On juggling creative outlets

Artist Thomas Hooper reflects on the ways his visual art and his practice as a tattoo artist inform each other, trying to finish everything you start, and why your peers are always your best resource.

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As told to Brandon Stosuy, 4002 words.

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You're a visual artist, who does gallery and commercial work. You're also a tattoo artist. How do you approach art you put on a person's body versus something you put on a wall?

These are the things I love, and I go through stages of finding it hard to marry them all; then sometimes they go together and inform each other really well. I view it like this: The tattooing is like being a carpenter, and that's my craft, and then I go home and I make art. Sometimes the art works well enough that I can take a break from the craft and take a week to make art.

I'm 20 years in with tattooing. It's one of the things that comes most natural to me. The way I tattoo is fluid, the confidence and everything is there, but sometimes I want to take those ideas and put them to paper or see them in a way where I don't have to think about how someone's going to wear it or live with it. That will separate the two for me. I can do stuff on paper, or as fine art on a wall, and I don't have the weight of thinking, "Someone is going to wear this for the rest of their life." There's a conscience to how I tattoo. People come to me and say, "Do whatever you want," and it's like, "Well, no, I want you to walk around with this forever and look at it and have a certainty that it's right and it's yours and it's part of you." You can't have it like, "Oh, this tattoo's amazing, and he was really nice, but I don't think it works on me."

The fine art is completely free. I can do whatever I want with it. Quite often, especially lately, I have customers bringing me pictures of my paintings and saying, “I’d quite like something like this tattoo.” They really do inform one another.

I did this piece for inside an elevator shaft in London. The person who commissioned it asked me to do a big 12-meter-tall painting to go inside an elevator shaft, and I was like, “Okay. I don’t know if I can do this. Send me pictures of what you want,” and he just sent me pictures of my tattoos. I had to say, “I can’t do this. It doesn’t work on paper.” You know, it doesn’t look the same. There’s no skin.

I went to school—I have a bachelor’s in drawing—and I didn’t follow the route to get a masters. Instead I started tattooing. This summer I was speaking with an artist. I was talking to him about his art. His work’s fascinating. He asked me about what *I* did. He got stumped on the tattooing and couldn’t move past it. He was confused by the fact that I was a tattooist and didn’t understand that I made art. Quite often it’s like a balloon deflating.

People are like, “You do… and… yeah…”, and I’m like, “Yeah, it’s just another medium.”

I hop between different things, and it allows me to not rely on anything emotionally. If all I did was tattooing, and that was my only creative output, if something didn’t work or I didn’t get to do what I wanted, I’d feel like I was not getting fulfilled; but, instead, I can juggle and move around so that I’m always in a place where I feel like I can make something work.

One thing I’ve figured out as I’ve gotten older is that I used to overthink the process. Now I have a bunch of projects going and a bunch of different kettles on the fire, and it’s easier to just do more and to keep things going.

Yeah. My day will be: family time, run the kid to school, and then if I get a little bit of time I’ll sketch some stuff out, and work on correspondence and communication with people I’m working with. Then I go to work at the shop and I tattoo and then I come home, do family time, they go to bed pretty early, and then I’ll get three hours of sleep and I’ll make art and work on something. So, rather than watch TV or do something like that, I’ll make stuff at night in my little cave in my house.

I never really get any sort of artistic block. I’ll be working on something and if I’m like, “Oh, I think I’ve screwed this up,” I’ll be like, “Well, do you know what I’m going to do? I’m going to put it in the drawer and I’m going to pull this thing out that I worked on last month.”

I never look at something as good or bad now, because I have so many things I’m working on. I’m like, “Is that working, or isn’t it? I’m not sure yet, I’ll work on it some more to see if it is.” And, the tattooing is so much in the moment and it has to work. I’m obviously not going to make mistakes with the technical aspect, but choosing the art and the stuff for the customer has to work quite right and I’ve got to give them this undivided attention. It’s always important to me, and I want them to know it is. You know when something comes really easy

to you, people can just think it’s really blasé, like you just don’t care. But I want them to know that this is important to me.

