

PINK MEETS INK

Cancer Survivor Stella Kanefsky
& MUCHA INK's Alphonse Mucha
Talk About Art Nouveau, Personal
Ink, & the Art of Giving Back

Prior to last spring, Stella Kanefsky, a 43-year-old Baltimore native, had never gotten any ink. Although she admired well-crafted tattoos on others, she was uncomfortable with the idea of having one herself, mostly because of her job working as a middle-school teacher in Lutherville, Maryland. "I liked tattoos on arms and on people's backs, so I always figured if I ever got one that's where I'd do it," Kanefsky told *Tattoo Culture* in November. "But Baltimore really heats up between May and September, and I felt uneasy about walking up and down the halls in short sleeves or a summer dress with tattoos all over. So, I never did it."

The story could have ended right there. But, as chance would have it, it didn't. Circumstances, simultaneously bittersweet and serendipitous, would bring Kanefsky face-to-face with her nascent artistic drive, a guru of decorative design, a bottle of tattoo ink, and her own mortality... though not in that order.

Kanefsky graduated with a degree in art education from the MICA in the 1990s and began teaching almost immediately. One summer, she volunteered as a docent at the Baltimore Museum of Art. A lover of figurative art and illustration, she always admired the Art Nouveau movement, but once she began spending her lunch breaks wandering through the BMA's basement archives her admiration turned into obsession.

Down there, the museum houses a large collection of late 19th and early 20th century drawings and prints that aren't available for public viewing. During these underground sojourns, she immersed herself in the work of Gustav Klimt,

Charles Rennie Mackintosh, and Aubrey Beardsley. Kanefsky says she was drawn not only to the feminine, floral, swirling opulence of the Art Nouveau but to its philosophy as well.

“The point was that art is in everything,” she said, “and it’s in harmony with nature and natural forms. It was considered to be a total art style. There was a time you could have hung your Nouveau art above your Nouveau furniture in a house built in the Nouveau style. You could wear your Nouveau gowns with your Nouveau jewelry, eat dinner off your Nouveau china, smoke out of your Nouveau cigarette case, etc. It was all encompassing.”

Kanefsky was so inspired by the organic styles of the movement that she began working on her own art. This was the summer of 2011, and she was seriously considering going back to school part-time to pursue a new fine arts degree. Then, her plans came to an abrupt halt when she felt a lump in her breast. “Lot’s of people say they had this feeling of disbelief when the doctor handed them down the verdict,” she said, “But I think I knew what she was going to tell me before I sat down in her office. I was already imagining what it would feel like, to not have breasts anymore.”

That feeling turned out to be eerily prescient: Kanefsky’s doctors said her family history combined with the aggressiveness of her cancer made a double mastectomy, along with radiation and chemo, the most effective treatment. Less than two weeks after being diagnosed, both of her breasts were gone.

Kanefsky, who is single, says she would not have survived the treatment had it not been for the friends who rallied around her. One of them, herself a breast cancer survivor, came to her aid in a rather unusual way: “My friend Laurel DelMar has been in the arts community in Baltimore and beyond for a long time. When she was going through her own healing process, she knew if she

was going to get new breasts she wanted to do something really different. She's the one who connected me with P.Ink."

Personal Ink (P-ink.org) is a new donation-funded organization dedicated to connecting breast cancer survivors who face reconstruction with tattoo artists who have something to give. DelMar had a great experience with P.Ink, and became close friends with its founder, Molly Ortwein, herself a breast cancer survivor.

"When Laurel told me about Stella and her background," says Ortwein, "I knew immediately who we had to get her in touch with"—the man at the helm of the Nouveau Renaissance: Czech-born, New York-based tattoo artist Alphonse Mucha.

"I knew of P.Ink from a colleague who had donated her services, and she introduced me to Molly and Stella," Mucha told *Tattoo Culture* in a phone interview. "They did not have to spend much time to convince me. I was excited to be part of the project."

It's hard to imagine a more suitable pairing, given their shared love of Art Nouveau. But Mucha and Kanefsky's meeting takes on a special poignancy when considering the similar missions of the P.Ink project and of Mucha. He and Kanefsky share a similar belief that tattoos can bridge the organic and the synthetic. As Mucha said, "I think Stella really appreciates the central thrust of Art Nouveau and agrees with me that tattoos are a natural progression in contemporary practice. Imagine that, in the turn of the century, tattoos had not been mere taboo curiosity reserved for criminals, sailors, and sideshow performers, but as legitimate a venue for self-expression as fashion or interior decorating. Followers of Art Nouveau certainly would have decorated themselves in this way 100 years ago if they could have. In our culture today, tattoos are not only permissible but increasingly common."

Kanefsky follows the idea through: “We can decorate our bodies as we chose without facing the same judgments of the past. But a woman missing her breasts? This still seems very unnatural to most people. With or without plastic surgery, she may look at her body and only see the thing that’s missing or the replacement which is ‘fake’. This is how a tattoo can reunite a woman with her own body. ”

Clearly, this is a big errand for the hand that guides the needle, and the tattoo artists involved with P.Ink understand that no two canvases are alike. Although many women who have full mastectomies opt for traditional reconstruction, that is certainly not always the case. “I was lucky,” Kanefsky points out. “Being a public educator in Maryland, I have really excellent health insurance. But not everyone can afford reconstructive surgery. It’s not just about having scars, many women are left without nipples. Some women can’t get one let alone *two* new breasts. It’s not an option for them.”

Mucha is no novice when it comes to bodies ravaged by injury and surgery. “I have worked on clients who wanted to cover over their scars, a few of them amputees,” Mucha says. “It depends somewhat on the location, frequency, and severity of the scars, and it’s up to the individual, of course, how he or she wants to deal with it. But I always encourage my clients to work with the scar instead of against it. I tell them, don’t obliterate it. Adorn it. It’s part of your body, a badge of your history—Scars do not have to be imperfections which we’re ashamed of. I think this is why P.Ink is so great. It helps women who see their bodies as a battlefields see them instead as a things of beauty.”

Kanefsky’s tattoo was finished in two sittings. Rather than selecting an existing design, she put her faith in Mucha’s powers of improvisation and gave him just two points of guidance; “She told me, ‘I love peacock feathers, and I don’t love symmetry. The rest is up to you.’ For me, this is an ideal situation for custom

work, where you have a simple, yet solid visual base with lots of room for interpretation and play. These are the most enjoyable tattoos to create.”

Kanefsky continues to be in remission and is now a part-time student at MICA, where most of her younger classmates are covered in tattoos. In fact, she laments that many of her friends who are her own age had their first work done decades ago, and she feels like she’s only just catching up. “Maybe I was looking for an excuse not to have a tattoo because I was afraid, but now I’ve survived a battle with cancer,” she says. “I could have looked at it as a horrifying event, instead it inspired me to do something I’d always wanted but was too scared to do.

“Stella was my first post-mastectomy client,” says Mucha. “Now, I have tattooed 5 other breast cancer survivors, all of whom I met through P.Ink. I’m honored to work with these women. They’ve been through so much, and when they come out on the other side, they’re fearless. It’s incredible.” ■