


ABRAHAM ORTEGA

Tatuajes Chicanos



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Pencils and sketch pad in hand, a young Abraham Ortega excitedly headed out to a friend's birthday party. The son and grandson of artists, he was already a passionate sketcher. Consistent encouragement from his mother led him to assume that drawing was the de facto activity for all kids his age and would thus be the primary happening that night. However, as the party progressed, he soon realized that wasn't the case. "I thought everybody drew because my cousins would draw, my brother would draw," Ortega says. "Everyone that was in my world as a kid would draw. I thought that's just what people did."

Since then, Ortega's artistic drive took him from childhood drawings of cars and motorcycles to tattooing black and gray Chicano imagery. What once was a teenage hobby has turned into a fruitful career as both a tattooist and shop owner. Abraham Ortega is a staple in both the San Jose and Chicano tattooing communities.

Born in the Garden City in 1974, Ortega was raised on the East Side by proud Chicano parents. "My parents really pushed the whole Chicanoism on me. It helped me be aware of who I am and where we stand as a people," he says. "That shaped who I am today, especially with my tattooing." This sentiment is beautifully embodied in a large painting on the wall of his shop. It depicts a "proud Chicana" holding her hands in the shapes of the letters E and S for "East Side." Behind her the number "1910" looms large. It symbolizes the nineteenth and tenth letters of the alphabet: S and J.

Ortega has a childhood memory of watching his cousin construct a tattoo machine. At the time, he didn't care much about the craft and was more fascinated by the mechanics of the device. Eventually, as a teenager, he did develop an interest in body art and leveraged the memory to build his own. "I put together a rig with a Walkman motor, pen, toothbrush, guitar string, and I started tattooing my legs and all the homies in the neighborhood," he says, chuckling. "Everyone knew I could draw so they were all for it."

Ortega and his friends have routinely experienced discrimination in their everyday lives. "I have been beat up by the cops for no reason," he says. "I have been arrested for no reason." As they embraced their ethnic identities with these tattoos, the biases others

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held against them grew. "Back in the 1990s and 2000s, it wasn't respected," he says. He remembers people calling the style "cholo shit," but he strongly disagreed. "I was trying to push it as an art form. It's beautiful shit. I wasn't trying to make it gangster. I was just trying to make it cool."

Within a few years, at the age of 18, Ortega began tattooing professionally in the East Side shop Vision Tattoo. While there, he became a father and began to work other jobs, but in 2000, he returned to the tattooing world and saw his cultural iconography go from socially stigmatizing to mainstream.

The first time a white client asked for a Chicano tattoo, Ortega wasn't sure how to feel. "I was torn because I thought, 'This is ours. Why are you getting this when you didn't earn it?'" he says. "But then I realized if I want to push this as an art form, then everybody has to appreciate it and I got to be able to appreciate anybody who wants it."

Through the 2000s, Ortega was tattooing mostly walk-in clients who wanted many different tattoo styles. But by the end of the decade, he joined Death Before Dishonor Tattoo Studio and was able to see clients by appointment only. This afforded him the opportunity to perfect his Chicano style and build a solid clientele. In 2014, he felt the need for change and began entertaining the idea of opening his own shop.

"I didn't know where else to go," he says. "I didn't want to leave San Jose. This is where my people were, but there wasn't a shop that I felt I would fit in. There were good shops, but I just felt like they weren't really my style." So, in 2016, he took the plunge and opened Blacksuit Tattoo on Second and Santa Clara.

"I feel Blacksuit is an underdog shop. I feel that we don't politic, we don't play the game. We're just here doing our thing, and I think, to this day, people still don't know who we are or where we are."

Despite this impression, anyone who walks off the street into Blacksuit will find half a dozen tattooists busily practicing their craft and clients leaving with gorgeous works of art on their bodies. While Ortega may feel like an underdog, there is no denying the legacy he is leaving in the 408. 🇺🇸

