The Beauty of Body Modification

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In beginning my ‘new-to-you bodily practice’ I deliberated on what may be the most enlightening embodied experience, as someone who is deeply fascinated by art, I wanted to choose a practice that would revolve around artistic expressions of the self and culture. I am particularly interested in the aesthetic of body modifications such as tattooing and piercing, and I originally thought that I would participate in gaining an embodied experience through such aesthetic, however I do not want to make a permanent modification to myself at this moment in time as I have never made a permanent modification to my body. To be honest I believe the thought of permanently altering my body with a piercing or a tattoo frightens me because I always have these thoughts, “what if I don’t like the way it looks five years from now?”, or “how do you expect to look professional or get hired at a job with that on your body?” Body modifications such as tattoos and piercings have been associated with deviancy and marginalized in American society for what seems like forever now (Thompson, Beverly Yuen.). While this stigma that surrounds artistic body modifications in society has undergone a huge transformation to become what it is today and developed to be more accepted as a form of expression, I am becoming more curious about what these stigmas may look like in other societies around the world, and what significance artistic body modifications have in other cultures.

In many cultures, body modifications are seen as a rite of passage, or a religious symbol which ensures social acceptance. In Indian, African, and Arabic countries, artistic body modification in this sense is viewed as beautiful because they symbolize things like fertility and worship of the gods. I decided to take a more temporary approach to achieving this aesthetic by participating in Henna tattooing. Henna tattooing—also known as ‘Mehndi’ originates from the region of Western Asia and is a semi-permanent form of tattooing. The tattoos are formed by
staining from the dye of Henna trees known as “Hina trees” or “Lawsonia inermis” that are traditionally worn as a form of religious passage in marriage and burial rituals. Contemporary Henna practices are generally associated with ceremonies that mark calendrical and life cycle transitions (Spurles, L). I am fascinated by this practice because it has such powerful significance within the culture itself and as an individual it appears to be a very spiritually enlightening experience. In order to fully immerse myself into this experience I sought out the mentorship of an individual that practices Mehndi to help me study the social context of Henna production. I reached out to an artist in Boston, that specializes in contemporary Henna art, at a “Henna by Heather” vendor and I gained an understanding on the production process of the Henna dye and the tattooing itself. This experience has challenged me to step out of my comfort zone by adorning my body in the Mehndi aesthetic. I practiced the use and production of Henna on myself in my own time and documented it through a series of images, and I recorded my findings in field notes throughout my journey. Throughout the physical Henna production process, and the tattooing process I recorded the reactions of others around me and my initial feelings with the tattoos. I was extremely excited to delve into this project and to see others’ reactions to my practice in social settings and to become one with this culture.

**Embodied Experience through Mehndi Art**

Initially, I had hoped to meet with a Henna artist to learn more about the Mehndi practice, however my budget and schedule did not make it possible, as the artist, Heather stated in an email conversation, “It will be tough at this time of year, as the henna season is primarily June through September, with some, but less, work available in May and October. So henna artists generally are not out and about working public events, available to be observed, outside that
“So, I decided to seek this journey out on my own. We continued to communicate through email as I was still curious about her occupation as an artist and advocate for anthropological studies such as the one I was hoping to conduct. Heather was a former anthropology major with a concentration in, “two major studies on subway musicians and goth clubs (Figure 1”).” Even though my timing for this study did not fall within the right schedule for the henna season, I still found her words to be quite enlightening. She recommended that I utilize my technological resources such as YouTube and Google to study Mehndi techniques that I could practice on my own and suggested I use a henna brand called “Zenia” as seen in Figure 2. I purchased the henna dye through Amazon and practiced on myself for a few sessions, and then progressed to creating designs on other people. This was my first attempt at working with Mehndi, solo.

I realized that upon opening the ‘Zenia’ Henna packaging and handling the dye tubes, that the cone could be held similarly to that of a pencil, where you grasp the cone between your

Figure 1: Left image, screenshot of email with Henna by Heather
Figure 2: Right image, box of ‘Zenia’ cones purchased off Amazon
pointer and middle finger in your dominant hand. I practiced holding the cone in my right hand (my dominant hand) and applied different pressures to the tube to release the henna dye at different thicknesses. It took me a couple of tries to feel comfortable with the feel of the tube in my hands and the amount of pressure required to apply the henna dye to a surface. I started out by squeezing the tube a little bit at a time, as I was tentative to accidentally apply too much pressure and cause the henna mixture to come out in a large blob. When I first began applying the Henna to my skin, the dye appeared to be a very dark brown, almost black, then lightened up as I continued using it. I discovered that the longer I held the cone in my hand, it was easier to work with the henna product, from the heat produced by my palm, the mixture became lighter and smoother. My hand shook quite a bit at the beginning, and I am glad I chose to practice on a piece of paper towel because my line work was an illegible mess. Practice designs consisted of straight lines, dots, curved lines. As a perfectionist by nature, I found the beginning process with the henna to be a bit frustrating as I had hoped to be able to create designs effortlessly right away. However, with about an hour of practice, I began to improve, and felt more confident with handling the henna. My practice designs can be seen in Figures 3-7. My technique with handling the henna cone was to position my wrist away from the design I was working on, so that whenever I applied the henna, I could avoid smudging the wet dye. The design process took me about an hour and a half, as I had to wait in between sections for the henna dye to dry.
As shown in Figure 8*, my friend Olivia’s hand is adorned with the intricate designs of wet henna dye. Olivia had asked me to reference an image that she had found on Pinterest to mimic a triangular shape along her wrist, with small, detailed rings on the fingers. Figure 9* is displaying Olivia’s hand with the henna dye completely dried and removed, leaving an orange-brownish colored design on her hand. I recommended Olivia to keep the dried product on her hand longer if she wanted the tattoo to last longer. She decided to keep the dye on her hand overnight. Olivia made a remark after seeing the final result stating: “I feel so cultural.” The design process took me about an hour, I had to wait a few times to allow the dye to dry so I could go in between sections to add details. The longest part of the design process were the small ringlets along her fingers, it took a lot of patience to sit and slowly apply the dye to ensure a clean straight line would come out. Figure 10* shows my friend Rene’s hand with the wet henna
dye, this was a similar approach to the design that I had created for my friend Olivia, with a floral like shape starting at her wrist, that branched out to her fingers in ringlets. I free-handed this design, as Rene had no requirements for what she wanted it to look like, she stated, “do whatever you think will look good on me!” Rene is a very ‘outdoorsy’ person, so I decided to go with a floral design to highlight her fondness of nature. Figure 11 shows her hand with the dye completely dried off with remaining brown stained designs left behind. I recommended Rene to follow the same instructions I gave Oliva, and she chose to keep the dye on her hand overnight as well. Rene emphasized how she was delighted in the result of the design by posting images to her Instagram and asked if I could do more Henna for her in the future. I graciously accepted her request and felt a strong sense of pride in myself for creating work that someone would want to have done on themselves again. After seeing the results of my work on my friends’ hands and on myself I found that our perspectives of our own individual bodily images became amplified, as the intricate designs of the henna held powerful spiritual and mental meanings within ourselves.

