

SPECIAL TATTOO ART ISSUE

# JUXTAPOZ

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STEVENS

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SHAMROCK TATTOO

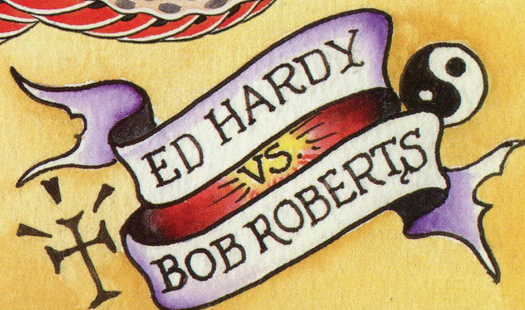
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ROCKET FROM  
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Lenny Buck 2001

Asian Pinup, acrylic on canvas, 24" x 36," 2002.



# Sunny Side Up

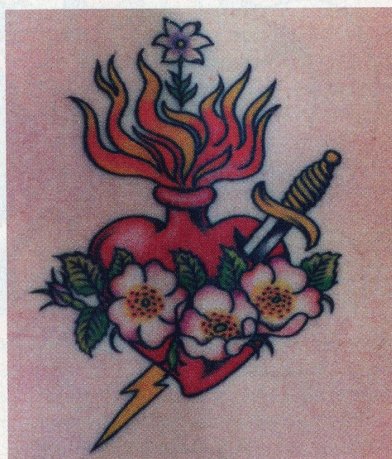
## THE CHARMED LIFE OF SUNNY BUICK



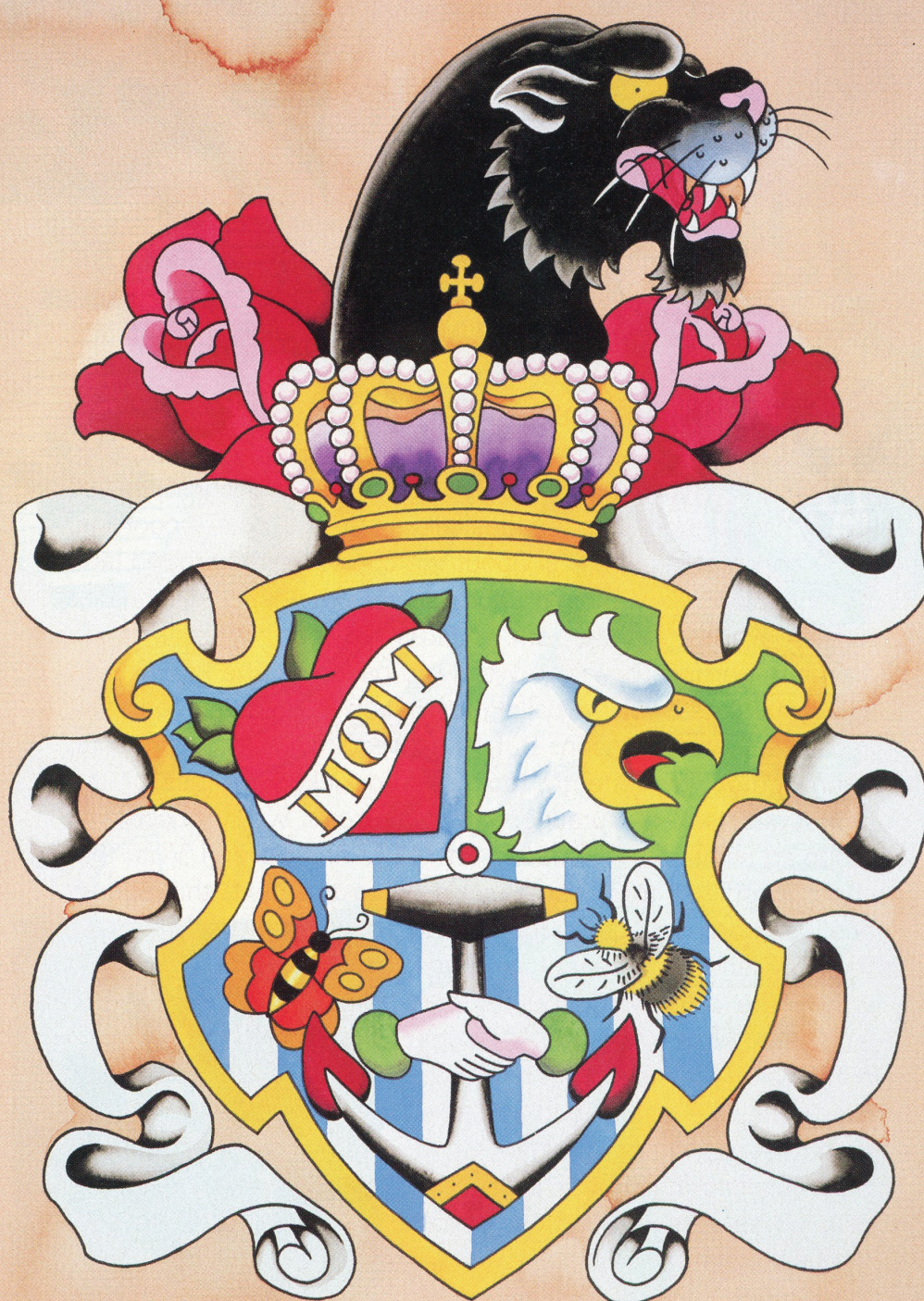
Our tattoo issue wouldn't be complete without a consultation with Sunny Buick, who's been a death rocker, a storyteller, an impromptu therapist, and, most of all, on the scene since the days when it wasn't a scene yet. Plus, she plays a mean accordion. Annie Tucker unravels the mystery.



