

cuba
ABSOLUTELY

**WHAT'S ON
HAVANA**

**APR
2015**

**Habana Vieja:
Ciudad en Movimiento**

(April 15-19, 2015)



The XVII Festival de la Huella de Espana

(April 12-19, 2015)

The Havana Queens Party

An army of little girls in long skirts

LET'S DANCE





La Marca: Havana's first tattoo parlor

by María Montes

Being a habitu e of Habana Vieja is quite different from just passing through: I've been finding that out for the last few months. Wandering the streets becomes a kind of addiction, looking at the small souvenir shops, women dressed in Colonial-style costumes, living statues who are getting more perfect and more amazing, the clatter of stilt-walkers and the pigeons in San Francisco Square. And on Obrap a Street, in the midst of so many maraca and bongo peddlers, fans decorated with Cuban flags, t-shirts printed with the image of Che and ladies selling their crocheted wares, a place that has taken on the search for *cubania*... no prejudices, no hoopla.

It's called *La Marca*. That's where I first met skinny, curly-haired Robertiko, with his sleeveless t-shirt showing off this tattooed shoulders. He was sitting on the floor, at the door, with an attitude, the poster-boy for the fact that this was a tattoo parlor. I stop and ask some questions. They tell me the place is a studio and a gallery that opened last January and that has been doing well. First I talk to Dione and she makes the arrangements for the interview that I now feel is a must. I am met in the large and well-lit reception area that has an art exhibition on its walls. On one of the walls, Mauro is putting the finishing touches on a lovely mural filled with elephants. Near the entrance, close to the floor, there are some drawings made by the community's children who were invited to learn



[contents](#)

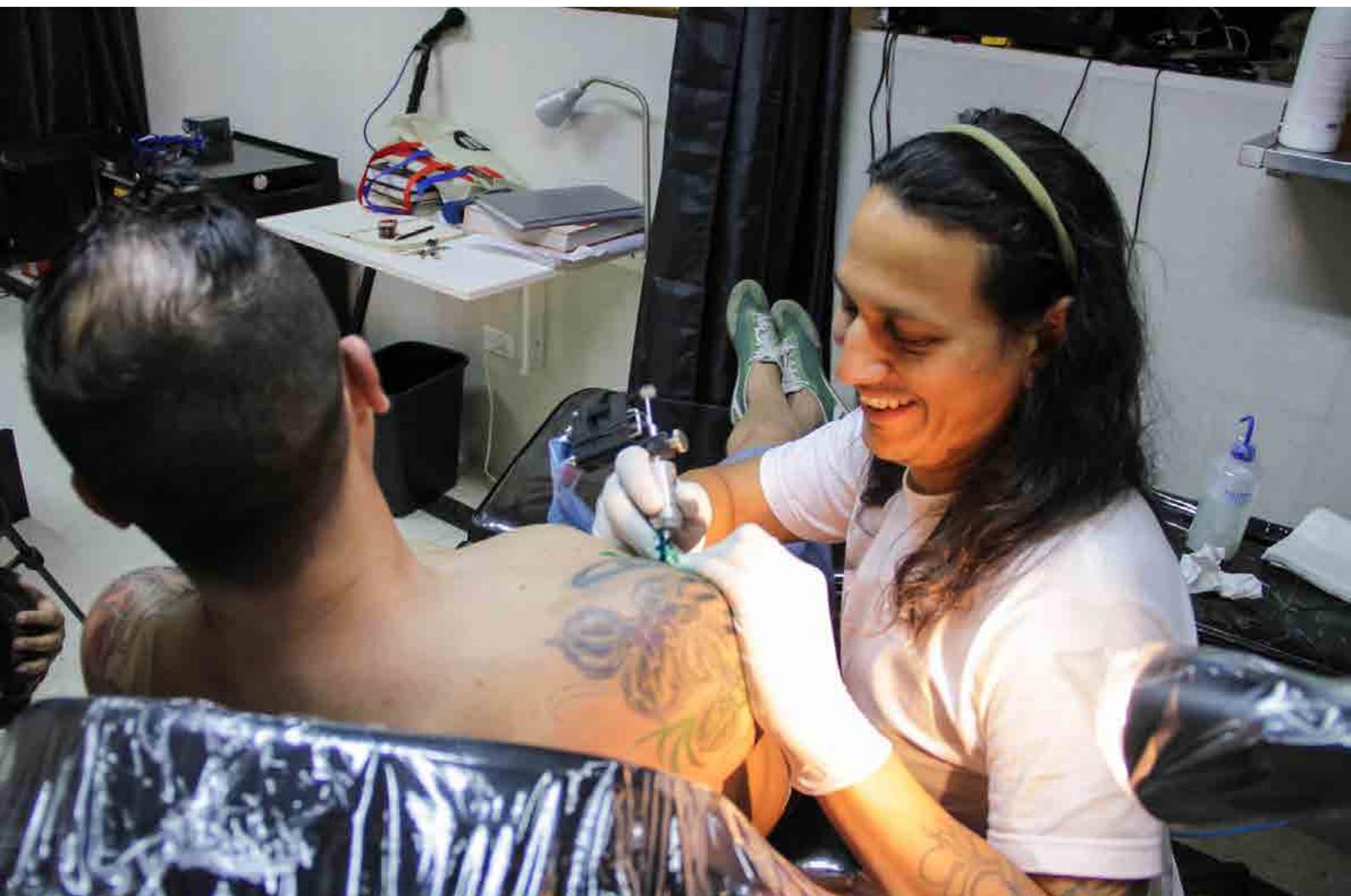
about mural painting and to do one themselves. Just above that are some posters for the Dulce Dolor (Sweet Pain) exhibition practically being evicted by Mauro's pachyderms. In a corner, a statute of Our Lady of Regla and, holding a wooden trunk decorated with shell-eyes, the house *elegguá* with an omnipresent offering of sweets and candies is helping to open the way for this project that is primarily seeking to validate tattooing as an art form, from a new, genuinely Cuban perspective.

