

Guest editor interview

GUIL ZEKRI



ZEKRI

Back in February 2012 I interviewed Guil for Skin Deep. I had been a long time fan of his take on realism and it was a great to find out that the man behind the artist was as cool as his art was Trent Aitken-Smith Guil Zekri

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uil grew up in Israel, serving as a marine paramedic in the Israeli Army when he was eighteen. After three years he left, spending a year in New York and Los Angeles, before deciding to study in Paris. Once Guil finished studying, it was onto Germany and it was here that he finally got into



tattooing. Starting at a studio in Munster, he quickly moved onto a studio in Cologne, where he worked for three and a half years before opening his own studio, Reinkarnation. Seven years later and Guil is going stronger than ever and has just opened a second studio.

WHO HAVE YOU GOT WORKING WITH YOU AT REINKARNATION NOW?

Reinkarnation has been alive and kicking seven good years and I have a fantastic team that pushes the studio constantly. They are really amazing and when I say amazing, I'm talking about their personalities first and foremost. I have a great family that surrounds me. I know it sounds a bit kitschy but it's the truth. No attitude, no bullshit. Every one is in the same boat, I'm just the captain. These guys are very important for me, without them I would not have been able to open my second studio.

The team is made up of Cigla, who has been with me nearly three years. He is an amazing black and grey artist. Aron Szabo came to us after working with Jason Butcher. He brought a lot of knowledge with him about black & grey tattooing. Of course working with Jason had a massive positive





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TATTOOING

"I really try to separate my painting from my tattoo work as they work in different ways for me. When I am painting, I am only with myself. I can allow myself the time to work with the material and pigments in layers. And the concept is mine only. Working in the tattoo medium you share the process with your customer. I think that by separating the two mediums the influence on each other is even stronger."

influence! Claudia Linde is one of the most amazing painters I have ever seen. Huge format pieces, a mix between abstract and figurative. Powerful and strong, dark and enigmatic! Frankie is one of the greatest and most motivated and proud, traditional artists, I know. He is the real thing! Jenny is our piercer and shop manager. And then last but not least, Michael, our assistant, social media and website guy.

There is no set up at all; every one knows what they do. They all have different styles and our customers know exactly who they would like work off of when they contact us. That makes our shop manager's work much easier. We never have any fights over designs or customers. We share our work and

share our customers. We all find it more enjoyable to work in this environment.

TELL ME MORE ABOUT THE NEW STUDIO...

The new studio is a second
Reinkarnation. It's important to
mention that money was never the issue
when deciding to open the studio. I am
very humble and still drive a small golf
from 1998. I opened a second studio
because it just felt right and we had
enough work to share with other artists.
We needed a bit more space, not to feel
like sardines in a tin, so I decided to
search for a new place.

All the artists joining us in the new studio are actually friends of mine that were working with me as guest artists at the original Reinkarnation. All of them enjoyed working with us and wanted to stay. I think of it as a collective; a shared space between friends, where all the friends love tattoos and tattooing. There was a real push from friends and artists and it just happened to be that the new studio is right near my tai-chi school... and in my neighborhood. So it fell right into my hands!

Reinkarnation stays Reinkarnation! Same, but different.

In the new studio we will have Agrypa, from Krakow. Just check out her work, it is amazing. We will also have







IN PAINTING WE HAVE A FREEDOM NOT AFFORDED **US AS ARTISTS WHEN MAKING TATTOOS**

Marco Hengst, who will cover all the Japanese stuff. He is a clever man with a lot of experience who has been tattooing for almost twenty years now. And he has also worked with Theo Jack so just imagine the influences he will bring to the studio. Next we have Amir and Pat, two young artists who are growing fast and strong. Then there is John, the new shop assistant. And most important of all is my Maria. She is my right hand, the boss of the second Reinkarantion and the key to our success. And by the way, Maria is also my first apprentice!

