

Permanent pastime

Haas makes body art more than a hobby

By Rachel Barry
 THE BATTALION

Erica Haas got her first tattoo when she turned 18, but she had known she wanted one since she was 10-years-old.

She waited until she went to college, and then came home with the tattoo to her shocked parents.

"My mom grabbed some alcohol and a cotton ball and tried to rub it off because she thought it was fake," Haas, a graduate anthropology student, said. "My father just shook his head and said 'kinder, kinder' ('child, child')."

Haas' first tattoo was of a salamander. The image was from a brooch her grandmother had given her.

Shortly after she got the tattoo, she lost the pin. Now she has the tattoo as a reminder and also as an entertainment tool for babysitting dilemmas.

"It's great when I'm babysitting," she said, "because I can move it around with my neck muscles, and it entertains the kids so they keep quiet."

After getting her first tattoo, Haas began saving up for others.

"I had a jar, and I would put \$5 from every paycheck in it until I had \$200 to get another one," Haas said.

Now Haas has taken her love of body art a step further. She graduated from the University of Minnesota in 1994 with a degree in anthropology and American Indian studies. She then came to A&M as an anthropology graduate student to continue her studies in folklore. Her thesis is on contemporary body modifications.

"I've been trying to make my hobby my academic goal," Haas said.

Over the past five years, Haas has had five more tattoos to the original salamander and doesn't plan to stop until at least 60 percent of her body is covered. She says her body looks better with the tattoos.

"The body is a temple," Haas said, "and mine has stained glass windows."

Haas said, however, that she doesn't want to get a cluttered look.

"I think it is most aesthetically pleasing

when they are spaced out," she said. "Then you have the color of it and the skin around it."

Haas says her tattoos will not lose their artistic beauty when she gets older.

"If I'm going to be wrinkled," she said, "at least my wrinkles will be pretty colors. I'll be the one in the nursing home who gets bathed on a regular basis."

However, Haas said that not everyone is accepting of her tattoos.

"People with excessive tattoos are usually depicted as being social deviants," she said.

Some people, Haas said, make comments about her behind her back. Others come up to her and begin grabbing her to get a better look at her tattoos.

"I may decorate my body, but that doesn't mean you can touch it," Haas said. "You look at a Monet in a museum, but you don't put your fingers on it."

Last April, work began on her largest and most intricate tattoo yet. It is a scene of a Mayan blood-letting ceremony with a man and a woman pulling a rope of thorns.

The tattoo has taken almost 12 hours to outline and will not be complete with color until sometime in December.

Michael C., a local tattoo artist, works with a stencil on Haas' back for periods of about an hour to an hour-and-a-half. Haas says the pain dictates how long she can spend getting the tattoo outlined.

She said she has ways of dealing with the pain.

"I try to leave my body and go to another world to leave the pain," she said.

C. said that full-back art like Haas' is unusual to find in a college town.

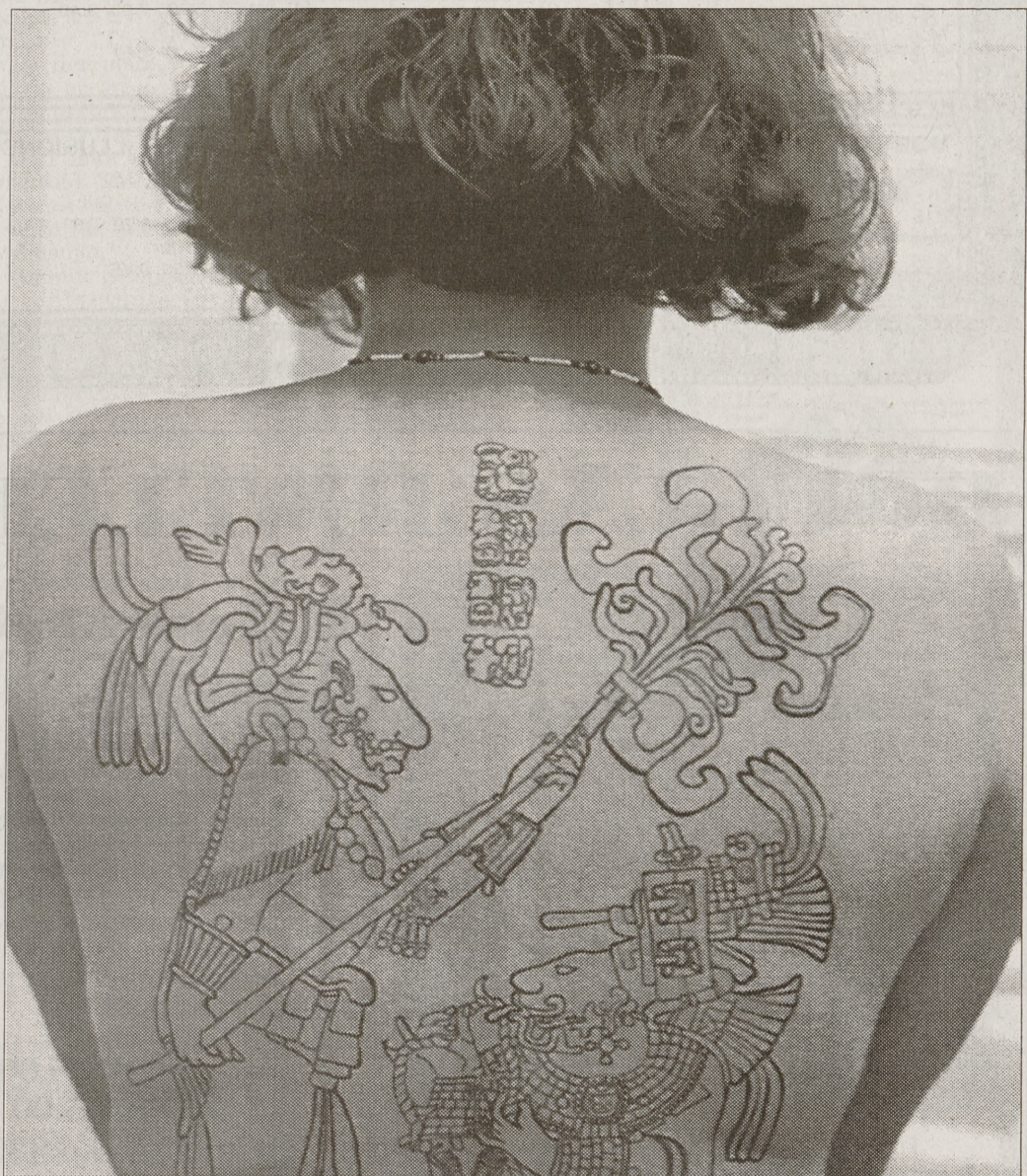
"It's interesting to do real art as opposed to the 'stick-ons,'" he said.

