

# *The Body as Canvas as Picture: Body painting and Its Implications for The Model*

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**Abstract.** Body painting turns the body into a canvas. This frequently used phrase illustrates the challenge that body painting faces: It uses a three-dimensional surface and has to cope with its irregularities, but also with the model's abilities, likes, and dislikes. After giving an introduction to the art and categorising its various types and contexts, the article focuses on the European body painting scene and on the role of the model within the scene. Although body painting can be very challenging for her – she has to expose her body and to stand still for a long time while getting transformed – models report that they enjoy the process and the result, even if they are not confident about their bodies. A reason is that the "double staging" – becoming a three-dimensional work of art and then being staged for a photograph – removes the body from the model and gives her the chance to see her painted body detached from herself. On the one hand, body painting closely relates to the body; on the other hand, it can help to overcome the body.

**Keyword:** *Body Painting, Identity, Model, Participant Observation, Well-Being*

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## **1 Introduction**

Bodypainting is a form of design or art that is neglected in many respects: If you are looking for articles on the subject of bodypainting, you will mostly find them in the medical section, where it is used as a tool for teaching clinical anatomy [1, 2, 3], or works that treat bodypainting along with make-up, tattoos, hairstyles, etc. Further, as it is difficult to exhibit, it also does not easily find its way into museums or galleries. Thus it seems like a marginalized kind of art.

Yet, there is a very vivid scene purely devoted to bodypainting with events such as the World Bodypainting Festival, with workshops, courses, blogs, and Facebook groups. An estimation based on the experience of former world champion Peter Tronser is that alone in Europe, far more than 100 000 people have either practiced it already or a strong interest to do so. People take on different roles in the scene, as painters, models, workshop leaders, and photographers – and most of them do so not to earn money, but as it increases their well-being. In this article, I want to highlight the role of the model that is particularly interesting because it undergoes a

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transformation through both painting and photography and wants to find out why models characterise bodypainting as a psychologically beneficial activity.

## 2 Methods

My research is based on a long-term participant observation both in the bodypainting and the photography scene (for the term "scene" see [4]). To a certain extent, both scenes are delocalized and the internet plays an integral role in connecting, discussing, and planning. Body painters need photographers to capture their art, and photographers find an exciting subject in bodypainting. Moreover, the models, mostly amateurs, are often the same within both scenes.

I have repeatedly carried out bodypainting shoots, was a jury member at festivals, got painted myself, and assisted body painters which enables me an emic perspective. To give the models engaged in bodypainting a voice, 23 semi-structured interviews were conducted by the Australian body painter Wing Sum Diana Chan and by myself. The sample consists of women between 18 and 38 years and two men, ages 26 and 32, mostly from Europe and Australia. The number may not be high, but, considering the very similar answers, clear tendencies can be seen. Most of the interviewees also model in other genres such as fashion or fantasy. Five of the bodypainting models are also body painters themselves. Concerning ethical aspects, I got the impression that the interviewees themselves are interested in research—nobody attached importance to anonymity.

*"I hope my interview helps other people to discover bodypainting as a source of inspiration to experience bodypainting themselves." (Katharina)*

The answers given were clustered with the help of content analysis, "a method for identifying and analysing patterns of meaning in a dataset" [5], which suits the topic as it not tied to a particular theory and serves as a useful tool to highlight the process of social construction (see [6]. Various patterns of meanings could be identified by the use of similar words and expressions. When drawing such categories, it is undeniable that – being at the same time being a participant observer [7]– there were some preconceived assumptions but also a general openness to new information. Thus, the method matches David Altheide's "ethnographic content analysis", which "consists of reflexive movement between concept development, sampling, data collection [...] and interpretation. [...] Although categories and 'variables' initially guide the study, others are allowed and expected to emerge throughout the study" [8]. The focus was placed on the qualitative side rather than on the quantity, as the research question is qualitative.

## 3 The Body as Canvas

An expression that almost always pops up when it comes to bodypainting is "the body as a canvas". A classical artistic touch is introduced with the term "canvas". The bodypainting scene

is fighting for recognition as a "real" art form, which is also evident in expressions such as "bodypainting is an art", which was chosen as the name of a Facebook group.

The expression also means that something three-dimensional, dynamic and lively is compared to a two-dimensional, rigid material. This already points to one of the challenges that bodypainting poses. The association "blank paper" is close to the term "canvas": The body appears as a blank paper, which must be designed. However, the painting also has to be adapted not only to the model's body but also to the person and her character, e.g. how well she can endure the process. Creativity finds its limits with regard to reality – a fact that makes invention actually relevant: the creative product has to be made, the idea has to be transformed into reality. This is called the problem-solving ability of creativity compared to unlimited creativity that cannot relate to everyday life [9].