I love having a million things going. I’ve got a couple of drawings that are half done from about 10 years ago. I’m like, “I think I’m about ready to start working on this one again.” I’m constantly in debt with the bank of sleep.

What do you think about when you’re tattooing?

With tattooing, there’s a lot of down time, where I’m just working somewhat in silence, and my customer’s focusing on being still and in pain, and I’m probably shading 300 triangles on them. After the fifth one, my brain and body divide and I think about things. I think about what to make and creative things and processes; by the time I get home, I’ve got all the ideas and I’m like, “I need to do something, and I need to go to bed, but I’m going to do something else instead.”

I go through periods of having a little meditation practice while working, and then I go through periods where I sit down and I do it and I’m like, “I just did this all day in a crazy, loud, wild room full of people talking.” On those days, I just want to go and draw something, or make something, or take something apart.

I was going to ask if drawing on people’s bodies all day burns you out for other kinds of drawings, but it seems to fuel your other outlets.

Definitely. There’s some other stuff that works, too. Like right now I’m doing this funny social media thing called Inktober where I try and do an ink drawing every night. It’s difficult because it’s just like being at work, and I’m tired and I’ve got to think of an idea, but it’s just a month and I like where it pushes me and it refines a skill.

I spend all day working very slowly, refining things and working towards an end. It could take a long time for that to come to fruition after many hours. So at home I’ll do things that are quicker and simpler. I paint in a simple way, or lately I’ve been taking things that are too detailed for me to tattoo and laser etching them into wood, and then loosely abstract painting over them and sanding them back down to the wood and then painting on them some more so that they become these strange, colored, messed-up objects. They don’t relate to my tattooing in any way, except for little underlying hints, and I like that it’s more physical. There’s a bunch of stuff I do where there’s nothing careful about it, it’s quite abstract and there’s tons of chance and randomness. If I feel like it’s too much like work I’ll go do something else.

In general, how do you avoid burning out? You were saying instead of watching TV, you’ll work, or you’ll stay up late. How do you know when you’re doing too much?

