

# THE AMAZING WORLD OF Sunny Buick



ph by Johanna Pacheco Surriable











**Sunny Buick** is one of those artists in tattooing I always admired. She goes back at least 3 decades and has been one of the first lady tattooers I knew of.. with her artistic endeavors and tattooing she always made me dream...

Love her style, so colorful, naive, whimsical but also bold in its simplicity, and always different and inspiring. But painting and tattooing is not all that Sunny does. She is really a multidisciplinary artist, always experimenting with new mediums or doing performances, and lastly a movie!! Sunny is from Canada, lived in the US, but naturalized French.. she chose to move to Paris years ago, and now she tattoos by appointment only in her private studio. Talk about starting all over!! She is an iconic character, she looks like she comes out of the Fifties! and so is her art and her tattoos, and I can't wait for her return to America one day, so I can finally get a tattoo by her!

Sunny is definitely a tattooer who inspired many, even if not everyone of the younger generations might know this, she left her unique mark in the tattoo scene and therefore made it more accessible to women.. an extraordinaire artiste who helped pave the way for more female tattooers to come.



Voilà! C'est tout! Respect!  
Enjoy her story!

by Elvia Iannaccone Gezlev









*What's your origins, where did you grow up,  
what was it like your upbringing.. ?  
From what you share it seems like a very  
bohemian one...*

I have a hippy mother, and I never met my father. I grew up all over the place, not a very stable or secure childhood. My mom was very wild and rebellious against all authority figures. She is like a child. I learned to survive on my own and to live outside of society's norms. I was born in Canada, in a cabin in the woods, with no running water or electricity. I spent time in the Santa Cruz mountains, but also in Lafayette, a very square suburb of the Bay Area (where I didn't fit in at all), then I started high school in San Francisco; finally feeling at home and free from any judgment. We moved almost every year, when I was young. My mom was always running away or wanting to start over. It may be one reason why I moved to France, there's nothing unusual about doing a crazy thing like that in my family! You are right it was very bohemian and I like to think of myself as a beatnik, with all the values and lifestyle that go with that. The artist way! My first name is Gypsy, I didn't know until I moved to Europe that gypsy is actually a derogatory term... I was named after my mom's best friend who lived in a real wooden Manoush wagon. I went by my middle name Sunshine in school. My sister had it worse than me though, she lived in a tepee with my mom on an Indian reservation. I remember living with my mother's fear to not have enough money for rent. Those things come flashing back to me lately, with the insecurities created by this pandemic. Most all of my family were or are artistic, but I'm the only one who found a way to make a living from my art.









*What was your first encounter with tattoos ? Were you inspired by them or scared somehow?*

You know most kids love tattoos, to them they are cartoons on the body, there's no judgment. My sister had a small rose on her breast tattooed at age 15 by Lyle Tuttle. She is 14 years older than me. So she got tattooed by Lyle when I was 1 year old! She was never around when I was growing up, but I remember her tattoo. I met Lyle when I was 16. I already knew I wanted to be a tattoo artist. Back then I met some cartoon artists who had a friend who had just started tattooing. They were talking about how it was a great way to make a living as an artist without having to do boring graphic design. I immediately picked up on that and thought it would be so great to do drawings on the skin! Six months later and I was living in a flat below Sonny Tufts who was an apprentice to Lyle Tuttle. So I was hanging around tattoo shops and at the tattoo museum after hours, from a very young age. No one took me seriously though, I was young, cute and blonde, more like a piece of meat to those guys. But I was really in love with Sonny Tufts, even though he was a kleptomaniac and a speed freak. We were all doing a ton of drugs in those days. Sonny was the first heavily tattooed person I ever met and he was a huge influence on me and my musical taste today.



