Spotlight: Living Canvas Tattoos

By Danielle Oberosler

While talking to the owner of Living Canvas Tattoos, Mark Walters, I heard a story about the hardships of opening a tattoo shop that I've heard a dozen times before. In 1993, Mark decided to open his own tattoo shop, which would be the first one ever in Tempe, Arizona. First, Mark had to go through the surrounding neighborhood to get the homeowners to sign a petition stating that they didn't mind a tattoo shop moving into the area. Next, he applied for a Use Permit with the city council, but since Tempe had never had a tattoo shop before, it became a big deal. There was a city council meeting where the public was invited to discuss their views on whether a tattoo shop should exist in Tempe or not. Mark claims, "There was a huge turnout for the meeting. And so much controversy! I had an idea of how I wanted the tattoo shop to be, but the public had this idea that we were just going to be a bunch of scummy old bikers, you know what I mean? So, that was our biggest battle, convincing Tempe it wasn't going to be like that." After Living Canvas had won the fight to exist in Tempe, Mark built a very stylish and clean establishment. Within two years, six tattoo shops have opened up within three blocks of Living Canvas, without the slightest struggle with the city.

Living Canvas is located on Mill Avenue, which is Tempe's equivalent to a bustling downtown strip. They are also, by no mistake, directly across the street from Arizona State University. Tattooing the A.S.U. Sun Devil on the collegiate masses kept Living Canvas busy in the beginning. "But now the university students are only about 40 percent of the people who come here. We get a lot of business from the locals. We've been here for eight years. And last week there was a story about us in the newspaper. There was also an article about us a month ago in a local Arizona magazine called Playtime. In Tempe, we're pretty well known. We have a good reputation," which is something we all know you can't buy! The crew at Living Canvas, which consists of tattooists Mark Walters and Jason Bench and piercer Ed Vayo, maintain a busy schedule. Usually booked days in advance, the artists spend time preparing artwork for each customer. "Most of the stuff, we do, even if the customer wants some flash, we end up drawing for them anyway or changing it around a little bit. It's pretty rare for us to do something right off the wall. Especially since Tempe is so small, we don't want to put a lot of the same stuff on people. They might run into each other!"

Mark started his tattooing endeavor 12 years ago under the teachings of Ernie Gosnell, owner of Seattle's Lucky Devil Tattoo Shop. He also credits much of what he knows to Larry D. from Peter Tattoo and Frank Speaker. But he is inspired by his longtime buddy Kevin LeBlanc, who did both his sleeves when he worked in Tempe, but moved on to East Side Ink in New York. The color that Kevin put on Mark's arms just jumps, it's so bright. To keep his sleeves looking good, Mark slathers himself with sunblock and claims to wear long sleeve shirts even when it gets up to 120 degrees during the summer. Mark's work is colorful and bold, and judging from his portfolio, it appears that he enjoys doing Japanese tattoos. His koi fish and dragons are brilliant and vivid, which contrasts nicely with the black and gray background. Jason Bench learned to tattoo from Janine Johnson at Lady of the Lake Tattoo Shop in Colorado. He is versatile in his tattooing abilities. "He likes to do portraits and stuff, but he loves big, bold outlines with superbold colors. His colorwork holds up like nobody's business! The way he puts color in, it just goes in so smooth. He tattooed the apprentice here, and it was healed within a week. There was no scabbing, and the color is blaring."

After the first year in business, Living Canvas
acquired a shop mascot. He is a six-foot long Iguana named Otto. He's been hanging around the shop and eating his vegetables for the last seven years. I can think of worse animals to have in a tattoo shop. At least Otto doesn't make noise, shed hair, or tear up furniture! If you find yourself in Tempe, you might want to stop in the original tattoo shop in town, give Otto a leaf of lettuce and, who knows---get a tattoo!