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THE JEWEL OF THE CROWN

# REAL TALK

B-REAL EXCLUSIVE

**PLUS**  
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KIAN FORREAL

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SKATE OR DIE









# KIAN FORREAL

Sipping green tea and enjoying the Friday night haze that is Sydney's Surry Hills, Kian Forreal clocks me from a tiny café on the other side of Crown Street. We eloquently introduce ourselves and sit for a conversation that is part tattoos, part Yakuza and full grade no-bullshit.

INTERVIEW **CRISTIAN DIAZ** PHOTOGRAPHY **JOHN CHURCHILL**

**Tattoos... how did you get into them?**

Well, just by getting tattooed. Actually that's not true. My dad had tattoos so I always saw his and I'd also draw tattoos on kids with markers when I was young. So, I mean, I was drawing stuff on kids when I was 7 or 8 years old and making transfers on wax paper, using magic markers and shit, just trying to figure it out. When I was old enough to sort of figure it out I made homemade tattoos. I tattooed myself and a few other kids. After that I was kind of hooked.

**A kid inking kids in the hood! There must have been some really pissed off mums!**

Yeah I'd kind of get in trouble for that...

**Tattooist or artist, which defines you?**

I came from the street, you know, I was more of a tattooer before becoming an artist. Now it's like a career choice where kids from College with Fine Arts degrees are getting into tattooing as an artistic endeavour. Back then, man, this is you know late 80s, early 90s it was pure street, all punk rock and shit. The artwork aspect was maybe third or fourth down the list of why you got tattooed.

**Did you possess the artistic talent from the beginning or has it been a craft that you've trained over time?**

With drawing, it's like going to the gym. It's a muscle that you have to be flexing; you have to keep working on it. I didn't really know how to do that when I was young because no one really taught me. I had the technical ability to put ink in the skin but the drawing bit, man it took a lot of years without someone properly showing me. It took a while stumbling in the dark figuring out how to do it.

**Kian Forreal and Japanese style, when and why is this collaboration so strong?**

In the last eight years maybe, or nine. It was me looking for something that had meaning to it. I look at people that get little stuff on their shoulders and I find it completely meaningless. I've done that. If I were still doing that then I might as well just fucking sweep floors or flip burgers and shit but with the Japanese stuff and the big pieces it was much more of something that I could believe in. I could create something with a whole arm and a whole back and there was something behind the design. It wasn't just arbitrary bullshit, that's what inspires me, when there's something deeper to it. And it's something that really belongs to a certain tradition, it's authentic, it's real. It's not like a fad.

**I take it you don't do Mickey Mouse tats?**

Nah man!

**Looking at some of your back pieces I can't help but think of an underworld Yakuza dude from a 90's Wesley Snipes movie, do you know much about these suited-out gangsters?**

The Yakuza came from two different things in Japan hundreds of years ago. These were basically the underworld figures of gambling gangs and market vendors, which later evolved into what it is today. The guys were getting heavily tattooed to show their devotion to their gang and the lifestyle they lived. This was all mainly happening in the pleasure quarters of Japan.

**So are pinkies still getting cut off these days?**

I think there's still a huge underworld that no one ever sees that's totally Yakuza. ►

But you'll never meet or even know any of these guys' names unless you're part of that world.

**I spoke in the previous issue with another Inner vision artist, Rhys Gordon, and his thoughts on tattoos gaining popularity is definitely a positive. How do you feel about tats being one of the latest trends?**

It's a positive. But it's not just because it's trendy, it's because the quality's good. You have to look at why they're popular now. Ten years ago tattoos sucked and there were very few people who were doing good tattoos.

**Because?**

Just shit work, you know maybe guys weren't artists or just didn't put the energy into making a nice piece of art with tattooing. But now you've got good quality stuff on people walking down the street and others are seeing it. Most of my clients now aren't gangsters or jailbirds; these are guys that own businesses and have money to pay for quality. It's kind of like parachuting. Nobody wanted to do it when you couldn't steer the fucking thing but now that you can steer the parachute practically anywhere there are heaps more people skydiving. It's the same sort of thing.

**Are the tats that client's now request also evolving?**

Most of my clients are heading in the direction of getting full pieces for their first time. Like yesterday, I've just booked in some guy's first session, which will be a full back piece from neck to ass.

**Reality shows like Miami and L.A. Ink - your thoughts?**

Yeah, these TV shows are now showing good quality work as well, so the regular guy is now like "Fuck, I can relate to that. That's a nice tattoo, I want one of those." It's crept into the consciousness of society for sure and it's the right time for it.

