

The Artist As A Young Man

By Stephen J. Cramer

The young man strode into the art supply with a purposeful gait, notebook in hand, his shirt barely covering the myriad tattoos covering every inch of his arms, shoulders and neck. Both customers and employees alike followed him with their eyes, silently examining his pierced lips, eyebrows, and nose, as he headed to the colorful display of drawing inks. A small child pointed at him; her mother desperately pulled the innocent girl away from the perceived danger; all ears bearing witness to her audible gasp of “That’s disgusting!”

The employees shared a knowing smile with each other—after finding numerous empty boxes of ink throughout the store, they had hoped to foil the culprits by adding strips of filament tape to each box. Now they would be able to follow their plan to fruition by listening for the tearing of boxes, an audible sign of shoplifting.

After waiting a few minutes, we decided to casually observe our new customer and found him carefully studying the colors and looking through his nearby opened drawing book. Our eyes widened as we peered over his shoulder at the images on the paper—incredibly beautiful nudes and detailed buildings, fantasy sketches of heroic amazons and the delicate features of a nursing baby. Tears welled up in my eyes as I realized that I would never behold such mastery from my own hand, and might never again have the opportunity to converse with this artist as a young man, enjoy his unspoiled freshness, and share his passionate vision. In an instant, his own body art dissolved and I found myself comfortably involved in discussing his choices of light and shadow, form and texture, subjective style and inner thought processes used to create such depth of character.

Finally, it was within me to state that he “probably surprised a lot of people with his ability”. He smiled slightly, and turned toward me with an unexpected response. “My body is my sketch book, when I look at it I am reminded how much I have learned, and how much I still don’t know. My art, that’s my future.” I told him I understood, but I don’t believe I did. His tattoos came back into focus; their

permanence troubled me as I wondered if he would think differently about his present choices later in his life, but be unable to erase them. The punctures in his flesh might heal over time, but how many missed opportunities would he cause by such a visually assaulting personal fashion statement. My own inner prejudices were beginning to obscure my view of his talent. Was he really as amazing as I perceived? Would the permanence of his body art on such an unchangeable canvas cause him future distress or enduring happiness? Was he creating unnecessary obstacles—a career that might never thrive because many people would find him unapproachable and therefore never see his visions? Was I viewing his failings or mine?

But it did not matter to that young man, for after purchasing several bottles of ink, and a new drawing pad, he departed to follow his dreams, leaving our limited vision behind. He was living in his freedom, while ours imprisoned us.

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