



## An Artist Pricks Her Skin and Our Conscience Over Hate Crimes

By Jessica Dawson  
Special to The Washington Post  
Thursday, September 1, 2005; C01

Tomorrow night, artist Mary Coble will subject herself to a marathon tattoo session that could make a career Marine wince. Beginning at 6 p.m. and likely continuing until dawn the next day, a tattoo artist will etch 400 names into the artist's back, legs and arms. And we're all invited to watch.

The 26-year-old Washingtonian's show at Conner Contemporary Art is a rare opportunity to see performance art locally -- not to mention the chance to witness an artist literally spill blood for her cause and craft. It's open to the public from 6 to 8 p.m., and viewable for its duration via a live Webcast at

<http://www.connercontemporary.com/artists/coble/webcast.htm> .

Here's what attendees at the Dupont Circle gallery will see: Tattoo artist Lea Smith will prick Coble's skin to form the names of hate crime victims from the nation's gay, bisexual and transgender communities. (Smith and Coble have enjoyed a close friendship for years; Smith applied Coble's ink tattoos, a band of dancing figures around her lower right leg and a turtle on her right shoulder.)

Once the tattooist etches a name (she won't use ink), blood will well on Coble's skin. Then Smith will press paper against the welts to make mirror-image prints of the first names. As the evening progresses, her prints will wallpaper the gallery with victims' names written in blood. A selection of the prints will be on view at Conner from Sept. 9 to Oct. 22.

Such grisly business isn't news to the art world. Coble joins a long line of performance and body artists -- Marina Abramovic in the 1970s and Matthew Barney more recently -- who have subjected themselves to bodily harm while pursuing ends both spiritual and political.

For Coble, a recent graduate of George Washington University's master of fine arts program, using her body in performance and photography has aided her work's explorations of gender and sexuality. In a conversation with Coble last week, she revealed what attracted her to such a painful project and why she believes it matters.

Q. What can visitors expect to see?

A. Tattoo equipment in the gallery's main room, maybe a chair and a table. I'll be sitting to one side so people can walk around me. Lea will have her tattoo gun and setup. We'll have someone wearing gloves to take the print from Lea and tack it on the wall. There will need to be some distance. I don't want people to touch me. But they can interact with me if they have questions. I want people to question.

I look at it like a performance. Basically, the piece consists of people coming into the gallery [to watch me get] tattooed and seeing the prints amassing on the wall.

At 8 o'clock we'll ask the public to leave, but we'll keep going. My partner and friends will stay to help me out. We're not going to stop to sleep, though we need to keep up our strength. We may stop to eat. But we won't go out to dinner or anything. [Laughs.]

Q. How long will it take?

A. We practiced a bit, and it takes about five minutes to do one [name]. To do 100 it'll take eight hours. But it may go faster once we get going. Now the list is over 400. I'm not going to consider the piece a failure if I don't do the whole list. But my goal is to do the whole list. It very well could take until the next morning.

Q. How did you gather the list of 400 victims from the past 15 years?

A. I compiled my own personal master list. I naively thought I would be able to go to a Web site and find a complete list of hate crime [victims]. The FBI has statistics; however, those deal in numbered statistics, not names. I'm not claiming this to be the complete list -- hate crimes are underreported.

Q. And the idea for the tattooing, how did that arise?

A. I did a tattoo piece once before, during grad school, so I had some experience with it. For this piece, [as I read] descriptions of the murders, it was very alarming that, especially with gays, when people were murdered, their murderers carved specific names into their bodies. Names like "dyke," "faggot." Having these names tattooed on me is paralleling what happened to these individuals.

Q. Are the scars permanent?

A. Long-term, no. They disappear. Immediately, the blood will bead up. Then for the next couple weeks you'll be able to read the names. I'm guessing from past experience that within six months any traces will be gone.

Q. Why not use ink?

A. This isn't a memorial. I don't want to walk around with these names memorialized on me. I've gathered up the research I've done so people can see that this is a huge problem for this community.

Q. You titled the piece "Note to Self." Why?

A. The title refers to making prints from the list. They're notes as reminders to myself and all of the viewers that these people have been murdered because of hate crimes. Chances are, many people will see their first names someplace on the wall. It's a note to myself and to other selves.

Q. You've chosen to make yourself very uncomfortable. What does that mean to you?

A. This isn't about how much I can hurt myself. Believe it or not, I don't enjoy getting tattoos by any means. I'm pushing myself to limits and that's just part of the endurance aspect of it. But people need to know that people have died and that no one organization is keeping track. Things aren't being reported. A hate crime doesn't just focus on the individual. [Murderers] are speaking to the whole community.

*Note to Self* by Mary Coble at Conner Contemporary Art, 1730 Connecticut Ave. NW, 202-588-8750. Performance tomorrow 6-8 p.m.; performance live online at <http://www.connercontemporary.com/artists/coble/webcast.htm> . Prints from the performance on view at Conner Sept. 9-Oct. 22, Tuesday-Saturday 11 a.m.-6 p.m.

© 2005 The Washington Post Company