**And what's it take to become an AMAZING tattooist?**

OBSESSION! That and a lot of other different factors. Tattooing is one part of being a tattooer but another part is being a good sales person. You have to be a people person, you know, you have to be able to sit and talk to people for sometimes 7 to 8 hours a day and entertain them, even if you don't like them, you know. And that's work. Plus you've got to make people who are scared feel comfortable.

**Are those the only glammers of dealing with clients?**

You've got to deal with people's fucking blood up to your arm sometimes, you've got to deal with some people who smell and all other sorts of shit. So being able to draw a nice tattoo and translating it from a drawing on to the skin is all nice but everyone forgets that you also deal with the client that's going to be sitting there for hours at a time.

**So basically just being a great artist won't cut it as a great tattooist if you don't have the people skills?**

Yeah people skills but lots of artists cannot tattoo for shit. You look at their art and you think, "that guy can really draw." But then you see their tattoos and they suck. A lot of guys can hit a punching bag really well but you put them in a ring and they get knocked out in 10 seconds. You know what I mean?

**Dudes that wouldn't bust a grape in a fruit fight...**

There's guys who can train like motherfuckers but you put them in the Olympics and they fucking choke. I think it's that special quality, and I'm not saying that I'm special or anything, but just that special thing where I'm not the greatest artist but I do what I can with what I have and I would try to push myself. If you can draw, tattoo, be good with people and show up on time then you're on track to becoming a real good tattooist. Man a lot of tattooers don't even show up on

time and are just fucking lazy. They don't have their artwork done and are ~~always~~ out chasing bitches and getting drunk.

**They're easy like Sunday morning...**

Man when I came into the shop five years ago it was a little more mellow, but now everyone here (Innervision) works 7, 8 hours a day, everyone's on time, everyone's got their artwork done. No one draws on shift. I work six and a half days a week, and a couple of nights too. I mean its like fucking full-on!

**What's the secret to your work ethic? Ginseng tea?**

At the end of the day it's like I can either work while I'm in my prime or I can just fuck around. I can fuck around when I get old, I'd rather work hard now and set the tone for myself. I mean if you're lazy now in your 30s and 40s then when you hit 50 it's too late. What else are you going to do, right? I mean I'm pretty much married; I have an awesome chick so I don't need to go out and be chasing pussy. I've drunk enough liquor and smoked enough dope for a lifetime in my 20s, so I like working now. I like doing my thing and putting good tattoos on people and making them happy.

**Do you still enjoy the process of getting inked?**

Yeah I still like getting tattoos man. I've got both my arms, my back and some stuff on my legs. But I haven't really gotten a lot of big work in a long time, mostly because I've been travelling and working for about 10 years on the road.

**Really, in what countries did you make a living?**

Well I've worked in Denmark, Norway, England, Italy, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and France. I'd do a few weeks here and there and just keep moving on. Like I'd go maybe March or April to work all the northern countries. I'd come back after the summer, hang out for a month in Spain and then I'd go down to Thailand, then work in Australia, back to Thailand and then go back to Europe for their summer. Seriously man, I don't think I saw a winter in seven years!

**Ha-ha so you were the endless summer sub-contractor. Sounds like the life!**

Just do your tattoos, take your money and split, easy. No responsibility. But you really get sick of living out of a backpack for fucking years man, you know? two pairs of shoes, two pairs of jeans and five T shirts.

**From all those years on the open road and sea I'm sure you could tell me some fucked up stories all night long. But from all that whats been the most memorable experience for you?**

Ha-ha yeah man I've seen some shit but um I don't know dude, I've got a bunch. The best experience I've probably gotten is working and learning from some amazing artists. I remember when me and my girl drove from Canada to New York City and I worked for like three weeks in Manhattan with some fucking awesome dudes. We continued across to San Francisco, then Seattle and all the way back to Vancouver, we worked with amazing artists in every city.

**Any particular guys that stand out for you?**

John the Dutchman and Henning Jorgensen. Yeah I was really fortunate to be able to work with both those guys in the same period of time. Honestly I wouldn't be where I am without those two, I owe the Dutchman and Henning so much. The other guy too I worked with here in Australia is Trevor McStay. I worked with him really early on.

