

La Marca: The First Studio-Workshop about Body Art Opens Its Doors

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A studio-workshop of visual artists - where body art is the central theme - opened its doors in the Historical Center of the City of Havana. La Marca, as it is called, was inaugurated with the exhibition *Dulce dolor*, which shows posters focusing on the art of tattoo.

Clotilde Serrano

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A studio-workshop of visual artists - where body art is the central theme - opened its doors in the Historical Center of the City of Havana. La Marca, as it is called, was inaugurated with the exhibition *Dulce dolor*, which shows posters focusing on the art of tattoo during the period 1959 to 2014 and curated by Pepe Menéndez.

The project, located on Obrapia between Oficios and Mercaderes streets and sponsored by the Historian's Office of the City of Havana, is a gallery space that has a workshop for doing tattooing. Headed by Leo Canosa, a tattoo artist, the project also includes painter and designer Roberto Ramos, tattooist Mauro Coca and researcher of this artistic specialty Ailed Duarte.

As pointed out by Leo: "This project has been motivated by the recognition that tattooing has at present. What we have proposed is to include all the artistic expressions that use the body as support, and here we include body art, body painting and engraving."

La Marca proposes to always have exhibitions of paintings, engravings, posters, and even the presentation of performances as a complement to the work that these visual artists develop in the workshop. Regarding this Leo points out: "When people come here we always ask them what they want to do. We have an interview with them and we suggest they can be tattooed according to their skin, their skin color, and the idea they may have. Then with them we design, or adjust - if they prefer to reproduce the work of an already well-known artist - how to put it onto the part of the body where it will be shown. We also make personalized designs that are exclusively drawn because all of us involved in the project are visual artists."

The process of taking a work of art and putting it onto that part of the body where one wants it to be placed is sometimes a very difficult process. During my visit to La Marca I could see how elements of a work by Vicente Bonachea were adjusted to a young lady's leg and how steps were taken so that it could be as faithful as possible to the original. Regarding this Leo explains: "When we are about to reproduce the work by a visual artist we try to study the steps taken by the artist in the work, to be exacting with all the technical procedures that have been followed. We try to preserve the same process so that it has the most resemblance possible to the original work; we do not preclude any step and we use all elements. We prepare skin as we would a canvas to work on it; a background is drawn which will later make it possible to continue drawing this piece just as it was done by the artist."

Contemporary times have modified the concept of tattooing as a distinguishing element of marginality. La Marca, among its many endeavors, also has this goal: to give tattooing the status of art work.

In this regard, Leo, who heads the artistic team, points out: "There are people who still think that tattooing is marginal. Once here they change this idea because this project aspires to show how old this technique of engraving the skin is in different cultures. Others, on the other hand, know that the tattooing we do is artistic and come for this, to have art work on their own bodies. This is the first body art project in Cuba and we expect it can contribute to help many have a different conception of tattooing."

Almost as ancient as the emergence of humankind, tattooing has historically had different functions according to the geographical regions where it was practiced. For example, in Egypt it dates back more than 3,000 years and was more used by women who bestowed it with certain magical powers. In Native American cultures it was done to mark the transition from puberty to adulthood, or in memory of those who had fallen in combat. But Polynesia is considered the region of the world with the most tradition of tattooing; its tribes, in addition to using it in an ornamental sense, used it to stipulate hierarchies. Very few cultures used it with a derogatory sense. In Japan, in the 5th century B.C., it was used to distinguish powerful sectors. However, certain marks were established to identify criminals and thieves. Perhaps out of these practices came the pejorative sense given to it by some Western cultures.

By the end of the 20th century, tattooing began to be very popular and was progressively incorporated in society regardless of class distinction. Its esthetic was welcomed by many well-known artists throughout the world who started using human skin as the support for their art. La Marca, exactly so, aspires to make this history known and to make it possible for anyone who considers it seemly to have a work of art on his or her skin.

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