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Life

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A tattoo too far: Is it art or an embarrassment?

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It might be the name of a former flame etched on the skin or the effects of ageing but for some people, tattoos are a matter of regret. What do you do when love fades but the ink stays?

By Clive Hopkins.

Steel Lotus Body Arts in Sydney's Darlinghurst looks more like a slick design studio than a stereotypical tattoo parlour. It's here 29-year-old Dean Carlyle and his colleagues etch art onto skin to satisfy their client's need for fashion, bravado or decoration.

However, now that tattoos are as likely to be hidden under a businessman's Paul Smith shirt as a biker's leather jacket, tattooists like Carlyle say half their customers have tattoos they would rather be rid of. "Fifty per cent of our customers have tattoos they regret, often in a position that doesn't complement the body," says Carlyle. "They might have gone to a street shop, chosen a picture straight off the wall, stuck it in the middle of their arm and it's too small or badly done. They were probably drunk, so they don't like it any more. They ask if I can go over it and redo it but usually I have to tell them to get it lasered before it can be reworked."

Enter removalists such as Melbourne cosmetic surgeon Dr Gavin Chan, whose stories about tattoos gone wrong range from the comical to the sad. One 38-year-old man, married to a Japanese woman, had their young son's name tattooed on his forearm in Japanese but neglected to check the spelling. He managed to have the offending letter corrected before his son was old enough to read.

Another patient was an 18-year-old guy with the name of an ex-girlfriend tattooed on his abdomen. He was desperate

to have it removed, because he believed it was preventing him from finding a new girlfriend.

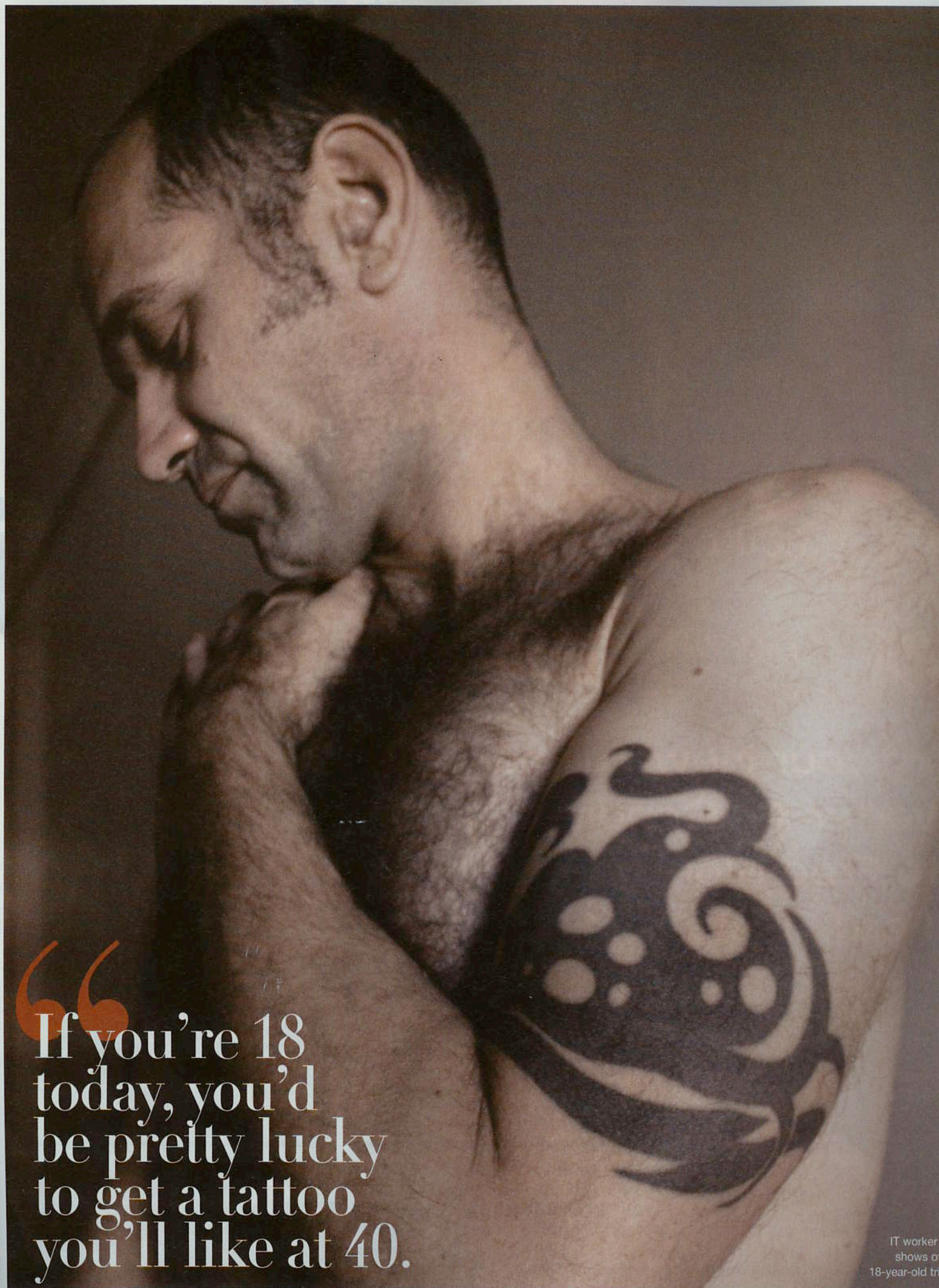
At the other end of the spectrum, Chan is treating a patient with a tattoo of a tiger on his face. He got it while intoxicated in Thailand but now, as a 40-year-old father, he has to deal with frequent comments from strangers about his suitability as a parent.