**Where did you see the best work?**

Probably New York City. There's just a good vibe there and some really good tattooing. I mean if you think about it you've got like 7 million people in a city so you really have to strive and push yourself to make it there cause if you're shit then you're not going to make it. ▶



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**Considering all the different scenes that you've been a part of now, how do you compare the rest of the World's tattoo scene to that of Australia's?**

Just here it's really separate. In Europe there's a lot of interaction as you have heaps of international conventions in all the major cities, whereas here that doesn't happen. There's also a lot of underground politics in tattooing here. The way it is here is how it used to be in America probably 20, 25 years ago. Here you just don't have the population. In America it was controlled by the underground until tattoo shops started opening everywhere so that eventually died out.

**Are you inspired yet to open up your own shop?**

I'm happy having no responsibility. I do my job. You know, I want to make good tattoos and the only way you change tattoos is by doing good tattoos. A lot of these guys they want to write books and throw conventions and have two shops. You look at the guys who do that and 9 times out of 10 you can see the quality of their work going down. As the more projects they take on their work suffers. I don't want to be known for the great convention I threw or how much money I made or my 10 artists at my three shops. I'll be known for doing good tattoos.

**Keeping it simple, yeah nice... So is this your dream job?**

Yeah, life's good, man. I work hard for it. I didn't have it handed to me so my life is definitely what I've made it. I'm doing what I want to be doing. It's not like I got stuck on a side road and I'm just content. I'm doing exactly what I want to do.

**Even though you're an accomplished tattoo artist do you still get knob-jockey requests for random tats? I've heard stories of guys getting the bottom of their eyeballs done and random shit!**

I say no to people at least 10 times a day, you know what I mean? I don't tattoo hands or faces or necks generally speaking. I think it lowers your stock in life to be that explicit with your tattoos. In the Japanese tradition, tattoos are a private thing, so a lot of the guys that have full bodied suits you'll never see them, they don't wear T shirts, only long-sleeve. It's a very special occasion where they pull them out and so it's not about being flagrant.

**So it's always your call regardless how much they want to pay you for a piece?**

I'm not a whore. If I don't like it I don't do it. I'm pretty straight with people. The last thing you want is me tattooing something on you that I'm not into, that for 20 hours I'm just like fuck, I can't wait for this to be done. You don't want that. I'll just become another guy taking your fucking money and I don't want to be that guy.

**The most frustrating aspect of being a tattoo artist?**

Not enough time in the day.

**What about Koi Fish scales? Are you sick of the sight of them yet?**

Koi Fish are easy dude. Dragons have a lot of scales. When you have a day when you're doing like 7 hours of filling in scales it becomes very tedious but no one else is going to do it for me.

**So what can a potential client expect from your service?**

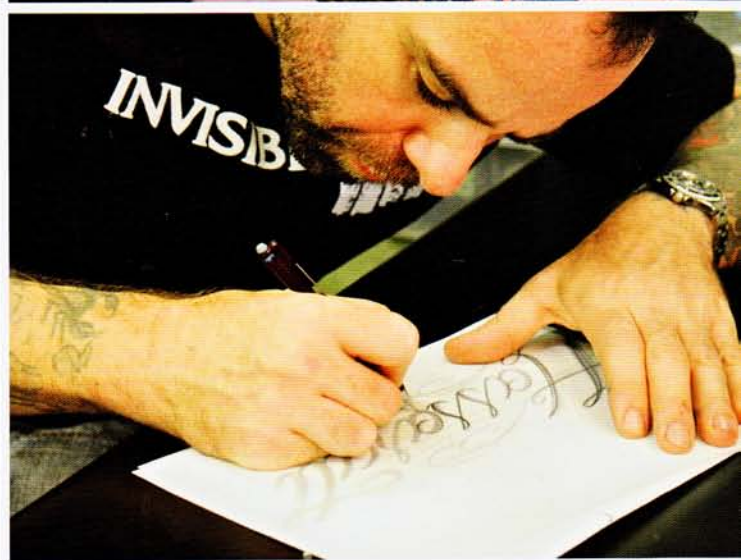
If they're cool with me they'll get exactly what they're looking for and better.

**Final words of inspiration for the next generation of Kian's?**

Ha-ha that's a tough one. Don't ask for anyone to teach you to tattoo until you're heavily tattooed. Don't go in there with your little drawings and a couple of tiny tats of the Southern Cross on your fucking arm going "Teach me". Get a fucking couple of sleeves first.

**Earn your stripes...**

You have to know what you're getting into. It's a whole thing. People want the glory of going into battle without doing the training. Don't be a weekend warrior. ■



For more information on Kian visit [kianforreal.com](http://kianforreal.com) and [innervisiontattoo.com.au](http://innervisiontattoo.com.au) or call (02) 9361 4376





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