

TATTOO MASTER

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BIG

A DESIGN FOR LIFE

GUIL ZEKRI

Working out of Reinkarnation in Cologne, Guil is a force to be reckoned with in the world of realism. In an attempt to see how he works his magic, I caught up with him a few weeks back and we worked through his tattoo process from conception through to completion. In part one of this tutorial, Guil will explain how he gets an idea from his customers head and onto their skin...  Trent Aitken-Smith  Trent & Guil

Guil Zekri is one of those amazingly talented tattooists that has a knack of turning every idea into tattoo gold. His work is sharp, tight, and bold, but most of all... it is BIG. Guil's ethos is, go big on the skin but cram it with detail. By doing this, he creates tattoos that stand out whether you are two inches away, or two feet away.

"The first step is one of the most important... listening to the customer's basic idea and trying to build an image in your head. This means trying to imagine the completed tattoo, or more importantly, to figure out a composition



that will lead to a final piece. Of course it's even better if the customer brings with them as much reference as possible to show what they would like the completed tattoo to look like. I personally never use tattoo references, for the simple reason that it is just too hard to create an original tattoo when the customer brings in a picture of a brilliant tattoo. Because once we have seen the other tattoo, our thinking and imagination will always be blocked by the other tattoo.

"Placement is also key to a beautiful tattoo. A golden rule of tattooing is making sure that the tattoo design will fit the morphology of your customer. Every person is built differently and it's important that the composition will consist of the original elements given by the customer, the plan that we have envisioned in our head and that it will 'fit' the area the customer would like the tattoo to be positioned."