Figure 8: Olivia’s left hand with wet henna designs adorning it

Figure 9: Olivia’s hand with the henna completely dried off the day after

Figure 10: Rene’s hand with wet henna designs adorning it

Figure 11: Rene’s hand with the henna completely dried off the day after
Further Explorations of Body Modifications

During my spring break in March 2022, I was home alone most of the time, because my parents worked, and my brother was in school. Being home got boring pretty quickly, which allowed my mind to wonder. I have always had a strong fondness and curiosity towards body modification, and that curiosity finally got the best of me on the evening of March 14th after seeing an ad on my Instagram feed for a tattoo shop in my hometown. I shoved my prior anxieties towards society’s views on body modification in the back of my mind and feverishly clicked on the appointment scheduling link on the tattoo shop’s website. I chose to schedule an appointment with the tattoo shop in my hometown, “Flyin’ Aces Tattoo & Piercing”—where I had met with a woman who did piercings. I had always wanted a nose piercing since I was in middle school, and I couldn’t hold back any longer. The artist’s name is Bunnie, and I was able to conduct an interview with her to speak about my admiration for body modification and how it has grown in diversity around the world. The piercing process was so much easier than I had expected! The Flyin’ Aces Tattoo & piercing shop is based in New Bedford, MA, and is owned and operated by Kenny Tetrault. Kenny is an experienced artist who has worked specifically in the art of tattooing for over 30 years. The shop had a homey and intimate feel, I met Kenny when I came for my appointment with Bunnie. Both artists were very enthusiastic about my visit, and were very accommodating to my nerves, as it was my first time going to a tattoo shop.

Bunnie began working with Kenny as an intern social media manager and receptionist. She then gained her apprenticeship as a body piercer. Much like myself, Bunnie strives for perfection in her work, and ensured that I was comfortable and pleased with the results of my nose piercing. I felt like a completely different person once the piercing was complete. I felt so confident and radiant. When I was young, I was very self-conscious of the way my nose looked.
I always compared myself to the feminine beauty standards society teaches us—to have dainty delicate features, and I always felt outside of that standard and pictured my own nose to be large and not feminine enough. Since then, I have worked to accept myself as who I am and embrace my features.

**Discussion and Interpretation**

I found that my self-esteem soared after getting my nose pierced, and my confidence in my body image increased significantly. The piercing process was oddly therapeutic for me. Bunnie did some breathing exercises with me before she pierced my nose, because I was quite nervous. Eventually my excitement overrode my nerves and before she pierced my nose, she reassured me that it wouldn't hurt that much initially, and it would feel more like a lot of pressure/ a pinch. I was pleasantly surprised that the piercing did not hurt for long at all, it was only a quick pinch and there was a dull ache for the rest of the day. The fact that you must experience some discomfort or pain in order to get piercings means that there’s a level of mental strength, and emotional vulnerability that goes into getting it done. Inherently, just by getting a piercing, you must be strong enough even though the discomfort is so minor! The piercing absolutely reminded me of just how strong I am and how much I am capable of doing when I set my mind to it. I couldn't wipe the smile off my face for the rest of the day after seeing the end result, as seen in Figures 12 and 13. This beautiful piece of jewelry shined on my nose and suddenly I wasn’t in the mirror lamenting the size of my nose and was only admiring the glittering little diamond adorning it. I found that a piercing (on the nose, ear, belly, etc.) can give someone something to love and focus on when they see themselves, rather than negative thoughts on one's body image (Martinez, A).
Conclusion

Throughout this bodily practice, I have come to understand that body modification can be evaluated as a social stigma. Going into this study, I had only a slight inkling of the perceived discrimination that surrounds body modification. This process of getting in tune with my body mentally and physically has allowed me to see past these social stigmas that have been erected in today’s society to dampen the expressive power of an individual’s own body. In the short span of three months and over six sessions of mehndi designing, and nose piercing, I have battled those stigmas, and found that my own expressive power has quite literally exploded out of me through my Mehndi art, and confidence in my own beauty. I have reclaimed my body from the ‘piercing’ gaze of society and embraced myself through the beauty of body modification.
Works Cited