YOU GREW UP IN ISRAEL, WENT TO RWANDA IN THE ARMY, SPENT SOME TIME IN AMERICA AND PARIS, THEN SETTLED IN GERMANY...DO YOU THINK ALL THESE DIFFERENT **CULTURES, RELIGIONS AND EXPERIENCES 'OPENED YOUR EYES'** TO THE CREATIVE WORLD?

Yes, with a huge Y! People who don't travel miss out on half of life. I think traveling is one of the best ways to develop in any direction. It is such an inspiring experience... and I'm not talking about hotel and beach travel! I'm talking about back packing! Going









you. It changed my way of thinking about 'art' and it has made me a bit more 'difficult' in my perception of it, including tattoo art. I am more critical with the work of others and with my work in general. I also learned not to judge art according only to my personal taste. I would remain ignorant if I wasn't able to appreciate other peoples work only visually, without understanding any of the philosophical ideas behind it. A lot of art work is hard to understand only from the figurative forms and I'm talking about art in general. In the tattoo world it is a bit easier because we work with



FROM THE MOMENT THAT I HAVE THE MOTIF ON PHOTOSHOP OR PAPER, LIFE IS EASIER

clear images and we actually play with images while tattooing. Tattoos are definitely a representation of art in general, but transferred onto the medium of skin. No one can tell me that their tattoo art is original, I would not believe it. But I have to admit that there are some clever tattoo artists that have been inspired by different art forms and have transferred it beautifully to the medium of skin.

But for me, the six years of study blocked my creativity for a long time. Searching for the right concept in which to work with was very hard and I think the concept and the ideas come before the drawing, or painting, and then develops in the doing. So yes, it took me some time to find a direction in tattooing that would also represent what I stood for in my art. I had to really think hard about where I 'came from,' what my influences were...and then use this 'knowledge' when creating art on skin.

I have never learned technical painting or drawing and I'm actually an autodidact when it comes to what is considered practical art. It was not easy in the beginning but with some hard work I figured it out. I try to retain what I studied in university and then bring

it to life on skin. I stay loyal to mystical subjects and religious themes as these were always my favourite subjects.

I WAS ABOUT TO SAY, ON THE WHOLE, YOUR PAINTINGS SEEM TO HAVE RELIGIOUS AS WELL AS SPIRITUAL THEMES, DO YOU CONSIDER YOURSELF A RELIGIOUS PERSON?

Oh no, I'm not a religious man at all. I would describe my self as mystical, or spiritual, like everyone really. No one can say they are not spiritual. But I'm not religious. To answer this question fully I have to add that I was raised as a child in a Jewish orthodox family, so getting out of the religious brainwash was not easy. I do respect religion in the aspect of bringing people together in a good way. I think religion is a prolongation of history and with it comes many things like art, history, war, compassion etc. Unfortunately religion is used to make money, start war and control mankind...and I do not want to have any part of that!

I do find the stories, legends and myths beautiful as a book but I do not believe that Jesus walked on water, or that Moses parted the waves. Though

GUEST EDIT

MUSIC

"I'm a huge music fan and I listen to all types if it is good; from metal to jazz, through to classical and gospel. My last musical project. Collective Memories, I put a lot of effort into. The album was finished but was never released. How sad is that? Working on something for two years and it fell into the water because of differences. I would like to do more music in the future but it might take a different direction, more a duo and world music. Maybe traditional instruments and some clear female vocals. Dark and melancholic, rich and poetic."

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it does, of course, provide colorful images for the mind.

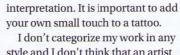
My paintings are influenced very much by biblical stories. They've always interested me and in all my travels I have understood that we all believe in the same thing, whatever we call it. Humans are very similar in their perception of life, death, god etc. so we all think the same, we just act differently. I have chosen to adapt it into my work in really natural ways. The more you try to avoid your past, the more you find yourself dwelling inside of it. And I have just transformed it in my art! All my paintings have a bit of a subtle switch to the real biblical story, even though the representations are traditional!