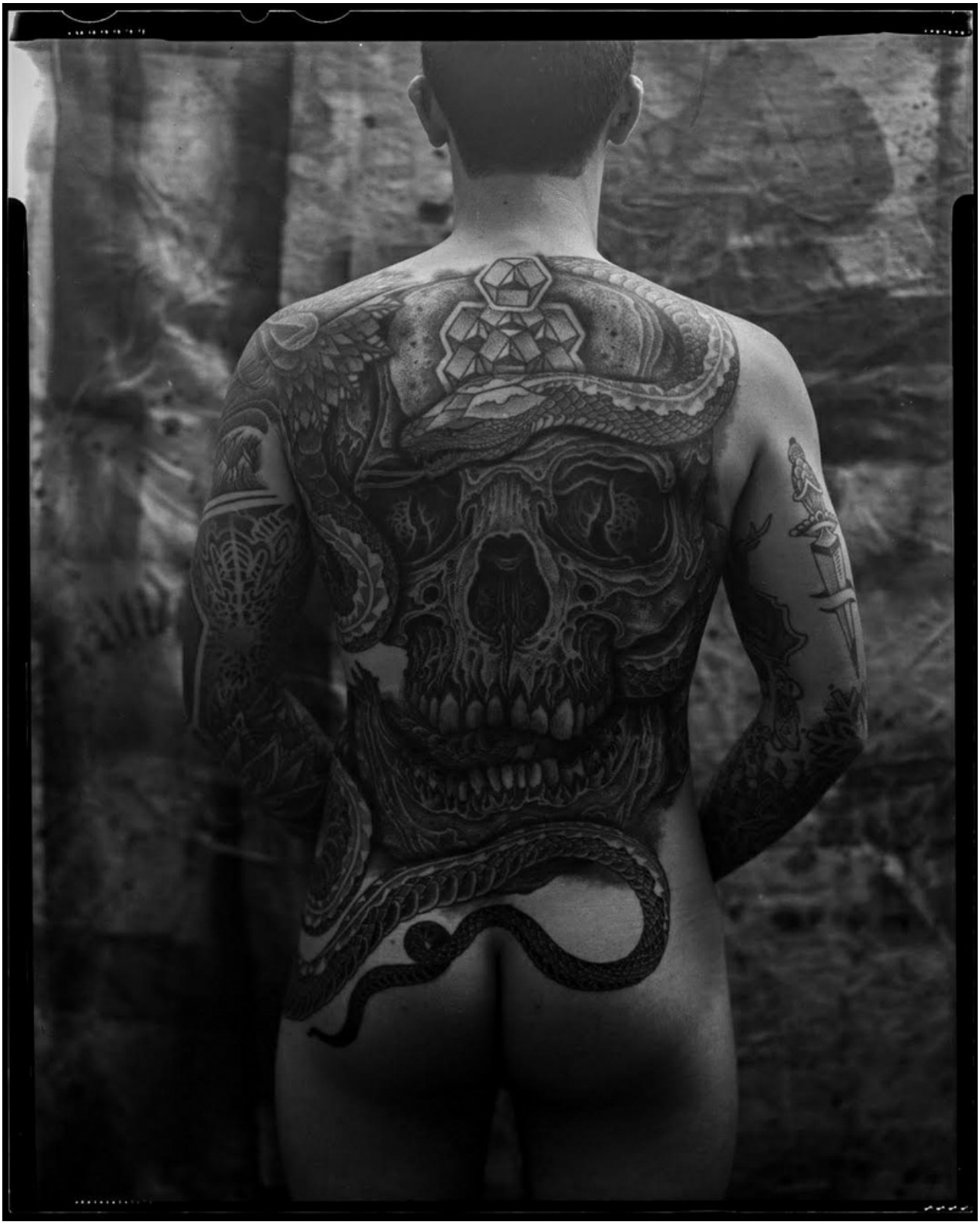
I don’t get burnt out on painting or drawing. I’ll get tired because I’m pushing into my rest time. But if I tattoo a lot—if I do a couple of weeks of 10-hour days—that’s when I get burnt out because the social interaction is hard and there’s the weight and pressure of performing constantly every minute whilst you’re at work. That’s when I get frazzled. I’m just like, “Please nobody ask me a single question for a few days.”

When you’re tattooing someone there’s a point where you’re done with the tattoo, the customer’s satisfied, and the project is done. You said there are certain drawings you have that are a decade old. How do you know when something like that is complete?

I’ve been teaching myself to use pen and ink, like dip pens and ink. I’m getting to a point where I’m

comfortable. I grew up looking at a lot of etchings, and it’s a little dream to be able to draw some of those etchings, so that’s what I’m doing, trying to teach myself. But there’ll come a point where I’m like, “I’ve got to leave this alone or I’m just going to screw it up.” And it looks done or quite often I’ll ask my wife what she thinks. I’ll be like, “What do you think?” And she’s like, “Don’t do anything else to it.” I’m like, “But I really want to do this.” And sometimes I’ll listen and sometimes I won’t.

I’m in my studio right now and I have a painting that I painted over the top of three times. Now, it’s just a big kind of indigo, blue square with a red circle on it. Nothing else. It’s not finished. It’s just a background for something else, but to me I’m like, “Actually I really like looking at this the way it is right now.” And also I’m like, “I don’t know if it’s finished.”



Sometimes I’ll put those things in exhibitions. It’s like a little gamble. I had a show last month. I had this idea and I had a week to do it and I had the mornings and evenings and I kind of pushed it through—it felt a little rushed, but I really liked it. And my wife was just like, “You can’t hang that, it’s not going to be done.” And I finished it to a point where I was happy with it and I hung it, and it sold the next day. But the

ones that took four times the amount of time? They're not going anywhere.

I try to let go and let it be and see what happens because I don't know what other people think when they look at it. You're trying to make something that captures something for someone else. It's an odd one. I honestly never know when stuff's finished.

Are you happy with your current balance between tattooing and gallery art?