**IN ALL THE BEST WAYS,** Sunny Buick stands out like a sore thumb in the locker room of Bay Area tattooing. In a man's world, Buick has used her femininity to full advantage. She exudes elegance and poise: cool ink, cool clothes, and just about the coolest name around (and it's not even fake). But far more significant than the fact that Buick looks like a page from a 1920s glamour magazine is the premium portfolio of tattoo work and paintings she has birthed to substantiate her snowballing reputation as a blue-ribbon artist and a really nice person. But be warned: what Sunny wants, Sunny gets. She recently took on and kicked the ass of the monstrous task of curating San Francisco's wildly successful group art show, *Sci-Fi Western* (at 111 Minna Gallery). With that checked off her to-do list, Buick's on to the next: this spring, she'll say bon voyage to the City by the Bay and high-heel it to Paris, where she plans to conquer a new language, live out her wildest bohemian fantasies, and propagate American-style tattooing in a city that won't even know what's hit it. Between packing up her apartment, keeping her day job, and overseeing the final days of her art show, Buick managed to squeeze in a final curtain call. Take a bow, Sunny.











**Where did you grow up, and what's the origin of your name?**

My mom was a hippie. I was born in Canada because she was fed up with the US government. But she couldn't stand the winter, so she came back pretty fast after I was born. I grew up all over the place: Portland, the Santa Cruz Mountains, San Jose, and the East Bay. I came to San Francisco for good my first year of high school.

I was named after my mom's girlfriend, who had changed her name from Jennifer to Gypsy. The last name Buick came from a guy my mom was living with at the time. It worked out perfectly. I was tortured by my name growing up, but now it describes me to a T, because Buick conjures up a whole hot-rod life.

**When did you start tattooing?**

When I was 16, I started dating a guy who was learning how to tattoo, so I got to meet all the crusty old tattoo guys in the city. I was hanging around Lyle Tuttle's museum and Erno [Szabady] Tattoo when it was first being built, and I saw Ed Hardy's books for the first time right before that. I wanted so badly to make art my career, but everyone said, "You can't make a living doing art." Since I had already met many tattoo artists at an early age, I asked all of them for a job. But for 10 years before I started working in an actual shop, I was going to school, or working on my own art, or tattooing out of my house.

**Was that when you got your apprenticeship at Henry Goldfield's shop?**

Yes. You're supposed to work under a master for seven years, which is a tradition in all kinds of skilled labor. I stayed for five and a half years.

