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You could say that Kian Forreal has been on a journey since he began tattooing 14 years ago, a journey in search of a depth and an authenticity that many never seek and which eludes those that look for it. Kian started out tattooing in street shops in his native Canada and he could have stayed in street shops, as many do. But at some point, something threw a switch in him and drove him to take his tattooing to another level. Since then, he has travelled the world, working and sharing knowledge with some of the best tattooists around. He is currently in Sydney, Australia but, as with all those of a peripatetic nature, his wanderings may not be over for ever. The journey continues...



kian's girlfriend linnea shows off his tattoo work on this month's cover



“If someone offers you a critique, it means they care about you and your work... If The Dutchman says to me my work sucks, I love it! It makes me go away and work even harder”



Kian Forreal

LIFE IS A JOURNEY

“Something – I don’t really know what – pushed me to set my sights high. I left Canada and went to Europe where I worked at Neil Ahern’s studio Inkadelic in Ibiza. He took me under his wing and gave me... well, not an apprenticeship as such but let’s just say he sorted me out! Amongst other things, he taught me to make good needles. Once I could do that my work really moved on. Every artist should be able to make needles! It gives you a real understanding of how the ink goes into the skin. Sure, I buy them in now, as most people do, but if you know how to make them, you know if you are buying good ones. Also if you run out of the bought-in ones, you can still carry on tattooing. I think tattooers should be able to make inks too and take a machine apart, cut a spring etc. Kids that are buying all their equipment from China, in the long run their lack of knowledge will be to their detriment. The thing that made me realise I could take my tattooing up a level was having someone believe in me. The first person was probably Neil – although I don’t think he believed in me at first. He really kicked my ass! But I believed that he believed in me, if you know what I mean. He really helped me so much. And all the other great tattooists that I have worked with – they have all believed in me too. People like Henning Jorgensen, The Dutchman, Aaron Bell, Troy Denning, Jason Kundell, Greg Orié, Trevor McStay. They took me into their shops and their homes and gave me so much help and knowledge. I’d like to pay tribute to them.

Those guys must have hundreds of people wanting to work with them. What was it that they saw in you, do you think?

I don't know. I'm just a regular guy. Tattooing isn't about the lifestyle for me. It's about working hard and learning all you can in the time you are here. I try to have a wide world view. I think a lot and I read a lot. I hope I learn from my mistakes, although I like to make them two or three times just to make sure I have really learnt the lesson! I think of myself as young and inquisitive... one day perhaps I will be old and wise.

I try to hang out with older dudes as much as I can – the ones who have been in the trade for many years – because that's who you can learn from. A guy who has been tattooing a few years, who has never made a needle, who sends his machines away to be tuned or, worse still, just buys a new one when the old one goes out of tune – what are you going to learn from him? Maybe some fancy design ideas but I can figure out the creative stuff for myself. I want to learn the deep knowledge that only comes with many years of experience.

Does it take confidence to work with and maybe take criticism from artists you admire?

You know, there is nothing worse than showing your work to someone you really respect and they say 'Yeah, yeah, that's nice. That's really good.' You don't learn anything from that. Sure, it strokes your ego and that's what a lot of people are after when they show their work around. But if that experienced artist says to you 'Your wind bars are shit... have you tried doing them like this?' Gold dust! That's when you really learn something. It's easy to get hurt by