I like how it is. Well, I'd like to be able to make enough income from my art so I could take a month off from tattooing and make art for a month, and then come back to tattooing with that renewed passion. You know? Like, I don't want to take a month off and just play video games. I enjoy traveling, but I'd like to just go explore something else visually. It is hard.

I recently was working at a tattoo convention—they're like tattoo festivals almost—and one of my friends who I hadn't seen for a few years asked me if I still tattooed that much. I was like, "Yeah, about 45 hours a week." It's hard because we live in this strange world with social media where our day-to-day representation of what we make is presented by what we post. And so if you're not really posting, people think you're not really doing anything, which is fine, they don't need to know whether you're doing something, but then when you come to wanting to show people… You've got to play the game.

It's hard trying to represent myself properly. I don't want my customers to feel like I don't want to tattoo them, because I'd rather be painting, and I don't want people that might be interested in my painting to think that getting a painting from me just means they're getting a tattoo as a painting. It's a conversation I've been having a lot of in my head of like, "Should I get a decent website? How should I represent this?"

So right now I'm using social media for what it is and just posting. I'm probably posting more than I should, but I'm just trying to put it out there. I'm also doing it for my customers because when I complete a tattoo and I post the finished image of their tattoo, I think they enjoy it. They like to see, "Oh, he was proud of that one." But, for all that, I'd like to just delete social media from my phone.

Are there things you do to reclaim more time in your day?

The big trick, I find, and it frustrates quite a few people, is: I don’t answer emails that often. They either go through my shop, and my shop manager’s fantastic, and she’ll do a lot of the tattoo stuff, or I have a computer next to my tattoo station and so I only answer emails during my tattoo time at work. For instance, if my customer goes and pees I’ll look at emails and answer an email quickly.

Outside of that, say my son wants to watch a movie with me, I put a TV in my studio so he can watch the latest Avengers movie and then I can sit and work on a drawing. We’re in the room together talking. I’m not using the screen; I’m paying attention to the paper, but you know, we’re together. It’s to the point where we can put on documentaries and he sits there and draws, too.

So, the trick, for me, is juggling, multi-tasking, which I’m not very good at, but I try to do it a lot.

Do you ever abandon anything? You can’t abandon a tattoo, maybe, but if you’re doing a work on paper or something, if you think it’s going the wrong way are you okay with just stopping or do you find yourself wanting to keep going?

I keep going and I try to finish everything. I used to get frustrated and if something sucked I’d just be like, “This is shit, I’m going to tear it up and put it in the trash. I’m done with that.” I kind of refigured my thought process around it and the first one was: I don’t want to waste anything. Nothing gets wasted. Like

recently, there were two bands that wanted to use two different paintings of mine as their album covers, and all I took was iPhone pictures and put them on a little art vlog that I do sometimes, and then I painted over them with something else. And I was like, “I don’t think that works.” I don’t have a high-res scan of it and I’m like, “I can’t help you. It doesn’t really exist, except in this version on Tumblr.” So it’s not good enough for print, really.

I’m not very good at keeping sketchbooks; instead, it’s like everything is my sketchbook. Everything is leading into the next thing, so I don’t get hung up on if it’s working or not. There have been a few big projects where I really stressed about making sure it was the best I’ve got and everything like that, but for the most part things definitely don’t work and I’ll stop halfway through until I come up with an idea to make it work.

And then the other one is I want my son to see me finish things. I want him to see me fail, but I also want him to see me finish what I’m doing so that he knows it’s okay. And I want him to be involved, and I try not to show any frustration about any of it because I don’t want him to learn that habit. I don’t want him just seeing like, “Oh look, here’s these things I made that you didn’t see me make but they came out of somewhere and everyone likes them.” I don’t want him to have this feeling that he needs to meet those expectations or anything like that. So I do stuff and I’m like, “Look, I finished this,” and he’ll be like, “Oh, I don’t really like that bit.” I’m like, “Yeah, me neither.” I value the time in it, and the energy. If I finish something, it’s a success to me. And then I let other people make their minds up.

Do you have any tendencies in your work that you have to fight against? Do you find yourself repeating things or things you find yourself going back to—or do you sort of embrace those repetitions?

