

TATTOOS ASTONISH, REPEL, FASCINATE. In an impermanent society tattoos are a sign of permanence. A tattoo marks us for life, visible reminders of who we were on that night or on those days.

Tattooing is one of the world's most ancient art forms; photography is one of our newest. Using an 14 x 17 camera, these portraits were photographed by Douglas Busch in Sturgis, South Dakota during the Black Hills Motor Classic (attended by over 450,000 bikers), in New Orleans at the National Tattoo Convention, and in Rockford, Illinois at Busch's studio (which is across from a tattoo parlor).

In Sturgis, Doug set up his camera in a rented storefront while muffler-to-muffler Harley's roared outside. Wanting to make traditional portraits, he invited all to come inside. He explains, "Having grown up thinking of tattoos as a closed culture I found just the opposite—men and women who welcomed me and my camera. I was struck by their honesty. These are people who have literally chosen to wear their hearts—or a skull and cross-bones—on their sleeves. They are expressing a choice, an aesthetic choice. And in the portraits I'm trying to respect that choice, not judge it."

For some, the tattoos are a symbol of transition, an outer mark of an inner passage. Some of the men and women in these portraits desire even more tattoos. "They are dedicated to it," Busch says. "They love the needle. Once they have one tattoo, it's hard to stop." Others choose one design of their own making. Many of the subjects of these portraits have families, children, respectable jobs.

According to Busch, who has also printed these portraits life-size, "Tattoo art is a growing movement in America. I simply wanted to see it more clearly, and to give others that same chance."

Like all art, Busch says, "a high percentage of tattoos strike me as primitive, but the extraordinary ones are true works of art—museums without walls, flesh as canvas."

Daniel Voll