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Danny Fernandez

How Santa Cruz helped one artist find his potential.

Dozens of artists lined the sides of Pacific Avenue under the Santa Cruz sun. Some were actively painting in the salty air, others selling their art. Danny Fernandez's heart leapt with excitement. When he moved from his childhood home in suburban Santa Clarita at the age of 19, he promised himself that he would "somehow build a career out of art." There, in front of his eyes, he saw people accomplishing exactly that.

"I grew up in a place where there wasn't a lot of interest in the arts in general," he recalls. "It's not a big artsy town." That particular contrast between his hometown and the Northern California beach town astounded him. That culture would prove paramount to Fernandez keeping his promise to himself, now a locally renowned tattoo artist.

For as long as he can remember, it has been nearly impossible for Fernandez to contain his creativity. Artistic creations have flowed from his hands since he was a toddler. According to his mother, his doctor was shocked at the level of dexterity displayed in his Play-Doh sculptures and Lego buildings. He treated art as his own form of entertainment—allowing him to escape to his own imaginary worlds and miniature realms.

Once at a friend's house, Fernandez found himself with some cardboard and scissors. "I created a miniature version of their house," he recalls. "All the separate rooms, little sofas, the TVs, all out of cardboard, markers, and tape." Only five years old at the time, he recalls the amazement of adults upon seeing the replica. "It was a pivotal moment that led to me realizing that something I'm doing is valuable to people."

But, as he grew, the adults in his life began to see his artistry as a distraction. Fernandez found that confusing. Throughout junior high and high school, he drew incessantly with his generic ball point pen in his spiral-bound notebook. "I was really into patterns. [They were] simple, easy things to mindlessly let your mind flow," he says, recognizing again that his art was an escape."

While Fernandez took some classes that enabled his creativity—such as film making and graphic design—it wasn't until his senior year that he took a traditional art class. The instructor was in awe at his ability with little formal training. She lamented that he hadn't taken her classes sooner. She pulled a few strings and enrolled Fernandez in the advanced class. Its curriculum was typically reserved



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for students who had taken several prerequisites. Fernandez says her confidence in him was life changing. "She was one of the few people during that time period that showed any interest in what I was capable of," he says. "She wanted me to learn what she was teaching her fourth year students. It was really phenomenal to hear that. I didn't think I was good, and she was telling me I was good enough to be with these kids."

Inspired by his teacher's confidence, Fernandez entered community college determined to get an art degree. He soon found the academic structure "rigid and limiting," even in his art classes. When he was on the cusp of finishing an associate's degree, he dropped out and moved to Santa Cruz with a friend. It was a place familiar in name only, thanks to the ubiquity of the Santa Cruz Skateboards logo.

In Santa Cruz, Fernandez dabbled in freelance graphic design and mural work. He didn't find any of those gigs particularly viable for the long-term. But the arts culture led him to explore other mediums. He decided he wanted to pursue body art and asked a friend to teach him how to tattoo. After buying a tattoo ma-

chine, he and his friend started tattooing each other.

Half of the tattoos covering one of his arms were done by himself during this experimentation phase. "It's trash," he says. "It's a garbage sleeve. But I love it. That was me."

Three or four years later, he did "the right thing" and found an apprenticeship at Triton Tattoo under Jeff Noyce. After a decade of tattooing, Fernandez has made a name for himself for his illustrative etchings of animals and scenes on his clients' bodies. Each piece seems mystical and fantastical in a way that harkens back to the miniature realms of his childhood. Employing primarily black and gray ink and the thinnest of lines, he achieves intricate details that mesmerize the eye. Clients as far as Australia have traveled to get his art permanently imprinted on their skin.

Like his tattooing, Fernandez's love for and familiarity with Santa Cruz has also matured. "There are a lot of creatives," he says. "They inspire each other, and it keeps the fire stoked. The strong use of nature in my work is because I'm surrounded by redwoods and by the ocean. I wouldn't make the art that I make if I wasn't living here." ■