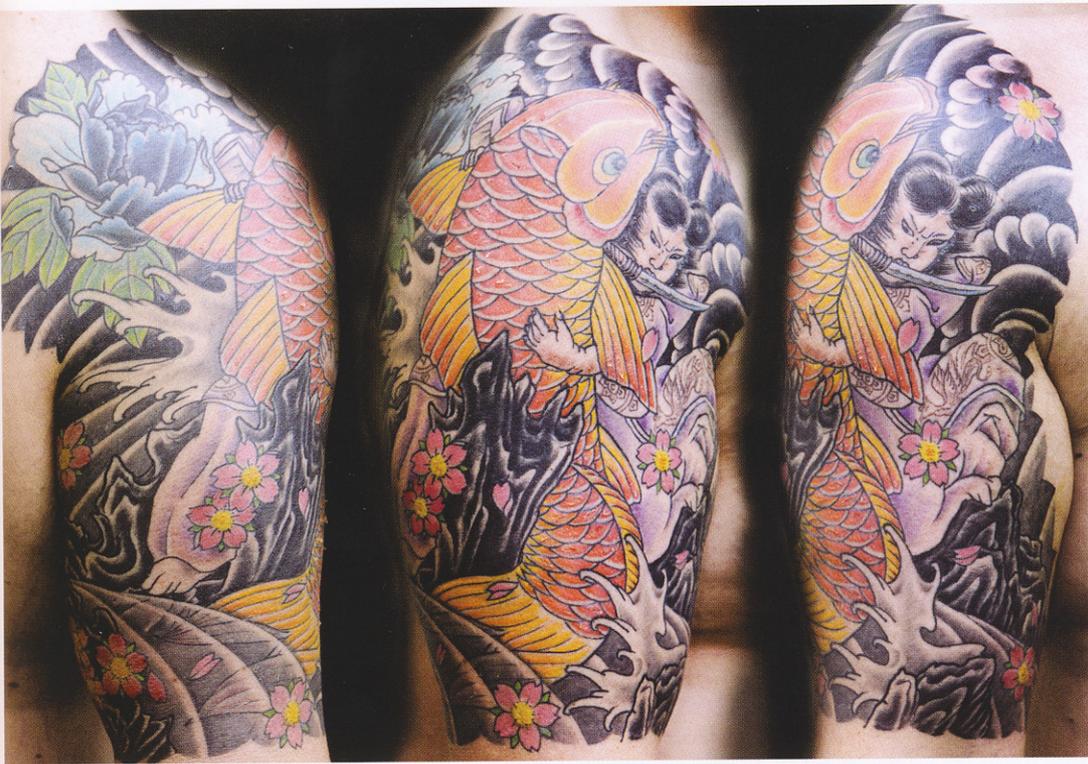
comments like that and people can get very defensive about their work but if someone offers you a critique, it means they care about you and your work. Now I love getting criticism. If The Dutchman says to me my work sucks, I love it! It makes me go away and work even harder.

What is the best piece of advice you were given in the early part of your career?

You've got to know your limits when you are just starting out. Stick to the small stuff. People who do back pieces and free-hand sleeves when they really should be doing just little stuff... they need to stop what they are doing and take a step back. If someone sees a Horiyoshi backpiece and tries to copy it, but without the depth of knowledge needed to tattoo in that way, they are only going to do what their inexperienced brain thinks it sees in that tattoo.

The worst thing for tattooing is bad tattoos – especially bad, big tattoos. Most members of the public don't buy tattoo magazines. They see tattoos on friends and co-workers. If they





see a shitty tattoo and think that's what tattoos look like, that's maybe ten people who will never get a tattoo.

Is there a way to minimise the number of bad tattoos being done?

Artists have got to speak out and offer advice and criticism. If you see someone doing something wrong, say something. I sure as hell do! We all have an obligation to make the tattooing profession the best it can be. You've got to stop worrying about what people will think of you. Tattooing is not a popularity contest. People will thank you for it. The guys who helped me in the early days, I hated them at the time, but I thanked them later because I could see how much they had helped me.

Do you believe in any sort of official regulation or training for tattooists?

No, absolutely not. I think we can operate at a higher level than that and be more self-regulatory. The last thing we want to do is involve any sort of government regulating body because they will always take it down to the lowest common denominator and also use regulation as a way to extract cash from us.