After coming through the inner doorway separating the gallery from the studio, Leo started to fill me in. A spiral staircase takes you up to the tattoo salon. Everything is spotless here. There are three black chairs separated by curtains to provide some privacy for the customers. Meanwhile, I am looking at the walls with their demonstration of everything that is being done here and more. There are photos of finished tattoos, sketches for plans and shelves with thick volumes of drawings of flowers, birds and butterflies. There are faces, skeletons, monsters, fantasy animals. There are photos of Leo's little girls and the daughter of Ailed Duarte, mother, wife, owner and queen of the place that smells of ink and disinfectant.

Leo chats while he fills a woman's hip with color. The precision with which he works is impressive; it is a profession that leaves no room for mistakes.

He tells us about responsibility and how *La Marca* looks after their clients' health. The sterilization room is separate from the studio and the water is thrown out after every client. *La Marca* will not tattoo anybody under the age of 18, not just as a mere legality, but because at that age it is difficult to appreciate the permanence of placing an indelible series of marks on your body that you are going to have all your life. That's why Leo won't tattoo anybody who seems to be unsure, those who don't really know what they want. Every job involves a preliminary process where the idea brought in by the client is discussed, negotiated and recreated in the artist's style so that the two of them, tattooer and tattooed, end up happy and satisfied with the final product. They aim to have every job be unique, unrepeatable, personal and authentic.

I am almost convinced. I who am so conventional and hate taking any risks. I'm almost thinking about the image I would like to have tattooed on my body. Almost unconsciously I'm looking for a little spot where I could place a mark, my mark, or better still, the mark of *La Marca* on my still unmarked skin. Like David is doing over there on the third chair. He is a visual artist who has decided to place his art on skin instead of on a canvas. Besides the act of creation, he also enjoys the art of conversation since the relationship one has with one's tattooer is



akin to that of a confessor. Clients have told him all kinds of stories. It's a curious fact, not seen every day, but David is a tattoo artist without tattoos. He has decided to take his time and work on a design that is going to decorate his skin—he wants to be one hundred percent sure.

As I write this article I am overcome by the intoxication of the place and its charm. I am again thinking that I might get a tattoo, invisible to others, on the palm of my hand, on a foot, something very tiny. But in the meantime, I invite you to visit *La Marca*. The place and its tattoo artists has imbued me with a rare fascination thanks to their sincerity and enterprise. Maybe I'll never decide to get a tattoo, but who knows? Maybe I'll decide to get one on my big toe!

THE CREW

Ailed Duarte: A+ in the History of Tattoos and Body Art in Cuba. She is the owner of *La Marca*, the leader of the group, responsible for getting materials and for the sense of order and progress. Leo is her husband. She has many tattoos.

Leo Canosa: Father of two little girls, a life-long tattoo artist with a great reputation. He comes highly recommended. His dream is that one day tattooing will gain its own special niche on this Island. He has even more tattoos than Ailed.

Robertiko Ramos: Designs clothes, stage sets, posters, tattoos and whatever comes around. He is responsible for Culture in *La Marca*—he's the guy you have to talk to if you want to show your work there. He's not easy but he is honest. Loads of tattoos, some of which still require finishing up.

Mauro Coca: Always dreamed about becoming a tattoo artist, nothing else. He is 23 years old and has earned a place in the union. Every day he draws and tattoos better. He is going to create the Save the Elephants Foundation. He is about to become a father.

Dione: Luckily for *La Marca*, she is in charge of Public Relations. Nobody can compete with her smile, and her patience is legendary here. Plus, she makes a mean cup of coffee! She has tattoos everywhere.

Martamar77: Girl looking for boy for a non-commitment: 1.56, dark-haired, slim. She doesn't know how to walk on high heels. She is a radical feminist. She says she is a journalist and a community manager and that's where most of her time is spent. Active collaborator in *La Marca*, she has just been tattooed and can't wait to get more.

David: *La Marca* tattoo artist. He still isn't official because he practically arrived yesterday but he has studied in all the schools and knows all the techniques. He's never been tattooed. His skin is black and his eyes are kind (author's note).

[CONTINUE TO READ FULL ARTICLE + SLIDESHOW](#)



[contents](#)