Edwin Klok is 42 and an IT professional in Sydney. He has abstract tattoos on both upper arms and shoulders, which he had done in his 20s. Today, he's married with four children.

What does he think of his tattoos now he's a working father? "It's hard to say, although I do like them," he says. "As you get older, your body changes, things go south. But that person you were when you were 15 is still an essential part of you. You can't be the person you are now without having been who you were."

Klok had his first tattoo done in his native Holland. "I was 15," he says. "It was a picture of a pig on my left upper arm, with the words 'nurfus pig' underneath [a corruption of the English 'nervous']. Eight of my mates had the same thing done, although the significance of it escapes me now." The pig was soon joined by a grim reaper. "It all fitted with the hard-drinking, reefer-smoking, punk rock scene in Holland at the time," says Klok. "We thought we were well hard."

After three years of travelling, Klok returned to the Netherlands, aged 22, and decided he no longer liked the →



“If you’re 18 today, you’d be pretty lucky to get a tattoo you’ll like at 40.”

Photography: Rick Carter

IT worker
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18-year-old tri

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DESIGN FOR LIFE

The Steel Lotus Body Arts studio in Sydney's Darlinghurst is something of a revelation to a "cleanskin" such as myself – it's smart, comfortable, spotless and there are no illustrations of tattoos on the walls.

It's not until tattoo artist Dean Carlyle strips off his zip-up sweatshirt and gets down to work that you'd have any clue about his profession. Originally from New Zealand, the 29-year-old looks like the young commercial artist I guess he is – one who uses human skin as his canvas.

"Reality TV shows like [US-based] *Miami Ink* have kicked off a new wave of tattooing in Australia," he says. "People have started to realise you don't have to be tattooed by a biker and you don't need to have an off-the-shelf design." Carlyle specialises in oriental designs, with koi fish and dragons popular at the moment.

Before any ink is put to skin, however, a potential client will go through a lengthy consultation process with Carlyle about their design and what it will look like in the desired position. The process – from first tattooing session to completion – can take many months.

While Carlyle believes it's unfair to judge tattoos from 10 or 20 years ago, as the inks and equipment have improved, he accepts the final result will depend on the quality of the skin, with exposure to the sun and gradual loss of collagen taking their toll.

"I recommend 30-plus sunscreen to all my clients," he says. "As an artist, I need to get something out of it, not just the money. There's something very satisfying about putting your art on someone permanently. Some pieces take months and you get quite attached to them."



Tattoo artist Dean Carlyle at the Steel Lotus Body Arts studio.

“Your body changes but the person you were at 15 is still part of you.”

Edwin Klok, with son Reijer, got his first tattoo when he was a teenager.

tattoos. He visited a plastic surgeon but the results of removal at the time were not good. "I saw photos [of removed tattoos] and they looked worse than the tattoos, like a burn. I changed my mind but didn't want to keep them as they were."

Klok then moved to London, where he discovered tattoo artists working with bigger, abstract "tribal" designs. He now has his original tattoos covered up with larger, more thought-out ones and, sadly, nurfus the pig and the reaper are no longer with us.