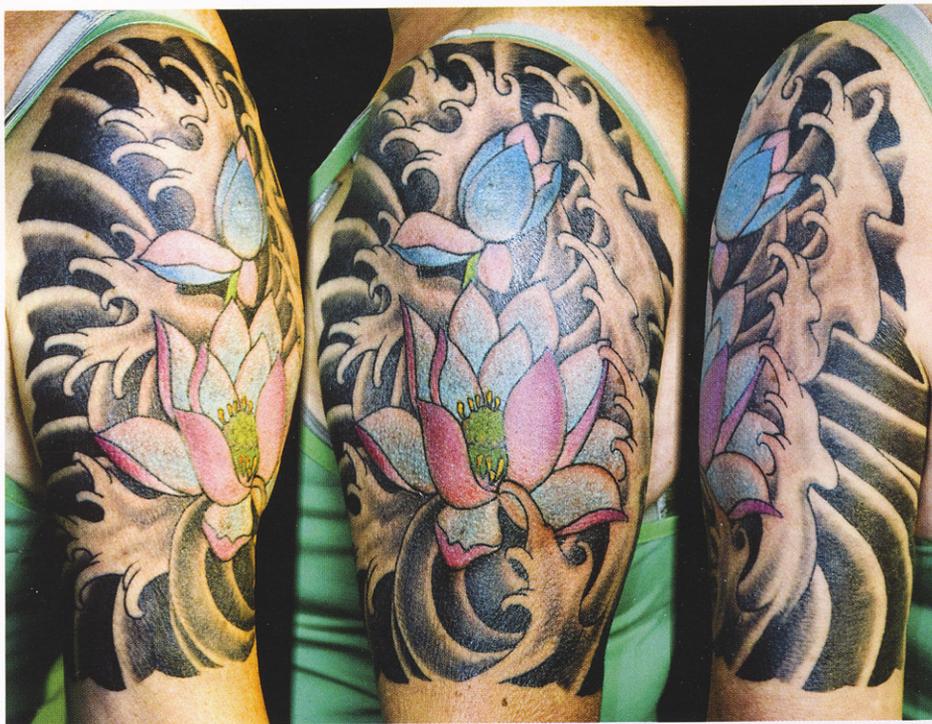
Are you optimistic that this won't happen?

No! I'm probably being idealistic but I can dream, can't I?

What about the future of tattooing as a whole. How do you feel about that?

I'm just amazed at how quick people are to 'sell out'. Whether it is doing a TV show, a range of clothing or putting a tattoo design on an iPod or a mobile phone... it's just going to reach saturation level and tattooing will become a joke. For example, Japanese tattoo designs are an awesome artform, steeped in history and tradition, but if you put a koi on an MP3 player, it takes away their power and





mystery. I think people who are serious about their love of tattooing need to slow down a little on that stuff. The problem is there is only so much cash you can make by tattooing because a person can only work so many hours in the day, do so many tattoos and charge so much per hour.

Here's something for all the kids who want to be tattooists to think about – if you want a job that is cool, glamorous and gets you the girls (or guys!) maybe tattooing isn't for you. It involves working a lot of long hours, dealing with a lot of smelly feet and armpits and it won't make you rich. It is also hard on those who share your life. It can make you grumpy and turn you into a bit of a control freak.

So what's the good side to being a tattooist?

I love the fact that there is never-ending room for growth and creativity. If you look at someone's tattooing, it is a very good indication of where that person's mindset and self discipline is at. If they do good, clean work, chances are they are a rounded and well-adjusted individual.

Are you rounded and well-adjusted?