**Was Henry a good teacher?**

Definitely. It was like getting a Masters' degree. He was a great historian; he knew a lot about people's tendencies; and he knew how to control a retail situation in the tattoo profession specifically. He's a carpenter and a sign-painter, too, so I also learned how to fix and make things. He's totally respected, and anybody who goes through working for him goes on to be successful because he's kind of the last person doing traditional tattoo apprenticeships.

**How did you meet him?**

I went into his shop to ask him for a job. I had kind of an in because I knew some people he was fond of, but when I called him back about the job later, he totally snapped at me on the phone. At that point in my life, I was feeling very fragile, and that made me feel like I could never work for him. Then I told people in the tattoo business about it, and they encouraged me to try again. So about four years later, when I heard that he had an opening, I went to him again, and this time I had more tattoos, I had a whole set of flash, and I was wearing a really short pair of shorts ... and I was hired! It was great timing, too, because then I was really ready and confident about having something to show him. I wasn't ready the first time.

**How long ago did you leave his shop?**

A year ago. Then I started working for Cold Steel [on Haight Street in San Francisco]. They had told me I could work there anytime I wanted. It's been great because the people I work with are into what I'm into: doing art shows and being productive. It also makes for healthy competition, which I totally crave.

**How do you feel about being as a woman, working in an industry that's historically been dominated by men?**

Tattooing and the lowbrow art movement are both boys' clubs. I definitely have something in me that wants to bust into the boys' club, and I don't think that's hurt me one bit. And these hardcore boys' club guys who believe women don't belong in tattooing have totally got it warped, anyway. Ever since the invention of the electric tattoo machine, women have been involved, whether it was the tattooed lady in the circus or the wife of the tattoo artist. Also, it's always worth having a woman working in a shop, because there's always going to be someone who feels more comfortable getting tattooed by a woman. I think if I were a guy at my level of technique, I might not get so much notice, because there'd be a hundred other guys at the same skill level. I've also created a memorable persona for myself that gets me extra attention: I show up to an art opening, and I'm all dressed up; I have a cool lifestyle.... I think this whole experience has helped me to be a strong, sexy female.

**How have you seen the tattoo industry change since you were a 16-year-old hanging around tattoo artists?**

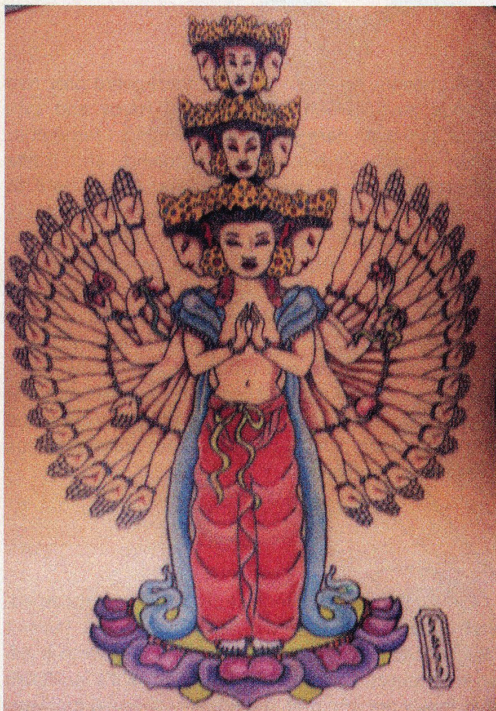
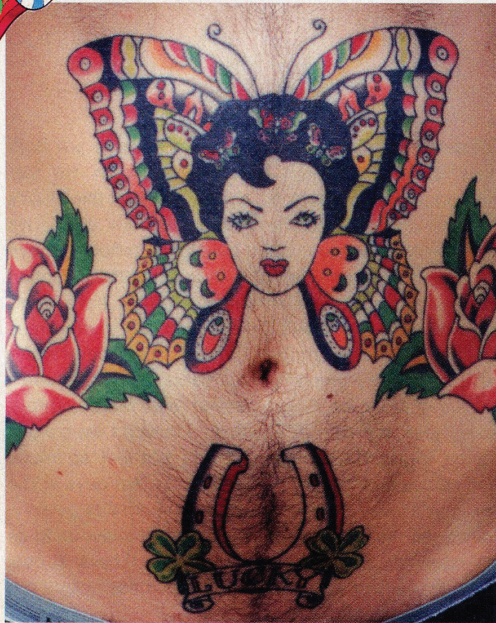
It's changed so much. At first, there were only two famous guys in San Francisco: Ed Hardy and Lyle Tuttle. I've been here since the beginning; I remember when Freddy Corbin started tattooing, and Eddie Deutsche came to town soon after. I was here to watch all the young guns come up and turn tattooing into the rock-star scene it is today. Maybe a year before I started tattooing in a shop, everyone started opening tattoo shops. Piercing and tattooing was one of the Fortune 500's fastest-growing industries. I also watched magazines crop up everywhere; at first, *Outlaw Biker* had the only tattoo magazine; now, there are tons of them. That, and conventions; I think the first tattoo convention was in 1980, and there used to be one about every five years. Now there are sometimes five in one month across the country.