Twenty-five years after his first tattoo, does Klok think he will have his current tattoos in another 25 years? "Maybe I'll have them touched up," he says. "They're not going to be looking any better than they do now. If you're 18 today, you'd have to be pretty lucky to get a tattoo you'll still like when you're 40."

Chan specialises in non-surgical procedures such as laser treatment and is finding tattoo removal is a growing part of his business. "Tattoos are becoming more popular but there's also an increasing awareness that it's possible to have one removed," he says. Designs of all shapes and sizes are coming off and Chan now averages one or two treatments per day, whereas three years ago it would have been one or two per week.

His patients are split evenly between those who don't like the tattoo (because it's badly applied or in the wrong place) and those who now don't want a tattoo at all. A change in lifestyle, such as a new job, combined with a highly visible tattoo, is often the motivation behind the change.

Most of Chan's patients are in their 20s and 30s, although his oldest was a 60-year-old woman. "She apparently got drunk on a hen's night, having never been drunk before, and ended up with a star on her hand." His youngest patient was a 15-year-old boy who was brought in by his mother. The boy had tattooed his own left arm with abstract shapes using supplies he'd bought on the internet.

The removal process, Chan says, starts with a



consultation to establish how much the patient wants to go ahead with the procedure. The process can take more than a year, costs \$225 per session, and 1 to 2 per cent of removals will result in scarring.

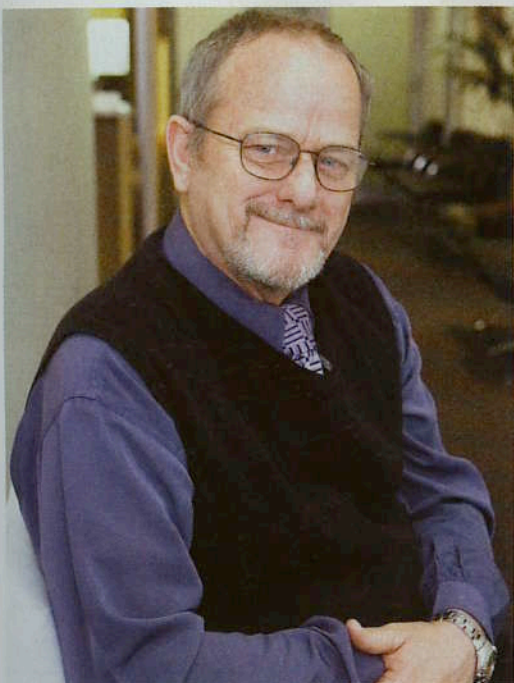
"I woke up some mornings stuck to the bed sheets [because the tattoo site was weeping]," says photographer Billy Ryan, who had his tattoo removed in 1993. Ryan was one of the first in Australia to undergo laser removal and was prompted to do so after the tattoo caused him to miss out on a job with a press agency.

The tattoo – a female figure that extended from his right shoulder to his elbow – cost him £25 in the UK in 1978. But, despite being a friend of a friend of the doctor who performed the removal, and paying less than the full rate, it still cost Ryan \$4000 to have it taken off. "If people knew the cost of the removal process, and what's involved, they probably wouldn't have the tattoo in the first place," he says.

One of Chan's patients is Peter Richardson, a high school teacher in Bundoora, Victoria. Richardson, 47, got the first of his four tattoos when he was 16 and in the navy. "It had to be something with 'mother' on it, so she wouldn't feel too bad about me getting a tattoo," he says.

After the navy, Richardson retrained as a teacher but it was the positive reactions from his younger peers at university that convinced him to cover up when he began teaching in 1996. "Because teachers are looked up to by their students, I didn't want to influence someone to get tattoos."

But Richardson's tattoos were still visible under a white shirt and, after five years of teaching, he decided to have them removed. Up to that point he'd kept quiet about his body art at school, and no one had referred to it, but an incident two days after a laser treatment changed all that. "A student grabbed my arm to get my attention and pulled the blister off," he says. "He got quite a shock when he saw all this red stuff oozing out of my shirt. He →



“If I can influence one student not to have a tattoo, I’m winning.”

Teacher Peter Richardson had two of his navy tattoos removed out of concern about their effect on his students.

was really apologetic and I explained to him and his mates what had happened.”

