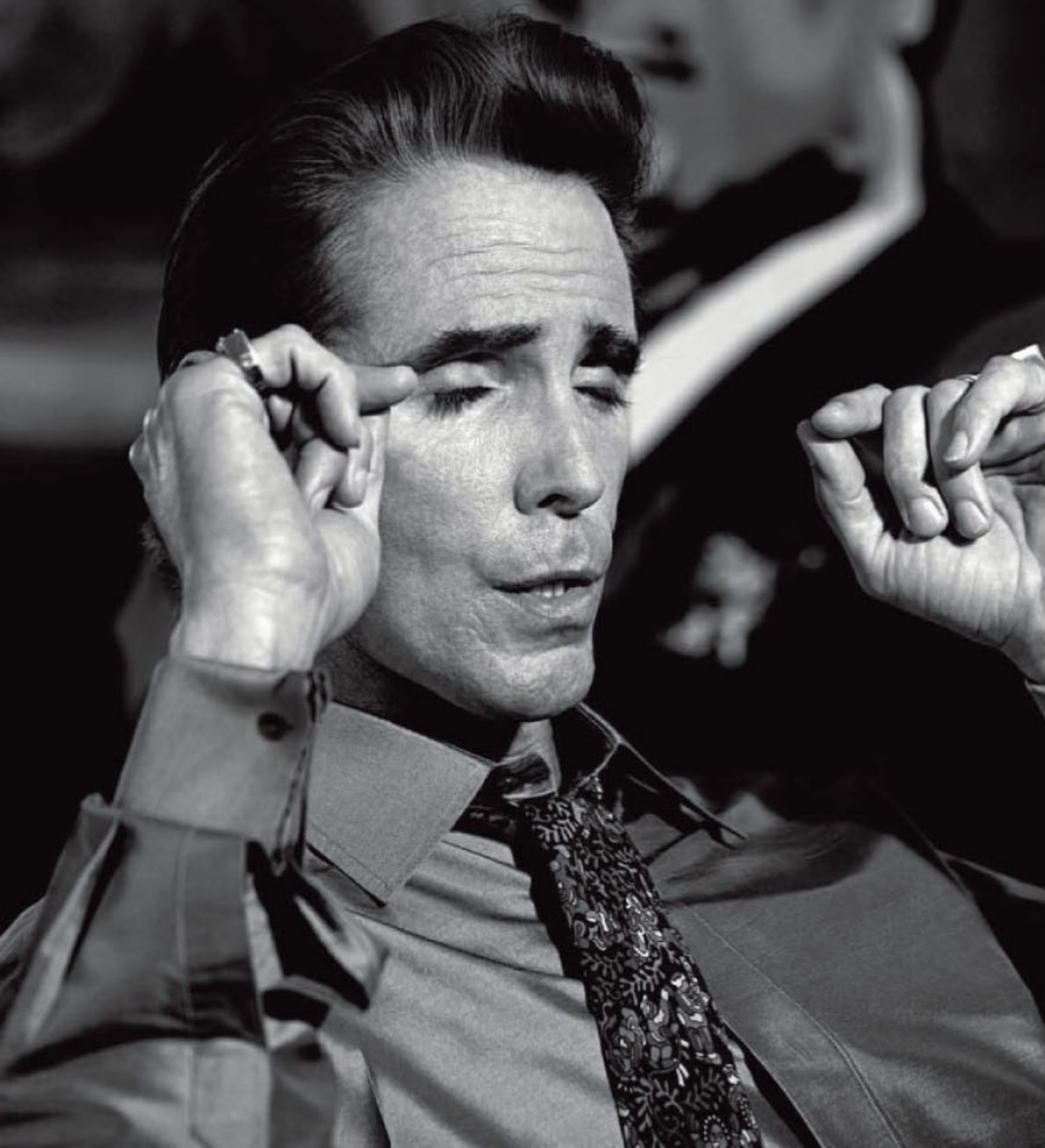


flesh painter

MARK MAHONEY

photos by francesco carrozzini

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FLESH PAINTER. MARK MAHONEY
by Roberto Croci

"Mark Douglas Patrick Mahoney from beautiful Massachusetts"; it is with these words, spoken in a mellow voice, that the most sought-after tattoo artist in Hollywood, boasting rockabilly hair, impeccable shirt, tie and waistcoat introduces himself. It was he who did the first tattoo for Johnny Depp while he was still a wannabe and who creates not only masterpieces for such celebrities as Mickey Rourke, Brad Pitt, Angelina Jolie and Lady Gaga, but also for anyone who enters his shop, the historic Shamrock Social Club on Sunset Boulevard in the heart of Hollywood. "My shop is open to all", he states with a devilish grin, "that's why I added 'Social Club' to the name: because, when you walk through the doors, you become part of my family. Tattoo is an art-form; my work is as clinically clean and safe as in an operating room, but the atmosphere in my shop is more like that of a pub than of a dentist. We're talking of the real world here, the real one that survives by feeding from the street and from all those elements that make your skin a record of your experiences. You know how it is: "A picture is worth a thousand words". Mark Mahoney, whose name clearly betrays his Irish origins, was brought up in Boston and as a child already showed a great passion for drawing. "Winter in Boston is real long and real cold, so I spent most of my childhood at home alone, imagining a future as a painter, drawing everything that came to mind. I have always loved black crayons, and I always finished these before the coloured ones; I always knew I'd be an artist but I had no-one to encourage me, to give me advice. Until at high school, my art teach-

