

Artist 'the best work of art of all' in tattoo art show

BY PAUL GESSELL

She started with the Virgin. The Virgin of Guadalupe, to be exact. On her upper right arm. Guen Douglas was 17 when she had that first tattoo. Her parents were not amused. A second tattoo came at age 21.

By 23, she was being tattooed "in earnest." The Virgin Mary sprouted tentacles like ivy across much of her body. Now, at age 30, the right arm, legs and breasts are in full bloom. There are flowers, birds, stars and the odd spooky face. The left arm is a work in progress, like a colouring book awaiting a skilled artist to fill in the blank spaces between the lines.

Douglas is a walking work of art. She is also a tattoo artist at Ottawa's Planet Ink. She has decorated many bodies over the years, including some of the artists participating in a new art exhibition she curated at La Petite Mort Gallery in the ByWard Market.

The exhibition is called *Permanent Collection: Tattooed Artists*. It is not about tattoos. It is about the tattooed, specifically tattooed artists, that very diverse community of people who have one thing, and often only one thing, in common: art on their own bodies.

Twenty artists are participating in the show. To be eligible, the artist had to have at least one tattoo. The artwork did not have to be about tattoos, although some of the artists chose that theme for their paintings, drawings or photographs.

There's the life-sized self-portrait by Saskatoon's Zachari Logan. We definitely know Logan has tattoos. His high-realism drawing is of him-



BRUNO SCHLUMBERGER, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

Tattoo artist Guen Douglas is curating an art exhibit at La Petite Mort Gallery in the ByWard Market. Twenty artists, who must have at least one tattoo, are participating in the show. Not all the artwork features tattoos, although some artists chose that as a theme.

self nude.

There's a creepy photograph by Aaron Lucy of Los Angeles of a heavily-tattooed (and pierced) man sitting at a table in front of a plate of raw meat.

There's a painted skateboard that has the appearance of tattooed flesh. That's from San Diego artist Adam Turk.

"Guen is the best work of art of all," says Guy Berube, owner of La

Petite Mort and a rather heavily tattooed work of art himself.

Unfortunately, Douglas will not be stationed in the gallery for the duration of the show. As a living, breathing work of performance art, she is a definite scene-stealer. She knows how to mug for the camera, pose like a supermodel or put on a pair of old-fashioned glasses and look prim and proper, except for the "sleeves" of tattoos on her bare arms. Cover

her flashy limbs and she could pass for a Sunday school teacher.

Douglas's arms can be found in a photograph taken by her collaborator, Remi Theriault, at the entrance to the gallery. The arms are holding a severed pig's head. The image is, at once, shocking and decadent but as luscious as a Caravaggio painting.

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Permanent Collection: Tattooed Artists

What: An art exhibition featuring artists with at least one tattoo

Where: La Petite Mort Gallery, 306 Cumberland, until July 26

Information: Phone 613-860-1555 or visit www.lapetitemortgallery.com

Tattoo: No longer a mark of rebellion

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"It cost \$13.50 at Sasloves Meat Market," Douglas says of the head. She had planned to tattoo the head but the process simply did not work on the skin of a dead pig. The pig's head is meant to symbolize what Douglas feels is the growing exploitation of the tattooed world.

