

Green Banana

carving artist

toronto filmmakers

radical theatre





lasting impressions

by Tamara Stanley

Scalpel in hand, Blair pierces the skin of a stranger. A spurt of blood trickles down a pale leg; a work of art is begun.

Blair, a body artist, performs a process known as scarification from the second floor of Passage Body Piercing Studio located on Church Street in downtown Toronto.

He sits on a black examining table, much like that found in a doctor's office, and describes the technical craft and questionable art of cutting.

"You can draw and create a piece of art on somebody," says Blair, "but you can't safely do it unless you think of the technical aspect, which is really important, and that's the sterilization."

Even though scarification may sound extreme, Blair says that no one ever screams because they go through a consultation before going under the knife.

With eight years of body art experience behind him, Blair says with confidence, "I'm really good." His interest in scarification began with his enjoyment of *National Geographic* magazines.

Bronze sculptures with fine scarification markings that were found in Nigeria suggest the practice of scarification dates back to the 17th century. Across much of Africa, cutting still remains popular today.

In the Nuba tribe, located in Sudan, girls must endure three stages of cutting during their lives. When a girl first starts developing breasts, a scarifier hooks a sharp thorn into her skin, pulls up, and then slices through the fold. The more the skin is hooked and cut, the more the scar rises. The second visit to the scarifier takes place when the young woman begins menstruating. Eventually, keloids (high, hard scars) develop. And soon a pattern of dots will cover the woman's abdomen from her breasts to her navel.

The woman will make her final trip to the scarifier after she has given birth to her first child and the baby has stopped breast feeding. The procedure takes up to two days to complete. The woman will get scars across her back and buttocks, on the back of her neck and arms, and on her thighs. In the end, the pain will all be worth it, because in Nubian culture, the scarification has made her desirable.

In Cameroon, the Bangwa people use scarification as a form of preventative medicine. It's believed that when a man cuts a four-pointed star onto his right side, close to the liver, the mark will prevent him from contracting a hepatic infection. The Bangwa also make cuts all over the body to free a person from spirit possession, which they believe causes illness.

After a bit of research, Blair discovered that no one was performing scarification in Toronto. "I started practicing on myself, basically leaving little marks and seeing what came of it," he says. Then he moved on to his friends. "They understood what skill level I was at."

Soon, the demand for scars increased and this past February, Blair took ownership of Passage, where he could offer cutting, branding, and piercing in a safe, sanitized environment.

The cutting process begins with a mandatory consultation. "It allows me to take a look at different scars on the body so that I get a rough idea about how they are going to scar because one person can scar quite differently than another person," says Blair.

The consultation also allows the client to determine the design he or she wants and Blair to determine his price. He begins at a minimum charge of \$120 for each design.

Blair says that most people take about six months to decide if they're ready to go through with such a procedure.

"You're changing the structure of the skin and the only way to camouflage it is by a tattoo covering on top of it," says Blair. When the person is certain of what he wants, Blair begins.

"First I clean the skin with iodine," he says, pointing to the surgical tools and sanitizers on the table to his right. The design is created and transferred to a stencil. This way, the customer can determine where it should be placed on the skin and how it will look once it is finished.

Once the decision is made, the design is cut into the skin. This can take anywhere from 20 minutes to two hours to complete, depending on the complication of the design. It takes about three weeks for the wound to completely close. "All I can do is do the procedure sterile, and tell you how to take care of it properly," Blair warns. If an infection does occur, it can easily be cleared up with saltwater, but the idea is to prevent it completely.

For the first few weeks, the scar is bright red. "Between three months and a year and a half, it will eventually go to a pure white scar or, if you're black, it will be a really dark scar," says Blair.

Historically, African tribes use scarification as a rite of passage. In Toronto, Blair performs scarification merely because he found tattooing to be too commercial. "People are getting it done and it's not super common. That also makes it more meaningful and symbolic."