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Drawn to a Larger Scale



Evan Sung for The New York Times

INKED Scott Campbell, a tattoo artist, will have a gallery show of his fine-art work. His life has been a continuous line of adventure, starting when he was a teenager in the Louisiana bayou.

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HOW did a 32-year-old college dropout from the bayou of Louisiana, with no formal training in art — well, to be frank, no training at all — end up with a one-man show in a New York gallery and a client list that includes [Robert Downey Jr.](#) and [Orlando Bloom](#)?

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For Scott Campbell, it all started at a tattoo studio in the Lower Haight district of San Francisco. “I’m just the dirty kid who snuck in the back door,” said Mr. Campbell, who said that he got the bulk of his art education tattooing teenage gang members in San Francisco in the 1990s.



Indeed, as he sat in the Smile, a restaurant on Bond Street, with his friend Dan Colen, a fellow artist, and with his lank dirty-blond hair brushing the top of his collar and his ink-stained forearms peeking out of his shirt, Mr. Campbell looked like a kid in [Salvation Army](#) vintage who sells Minor Threat albums at Bleecker Bob’s — never mind that his button-down shirt was Loden Dager, that his jeans were from Earnest Sewn and that his lunky diver’s watch was a Rolex. (A family piece handed down to him by an uncle in the [Navy Seals](#), Mr. Campbell explained).




And that tattoo career? It took off in 2005, four years after he moved to New York and opened his studio, Saved Tattoo, in the then-emerging neighborhood of Williamsburg, Brooklyn.

One day an impatient Australian came in and commissioned a small bird in flight on his left forearm. The next day, Mr. Campbell said, “Entertainment Tonight” came with cameras, grilling him on what kind of tattoo he had just given [Heath Ledger](#). The two became friends — “the sweetest guy, so open,” he said of Mr. Ledger. “The third time I hung out with him, I had keys to his house.”

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It became a pattern, as Mr. Campbell became something of a celebrity tattoo artist, charging as much as \$300 an hour (\$1,000 minimum) to ink customers like [Courtney Love](#) and [Josh Hartnett](#). After Mr. Campbell tattooed three of [Sting](#)'s adult children, he said, the singer and his wife, Trudie Styler, put him up at their house in London when he was there for a gallery show in October (he said he paid Sting back by giving him a tattoo, a meditation labyrinth on his back). And he said he recently went gallery hopping with [Marc Jacobs](#), who sports a tattoo of his two bull terriers on his shoulder, courtesy of Mr. Campbell. The nature of his craft, he said, helps to explain these friendships. "Tattooing is a very intimate exchange," he said.

"You have your hands on someone, you're communicating with them, and they're very yielding," he continued. "There's no cool-guy factor, no barriers."

IT'S easy to see why Mr. Campbell might have been welcomed into the inner circle of celebrity. He's charming in a not-too-forced way, can fluidly swing the conversation from Greek art to the Dead Kennedys to motorcycles, and he has an appealing back story.

He grew up in rural Louisiana in a fishing village called Hermitage. "I hated it when I was a kid," said Mr. Campbell, whose father owned a small oil-services company. As a teenager, he would order [William S. Burroughs](#) novels from New York and dream about the world beyond. "I felt like everything I was passionate about was something that was mail-order from somewhere else."

His rebelliousness inspired him to get his first tattoo — a skull on his leg — at 15, to his mother's horror. "When I was a kid, she sat me on her lap and said: 'Scotty, you could murder, and I'd still be proud to call you my son. But if you get a tattoo, I'll shoot you myself,'" he recalled.

Early on, Mr. Campbell toyed with the idea of a middle-class life. At the [University of Texas](#) he studied biochemistry and planned a career as a medical illustrator. Eventually, his restlessness took over. "I have the attention span of a gerbil," he said. He dropped out, spent a few years in San Francisco, where he worked in that tattoo parlor, before bumming around Asia and Europe, where he tattooed for cash, and then landing in Williamsburg in 2001.

Inspired by the street sensibilities of artists (and tattoo clients) like Mr. Colen and [Dash Snow](#), he dabbled in mixed-media art — United States currency (above) that he etches with a laser, for example — around 2004. The painter Michael Bevilacqua, a friend, encouraged him to exhibit his work in group shows, Mr. Campbell said. The work started to sell.

Last April, Mr. Campbell's solo show at OHWOW, a gallery in Miami, sold out, said Al Moran, its director. It was evidence that Mr. Campbell had the stature needed to carry a solo show on April 29 at the gallery's new space in Manhattan, on Crosby Street — its first since moving to the city. "All sorts of people were coming" to the Miami show, Mr. Moran said. "Tattoo kids were coming in, and museums were coming in."

Mr. Campbell said he is nervous to show in New York. But added, philosophically, "If the art world shuns me, I can still do tattoos."



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