I ALWAYS THINK OF YOUR TATTOO **WORK AS 'AFFECTED REALISM'...** THE SUBJECT IS USUALLY REALISTIC, **BUT HAS GUIL'S SPIN ON IT. DO** YOU CATEGORIZE YOUR WORK IN A **CERTAIN STYLE?**

Affected realism, that is so funny. I never thought about it like that. I never really was interested in hyper realism. I create realistic tattoos but they all have my



LIFE LEADS US THE WAY TO OUR FUTURE, EVEN THOUGH WE THINK WE CONTROL IT



style and I don't think that an artist should. It does not help creative behaviour. I don't like to put my self in different categories or sectors, especially when you are selling your talent, like we as tattoo artists do. I wanted to be free in my choice of what I'm tattooing. Of course every theme is interpreted through the way I see it, so I think the real challenge is to find good results for every design that I tattoo. The challenge is that people will realise that it is the same artist, whatever theme, subject, colour or size.

I do find though, the more time passes and the more I concentrate on my paintings, the more I find some kind of a middle way. I am the same person or artist, whatever medium I use. Whether it is a tattoo or painting, I will see it through the same eyes and interpret it in the same way. This means that the two mediums must eventually collide in the same style. I also think that it comes with trusted customers, experience and technical knowledge. For me it took a bit longer to achieve my own style because of the way I paint.

But I really work exactly the same way with both mediums. I don't differentiate between needles and brushes anymore.

If I had to 'label' my new designs, I think I would call them 'alien frequencies'. Only because I find it funnier than 'affected realism'.

CAN YOU GIVE US AN IDEA OF YOUR THOUGHT PROCESS WHEN COMING UP WITH A TATTOO DESIGN; FROM IDEA, OR **CUSTOMER REQUEST, THROUGH TO PUTTING IT ON THE SKIN?**

Trent man, how do I put in words something that is so natural? I have no idea! I think I function like most tattoo artists. We are not always free with our ideas, it really depends on the customers They will ask for a certain design that talks to them and my job is first to listen and then try to imagine this design in my head so I can fulfil my customer's request. Of course it does not always work and it is impossible for me to pleas every one, so there is some kind of a mutual selection that happens naturally

And it's even more difficult to explain because I work differently today. I am a very lucky man to have such amazing customers who normally don't even know what they are they going to get. Usually we sit together and chat a bit about what they would like to have and I try to stay very neutral. It's very hard for me to understand the meaning of every motif on every person and I try





to focus only on what the tattoo will finally look like visually. I try to 'realise' the customer's wishes but it is always through my imagination because the motif they have in their head, I can't really see! (laughs)

So after listening I really try to visualize how I can transform the image in my head into a tattoo, or a so-called 'oil painting' on my customer's body. I always take into consideration size, placement, black & grey or colour (which can change depending on skin type and theme). After all that is done, if I successfully visualize it in my head and see it virtually on my customer, then all is good!

Next I will do a rough sketch on paper and then work it in my way. Either I am going to draw it completely, or work it in Photoshop. I always try doing my own designs, meaning I will actually do the basic sketches and not search on the internet. I really try to create my references myself but of course it always depends on how much time I have etc. From these 'references' I will try to create an interesting image that will speak for itself.

From the moment that I have the motif on Photoshop or paper, life is easier. Then everything is possible. I normally don't finish my sketches until the end. I don't work a real background, or negative spaces, all of this I try to do in the tattooing process itself. I sometimes prepare a black & grey sketch and tattoo it in colour, or vice versa.

There are no rules and I don't follow my design until the end. I keep my artistic freedom.

WHAT IS YOUR DREAM CUSTOMER BRIEF FOR A TATTOO?

There is no dream customer but of course the more freedom the customer gives me, the more it will make the tattoo interesting. I am lucky enough to have really amazing customers that let me do what I want!

WHICH DO YOU GET MORE OF A CREATIVE KICK OUT OF, DESIGNING A TATTOO OR PUTTING IT ONTO SKIN?