By 3pm, though, everyone at the school knew. “At first, I was concerned but a lot of students pointed out they already knew I had tattoos, so it wasn’t as big a problem as I thought.” Looking back, Richardson wishes he’d never had the lower arm tattoos he’s now having removed – a sparrow writing “mother” with floral wreaths, and an anchor with “RAN”. The two on his upper arms, though, are staying. “One of them lists all the places I’d been to in the navy before I was 19. The other was done with bamboo in Singapore and I went through so much pain to get that one, I feel I should keep it.”

After the blood-on-the-sleeve incident, a number of Richardson’s students came to him for advice about larger tattoos. Many of his students already had tiny crucifix tattoos as a symbol of their Coptic Christian religious identity. So far, however, the students he’s spoken to have decided against larger designs. “If I can influence just one student not to have a visible tattoo, then I’m winning,” he says.

The 60 to 70 per cent of Chan’s patients who opt to have tattoos removed will apply an anaesthetic cream to the area a couple of hours before the procedure. This is followed by anaesthetic injections at the clinic and then a doctor applies the laser. “With the anaesthetic it’s painless but without, it would be excruciating,” says Chan.

The process takes 30 minutes, with photos taken before and after to track the progress. Healing takes a week, the design will fade after about a month and the process is repeated every six weeks until completed. “The laser breaks up the ink particles so the body’s immune system can digest and remove them,” says Chan.

Lidia Kumurdian was already a parent when she had her tattoo done. Now 50 and a mother of two, she had her first – and only – tattoo following a self-confessed “midlife crisis” five years ago. “I woke up one day and thought, ‘I’m 45, the kids are growing

up and I’m bored,” she says. “I’d always been a bit of a goody two-shoes, never done anything out of the ordinary and felt I had to do something daring. I originally considered having a butterfly but my daughter talked me out of it as being too ordinary.”

Kumurdian is now the proud owner of a small black widow spider, very low down on her back, which is visible only when she is wearing a bikini. She says she doesn’t regret her tattoo but that might not have been the case. “I originally wanted it on the small of my back but the tattooist stressed how visible this would be. I realise now if I’d had it in the original location, it would have looked tacky and I would have regretted it.”

Kumurdian says having the tattoo was an important step in the process of rediscovering herself. “I’m known as a ‘gunna’ – someone who says they’re gunna do something but never does. Things are going to be different and I’m going to put myself, if not always first, then certainly not last.”

Dijana Kumurdian, Lidia’s daughter, is 20 and an arts student at Melbourne University. She has no tattoos but went along to her mother’s tattooing

session “for moral support”. Dijana says she does find it embarrassing to have a mum with a tattoo, and even noticed a new-found confidence in Lidia after she had it done, but she still doesn’t want one. “If I wanted to brand myself, it would have to be something meaningful, not just a rose or a butterfly.”

For Dijana, there’s an important distinction between a subtle tattoo for personal reasons (like her mother’s) and a “big statement” tattoo – especially on girls. “The big upper arm ones look like a girl trying to assert herself and you don’t need to do that [just] with your appearance. I’m not sure I want to express some characteristic of myself like that.”

Carlyle says most females want tattoos they can hide beneath clothing “until they get the tattoo and then they want everyone to see it. They buy a new top to show it off, the whole thing.”

Despite devoting part of his working life to their elimination, Chan is not anti-tattoo and admits many of his doctor colleagues have them. “Tattoos are like marriage – you go into it thinking it’s for life but there is the possibility of divorce. And like divorce, it can be long, costly and arduous.” ●



CELEBRITIES TAKE IT OFF

If there’s one thing more awkward than having a tattoo you no longer want, it’s having pictures of it in the papers every day. After Johnny Depp and his *Edward Scissorhands* co-star Winona Ryder became engaged, he had “Winona forever” tattooed on his arm. Unfortunately, forever is a long time in celebrity land and after their split, Depp had it altered to read “wino forever”.

Pamela Anderson and Tommy Lee notoriously exchanged tattoos instead of rings after their four-day courtship, although the location of Tommy’s “Pamela” can’t be discussed in a family magazine.

Top prize, though, goes to Angelina Jolie (pictured). Having failed to learn her lesson with a tattoo relating to her then boyfriend Timothy Hutton, Angelina had “Billy Bob” etched on her arm. When her marriage to Billy Bob Thornton ended, she had the tatt lasered, which proved more straightforward than finding another Billy Bob.