I embrace the repetitions. Growing up in tattooing I looked at a lot of Japanese tattoo art and block printing. If you look at that world, you just repeat and repeat because each time you repeat it, it’s going to get better. If you only do something once, how do you know it’s your best you ever did? I love the idea of beauty through

repetition. You could almost call it “old world craftsmanship,” where a cabinet maker that made beautiful, artistic, ornate, carved wooden cabinets made them by hand. He didn’t make one and then make a different one. He probably made 100 of each one over and over again, and then it becomes that natural muscle memory.

So I really do embrace repetition. That’s why I like the patterns in my tattooing and a bit of my artwork. The thought processes that I try to avoid, and I have a really hard time with, are being critical of myself in a bad way. Like when I’m tattooing, if I’ve had a bad morning or something like that, and I sit down and I’m about to tattoo… A lot of what I do relies on linework and so you’re stretching someone’s skin and trying to pull these clean lines, and I’ll do the first two and I’ll be like, “That’s shit.” If I give it the best I’ve got, it’s going to be good, but if I start thinking it’s crap, then I’m just going to fill the space with this negativity and it is not going to be good. I have to abolish that.

A lot of people have the idea: “I want to be a full-time artist or I want to be a full-time this or that.” But, for you, having all these different outlets, they enrich each other and they play off each other and they make the other aspects stronger. Do you ever think, “I want to do this one thing full time, or this thing one full time”? Or is it important to have all these things going?

It’s important to have all those things going, for a few different reasons. I can’t imagine not tattooing, and to be good, it’s like playing an instrument. It’s a lot like music, where if you didn’t play guitar for a year and you’re an amazing guitarist, you’d still be a good guitarist but all your muscles have fatigued and you’ve got to rely on your memory to pick that back up. It needs that constant refining and practice.

I’d love to have a larger project where I’m like, “Oh, I’m going to do this for six months. I’m going to give my everything to something different and unique from what I’m doing now, like a short film or sculpture or something like that.” But obviously I need to pay the bills. I’m really fortunate and lucky that I can just go to work and I make something and I get paid immediately after it. Like, literally I’ll go to work, and if I only tattooed for three hours today, at the end of those three hours I would get paid for those three hours time.

But when you’re doing anything else you have to make it and then put it out in the world and invoice people, try to sell it, and then a few months later you start getting paid for it, so it’s difficult. The really fortunate part is I can make stuff and not worry about it. Just go and make 10 paintings and put them out in the world and see what happens. As long as my goal with the art is to break even on the materials, so it’s not a hobby that I’m paying for, I’m ok. If it can pay for itself, I feel like it becomes somewhat of a professional thing.

What are the most important resources for you in your practices?

My creative peers. The people that inspire me, or will tell me honestly what they think, or will help me—all of those different things. For instance, there's a tattooist in LA, Roxx, who's incredibly inspirational—her work ethic and art, it's all of that.

We currently have almost too much information and visuals. It used to be, 15 years ago, that my library and reference books were the most important thing, but I can think of anything right now and type it into the internet, and have far more information about it than I'll ever need. So, now it's become this thing with creative people, like Jake from Converge—every week we're texting each other about a project we're working on… we're having creative discussions.

I like the idea of making a community around what you're doing. In this day and age, community doesn't need to be people that live in the same town as you. Community is the world over. I have quite a widespread community. I have

my tattooists who I look up to, I aspire to—we bounce ideas off of each other. I have artist friends who have creative practices, musician friends who are juggling different things. Like, the guys in Converge, how they manage themselves as a band and do their stuff themselves—you know, the DIY thing. That's inspiring, because you're like, "Oh, right, so you don't need a manager."

There are so many interesting people out there doing things in their own unique way, and the opportunity to learn is huge. Being around other people, you're constantly reminded that there is so much to learn and so many different ways to do the thing that you want to do. I really like that.

Thomas Hooper Recommends:

Five artists I find important and a big influence.

Hilma af Klint

Anslem Kiefer

Roxx

Jim MacAirt

Jacob Bannon

Name
Thomas Hooper

Vocation
Artist, Tattoo Artist