I'm working on it! I have done a lot of work on myself in the last five years or so and I think my tattoo work has improved because of that. The thing is, you have to be confident that you are doing good work

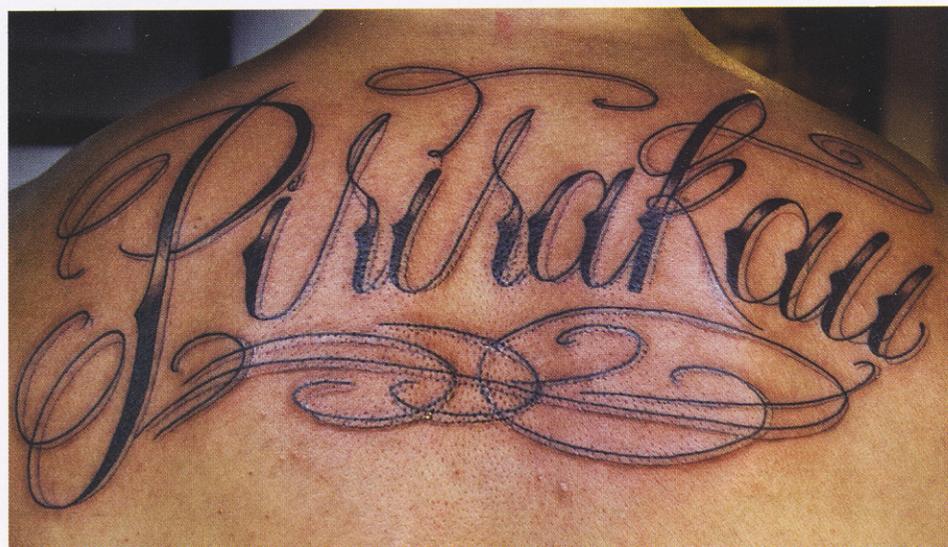




but you can't think you are better than everyone else because then it becomes arrogance. When I am actually tattooing, I try to do that Zen thing – 'to be of no mind'. As soon as you think 'Oh, I'm doing great here', you are bound to fuck up. It's like the downhill skier who thinks 'This is going really well'... watch him fall over at that point!

You have been moving around a lot during the last few years. Do you plan to stop in one place for a while now?

I haven't spent more than six months anywhere for the last couple of years. I did about 100,000km in 2007. I worked in New York, Toronto, Vancouver, Seattle, San Francisco, Helsingor and Barcelona. I need to stay put for a while... and count my air miles! I plan to stay in Sydney now, putting into practice all the things I have learnt from the artists I have worked with. If I feel I am stagnating, I will move on again. I guess I will know when to stop moving around altogether but it's not yet. Anyway, part of my whole mantra is not to think about the future. I like to keep so busy that I don't think about my career. I don't really plan ahead. I'm just going where it takes me. As long as I can keep progressing... I've seen too many people, in whatever profession, who have a bit of success and stop progressing. It's like actors who make a couple of good movies and then they stagnate. They party, they spend their money on models and



cocaine, they get fat and you never hear from about them again. Others will make good movies and then push themselves into doing other interesting projects or they will direct or go back to the theatre.

In tattooing I look at guys like Henning – 28 years in tattooing and he is still hungry for it. He is still pushing himself, learning new things and his work just gets better all the time. It's all about personal and professional growth.

And what about your clients? What do tattoos do for them personally?

They give them power and confidence. Tattoos can be armour or make-up, camouflage or decoration. They are a lot of things but mostly it all comes down to making people feel they have taken control over part of their lives, over how they look. We are given the body we have to live in but we can choose how it looks by getting it tattooed. I love tattooing for what it can do for people.

You've got to like people to be a good tattooist and you've got to want them to have the right tattoos for them. There is a lot more to being a tattooist than putting ink into skin. You have to make people feel at ease and wanting to come back for more. You are doing something quite intimate with them, so it has to be as relaxing an experience as possible for them.

We owe it to our customers to do the best possible work for them. Tattooing is powerful and precious and it satisfies some very deep needs in us. Nobody owns tattooing. It just is what it is and I love it. I really hope there can be some sort of community effort to keep it healthy. Without sounding too hippy-dippy about it, I truly believe that if you do tattooing in the right spirit, if you are good to the tattoo gods, they will be good to you.





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