For a long time it was preparing the design, but today I definitely prefer the tattooing itself. And anyway, from the first sketch through to the skin, the design I have prepared changes a lot normally, especially with my new designs where I have much more

freedom. It's more of a reference than a copy, so I enjoy it more. And I really do love the contact with the customers. It is very important, the vibe between customer and artist.

DO YOU THINK YOU'LL EVER OPEN A REINKARNATION IN ISRAEL, OR IS GERMANY YOUR HOME NOW?

Ten years ago it never crossed my mind to live in Germany, or even to visit as a tourist. Honestly! I think Germany was the last place on earth I wanted to visit and here I am ten years later living in Germany. And an owner of two studios. I think it is funny how life leads us the way to our future, even though we think we control it. But please, let's not talk about destiny and that kind of stuff, it's too complicated. I will have to write a book on this subject, or like fifty books (laughs).

So what is my next step? I have no clue. Once again I am waiting for this big room full of doors from which I can choose the door through which I will pass next. I have a vision where, still as a child, I see myself as an old man. It has been haunting me for decades now. I do see this scene in the desert landscape of Israel. So, I think, one day I will go back there to live and paint in the desert. But not yet. **TM**

INFLUENCES

I have so many influences in art: Rubens, Caravaggio, Goya, Velasquez, Pontormo... and so many more. Modern art: Barbara Krüger, Bill Viola, James Turrell and still more. My musical influences are varied: Steven Wilson, Dead Can Dance, Wagner, Fields of the Nephilim, Bigelf and countless musicians, bands and projects. I love reading too and am inspired by people like Umberto Eco, Daniel Arrase, Amos Oz...and thousands more that I enjoy reading and that I would love to read in the future.

BLACK & SKIN



Originally hailing from Bosnia and now working out of Reinkarnation in Germany, one of black & grey's finest artists, Cigla, chats one-to-one with our guest editor Guil Zekri & Cigla 🔼 Cigla





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LET'S START OFF WITH THE TYPICAL QUESTION, HOW DID YOU BECOME A TATTOO ARTIST? WAS IT SOMETHING YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO DO? BECAUSE IT'S HARD FOR ME TO BELIEVE THAT SOMEONE WHO WAS RAISED IN BOSNIA, A COUNTRY IN STATE OF WAR AT THE TIME, ACTUALLY **DREAMT ABOUT ART OR TATTOOS?**

To be honest, I never really thought about becoming a tattoo artist. Though, funny enough, my father had some tattoos. Still, I was never interested in getting one, or in his tattoos. Around 1996 I had a friend that had started to tattoo. He couldn't really draw so he asked me if I could help him with his sketches. We worked together on some designs and slowly he pushed me to try and do my first tattoo. My close friends, that had seen my drawings, offered me pieces of their skin to try the real thing. At that time

there were no shops, or even online shops, to buy your tattoo kit and no conventions in Bosnia, so you have to imagine how it all happened. You know, both of us laugh thinking about the amoun of people, including us, that got these 'trial and error tattoos'.

From 1996 to 1999 I had to build my own needles, build homemade machines etc. and just try what I could to tattoo. Their around 1999 I got my first tattoo kit, of course it was still just a hobby at the time. I had to work full time and nobody in my circle of friends seemed to like tattoos, or maybe they just didn't like mine. We had a lot of international soldiers that were looking to get tattoos and these soldiers became my customers.

SO IF WE TAKE THIS QUESTION FURTHER, YOU STARTED YOUR PROFESSION BECAUSE OF, OR AT LEAST WITH, THE





THE MORE YOU WORK, THE MORE YOU IMPROVE

our homes, tattooing soldiers. When I think about it, it's really crazy. (laughs)

My first tattoo was done in '98 and that's how I met my wife.