**You're moving to Paris soon. What have you noticed about the French tattoo scene when you've visited the country?**

They do totally different stuff there: no airbrushed-style tattoos, no hard outlines. The French haven't caught on to what's really popular in the US, which is old-style American flash tattooing. But I think it's inevitable that they'll get into it at some point, because it always

"Tattooing and the lowbrow art movement are both boys' clubs."





comes back to that. That's what looks and ages the best. I'm hoping to get over there and be a total novelty: an American girl who does authentic American tattoos.

#### What are your plans for working in Paris?

I already have a job there. When I went to Paris for my first visit, all the gear-heads I knew were getting tattooed by this young guy named Christian, and they said I should talk to him. It turned out that he's this hippie who owns an art gallery in the front room of his shop, and he had two other guys working for him. He's a really great artist, mainly because he really understands what people want. I told him I had a portfolio I wanted him to look at and that I needed a place to work in Paris. He looked through my stuff, and he said, "Okay, sure; you can work here full time."

#### What made you decide to move to France?

The first time I remember thinking about moving to France was when I took French in high school. I knew I would never get a handle on the language unless I moved there and immersed myself in it. I also think that moving to France is just something you do as an artist. Also, once I visited the Louvre, I realized how deprived of good art we are on the West Coast. You walk into the Louvre and realize somebody spent three years on one painting. I walk into a museum in San Francisco and see a painting that would take an hour to do. The art world has got to change. Nothing has happened recently that's really interesting.

You seem to be in an unusual position, then, because you gravitate toward classic, detail-oriented fine art, but you're also working in the very modern medium of American tattooing. How do you reconcile these two sensibilities?

When I'm painting, I can do things that I can't do when I'm tattooing, and that's really gratifying. Sometimes I feel like I'd really like to get away from tattoo imagery in my fine art, just to have another degree of separation, but I think it's great that I've created a symbolic language for myself. I have certain images that keep repeating throughout my artwork, and it always seems like, maybe a couple years after I finish a piece, I become aware of what I was trying to say. I'm intuitively doing stuff that I like that makes sense later on, but that's because I've developed a whole aesthetic through tattooing. My whole life and the way I think always end up in the artwork.

#### What are some of the repetitive symbols that come up in your artwork?

Water, women, keys, flowers, books, skulls, bones, flames ... Somebody I know, who's been studying the presence of geometric patterns in nature, just noticed recently that repeating shapes and patterns also show up in my artwork. I just started noticing it when I put together a bunch of my favorite tattoo photos. Also, the girls I paint tend to look like me, even if they're Asian and have black hair. I guess that's kind of inevitable. And if you go into my room, you'll recognize all kinds of collectibles that show up in many of my paintings.

#### What was the first tattoo you got?

I did a hand-poke tattoo on my hand when I was 15, but the first professional tattoo I got was in Reno. I couldn't find the shop I wanted to go to, so I ended up going to somebody who didn't know what they were doing. I got a pair of dice and got it covered up later.





S. Buick '99

Aaron's Tattoo (Blue Shiva), acrylic on canvas, 24" x 36," 1999.





*Jungle Climbin', acrylic on canvas, 24" x 36," 2002.*



"You have a huge responsibility as a tattoo artist. There are some stupid people walking around, and I'm not going to participate in their stupidity."



