



PUTTING
THE ART IN
TATTOO ART

WHEN CARRIE LYELL HEARD ONE OF HER FAVOURITE TATTOO ARTISTS WAS COMING TO THE UK, SHE COULDN'T RESIST GOING DOWN TO MEET HER (AND GETTING A BIT OF INK IN THE PROCESS)

"Skin is one of the hardest mediums to work on - you can't erase it if you mess up"

I first came across Ivana Belakova's work on Instagram and immediately fell in love. Her style was unlike anything I'd ever seen before and I knew right away I needed to be tattooed by this woman.

I fired off an email saying I'd love to interview her and get a tattoo at the same time, but with a year-long waiting list, I didn't hold my breath. So it felt like my dreams had come true when I found out she'd be in the UK for a tattoo convention the next month and miraculously had a spare few hours between appointments. I decided I wanted two origami birds, because they were decorations my wife and I had at our wedding, sent Ivana some images, and left her to do her magic.

When Ivana started out in Slovakia 14 years ago, the industry was non-existent and the only people that had tattoos were "prisoners or bikers", she told me as she applied the stencil of the first bird to my arm. "In my country, we had probably two tattoo shops and no one wanted to share the secret at that time."

Undeterred, she taught herself, tattooing anyone who would let her - including herself. "I didn't know how to tattoo in the beginning and I messed up so many of my friends," she laughs. What's the worst tattoo she did back then, I ask. On her best friend, apparently. "It was a disaster. But I thought it was so cool I actually put my signature there," she laughs. What about the tattoo on herself? Where was it? "On my bum, and it was so painful!" she laughs, again. "It was the shape of a heart but without ink. I was dating some girl at the time so I put it just for fun. There's nothing there now."

Were her family supportive? Yes,

she says, once the initial shock died down. "My mum actually lent me money for my first tattoo machine," smiles Ivana. Her grandmother took a bit longer to win over, though. "[She] told me, 'Ivanka, I think you should find a better job. Maybe you can work in a supermarket, like Tesco for example. That would be a stable job for you and you won't have to travel so much'."

Now 34, Ivana is based in California. She's worked hard to craft her art and her work is instantly recognisable. She has over 30,000 followers on Instagram, and people come from all over the world to get one of her unique tattoos. How did that evolution of style happen? "It's always changing," she tells me over the gentle hum of the tattoo gun. "I can't settle for normal. I always need to push boundaries. But it depends what is my inspiration, on who my client is."

It's not only Ivana's style that's unusual, but the fact that she is a very successful woman in a particularly male-dominated industry. "When I started [tattooing], I didn't have any problems," Ivana says. "But I moved to Australia and suddenly it felt very male. Nowadays, I don't feel it as much because it's more equal, a little bit. I don't really think about it too much. I just do my art."

But it must be difficult sometimes, to be taken seriously as an equal? "You have to be more...like a tiger. How do you say it? I don't know the English word for it but you have to be more tiger. You have to be fearless, and go for it. You can't feel like you are pushed around. That's why I say I don't care, I just do my thing and I just go for it. I don't care whether I'm in the

macho industry or whatever. I don't have to prove anything to anyone, I'm just me, you know? That's why, I really don't care. I don't care what they think about me."

What about her sexuality? Has she ever encountered lesbophobia at work? "I've heard all the names, but I felt it more when I was in Australia to be honest, and I know it's funny because Sydney's like a gay capital. I think it was a combination of not speaking any English, I was lesbian and I was very young, so all these combinations... I really felt at that time discriminated [against] and pushed away but that's made me stronger."

As I watch Ivana improvise the final lines on my arm, I wonder how different drawing on skin is to drawing on paper. "Very different," she says. "Skin is one of the hardest mediums to work on because you can't just erase it if you mess up. I still feel like I can achieve more and improvise better on the skin for some reason. I think maybe it's the needles. My needles are kind of like my brushes."

Sadly, there's not enough time to finish my tattoo in one session, but I'm excited to see her when she's next in London to have more done to it. As we're finishing up, I ask her what advice she'd give to someone looking for inspiration for their next tattoo. "It's important to think about what you want and where on your body you want it," she says, wrapping my arm in cling film. "But give it a lot of thought if you're not sure. It's your tattoo, and it needs to have some meaning for you." ❊

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