*When, how and why did you decide to eventually start tattooing and who was your mentor?*

So, I had already decided I wanted to tattoo and I had met Sonny Tufts and Lyle Tuttle. First I knew I had to finish school, I had dropped out of high school because I felt I was just being babysat. I was very determined to prove that I could finish school though, so I got a BA in creative arts from SFSU. I asked Lyle for a job, but he wasn't around his shop much anymore and all he could tell me was that everyone he ever hired was unemployable in any other kind of work. I contacted an esthetician who did permanent makeup, and I called shops (which you shouldn't do). For 7 or 8 years all I ever got was rejections but I never wanted to just buy the starter kit (there were ads in the back of biker Tattoo magazines). Yet, I was getting frustrated and impatient. A friend in the rock-a-billy scene had bought his equipment and started out this way, so I contacted him and he said to come over, watch and try it out. I called everyone I knew to see who wanted a free tattoo. The first day I drew the tattoo design and my friend let me tattoo some of the color. The 2nd day I did a tattoo from scratch on one of those people I had called. I caught the tattoo fever. I bought a used tattoo kit from another friend who tried to tattoo but then decided he didn't like it. My mom lent me the 500\$. Right away I asked Henry Goldfield for an apprenticeship, I wanted to do things right. But when I met with him he was vague about hiring me and then very mean to me by telephone, and I got my feelings hurt.

So I just continued on my own, frustrated, as I was only doing one tattoo a week or one a month. Each tattoo seemed like I was starting from scratch. Jeff Rasier told me I should be doing three tattoos a day in order to get the hang of things. He gave me a few tips and encouraged me strongly to get an apprenticeship. Jill Jordan also gave me some good advice and told me to practice redrawing old flash designs in my own style. I gave myself the goal to paint one sheet of flash every month, at the end of a year I had 12 sheets. Ed Hardy had his big exposition « Eye tattooed America » at the YBCA museum in San Francisco. He asked me to be a model in a tattoo « fashion » show. Henry was there, and I showed him my flash. I was super respectful and more confident, plus I knew that he had just fired an apprentice. He told me to drop by again, and I got hired. I started officially with Henry in 1996. He always said he liked to have at least one girl working for him, that it kept the shop from smelling like a locker room!!















Sunny tattooing in her Paris studio; below on the left, during a performance, and on the right guest spotting at Daredevil Tattoo, in NYC





*You are clearly focused on recreating beautiful whimsical designs.. reminiscent of the 50s graphic design, and beatnik culture.. very colorful, apparently simple illustrations.. How did you develop your particular style in painting and tattooing? And how would you describe it?*

I always thought I was doing old school tattooing until Instagram started to take off and there were a lot of tattooers whose style really looked as if it was designed in the 20's, 30's, or 50's. Like Paul Doberman, Samuele Briganti, Electric Martina and Rei at Ink Rat in Tokyo. Then the term Neo-traditional was created. But my work doesn't really fit into that category either. I have no idea what to call my style, except heavily influenced by the simple bold designs of American tattoo history. I take my interests and passions and I translate them into tattoo designs. My personality comes through in the work: a sense of humor, joyful, and sometimes a little dark. I really like to work with a client when they have a good idea, that interests me. Most of my clients come to me because they have similar interests and passions. I also have a file of "wanna do tattoos" that I'll send people when they request ideas from me.

*Can you name some of your favorite old and contemporary tattooers? Who particularly inspires you?*

Speaking of real old timers, I love George Burchett and Amund Dietzel's work, especially Dietzel's sign painting skills and his tattoo boxes. Have you seen those? He made a big pink Art Deco work station, completely beautiful! It went up for auction once, and I found out who bought it. You can find an article I wrote about tattoo furniture on my blog, another thing I'm really passionate about. Also I admire Bert Grimm, Charlie Wagner and especially Christian Warlich. Of course Ed Hardy, for all he has done for tattooing, his publishing, expositions and exploration in painting. He has really worked to build respect for tattooing as a proper fine art.

I also highly recommend Solid State books by Jon Reiter. It's incredible the work he's doing to dig into the history of tattooing. So much has been lost. I'm trying to do research on tattooed ladies and there's not much to be found unfortunately.







Speaking of contemporary tattooers, I love the work of Davide Andreoli, Marie Sena, Claudia de Sabe, Adam Warmerdam, Marcelina Urbanska, Adrian Hing, Alvarito, Dani Queipo, and Christopher Scott, among others..

I also find a lot of inspiration in Tibétain Thangka paintings, and Medieval religious paintings (I go to study them at the Louvre!), also in popular Mexican, Chinese, and Indian art.