#### What was the incentive for getting your backpiece?

I already had four tattoos, but I wanted to get something in honor of my grandmother, who was born without arms and did everything with her feet. She never joined the circus, and I was always obsessed about sideshow stuff because of that and because it was connected with tattooing. I wanted to have a tribute to her that represented her but wasn't her exactly, so I got a woman on my back without arms, surrounded by a group of other sideshow girls.

#### How do other tattoo artists respond to the fact that you're not covered with visible tattoos?

The fact that I don't have my arms tattooed is a big bone of contention with a lot of other tattoo artists. They tease me all the time. It's gotten to the point where I'm never going to get my arms tattooed, just to spite people. I just know that if I had really beautiful tattoos on my arms, people would come to me wanting that style, and I wouldn't necessarily be able to replicate it. I went to one artist because I loved the style of tattoos he had on his arms; it was exactly what I wanted on my arms, and he couldn't tattoo me the way that his own tattoos looked. I think a lot of people decide on what tattoo artist they want based on what the artist is wearing.

#### But typically, the tattoos that tattoo artists wear aren't as high in quality as the skill of the tattoo artist.

That's true. There's an old myth about never trusting a tattoo artist who has good tattoos. But I have seams tattooed up the backs of my legs, and I've had a lot of people come to me for the same thing because I have it on myself.

#### Do you often turn away customers who want tattoos you're not interested in working on?

Yeah, that's one thing about tattooing: if you've been in the business for a long time, you don't have to deal with anybody you don't want to. I've been in retail, where the customer's always right, so it's really refreshing to be able to tell people to fuck off. After all, you have to sit there with somebody, so you should like that person. And if somebody wants something stupid, I can't do it, because you start to really care about how you represent yourself on people's skin. You have a huge responsibility as a tattoo artist. There are some stupid people walking around, and I'm not going to participate in their stupidity.

#### What are your greatest strengths and weaknesses as a tattooist?

Tattoo artists are always learning and changing and improving. My greatest strength is probably dealing with people and getting them through the whole process. One of the biggest things Henry taught me was storytelling, which is a big part of keeping people's minds off the pain. He'd always say to me, "This is show business, baby!" and it is. I've also made a name for myself, which makes people comfortable, because I can really put in a good tattoo. My stuff heals really nicely, and the colors are solid. My weaknesses? My stuff is really simple right now, and I'd like to keep the simple aspects but work on making a design more like a whole picture, with more background and details like that. Also, although I do have a pretty good knowledge of machine-building, I'd like to be even more comfortable with it. The point when you find a machine that fits your style is when your ability takes off. Plus, as you tattoo more and more years, you get problems in your arms and hands; lighter machines are easier on your body. I'm using machines right now that are heavier than some guys' machines.

#### What's the hardest thing about tattooing?

I've had a couple clients die, and that's really tough. You don't even realize how much you become a part of that person, and then it hits you when they're gone that your work is gone, too. It's a really trippy thing. I tattooed a Grim Reaper on a guy, and then he died, and I remembered having wondered, when I was tattooing him, if he was going to die soon. Then his girlfriend came in, grieving horribly, and wanted the exact same tattoo. I finally had to turn her down. I felt like she was maybe suicidal and didn't have anyone to talk to about her pain, and it seemed like she was putting a lot of responsibility on me. She even had me do the design for the headstone. I had another client, and we just loved each other. He died in a car crash in Greece, and his whole family came and got tattoos from me after that. That was really tough, too. One thing I think a lot of tattoo artists don't take into full account is how much they have the ability to change somebody's life. Usually when somebody gets a tattoo, it's during a transitional period in their life. Sometimes, I'll start talking to a client in a really spiritual way and eventually end up telling them exactly what they want to hear.

#### What keeps you going as an artist?

I remember going to school and taking art classes, wondering how people came up with ideas and worrying that I would run out of my own. But now I can't stop the flow of ideas. I can't paint them fast enough. I think somewhere in the back of my mind, I would love to see my work lasting beyond my death; I'd like to see my stuff in museums. I think everybody has an immortality desire like that. ♦

Contact [www.sunnybuick.com](http://www.sunnybuick.com) to obtain the art of Sunny Buick.