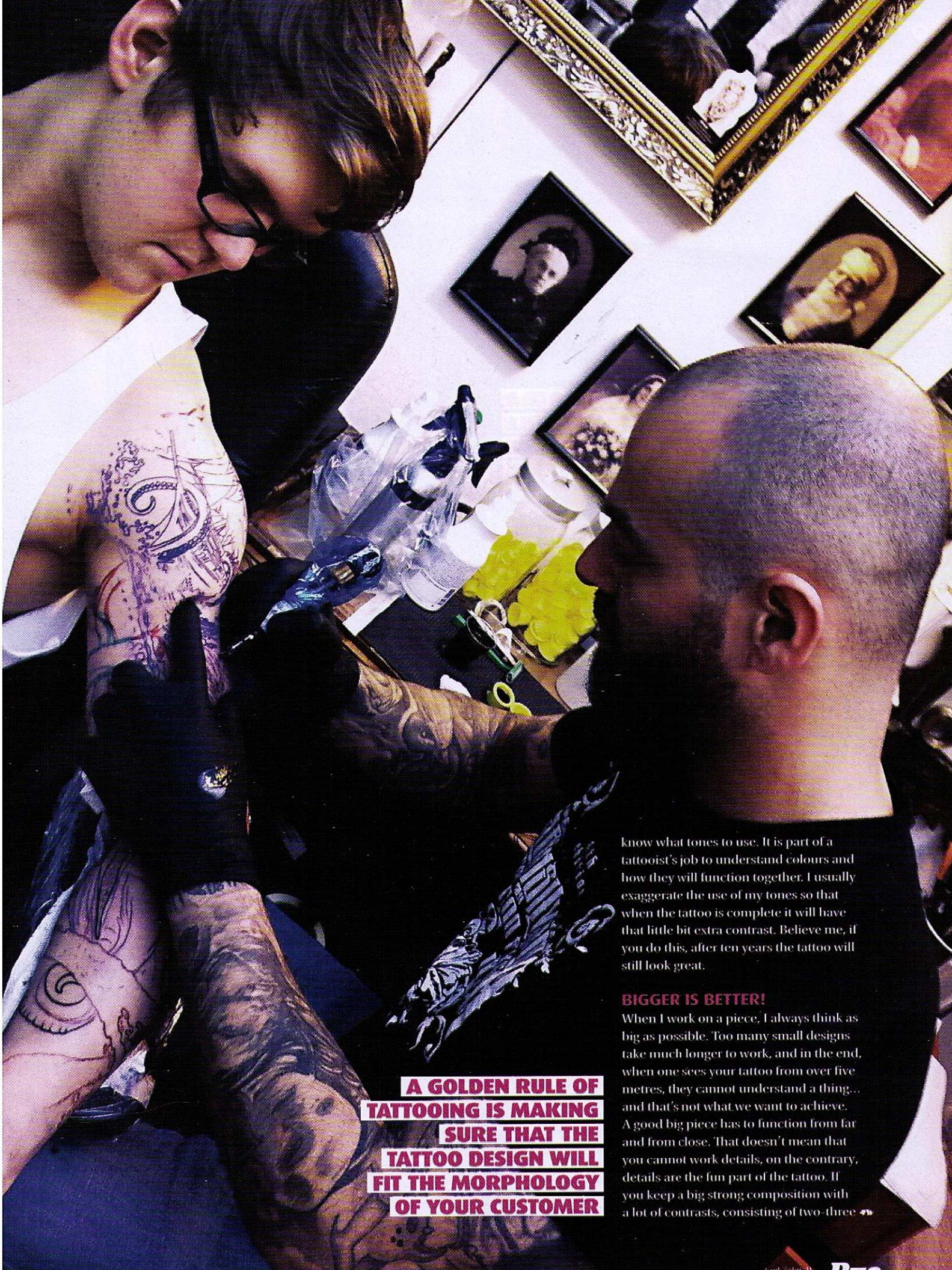
COLOUR OR BLACK & GREY

With black and grey I will always try to create a composition that will consist of elements that will leave some skin naked. The skin, or more accurately, the skin tones, will be integrated in the composition of the design. This economises time and pain and constructs a stronger, clearer tattoo that lives and breathes on the skin. With colour, I try to cover almost all the skin. I believe that colours stay better because of the density of pigments beneath the skin.

With black & grey I will generally use three different tones - black, medium grey, and skin. Of course you can always work very light grey too, but it's harder to control and the contrast of 'darker' grey is necessary for a tattoo. We must never forget that our customer would love to have the piece until the day they die, so contrast is important.

To work good colour pieces, we must





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know what tones to use. It is part of a tattooist's job to understand colours and how they will function together. I usually exaggerate the use of my tones so that when the tattoo is complete it will have that little bit extra contrast. Believe me, if you do this, after ten years the tattoo will still look great.

BIGGER IS BETTER!

When I work on a piece, I always think as big as possible. Too many small designs take much longer to work, and in the end, when one sees your tattoo from over five metres, they cannot understand a thing... and that's not what we want to achieve. A good big piece has to function from far and from close. That doesn't mean that you cannot work details, on the contrary, details are the fun part of the tattoo. If you keep a big strong composition with a lot of contrasts, consisting of two-three



IT HELPS TO TRY AND CREATE A STORY IN YOUR HEAD...YOU WILL KNOW EXACTLY WHAT YOU'RE MISSING TO COMPLETE THE 'STORY'



elements on a sleeve or a back piece, you can work on the details inside these elements. So even if the skin will lose the small details after 10-20 years, we still stay with a large-scale composition that will still function... and I think that is the key to doing a great tattoo.

MEASUREMENTS

After you have discussed your ideas with your customer and after the first sketch is done, go one step further and take measurements of the area that will be tattooed. Bear in mind that the finished sketch will not fit perfectly with our measurements, as we tend to go bigger or smaller in our sketches. But at least

after taking the measurements, we will have an idea of what we are dealing with and it will be easier for us to estimate the size of the piece. The first sketch can be small, an A4 will be enough. If the design will function on a small scale, it will definitely work on a larger scale... probably even better.

HIM OR HER/ DARK OR LIGHT

Normally, male and female customers will have different wishes concerning their designs. On a woman I will try to work lighter, that means more skin in the composition and much more flow and details. For a man, I will try to work darker and stronger. Personally, I believe a man can have a 'heavier' piece. But once again, everything depends on the design and the customer's wishes. In a similar vein, my approach is different for lighter and darker skin. It is good to keep skin shading in mind when we colour the sketch. Dark skin will need more contrast and light skin will give us the possibility to work lighter shades with different tones of colours.

SEARCHING FOR REFERENCES IN DIFFERENT MEDIUMS

Every artist works with references... and not only in the tattoo world. We need these references as it is impossible to create something new without knowing what was done before you. So be clever and check things out. When I search for references I use every type of medium - except tattoos that were done by somebody else. Your references should be as broad as possible; from pictures of paintings, sculptures, architecture, people, and whatever other mediums you can think of. I usually travel a lot so I take my own pictures of things I find interesting. Quite often, I take my own pictures of

the customer, or people I know or work with, to create my composition. It's hard sometimes to find everything on the internet, that's why the first steps are so important.

