

MASTERING IT

Meet Lara Jade Brown, master of areola tattoos

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Toronto-based tattoo artist Lara Jade Brown placed first in the areola tattooing category in the 2023 edition of The Skin Games, an international skincare competition.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JENNIFER ROBERTS

Mastering It is a summer series to introduce you to Canadians who have sought to rise above being simply good at their chosen endeavour – and who, by perfecting their skill, strive to become the best.

It's been almost two years since Lana Agostini has seen herself with normal-looking breasts.

After a double mastectomy in October, 2023, she was left with a scar line running straight across where her breasts once were. No nipples, no areolas. It was a constant reminder of the torment and fear that came with her breast cancer diagnosis. Her treatment included multiple surgeries, chemotherapy and radiation. She was desperate to feel like her old self.

On June 5, she made the roughly two-hour drive from her home in London, Ont., to Lara Jade Beauty in Toronto to get areola tattoos on her newly reconstructed breasts.

It was the final step in her returning to some semblance of normality.

"I can finally look at myself in the mirror and not think I look weird," Ms. Agostini said.

She found Lara Jade Beauty through social media. It was exciting to discover an option so close to home, she said, since she originally planned to travel to San Antonio, Tex., for the tattoos.

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Lara Jade Brown, the studio founder, says she feels a strong connection to clients who come to her as part of their recovery from breast cancer, one of the most common forms of cancer among Canadian women.

A mastectomy, or the removal of a breast, is a common treatment for larger tumours. However, the appearance of the chest post-mastectomy is an overlooked issue that a lot of patients struggle with, Ms. Brown said.

"They cut the breasts out, they cut the breast tissue out, they stitch them back up, and that's how women have to go and live the rest of their lives and still somehow feel confident, sexy and beautiful in their bodies."



Lara Jade Brown works with a breast cancer survivor who had a double mastectomy, while teaching her areola tattoo technique to students Jess Sparks, Kendra Neal and Lizzie Murphey.

The procedure can also make reacclimatizing to certain social situations particularly difficult, she said. “How do you meet someone online and go on a date and then expect to eventually get intimate and have to have a conversation about what’s going on under your shirt?”

While some patients may opt for breast and nipple reconstruction, Ms. Brown said their journey often ends there.

“They’re thrown out into the world like, ‘Okay, you have a breast back. You’re good,’ and they don’t even know that areola tattooing exists,” she said.

Ms. Brown, 35, started off tattooing eyebrows. Then, in 2019, she attended a conference in Las Vegas that would shift the trajectory of her career.

“I just absolutely fell in love with how [areola tattooing] is so life changing. It’s so much more than cosmetic. It’s restorative,” she said.

Six years later, Ms. Brown is at the top of her game. She placed first in the areola tattooing category in the 2023 edition of The Skin Games, an international skin care competition.

Her work was judged on 10 criteria, including texture, colour contrast, use of shadows, creativity and overall realism.

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Sherah Juarez, owner of the Ink Boutique in Houston and a Skin Games judge the year Ms. Brown won, said the four judges had narrowed it down from 10 finalists to two but faced difficulties deciding whose realism was more impressive. So, they brought the two remaining finalists in for interviews, asking them about their experience, where they source their tools and what they would change about their submission given the chance.

Ultimately, it was this opportunity for the judges to get to know Ms. Brown that Ms. Juarez believes clinched her the win.

“She’s just magnetic. You meet her and you can tell she has a good heart. You can tell she wants to help,” she said.

In July, Ms. Brown will step into the role of judge for the areola tattooing category at the Canadian championship of the World Universal League of Permanent Makeup.

It will be another step in her career path since she founded Lara Jade Beauty - taglined “Toronto’s most conservative permanent makeup studio” - in 2018.



Ms. Brown speaks with a breast cancer survivor who had a double mastectomy during a consultation at her Toronto studio, Lara Jade Beauty.

The desire to start her own studio stemmed from her frustration with the lack of permanent makeup artists in Canada offering natural results.

“My business grew quite quickly because a lot of people were looking for this thing that I was now offering: a very natural, very understated, less-is-more approach to permanent makeup,” she said.

She credits her mastery of the craft of areola tattooing to having an artistic upbringing, an obsession with learning and a deep compassion for her clients.

Given that nipples are such a personal part of someone’s body, Ms. Brown aims to make sure she gets the colour and shape of the areola exactly right – in particular for clients who had a single mastectomy and are desperate to match their healthy breast. A poor job would mean yet another hit to someone who has already suffered so much.

A self-professed perfectionist, Ms. Brown continues to improve her craft by studying real areolas and their natural characteristics, drawing inspiration from other artists within Facebook groups, and practising on latex when she’s not learning from client appointments.

“I always find something in my work that I think I can do better next time, which always elevates my work,” she said.

The global recognition of her skill in areola tattooing also gave her the confidence and credibility to teach, with students flying in from all over the world to learn from her.

She offers intensive three- or four-day-long training courses for artists who want to include areola tattoos in their offerings. The classes are her way of trying to make the service more widely accessible, she said.

Censorship by social-media platforms is part of the reason Ms. Brown’s services aren’t more widely recognized. It’s the bane of her business, with some platforms banning her



account outright and others constantly taking down her posts, citing explicit content.

At the end of Ms. Agostini's appointment, she stands in front of the mirror, not wanting to put her shirt back on. "I just want to stare at them," she said.

Despite having done dozens of areola tattoos now, Ms. Brown said she'll never get over the emotion they evoke in her clients. Some are shocked. Others are speechless. Many shed tears. But ultimately, they're all incredibly grateful, she said.

"I would have never thought that I could tattoo people's self-confidence, self-worth, self-esteem back, and make them feel human."

Ms. Brown finishes an areola tattoo on a client. Since nipples are such a unique and personal part of someone's body, Ms. Brown studies real areolas and their natural characteristics to make sure she gets the colour and shape of the areola exactly right.