

Walking in, everything appears to be in order. Tinkling chimes above the door? Check. Blue, felt pool table? Check. Swamp Thing pinball machine? Check. A quick trip to the restroom, however, reveals that the previous night at the tattoo shop had seen some out-of-the-ordinary events. A broken towel rack was the first clue. The toilet, knocked askew off its porcelain white legs and leaking from the base onto the floor, was the most obvious clue. And the dirty gray foot prints climbing up the wall was the strangest clue.

“Why does this kind of shit happen every time *you* come in?” Nickk questions Stephan, a regular client of Sacred Pearl, a custom tattoo shop in South Denver.

The two reminisce about previous events that Stephan has been lucky enough to bear witness to on his visits to the shop. This time it’s the abused bathroom. Last time, it was the aftermath of a bar fight. They can’t quite remember what happened before that, but they’re certain it was something out of the ordinary.

“There really is some interesting event that has happened or is happening every time I come in. Even if it’s just the excitement of getting tattooed and talking to Nickk and the other guys,” Stephan explains. “But that’s part of the reason why I love it here. These people, the artists here, live in a world that’s different from my everyday life. I come here and experience some of a different culture. And Nickk and I talk. He is always interested in what I’ve been doing in my life. We go back and forth.”

Sacred Pearl isn’t just a place to get a tattoo. It’s a place to talk, to relax, to play. The people here showed up because you asked them to, and their job is to please you. But while you pay them to decorate your body with an original piece of art, you also get to share pieces of your life and they reciprocate by listening and sharing parts of their life with you.

Nickk and the four other artists who pay rent at the shop do not just tattoo; they live and breathe in the world of art. Nick explains how all of the artists in the shop truly are artists and to them, tattoos are just another medium for them to express their creativity: “When we’re not tattooing here, we’re all producing some sort of art, so it’s definitely different from other shops.”

Looking more like an eclectic art studio than a tattoo shop, original art garnishes the walls. Instead of overdone representations of popular tattoos, a partially constructed mural is forming on the far side of the lobby while the rest of the interior exhibits everything from portraits, to paintings of zombies, to abstract pieces using a range of mediums. African masks stare blankly from their posts on the walls as a variety of antique artifacts fill in any gaps of open space.

Nickk makes a few phone calls to try to sort out the situation in the bathroom. No one is answering their phone.

“Nickk is just creative,” Stephan comments as he awaits the newest addition to a collection of wildlife that has been amassing on his upper arm, “he turns life into art.”

The tattoo industry has seen tremendous growth over the last couple of decades. All across the country, men and women, young and old, are making the decision to get inked. Tattoos are more than body art; they are a means of self-expression and more and more people are choosing to express themselves in this permanent fashion.

According to Nickk, it's quite an accomplishment that people are walking around all over the world advertising his art, "Tattooing is the ultimate form of art, at least in my point of view."

Unlike other shops that can feel pretentious, Nickk feels like Sacred Pearl is a place where people can be comfortable: Nickk motions to the pool table that is often used while taking a break from a large or intricate tattoo: "A lot of people come in and it's a little bit of a release. They relax."

Instead of walking in to a front desk and an uninformed receptionist, visitors are welcomed by a bright lobby and a soft, well-worn velvet couch as the quiet buzz of a tattoo gun whirrs over the hum of highway traffic outside.

While Nickk believes there is an increase in the number of women being tattooed, he says he has done thousands of tattoos on people from all walks of life. In addition to a passion for art and tattooing, he also enjoys working with a wide variety of people, making Sacred Pearl the perfect place for him to express his talents.

"Clients interested in custom tattoos need to have an open mind though," Nickk is careful to warn, "What the person sees on paper is

not always what the tattoo will look like on a person's skin."

Nickk's ultimate goal is for his customers to be happy. Since 17% of people who have a tattoo feel some regret about their body art, Nickk wants to be sure that his customers are making an informed decision. In fact, he and Stephan have spent almost an hour deliberating exactly where Stephan's praying mantis tattoo will look its very best.

Finally, one of the other artists shows up at the shop. He explains that two of his clients got into an intense argument the night before that eventually ended in a wrestling match in the bathroom. The source of the argument is unclear, but he insists that drugs and alcohol were not involved. Luckily, no one was seriously injured and no equipment suffered any harm. They can all laugh about it now and start to plan how they will repair the damage.

Since all the artists who tattoo here help to pay the rent, everyone is their own boss and no one has any authority over anyone else and there are no set schedules. If an artist is at the shop, he is likely busy with a tattoo. However, they do welcome walk-ins. With a smile, Nick points out, "We do get walk-in clients from the Wash Park area. Usually most of them come in as new customers and become regular clients."

Sacred Pearl's business revolves around repeat customers. People who come in for original, expert tattoos find themselves coming back not just for custom body art, but also for a place to escape the mundane and enjoy a more exciting, artistic world, even if just for a few hours.

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