It helps to try and create a story in your head. I find it helps me a lot. This will make the image that you build in your head clearer and you will know exactly what you're missing to complete the 'story'.

ROUGH SKETCHES AND DESIGN

My first sketch is fast, using intuition and references. I use Photoshop a lot, it's easy to learn and makes life easier... technology is here, so why not use it? I construct the first image on the computer, where I can take my references and play with them. You can also take pictures of your customers arm or back to try and fit the image on it. This helps for a 'first view' of the design before we place it on the skin. Try different positions to work out the best placement for your tattoo.

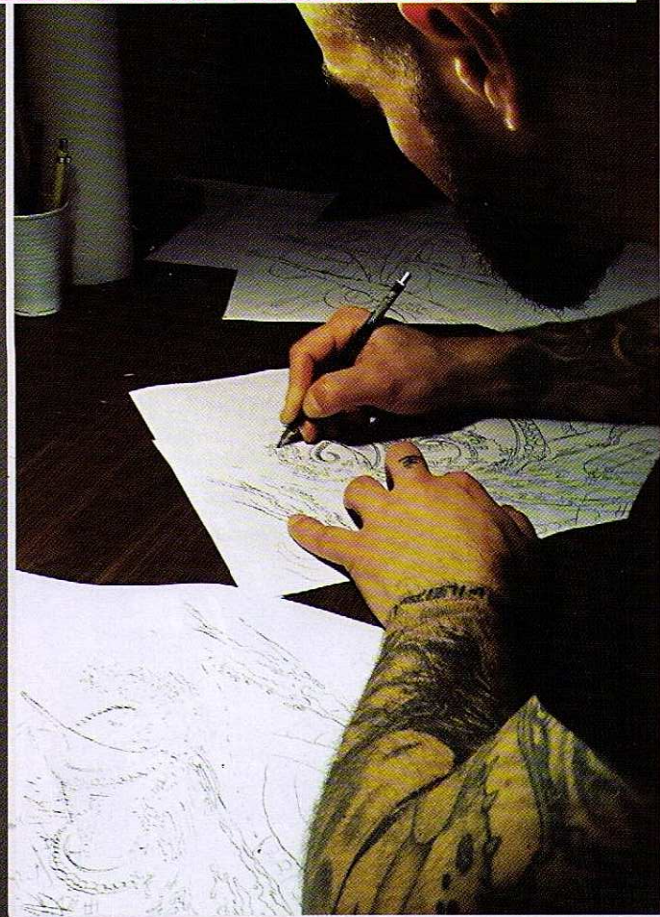
To summarise - firstly ideas, secondly measurements, and thirdly building it on the computer. If you thought carefully about all the things above, the construction of the first image on Photoshop shouldn't take too long and should be simple to construct.

FROM PHOTOSHOP TO STENCIL

Once the customer is happy with the initial design I print out the image, but this time I will print it in A3 as it is just easier to stencil the lines on this size. Here is where the first real 'thinking' work takes place - you have the measurements, ideas and references... now it's time to draw. Place your design on the light table and put clean paper on it. Remember, a sleeve is more complicated to work on



IF THE DESIGN WILL FUNCTION ON A SMALL SCALE, IT WILL DEFINITELY WORK ON A LARGER SCALE... PROBABLY EVEN BETTER



than a back piece. A back piece functions more like a painting, while a sleeve is round, curved and has some difficult places like the elbow, wrist and inside of the arm. For these places you need to find solutions, so start by creating some negative spaces. By negative spaces I mean the areas where only skin is left. It can be a certain detail, a part of a face, a wave or wind, or even some hair. All can be used as negative spaces in your composition. Try to figure out where the empty spaces will fall on the problem areas, on the inside arm for example. Now complete your drawing using pencils and using different colours. It helps to distinguish the different

elements in the design, if only to have some order in your construction. Try to think of the flow in the composition and try to exaggerate your references. This means stronger line structure to help us build a stronger piece.

PAPER TO SKIN

Finally, invite your customer to the studio and slowly try to adapt the design to their particular morphology. This is only the first try, mainly to see if we have figured out all the points while constructing the design as a whole. Make some photocopies in different sizes, so that you will have at least one match from the various sizes. Every person is built

differently and even if you took good measurements, it is always surprising to see which size fits in the end. I look at this part as challenging and fun. Now everything will be clear. Of course, if you do have a small problem, try to fix it by marking the sketch on the problematic areas and go back to the drawing table to fix them in your sketch.

Now the preparations are over, it is time to tattoo. **TM**