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Scarification: the new trend in body art

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Brian Decker draws flames on George Chase's chest with magic marker. He will follow the lines with a scalpel to create a permanent scar. (Pearl Gabel/CNS)



George Chase grimaces as Brian Decker carves into his skin with a scalpel. Chase has opted to be scarred rather than get tattooed. (Pearl Gabel/CNS)



Brian Decker scars George Chase at Sacred Tattoo in Manhattan. Decker, a piercer, has been doing scars on customers for six years. (Pearl Gabel/CNS)



Brian Decker scars George Chase at Sacred Tattoo in Manhattan. Brian has been performing scars for six years. (Pearl Gabel/CNS)



George chase received the first part of his scar--the XXX--months ago. Today he had flames carved into his skin. (Pearl Gabel/CNS)

When George Chase, a stout man with a shaved head and a penchant for tattoos, strode into Sacred Tattoo in New York's Chinatown several months ago, he had already made the decision to get three X's emblazoned across his chest. The design is the commonly accepted symbol for indicating that he has sworn off cigarettes, alcohol and controlled substances. But instead of getting the letters tattooed on his body with ink, Chase wanted to have his resolve memorialized in a far more striking fashion: carved into his body with a scalpel.

"To me, it's like the difference between a watercolor painting and an oil," said Chase, 39, a customer service representative for a telecommunication company. To prove his point, he lifted his shirt to reveal three slightly raised X's spanning 5 inches just above his right nipple.

Scarification, the act of creating designs out of scar tissue by cutting the skin or branding it with heated metal, has been performed for centuries among tribal cultures in Africa, Asia and Polynesia. Now, people are being scarred in tattoo shops and piercing studios in cities across the United States and Canada.

In Austin, Texas, for instance, Ron Garza, famous throughout the state for his deftness with a scalpel, is so in demand that he's been turning people down who want designs that he considers too mundane for his talents. In Toronto, lawyers, firefighters, even dentists visit Blair McLean, the affable owner of Passage Tattoo and Body Piercing, who will often sip tea with his clients before burning designs into their flesh. In Omaha, Neb., Body Mods, a thriving tattoo shop, has recently added an electro-cautery machine that draws body art enthusiasts from neighboring states to have their skin seared.

"For people who really want to establish a radical body style, they have to look elsewhere other than the tattoo," said Dr. Victoria Pitts, professor of sociology at the City University of New York and the author of the book, "In the Flesh: The Cultural Politics of Body Modification." "A scar is more visually striking, and it is considered more beyond the pale."

Since scarification broke into the body modification mainstream in the mid 1990s, people have been getting scars for a host of different reasons. Some people, like Dustin Sharrow, 25, a body piercer in Hamilton, Ontario, use scars as sort of permanent make-up. He has two 5-inch curvy lines branded on either side of his neck to accentuate his collar bone and a design resembling a tire tread down the center of his forearms that he felt "just had to be there."

Others use it as a form of therapy. One of McLean's most memorable clients was a man who wanted two narrow, 6-inch long slivers branded onto either side of his upper back. As he explained it, the markings symbolized two wings that had been pulled off, a sign to the world that helped distance him from what he regarded to be an overly religious upbringing.

“In his eyes, it was like he was a fallen angel,” said McLean, who began his career 10 years ago as a body piercer but switched to branding after experimenting on some of his friends. “I’m always free to hear people’s stories because it’s a part of the process. And when they leave, I want them to feel more finished and complete.”

Though each artist has his or her own special techniques, the basic practice of the trade remains the same. In the case of cutting, a topical anesthetic is first applied to the skin, a design is drawn with ink onto the desired area, and the artist then traces the design’s outline with a scalpel.

As for branding, there are two types: “strike” and “cautery.” When performing a “strike,” the artist takes a heated piece of metal and repeatedly burns the skin within a stencil or drawing. For a “cautery,” an artist uses a soldering device, also known as a cautery pen, to burn the design into skin tissue.

Chase’s experience, when he returned to Chinatown’s Sacred Tattoo to get a second scar, is typical of how the craft is performed. Brian Decker, Sacred’s resident scarifier, happened to be fresh out of topical anesthetic, but Chase elected to go through with the procedure anyway. “What can you do?” he said rather haplessly as Decker began to ink in a flame design above Chase’s existing X’s.

Moments later, scalpel in hand, Decker cut into Chase’s chest and traced the design in long, graceful strokes. Chase occasionally gasped in pain, but Decker was concentrated so intently he hardly noticed. Carefully, he guided the blade across Chase’s chest with his right hand, dabbing with his left hand at the trail of blood with a sterilized paper towel. With three rest periods, the procedure lasted just over an hour.

Not surprisingly, considering the invasiveness of the procedure, the scarring industry has its share of critics. “You can’t predict how much or how thick a scar somebody’s going to get,” said Dr. Christopher Harmon, clinical instructor of dermatology at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. “And sometimes the scar outgrows the pattern, so what they end up with is this real problematic big and tender scar.”

Few states in the United States have any laws that go beyond regulating normal tattooing. In April, Nebraska will become the only one to require a specific license in order to administer a brand.

In defense of the craft, Garza of Austin scoffs at critics who say that scars can grow out of control. “That’s the same as with a tattoo,” he said. “That’s where knowledge comes in and being good at what you do.”

As for the possibility of infection setting in, McLean noted that scarification artists tend to be extra careful about cleanliness, sterilizing all of their equipment with autoclave machines. “In my field,” he said, “if that was to happen even once to a client of mine, I would lose my career.”