

Austin's Tattoo Artists: Southside Tattoo

By Madeline Hollern

Within a trendy stretch of shops on South Congress, Southside Tattoo sits ready to pen permanent works of bodily art wherever your heart desires. The light-blue parlor full of friendly employees has been inking Austinites at their Congress location for four years now, earning a reputation as one of the most popular, personable tattoo parlors in town. On a peaceful Saturday afternoon, Southside Tattoo owner Chris Gunn and employee Michael Norris discuss art, their jobs and the perks and pleasures of life as Austin tattoo artists.

Chris Gunn

Not all business owners can

dress for work in Dickies and black t-shirts. But for Chris Gunn, owner of Southside Tattoo, clothes are just another art form for him to explore. At the moment, Gunn stands to the left of a blonde female customer with his tattoo gun pointed to her upper back. As she grits her teeth into a wincing smile, Gunn grins and shifts his shaggy brown hair away from his blue eyes. This, after all, is his life. And for Gunn, life is art.

Becoming an artist is in Gunn's genes. The son of two art teachers, Gunn attended the High School for the Performing Visual Arts in Houston, where he grew up, and later the North Carolina School of Art. When

Gunn moved to Austin about 14 years ago, he entered the world of tattooing after drawing beautiful tattoos for his friends that had less-than-stellar end results.

"I got sick of seeing my friends with crappy tattoos," Gunn says. "I had designed them, but the artists really screwed them up." Beyond his frustration, Gunn sought a career in which he could have the freedom to work in a laid-back atmosphere. "I wanted to be able to look however I looked, and dress how-

ever I wanted — not have to wear a suit and tie," he says.

Like many aspiring tattoo artists, Gunn learned his craft through an apprenticeship. "Once you get an apprenticeship, you work for the master. You pay the master. You're his personal slave," Gunn says shaking his head with

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Photo by Callie Richmond

Chris Gunn, owner of Southside Tattoo on South Congress, has been tattooing Austinites for more than a decade.

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Tattoos

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a laugh. "When you first start off, you mess all the tattoos up. But you learn, and it's a high — there's nothing more exciting than seeing someone's tattoo turn out better than you thought."

Apparently, a lot of his tattoos turn out that way. Gunn won Best Tattoo Artist in Austin in *The Austin Chronicle's* 2004 and 2005 polls. After more than a decade in the business, the affable tattoo artist has established his own vivid and color-

ful style. "I'm like the bright, bold color guy," he says. He also likes to take Japanese images and modernize them into his self-proclaimed "Neo-Japanese" style. As he speaks, Gunn tattoos the image of Mark Ryden's "Mercurial Water," an appropriately colorful image of a woman surrounded by animals. When asked about the best tattoo he has ever created, he replies, "The one I'm doing right now. It's always the one I'm doing right now. You're only as good as your last tattoo."

Michael Norris

On the opposite end of Southside Tattoo, tattoo artist Michael Norris tapes a piece of gauzy purple paper to his leg as he seats his next client. Like Gunn, Norris' creative tendencies are in his blood. "It runs in the family," Norris says of art. "I've always been an artist. I paint, I blow glass and I make art out of anything I can get my hands on." From the sketches and paintings on his wall to the glass-blown scorpion sculpture on his left, his point is affirmed. But tattooing remains his favorite art form, he says, "because it's the hardest."

Norris has worked at

Southside Tattoo for about a year and a half, but he has been a tattoo artist since 1995. He grew up outside Chicago but has worked all over the world, tattooing everywhere from Florida to Germany to Thailand. Right now, he surveys an image of a blue, black and yellow angler fish that he is about to ink on his client's neck. "Do you want it as big as we can get it?" he asks. She nods. "That's my girl," he says with a wink of his blue eyes.

Norris has a strong but innocent personality that makes him easy to trust. He enjoys psychology and wants to disprove ste-

reotypes about tattoo parlors and their artists. "A stereotype is a stereotype. People say things to us like 'Wow, I'm surprised you're friendly. Or clean cut. Or don't do drugs.' A lot of people are very intimidated by us until we disarm them with our friendliness."

At present, Norris has 45-50 percent of his body covered in tattoos. And like many tattoo aficionados, he wants more. He says the process of getting a tattoo is intense, and it heals people. "This is sociology," he notes. "I'm as much a counselor as anything. This is not just pictures; it's cathartic. It's art therapy."

Norris specializes in making tattoos that fit people and play up their underlying bone and muscle structure. He adores the beauty and art of everyday life. In a red box on his wall, he has the bones of two Austin bats displayed with their wing bones outstretched. He found the dead bats on the street one day, and he put them "into a 32-ounce jug of dirt for six to eight weeks until they were clear as a whistle." He says he is fascinated by the bones because they are both beautiful and immortal a permanent art. It's no surprise he works in a profession that produces the same effect. ♣