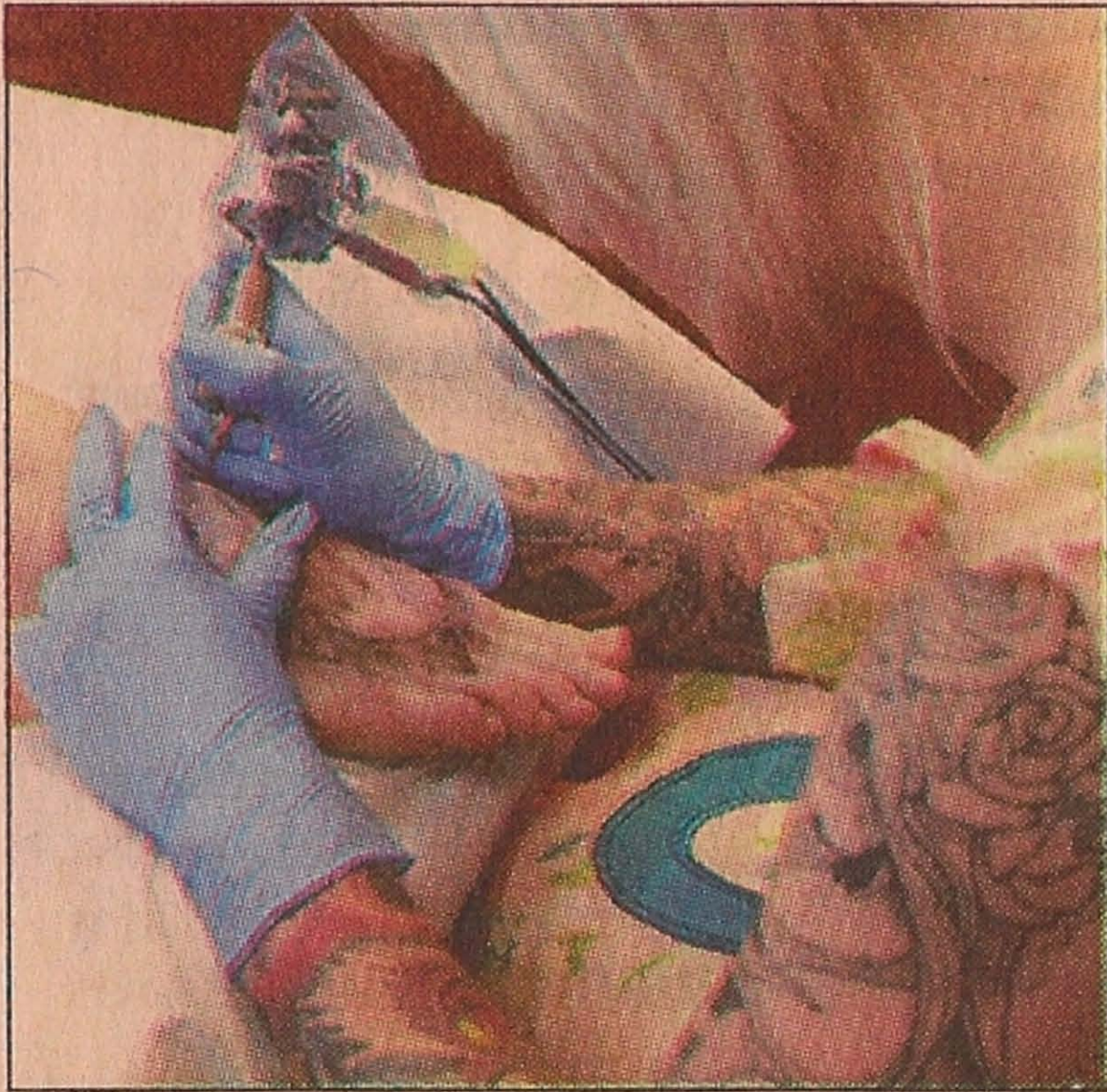
"These days with the Hallmark sentiment of television shows pushing the tattoo world into new markets, we forget the perspectives of those that came before," Douglas writes in an artist's statement for the exhibition. "Those artists and laymen who chose to adorn their bodies not to mark the passing of a loved one or to make grand gestures

of faith, but those that flouted the public opinion and got tattooed in spite of the name-calling."

Tattoos are no longer the mark of rebellion they once were. At least not since grandma started tattooing the names of her little darlings on her arm.

Douglas has lost track of how many tattoos she has, although she estimates she spent 25 hours under the needle. They all blend into one unique mural.

Soon, Douglas plans to move up a notch by getting her neck tattooed. Legs, arms and torsos can be covered with clothes, when necessary. Necks, hands and faces are another kettle of fish. Tattoos on those parts speak of a deeper commitment. Douglas is definitely committed.



JEAN LEVAC, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

Guen Douglas tattoos customer Julia Dickens at Planet Ink.