance. This analytical section is, perhaps, the only challenging portion for the non-academic to understand, and may be perceived as a minor flaw in her presentation. The remainder of the text is accessible and wonderfully organised utilising a plethora of examples to demonstrate how the aesthetic perception of tattoos and the tattoo culture has shifted from deviance to social acceptance in the United States.