I GATHER THAT YOU DIDN'T HAVE A REAL **APPRENTICESHIP BACK THEN...**

No, I didn't. At the time it was not so easy to get any information about tattoos; no YouTube, no tutorials, seminars or conventions. And the only ones that knew a bit about tattoos kept their secrets hidden. I really had to do it the hard way.

SO WHAT GAVE YOU THE PUSH TO GET TO THE LEVELS OF **TATTOOING YOU HAVE ACHIEVED?**

Well I had a lucky shot. In 2004 I decided to send an email to Guy Aitchison, I don't know what I was thinking to myself (laughs). But, two days later he answered. I sent him some images of my work and asked him some questions and he got back to me. This guy is a legend, he answered all my questions, gave me tips about tattooing and critiqued my tattoos in a very constructive way. It was such a surprise for me. All the 'secrets' I needed to know and from my idol. Afterwards, we worked together on his book, Organica. Guy asked me to translate his book into Serbian. Just imagine how much I learnt doing that!

LET'S JUMP FORWARD A BIT IN TIME, WHEN WE MET AT THE BERLIN CONVENTION IN 2007...YOU HAD A





STUDIO IN BANJA LUKA (BOSNIA), DIDN'T YOU? WHAT **HAPPENED THERE?**

Yes, I did. It was me and a partner, we opened the studio. We did something that was supposed to be impossible at the time in Bosnia. But it took me some time to understand that I wasn't evolving with my work. Unfortunately, people were narrow minded and their financial situation didn't enable them to spend money on tattoos. They had other things to think about. And so did I!

LET'S JUST REMIND THE READERS THAT WE HAVE WORKED TOGETHER FOR A FEW YEARS SO WE KNOW THE STORY, BUT FOR THEM, HOW DID YOU END UP IN GERMANY?

to admit that Cigla's hading I have ever seen.



After meeting at the Berlin convention, we stayed in contact on MySpace and tried to meet at conventions, then I did a guest spot at Reinkarnation and we decided to try and get a visa for me to work at Reinkarnation on a more permanent basis. Bosnia is not a part of the EU and therefore we needed to get me a working visa. It took one whole year to get the visa, with lots of hard work! But we have it now...

LET'S GO BACK TO TATTOOS, SO NOW THAT YOU ARE BASED IN GERMANY, HOW DO YOU SEE THE PROGRESSION IN YOUR WORK?

l already knew the direction that I wanted to follow with my tattoos. I wanted to do black and grey, in a realistic style, which



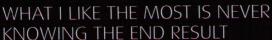
ONE LEARNS A LOT WHEN ONE ASKS AND LISTENS

has always been favorite style. Thankfully, you (Guil) wanted this particular style off of your hands (both laugh). So I had the opportunity to have more customers for my black and grey and the more you work, the more you improve. And of course because all the conditions changed, the customers, the company, having such good artists in the studio and so many guests, one learns a lot when one asks and listens. So yes, I learnt a lot every day. I hope someday to be so happy with my black and grey that I might try some Japanese. I love all styles of tattoos.

WHICH DO YOU PREFER, THE PREPARATION OF THE TATTOO OR THE ACTUAL TATTOOING?

That's a funny question...when I design a realistic tattoo, I don't just copy reference images. I prepare my tattoo for it to look its best on the skin and make sure I follow certain tattooing, or artistic, rules...like contrast, placement etc. But while I am tattooing, the same excitement comes with improvising a bit, adding textures or contrast. And seeing how this human canvas of skin reacts to my needle. So I guess the excitement is higher for me while tattooing. What I like the most is never knowing the end result, which depends on so many factors; skin, energy, placement, good day or bad day. It is one of the things that I truly love about this job!





I JUST WANTED TO ADD THAT CIGLA'S WIFE AND DAUGHTER ARE STILL IN BOSNIA, NOT AN EASY SITUATION. AND THAT BRINGS ME TO THE FAMILY QUESTION, WOULD YOU LIKE YOUR DAUGHTER TO BE A TATTOO ARTIST?

