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My life: Emma Hack

The Australian artist and body painter talks to Rob McGovern about moving on from wallpaper and getting help from somebody that she used to know

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EMMA HACK

THE KNACK OF IT I started face painting at 15 as a way of earning pocket money. I got so caught up in make-up artistry and wanted to work with these guys in theatre that I forgot I actually wanted to be an artist. One of my ex-boyfriends from back in the day said to me, when my art career started to climb, "It's wonderful - you're finally getting to do what you've always wanted to do." I said, "What's that?" He said, "Art." We're taught that we have to do "normal" things to survive and I think that's what kind of happened to me. When I was doing face painting at make-up school a teacher suggested I do what I was doing on faces all over the body. He said it would be "kind of cool". So I just started doing it.

IDOL HANDS I became aware of (German model, actress and artist) Veruschka's work in the early 2000s. I come from a small city in Australia. The internet wasn't really around then. It is so easy to look things up now but, back then, there was no reference material for me. When Joanne Gair did the Demi Moore *Vanity Fair* cover back in 92 (for which the actress appeared clad only in body paint), I realised that I could perhaps make a career doing this work. Gair actually came to one of my shows in New York recently. She is one of my idols. I also really like Veruschka's illusion of being at one with the environment and with the surroundings that she creates. There are undertones of that to my work. I prefer to try new things and not necessarily repeat something that has been done before. I love illusion and surrealism and it always makes me want to look a little bit further into the work.

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OVER THE WALL In 2005, I walked into a homewares store and saw Broadhurst wallpaper (brightly coloured geometric and nature-inspired oversized designs by Florence Broadhurst) on a wall. It was like a light bulb went off in my head. I was so drawn to the work as an artist, but also because of the Asian influences. I'm the only artist who's allowed to work with the Broadhurst archive (which she uses as background, against which nude models are painted to blend in). That same year, I had five ideas, and the wallpaper was one of them. I went into a gallery in Adelaide and I told the owner that I had five ideas and would they represent me if I went with any of them? I was told that if I took the wallpaper idea on, they wouldn't take me on. In my heart I knew I just really wanted to do the wallpaper. I went with my gut feeling. It took me three years to get a gallery to take me on after that.

GETTING GOTYE In the past, people would look at my work at an art gallery or an art fair and dismiss it as "Photoshop". I do use Photoshop to remove knicker lines but, other than that, what you see is what you get. My art isn't perfect, there are idiosyncrasies. What the Gotye thing (Hack did the body artwork for the video of the Belgian-Australian's 2011 hit song *Somebody That I Used to Know*) did for me was it allowed people to see the application process of what I do. I am thankful more so for that than the fact that it became a wonderful piece of art. I wanted to create a piece of iconic art that people would recognise for years to come, like Gair's Demi Moore cover. The producer contacted me and I said, "It has to be a good song because you only get the chance to do these kinds of thing once, because once it's done it's done."

THE NAKED TRUTH As an artist, I just need to get on with it. It's a very painful process and isn't comfortable at all for the model - or for me to have to stand for that long, so it has to be the right person. I moved away from painting celebrities or well-known people ages ago because it just didn't allow me to turn up and create a piece of art; they were very limited in what they were capable of doing. Dancers are quite disciplined, fit and healthy looking. I don't really like the "model" look. There has to be a certain amount of reality to the person that I choose. It's not about this glorified ideal, it's about being real. Before choosing a model to work with I will talk to them and I might even have a little look on Facebook, just to see what kind of person they are. I want to work with people who will just get on with it and are comfortable, as the process puts me in their personal space. I feed off positive energy from the model and I can put that back in to the piece.

BEYOND THE BODY I don't necessarily think of myself as a body-paint artist anymore. I'm planning to move into 3-D photography. Over the past 10 years, what I want to do has evolved. I wanted to capture these amazing images in my mind. That has so far just happened to involve a lot of body painting. For me, it's all about the imagery and, once I have created that image, I'm satisfied. It's all I want to see. It's not about that model being able to walk around looking amazing. Once I have captured what I had in my head, I don't even want to look at the model. It's done.

Work by Emma Hack, who is represented by the Cat Street Gallery, will be on show at the Affordable Art Fair, at the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre, next weekend. On Friday, Hack will perform live body painting at the event, as part of the Arty-Licious evening. For tickets, go to www.hkticketina.com.