

INVESTIGATION

Stuck on You

THOSE PERFECT WOMEN, THE ONES WHO ROLL OUT OF BED LOOKING FANTASTIC? THEY HAVE A SECRET. MEGAN DEEM GETS THE INK ON THE LATEST MUST-DO AMONG THE PRETERNATURALLY FLAWLESS

Caroline Kim heard about it from her hairstylist. A different woman was tipped off by her facialist. Cosmetic tattooing—inked-on brows, eye- and lipliner heretofore associated with sun-dried retirees and Michael Jackson—is becoming a time-saver as indispensable to young female power brokers as international roaming on their mobile phones.

Call the procedure what you will (and many do, dubbing it everything from “permanent makeup” to “micro-pigmentation”), going under the needle means not worrying about smudged eyeliner at a last-minute presentation—among other benefits.

“It took me about 20 minutes every morning to pencil in my eyebrows after they were overplucked when I was 23 and they never grew back,” says Kim, a 35-year-old marketing executive who recently relocated to New York City from San Francisco. She had brows and eyeliner inked on six months ago and declares the results “phenomenal, amazing,” and most important, “very natural.”

Cosmetic tattooers aren’t some splinter faction of the local Hart & Huntington franchise. They’ve long worked with plastic surgeons to create faux areolae after breast reconstruction or to camouflage white face-lift or breast-implant scars with pigment matched to the client’s skin tone.

But the desire for permanent makeup isn’t strictly contingent on time spent in the OR. “You’d think that women who love cosmetics and wear them all the time would be the ones coming in, but it’s the opposite,” says Mirinka Bendova, a micropigmentation specialist who shuttles between the NYC townhouse offices of clean-skin-cheerleader dermatologist Dennis Gross, MD, and a plastic surgery center in Fort Lauderdale. “It’s the youthful, ‘natural’ beauties whose makeup is tattooed.”



Almost four years ago, Jennifer, 37, a silversmith on NYC’s Upper East Side (who didn’t want her last name used in this article because she hasn’t told her friends that some of her makeup is fake), brought her favorite Chanel lipstick, a pale pink that’s since been discontinued, to Melany Whitney, who divides her time between Boca Raton, Florida’s Center for Permanent Cosmetics and its satellite branch in the Manhattan practice of dermatologist Doris J. Day, MD (whose eyeliner Whitney tattooed in 2002). Whitney colored Jennifer’s full lip, not just the outline, exactly matching the lipstick’s rosy tint. “It’s nothing dramatic,” Jennifer says of the results. “It looks more like my natural lip color.” Although the tattoo’s hue has softened slightly over time, “last year I had Melany do my charcoal eyeliner, because I love my lips so much,” she says. “I was always pulling at my lids to

get my liquid liner on and wondering if that could eventually cause wrinkles.”

While cosmetic tattoos are far more subtle than Kat Von D’s handiwork, the tools are identical, from guns to ink to the clusters of sterile disposable needles. Yes, that could mean a bunch of spikes firing dangerously close to the eyeball. The pricks are shallow—only a tiny fraction of a millimeter, which barely reaches the dermis—but *still*. “We do worry that even if the needles are sterile, a viral or bacterial infection can occur,” says Washington, DC, dermatologist Tina Alster, MD, who doesn’t have a tattoo artiste on the payroll.

The ink is made primarily of iron oxides—inert minerals that sit in tissue. Titanium dioxide, which is white, and reddish ferric oxide are often mixed with vibrant primary shades to create skin-flattering tones. Adverse reactions are infrequent. “On extremely, extremely

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rare occasions, I've seen granulomas—hard bumps—form,” Alster says.

Most practitioners sketch their brow, lip, or eyeliner design on the client's face before laying ink. Eliza Petrescu, Manhattan's A-list eyebrow-tender and owner of Eliza's House of Brows in Southampton, New York, which offers the services, and her on-staff tattoo artist, Lisa Jules, have even etched indelible eyebrow outlines underneath already ample brows, so “any waxer has a guide to follow,” Petrescu says. “And a woman doesn't end up getting half her eyebrow removed.”

Inking takes anywhere from 20 minutes for simple eyeliner (around \$1,100) to an hour for brows or the entire lip (\$1,500 to \$1,800). Tack on an additional 60 minutes if you'd prefer the area to be numbed, either with cream or lidocaine-epinephrine gel.

Complete recovery typically requires three to seven days. Lids and lips may be puffy for the first 24 to 48 hours, and every tattoo appears much darker for up to six weeks. No matter what shade you've chosen for your mouth, however, the area will be blood-red for two days before that layer sloughs off.

DISAPPEARING INC.

While all tattoo artists stress approaching the service with caution (for starters, check that the technician is certified by the Society of Permanent Cosmetic Professionals, the field's governing body), as with plastic surgery, not every procedure has a happy outcome. Just because someone can handle a tattoo gun doesn't mean she's adept at using it to conjure flawless arches.

“If someone's brow shape is already wrong for her face, and the tattooer follows it anyway, it looks even worse than before,” Petrescu says. The choice of color can also backfire. “Black eyeliner is one thing,” she says, “but you have to select a brow shade the way you do concealer—based on your skin and whether its undertones are blue or yellow.”

Tattoos deteriorate, no matter where on the body they're located, but ones on the face go particularly fast since they're continually exposed to sun. SPF can help slow this process, but in general, a touch-up will be necessary after two to 10 years.

For this reason, some bill their handiwork as “semipermanent,” but there's no such thing, according to Scott Campbell, owner of Saved Tattoo in Brooklyn and the body inker of choice to such fabulousity as Marc Jacobs and Helena Christensen. “Right now, you

either have henna, which washes off, or indelible ink.”

One 41-year-old jewelry designer living on Manhattan's Upper East Side (who didn't want to be identified because she's embarrassed about the outcome) went under the needle six years ago in London and discovered this firsthand. “My facialist's brows were great,” she says. “Mine weren't thin, but I wanted them a little longer at the tail end so that I wouldn't have to wear makeup. I already get my lashes curled and dyed for the same reason.” After her brows were tattooed, “they were fine,” she says. “But nine months later, they started to look artificial. My skin is very yellow, and the tattoos have become very pink.” She had been told that the ink was semipermanent, but “it's been six years, and the lines have faded but they're not gone.”

For those who have come to regret their tats, six to eight monthly treatments with a Q-Switch laser may be enough to pulverize all but the most stubborn body art, including work around the lashline (the patient wears protective eyeball shields, sort of like giant contact lenses). The energy blasts apart the large pigment particles; the small pieces are either excreted or so tiny that they're practically invisible.

When exposed to the energy wavelength used in tattoo removal, however, titanium dioxide and ferric oxide always turn black immediately, converting a formerly incongruous lipline tattoo, for example, into a page from the Kim Mathers look book circa 2000. This can be erased with the Q-Switch, but instead of just six or eight sessions, a patient will likely need 10 or more total.

ADDED INGREDIENTS

The next frontier for permanent cosmetics, and the tattoo field in general, made its mark last month. The lifespan of Freedom-2 ink, nanosize polymer spheres filled with biodegradable pigments, is equivalent to traditional inks. However, when hit by a Q-Switch beam, Freedom-2 particles burst and their contents leak into the body before being excreted. Two months after a single treatment, no more tattoo.

Currently, only black ink is available. In the first half of next year, the company plans to introduce more hues, as well as specially colored pigments for makeup. However, “we don't want this to be a situation in which a person gets one shade of eyeliner, then changes it three months later,” says Martin Schmeig, CEO of Freedom-2, Inc. “This isn't like highlights.” ●

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