



Meet the tattoo artist using her craft to reflect the histories and experiences of Black people in the African Diaspora.

ART



1.16.2018

BY EMMA BANKS

DOREEN GARNER IS CELEBRATING AFRICAN AMERICAN CULTURE WITH "INVISIBLE MAN TATTOO"



If you've read Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* masterpiece, you'll understand artist Doreen Garner's reference right away; a novel about a man whose skin color makes him invisible, the book and Garner's exhibit both seek to put the spotlight on a group of people often overlooked or undervalued. "Invisible Man Tattoo" opened at [Recess](#) art gallery on January 9, and last night the pop up tattoo shop also hosted a #MLK party in honor of the late, great Civil Rights activist, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Garner's focus is related to her work as a tattoo artist in that the exhibit focuses on the literal body—more specifically, "the exploitation of Black bodies by the medical industry from the 1800s to the present day." And the artist will be putting her craft to good use; she'll actually be tattooing visitors throughout the course of the pop up, which runs until March 4. Milk sat down with Garner to talk further on where "Invisible Man Tattoo" sits in the larger cultural landscape in light of MLK Day, and celebrating the legacy of African American culture in the US. Check the interview below, and be sure to pop by Recess before March 4.

INVISIBLE MAN *Tattoo* BROOKLYN



Invisible Man Tattoo reflects the history and experience of people of African descent – can you tell us more about the central theme of the exhibit?

The theme in this project is to change the demographic of Flash embraced by American tattoo establishments. I'm hoping because the imagery is more inclusive it will provide a safe space for people of color that have felt traditionally unaccepted, out of place, or not celebrated within other tattoo shops. Images that are used in the Flash designs at Invisible Man Tattoo celebrate black revolutionaries, black inventors, and reflecting on my own personal art practice, stories of black people that were exploited by the medical industry whose experiences are not known to many. These images are meant to serve as permanent badges of honor celebrating blackness.

How has your own experience as a tattoo artist been connected to or influenced by the historical context that is explored in Invisible Man Tattoo?

Before I began my practice as a tattoo artist or I like to call it an inscriber of flesh, I was simply a participant, a client. Of all the flash depicted on the walls or in the books displayed on the coffee tables in various shops I visited, I personally never felt any connection; but then I realized that the imagery wasn't made for me. It was made to celebrate white Americans. So I made the decision to open a shop that is created to celebrate Black Americans.

How do you hope to effect people with Invisible Man Tattoo? What kind of thoughts and conversations do you hope are prompted?

My hopes are that Invisible Man Tattoo functions as a venue to receive tattoos and also as a place of education. Participants are strongly encouraged if not required in some cases to do research on the history behind their selected designs. I hope that the conversations had between myself and participants in the project are enlightening to the point where we're educating each other. Hopefully that dialogue will continue outside of Invisible Man Tattoo as well.

Images courtesy of Recess

Stay tuned to Milk for more artistic endeavors.