

On the cutting edge

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Melbourne model Nadyne, who goes by the professional name Kitty Elixir, has an intricate scar design on her stomach of an endless knot. The scarring, which she had done a month ago at Third Eye Tattoo studio in Fitzroy, was performed for spiritual reasons, she says. A Buddhist symbol, the knot represents the interweaving of "the spiritual path, the flowing of time and the movement within that which is eternal", she says.

Nadyne, 29, began modifying her body at the age of 18 when she had her first piercings done to her nose and nipple. "The whole body modification scene is intriguing," she says.

"I have quite an extensive range of tattoos and a lot of piercings on my body and I guess scarification was the next step. The more I started to get into it, the more I learned about it, and it opened up my mind to new possibilities."

The scar design on her stomach cost \$150 and the procedure took about 2½ hours.

Timb Wilton, a body modifier at Third Eye, says the process of having scarification done is just as important to some as the outcome, and the pain involved is sometimes seen as enhancing the significance of the process. Wilton, who has scarred about a dozen customers since first working with the scalpel on a friend's forearm about two years ago, says his own experience getting scarred pushed him beyond his comfort level.

It took him about four hours to cut the design of a Borneo tribesman

into his thigh. "I decided at midday that day that I was going to do it and I had to keep pushing myself until I started doing it at 9 o'clock at night. The first couple of cuts hurt more because I hadn't quite gotten used to the sensation, and I decided about an hour in that the design was almost too big for me to finish in one go," he says.

"It was pretty traumatic, actually; I almost passed out at one point, and my friend who was taking the photographs had to help me out because I started going a bit shaky and went completely white."

Although scarification has been linked to circles such as the S&M scene, Sheringham says he isn't surprised by any of the clients he has fronting up to inquire about getting cut.

"The fact of the matter is that the types of people getting scarification done are very diverse," he says. "There are younger people, older people, people in white-collar jobs and people in blue-collar jobs. When somebody comes in, it's like, 'Oh yeah, you work in an office? Whatever.' "

Castle says the internet is playing a part in making scarification more accessible. Scarification images and videos populate platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, MySpace, Flickr and blogs, and the hit rates on websites such as YouTube demonstrate that scarification is attracting its share of attention and curiosity.

The technology is also providing forums to connect like-minded people to discussions about body art and modification, and the internet enables fans to inhabit the scarification world from the comfort of their own homes.

"I think there is little doubt that exposure to these images and stories makes people more aware of them, more aware of what can be done and thus more likely to pursue them," Castle says.

Wilton says he uses the internet as a gateway to the body modification world for a number of reasons.

"If I do something that I'm particularly proud of, I'll publish it on somewhere like bmezine.com and people can have a look at it, and I use it frequently to look up other people's work to see where they're taking it," he says.

"It's like when people started doing flesh removal (skin peeling). That came about probably six years ago; somebody put a picture on the internet and people started replicating it and it was a learning curve for everyone."

This year, 12,000 visitors went to the Sydney Body Art Expo to check out body art galleries and watch 130 artists in action. Scarification practitioners occupied a number of booths.

Los Angeles body modifier Luna Cobra, who did his first scarification piece in the United States 16 years ago, says he has always seen scarification as an artistic outlet. "I do a lot of art and this is just one of my mediums," he says. "I love the idea of helping my client through their own personal experience and how they want to express themselves, but the underlying issue for me is about the art."

The curator of Melbourne's Outre Gallery, Gemma Jones, says not every scarification practitioner can lay claim to being an artist.

"I think art is all about intent, and if the intention is to turn the body into some sort of artwork, then I think it is," she says. "I think in a lot of instances, scarification is going to be some sort of cultural discourse that's separate to art, but if your intention is to do it as art, that's when it's art. And I think art can be any level of visual communication."

Cobra's line of work also involves, among other things, filing down people's ears into sharp points, injecting their eyeballs with tattoo ink to turn the whites into different colours and splitting their tongues into halves — the image of one of his customers lying on the workbench with long cuts and blood trickling all over her back would make a fitting promo shot for a splatter flick.

Macquarie University associate professor Nikki Sullivan, an authority on body modification, says the practice raises lots of issues around individuals' autonomy over their bodies and what it signifies when people choose certain types of body modification.

"I think if you're talking about people cutting up their arms at home, then we read those scars as signifying something totally different," she says. "We read those scars as signs of mental disorder, whereas we might read something that looks more artistic as something that we wouldn't necessarily choose ourselves, but nevertheless as a valid type of body modification."

As for Nadyne, her next appointment at the tattoo shop is already booked. "Body art seems to change a person; you get an attitude because of what you're wearing on your skin.

"I think the older I get and the more I get, the more decisive I get about what ink and scars and piercings I want — and the more comfortable I feel about myself. I guess I've grown into my art and myself through all this experience."

And the rules are ... there aren't any

UNDER Victorian laws, scarification practitioners do not need to be accredited or to attain a set level of experience before cutting someone.

Nor are there any provisions to stop them performing scarification on customers who are intoxicated, insufficiently informed to give consent or unfit to give consent.

Victoria's shadow attorney-general, Robert Clark, says if there is evidence of emerging or growing problems relating to scarification, the legal regime needs to be reviewed.

"Scarification is a procedure that has serious and irreversible consequences akin to tattooing," he said, "and in instances like that you want to make sure that there's properly informed consent and that people do know what they're letting themselves in for and that the people who perform the procedures are able to perform them safely."

A 2005 submission by the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists to the South Australian Parliament select committee on tattooing and body piercing raised points pertinent to scarification.

The submission said many people engaged in these procedures during transition periods in their lives and in times when their desire for belonging increased; it identified the "young, marginalised, traumatised and mentally ill".