I would support her in anything that she wants but at the moment she is into dinosaurs. I don't know if she would like to be an anthropologist, or archeologist, but I will support her either way. I think they would be very cool jobs too.

HOW DO YOU SEE THE TATTOO WORLD IN THE TIME THAT YOUR DAUGHTER (WHO IS NOW FOUR AND A HALF) WILL BE OLD ENOUGH TO GET A TATTOO?

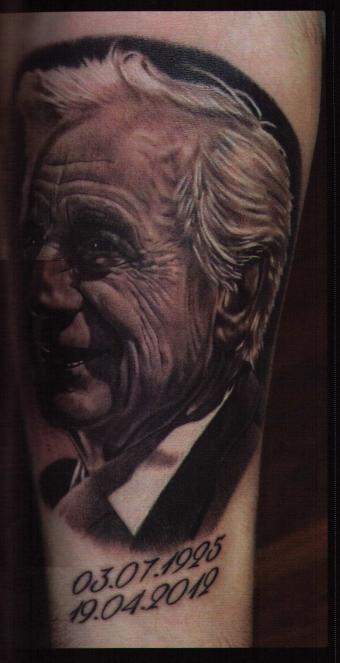
It's very difficult to see the future of the tattoo world. For now it's growing and stabilizing. It's hard to say, but it might have lost a bit of its mystery. Of course I'm happy that we are busy and people like what we do, but I still believe that a lot of customer are 'consuming' tattoos and not really 'transforming' themselves with the art. Take for example, at the moment a lot of tattoos get repeated by various, or even the same, artists because they are popular. I think the tattoo world has developed so much along the artistic path that it might be difficult to surprise people with new ideas. But we'll have to see. It will be a challenge.





UNUSUAL QUESTION, HOW DO YOU THINK FACEBOOK HAS INFLUENCED THE TATTOO WORLD?

It has changed it a lot; from the ego point of view of the artist and from the consumer point of view of the customer. It's strange but I have the impression that realistic tattoos, or hyper realistic tattoos, are getting more attention at the moment than other great styles like new traditional or Japanese tattoos. I think the thing with Facebook is that it's easier to impress people with a realistic tattoo that looks just like a picture, than with other styles. I think that social media doesn't always do justice to other styles. I also really think that realism, today, is more in trend than other types of style. Two or three years ago it was koi, after that came La Katarina (day of the dead ladies)...we'll have to see what comes next!



THINK THAT REALISM, TODAY, IS MORE IN TREND THAN OTHER STYLES

SO IN THIS VIRTUAL WORLD, WHO ARE YOUR REAL INFLUENCES?

and each brings something new every day. Then of course the big masters. Even though I am a realistic black and grey artist, my favorite artists were never realistic tattooers. I love all Jeffries, Filip Leu, Robert Hernadez. Paul Booth...and of the course Guy Aitchison. They really brought something new to attooing and did it with perfection!

AND HOW DO YOU SEE THE DEVELOPMENT IN TATTOO ART?

I think we will go back a bit in trends. I would love the tattoo scene to go back to when the tattoos had strong, thick, lines and





bright colors. Black and skin. I think these tattoos will come back because they make good tattoos. It's the traditional way to think about tattoos.

AND FINALLY CIGLA, HOW DO SEE YOURSELF AS A TATTOO ARTIST IN THE FUTURE? STILL WORKING WITH ME IN REINKARNATION I HOPE!

Yeah, yeah...that is for sure (laughs). I don't really know at the moment. I would like to draw a bit more, try and get into painting maybe? But always tattooing and no limits. Maybe develop my own style, or just keep trying different styles?

THE FUTURE

Cigla and I have worked together for a few years now and we are much more that just co-workers. I hope that this lovely relationship will continue like that, I definitely do see Cigla still working at Reinkarnation for a few more years. He has a lot of very cool pieces lined, I know because we collaborate together on some of the designs. I think these new pieces that he will be doing in the near future will get him even more exposure!