er, who was a real goddamn son-of-a-bitch, assured me I'd have no future as a painter because I didn't have the right qualities. How can you tell a kid of 13 with one sole great passion that he'll never be able to realise his dream? For me, it was a challenge, and the first time that I understood that it would be me alone to decide what I would do in life". The story of Mark Mahoney is not only a voyage through memory, but also a historic reconstruction of a period and culture that includes punk, bikers, the gangs of Long Beach, the chicanos, Hollywood and its celebrities. "I had my first tattoo when I was 15, at the Buddy Mott's Tattoo Shop. In those days, getting a tattoo was illegal in Massachusetts and so I had to go to Newport, Rhode Island, a small place that attracted sailors who liked ink. As soon as I walked into the shop, I immediately understood that would be my destiny. At the time, tattooing was a symbol of rebellion; people were scared of people with tattoos because they represented outsiders, criminals. That's why I decided to become "the best in the business". Around the end of the 1970s, when he was still not 20, Mahoney did his first tattoo on a friend. "The tattooing community had no more than 1000 members, dotted around the States. We all knew each other and you only joined the group if you were someone's friend.

It was impossible to find needles and equipment, and harder still to find someone prepared to teach you the trade. Then a school friend who'd just finished his military draft, Mark Herlehy, put the first needle in my hand and asked me to do him a tattoo, a tiger on his back. As soon as the session was over, Mark got up and the tiger suddenly drooped; I'd drawn it on his stretched skin, as he was sitting. That's how I learned my first lesson, literally at someone else's expense, luckily: never tattoo someone in an unnatural position, or you'll find yourself with a Sharpei instead of a tiger! Lucky that Herlehy's a friend. He's one of the most gifted artists I know; he's been 'operating' for over 30 years in New Hampshire and draws everything freehand." In 1978, Mahoney left for New York, where he frequented the punk scene of the Chelsea Hotel, the CBGB club and musicians like the Ramones, Misfits, Patti Smith, Dead Boys, Fleshtones, Blondie e Talking Heads. "The first tattoo in New York was one I did for Johnny Thunders: I was a friend of Nancy Spungen, and thanks to her I got to

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English

tattoo Sid Vicious before he went off his head. It was always a work in progress with him; he never managed to take a decision and often, after talking for hours, I'd leave without having done anything. A lot of customers came to my shop in Elizabeth Street, in the Lower East Side; other times, instead, I'd go to their place. I'd do tattoos in the backstage after concerts or parties too. In those days, the best tattoos I saw were Californian, many of which done by Pike's at Long Beach. That's why I decided to head for California". This was back in the early 1980s, and Mahoney witnessed not only the ferment of the Los Angeles punk scene but also the revival of the chicano movement and early rap. "I'm Irish and Catholic, so I felt at home right away, because lots of my customers wanted religious icons, Madonnas, hands in prayer, the Virgin of Guadalupe and all the symbols of Mexican culture, cholita girls and vatos, homeboys, friends of the barrios. After Long Beach, I moved to East L.A., where I refined my personal style: I abandoned colour and specialised in black and white, working only in "fine line", with a technique using a single needle that I learned from the legendary Ed Hardy, who was just out of jail. He was the daddy of refinement, and the man who opened the gates of paradise for me". These were the years in which Mark also discovered a talent for fashion. "Now it seems obvious, but at the time, associating fashion and tattoos was something new. I can't remember when I met Betsey Johnson, but I recall that she complimented me for my style. We worked together on a collection that she signed and which was a real success. But I'm not too interested in numbers: the fashion line I do today, the Valhalla Brand, is a way to share my aesthetics with the work. It's for those who love black and grey". Hollywood and its talent led him to be not only the favourite tattoo artist of the stars, but also to a long-lasting collaboration with director Tony Scott ("The hunger" and "Top Gun"): "We met when he was filming "True romance" and since then, every time he needs a particular design, he calls me. We worked together on films like "Domino" and "The taking of Pelham 1 2 3". He's the perfect client, able to draw me exactly what he has in mind. Few people have an attention for detail as has Tony". When I ask him why someone should want a tattoo, he answers: "A tattoo is an event. You do it when you want to celebrate a special occasion. Even though I've been in the business more than 30 years, I haven't had many tattoos done on myself: more or less 25, certainly a lot less than a lot of my customers. My tattoos are memories of unrepeatable moments, like the time when with photographer Nan Goldin we stole a car to go to Rhode Island and have ourselves tattooed. Unforgettable".