The golden age of illustration, American Regionalism and WPA painting, Muralists, a group called Hairy Who? from Chicago in the 80's also are font of inspiration. Thomas Hart Benton and Jesus Helguera are probably my favorite painters. I wrote an article recently (you can find it in my blog) about tattooers Duke Riley, Kyler Martz, Max Kuhn and Adam Shrewsbury. I really admire how they include tattoo language into a myriad of other mediums, I admire their courage to explore and to experiment.



*Ph by Johanna Pacheco Surriable*





*Sunny doing her first tattoo*

*You started your tattoo career in the US and then decided to move to Paris, France! Such a big move! What made you take this decision and what substantial changes did that bring to your quality of life and work?*

Since high school I've been a francophile, and I'm obsessed with the ghosts of the past, the artists and writers in the 20's living in Montmartre/ Montparnasse in Paris. I also had this idea that an artist should speak French. So living in France is tied up in this idea of an identity that I wanted to create for myself. Little did I know that living in France would be a 100% improvement in the quality of life. Socialism is a beautiful thing, I have health care and affordable rent. I've probably been able to survive as an artist because I made that move. In San Francisco tattooing was hard, the competition was really rough. It was a tattoo Mecca, all the best tattooers lived there. It was hard to get noticed or to get interesting projects. In France I found myself suddenly an exotic creature, doing authentic American tattooing. I got great projects and was able to show what I am capable of. After my first trip to Paris, I went home an empty shell. Nothing interested me anymore. All I could think of was living in Paris. It was like I left my heart there. I thought it would take me years of savings in order to move there, but all of a sudden things happened very fast. I've been here 18 years now. I became a French citizen in 2013.











*You seem very focused on your art, but you also share a lot of your personal life through social media .. which other qualities you need (if you need any) in order to be a successful tattoo artist today (in your opinion)? And what does that mean for you?*

I wrote a PDF document on my website that you can read if you enter your email address, where I give 20 tips for young people who want to be a tattoo artist. Here's an excerpt:

« all the best tattooers are very serious, extremely disciplined and work 12 to 14 hour days. They are married to tattooing and sometimes their home life suffers because they give it all to tattooing. After talking all day long with clients and colleagues, there's not much left for the ones we love. You must be someone who can find the balance.»

I don't recognize the tattoo world anymore. In some ways, because everyone is doing it, it has become less attractive to me. The marketplace has forced a sort of conformism and consumerism that is frightening.

I started to share more personal stuff about myself on social media, because I realized that I give off a very different impression, than what is really me. There are walls that have been built up for protection, and I come off as being cold, aloof or snooty. Sharing personal stories so people could get to know who I really am. It has been a great exercise, this writing, and I've touched a lot of people with similar stories. Storytelling is key to everything I do, Henry Goldfield was a great mentor in this respect.

Art is a form of therapy for me. Because disappointments were making me consider giving up painting, I stopped having gallery shows for a long time. I need the act of painting for my interior explorations, it's the easiest form of self-expression for me. Therefore, I stopped painting with a goal to sell the work. Commercialization of my work kills something, somehow. All my best work is work that I want to keep, things I've made for me. They become my babies, and it's hard to see them go. I still sell my work but I'm very clear on the value, I won't let a gallery tell me the prices anymore, I'm less motivated to give a 50% commission as well. I would prefer to show my work in a museum setting, where there isn't this pressure to sell. At the same time, I still need to make my living, so it remains a struggle.



*I know you are a fierce feminist in the sense of supporting women and their rights.. What does that mean for you? Did you ever personally encounter judgmental people or double standards being a girl? Do you think in tattooing relationships between guys and girls are easier today or not ?( if that makes sense)?*

I think it is a constant battle to be a human in this world; men and women have different challenges. As a woman, I see it from my perspective, the injustices, the difficulties. In tattooing being a woman has actually been to my benefit in many ways, but there are still these glass ceilings that you can not rise above. You can see what is on the other side but you can't get at it.