The rarity of body art has also created problems for Haas. She said finding people to interview for her thesis is a challenge.

"A lot of people when I approach them think that it is a scam," she said.

While many people who get tattoos and pierce their bodies don't realize the permanence of their actions, Haas said she is serious about her hobby.

"I'm in it for the long haul," she said.



Erica Haas, an anthropology graduate student, plans to cover 60 percent of her body with tattoos.

The body is a temple, and mine has stained glass windows."

— Erica Haas, anthropology graduate student

Keen's lyrics hold special meanings and lessons for Aggies

Robert Earl Keen says he likes walking around Northgate when he's in town. It brings back memories for the country singer.



MICHAEL LANDAUER
 AGGIELIFE EDITOR

"This is where I threw up. This is where I fell down. This is where I used to stand and shoot holes in the back of the Chicken," he said, laughing. "Yeah, you didn't expect that one."

When Keen comes through town, it brings back a lot of memories for him, but it also gives us a chance to hear many stories about being Aggies.

When Keen went to school here in the late '70s, the Chicken was less than half the size of what it is now. It lacked a back porch, and Keen remembers trudging through bottle cap alley to get from his house to the Chicken's only door. And he and owner Don Ganter

used to shoot at the bar's back wall — it was less crowded then.

Keen will bring his stories and music to the Wolf Pen Creek Amphitheater tonight, appearing with vocalist Sarah Hickman.

Although Keen draws good crowds across the country — he proudly talks of breaking a 7-year-old bar record in Houston over the summer — a Robert Earl Keen show means something special in this town.

He likes playing for Aggies because he always has a message that we can relate to. He said he can tell us how to get by on as little as possible, and he knows how we live — "Just try to get by, and lie to your parents," he said.

It is not the most worldly, moral wisdom, but it works for Aggies. And

almost exclusively for Aggies — we get more out of Keen's stories and songs than any other audience ever could.

When I came to A&M, I had never heard of Keen. Since I don't count myself among the masses of country music fans in College Station, I may have never heard his music — although Keen told me once that he's not country, and that I need to go see Jerry Jeff Walker.

But I found out early that knowing all the words to "The Front Porch Song" is not only a rite of passage in Aggieland, but it is also required to get into upper-level classes.

So I studied. I borrowed *The Live Album* and tried to keep it. I rushed over to Marooned Records when I heard he was playing an in-store acoustic set with some friend of his named Lyle last fall.

I started to suspect that Keen was an A&M institution.

This year, as a counselor at Fish

Camp, I got further proof. Most camps do the "Cooking with Copenhagen" skit, which ends with Keen's song about the dip. So most freshmen are introduced to Keen through a skit which usually ends in streams of vomit. But the freshmen in Camp James heard a little more about Keen.

Camps invite inspirational speakers to give freshmen insight into what they face as Aggies.

Ross McLaughlin, a graduate member of the class of '94 and a former officer in the Corps, spoke to the freshmen in Camp James and had 12 pieces of advice for them. With sincere conviction, he told them piece of advice number seven — "Go see a Robert Earl Keen show."

Yeah, Fish Camp teaches freshmen how to do yells, to understand the traditions and the difference between good and bad bull. But McLaughlin thought it was also necessary to introduce them to

Keen, a storyteller who knows Aggies.

A&M has changed a lot since the six years Keen spent fishing, drinking beer and going to school here. But a lot about the experience of living in College Station never will change.

College Station was the first place Keen lived after being born and raised in Houston. He chose College Station as a hometown after stealing his dad's car and making an unsuccessful run for the border — and we're not talking about Taco Bell.

So, some of Keen's memories will find their way into stories and songs tonight as he enjoys another trip back to A&M. And for Aggies, long after tonight's show is over, we will listen to his music, and it will take us back to our time at A&M. And maybe after tonight, a few more people who have never heard his music before will understand why his music is an Aggie tradition.

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