In the past I noticed there was enormous pressure on young women tattooers to be one of the boys to succeed. Being wild, heavy drinking, talking like a sailor etc. I asked myself if male tattooers were somehow uncomfortable with women colleagues if they were feminine? But if they were one of the boys they would let them in a little more? I don't know if this is still happening, I've been tattooing privately for 12 years and I don't go to conventions anymore, so I can't observe what it is like today. There are male tattooers that are very angry at women tattooers who use their body to gather more of a following on instagram (frankly, if they could do it, they would too!). Those in a position of superiority always want to stay there and will criticize or try to tear down anyone who threatens them.

*Tell us about your Gang of witches project..*

It is an artist collective with a manifesto and everything! We are stronger together, as a group we can amplify our voices. We feel it is important to champion the rights of the oppressed and marginalized, we are concerned about the environment and we are exploring esoteric spiritual practices. There is a residence for artists in Spain and I go there regularly to work and to retreat. I want to do this more, to get invited to more artist residencies. You meet really interesting people, get inspired, and get to try new mediums. I'm painting a huge mural there, so that's a new experience for me. I would love to work in wood and try out all the wood working tools that woodshop could offer me. Or metal, ceramics.... Collaborations with people who work in 3-D technology and Virtual Reality... I want to look to the future and try to imagine a bright and creative one!



*Do you have other passions outside of tattooing and painting? What's your favorite thing to do in Paris in your spare time?*

Museums, taking walks and getting lost (I'm still exploring Paris), record shopping, brunches with friends at the house, reading/research/writing, spiritual explorations, flea markets.

I miss doing so many of these things since the pandemic. I've been a workaholic for a year now, just keeping my head down finishing many old projects before I start any new ones. I used to travel a lot, I always come back home super inspired. I spend a lot of time planning and scheming for my new path. I want to make objects, videos, do performances, and I want to eventually create installations and immersive experiences. I want to transform, I want people to see my potential as a multi-disciplinary artist. I want to be showing in museums, public art spaces & site-specific art spaces. Making installations and immersive theater and/or VR. I want to give lectures or participate in conferences at Universities, about the history of tattooing, my journey, and underground art movements. Another ambition is to push myself as far as I possibly can as an artist, to explore deeper waters.

*I know you also paint a lot, how you see yourself developing as an artist in the future? What's the difference between art and painting tattoo art in your opinion (if theres any)*

Well, with oils you can make mistakes and then wipe them out and go back and correct them, so there's less pressure. Watercolor is totally unforgiving, like tattooing. No mistakes are allowed. Painting hurts my body less than tattooing.

I don't think there's any difference, really. Maybe tattoo art is more commercial in some way? I'm waiting for the day when art collectors go batty for tattoo art. There is so much great work out there and in my opinion, it is totally unappreciated! I check out all the great work of tattoo artists on @thepaperworkers on Instagram.

*Do you miss the US? Are you planning to visit and/or tattoo in the near future ?*

I do miss San Francisco sometimes, but it is like a divorce. You had some good times together but it just doesn't work anymore. It is necessary to look at it this way or you'll live with your heart torn between two places. I like to visit the US. The last 4 years political scene made me very happy to live somewhere else. The hate and tension that i was growing is horrendous, I don't want any part of it. Yes, I'll be visiting New York in September possibly. I always tattoo at Daredevil Tattoo in the Lower East Side, near Chinatown. I miss New York so much! I've made a bunch of new artist friends there that I'd love to meet up with, again.

Also new museums to see, vegan dim sum, Central Park, Coney Island...





*What are you working on currently?*

I spent the last 2 and a half years working on a performance art piece and then the video documentation. It's called « Eyecandy Bulimia » and it's a historical overview of « Lowbrow » an underground art movement that flourished in California in the 1990's and early 2000's.

Told from three points of view showing why it was and remains marginal. I play three different characters and there's a slide show of the art like a University lecture.

1 the critic, who hates the movement, and is dismissive and a total snob. She rejects « Lowbrow » on the grounds of it being retroactive and popular.

2 the artist who defends her confrères, using examples from art history finds all the ways to contradict the critic.

3 the guru who tells us how to find hope and courage to carry on, despite elitist systems and fortress mentality. She also gives examples of protest art and the power of DIY.

You can follow Sunny at @sunny\_buick  
or [www.sunnybuick.com](http://www.sunnybuick.com)