### **3.1 Defining bodypainting concerning the scene**

The first thing to consider is the extent to which bodypainting is a fundamentally different quality than clothing. "Dress is a basic fact of social life, and this [...] is true of all human cultures that we know about: all cultures' dress 'the body in some way, be it through clothing, tattooing, cosmetics or other forms of bodypainting "[10]. Entwistle gives examples of how differently dress is understood depending on the culture or on the situation: A bikini might be enough to ensure that a woman is decently dressed on a beach, but not in the boardroom. In the broad definition of "dress," bodypainting therefore certainly falls into this category. More narrowly defined, the color applied to the body is an important criterion.

Therefore, it can be concluded that bodypainting is both the process of applying paint on the skin and the result of a non-permanent painting that goes beyond typical make-up. "It is similar to tattooing in that it colors the wearer's skin, but it's very different [...] in that bodypainting is intended to temporarily transform the wearer into a different person, animal, or even spirit. Tattooing, on the other hand, is generally used to mark a permanent or semipermanent status or identity onto the body "[11].

Different than make-up, bodypainting affects the entire body or more extensive parts of it. Also, it is usually not used to move the body towards an ideal of beauty. Nevertheless, the term "bodypainting" can also be used to include make-up for special occasions. The art of mehendi or henna can also be understood as a kind of bodypainting. However, it lasts a bit longer and is at its decorative peak of saturation on the day after its application [12].

Let us take a closer look at the canvas: In recent decades, the body has been exposed to increased social science interest. While in critical theory, the body was ridiculed as something inferior, and at the same time, desired as something forbidden or alienated, "the body seems to be increasingly staged and presented in the transition from modernity to reflective modernity. Phenomena such

as bodybuilding, body shaping, body painting, body piercing, wellness and beauty, jogging and walking, but also the spread of Asian relaxation and martial arts clearly speak for increased body awareness" [13]. The body is understood as malleable, and some scholars even claim that there is an imperative to control and change it [14]. There is also an increased focus on physical aspects during leisure activities [15].

As a foundation of this article, I distance myself from dualistic categories such as mind versus body or self versus body. "The body is not viewed as an object, entity, or vessel for the self, but as an active and mutating form that permits and restricts particular modes of being-in-the-world" [16]. The body is situated in structures of power, and some of them can be shaped, infiltrated, accepted or ignored by its owner. Just as Joanne Entwistle sees the dress as both a social and personal experience [17], bodypainting may seem like something superficial at first glance. Still, for the model, it is ultimately an embodied experience.

### **3.2 A categorization of bodypaintings**

Different techniques are used for bodypainting: Usually, specific paint is applied with a sponge, a brush, or an airbrush. In addition, there are often latex body extensions, headdresses, wigs, and even clothes that can be integrated.

There are different types of bodypainting: Some imitate clothing such as corsets, blouses, or trousers that remain closest to the everyday perception of the body. Often, it only becomes apparent at second glance that the model is not wearing real clothes, so that there is a surprise effect. Pin-ups in the style of the 50s are a popular topic, but there are also boudoir scenarios in which underwear and stockings are painted on.

Monochrome paintings immerse the body in one color. Gold paintings are reminiscent of a famous scene from the James Bond movie "Goldfinger." 007, played by Sean Connery, finds his secretary Jill Masterson (Shirley Eaton) dead on her bed. The villain has put gold color over her body, and it is argued that her skin could no longer breathe. One cannot die because of a golden bodypainting, but still, this persistent myth adds tension to the picture. Also, a monochrome bodypainting gives the model something sculptural and can thus be understood as an extension of the field of "classical nudes."

Figurative paintings should transform the body into a different creature, e.g. into an elf, a lion, a dragon or a tree (for animals paintings in Siberian tribes see [18]). Thus, it can be a fantasy or a living being that exists. In another variation, one or several models, arranged in a particular way, are supposed to form a creature. The surprise effect lies in the process, be it that the recipient sees the creature or the individual model(s) first.

Another type of bodypainting can be described as conceptual: here, works are created that represent something rather abstract. To do so, the body is often divided into smaller canvases like

the back, the chest, etc. While figurative paintings mostly shape the body respectively accentuate its shape, this is not necessarily the case with conceptual illustrations. Conceptual paintings sometimes only become understandable when the recipient learns the title or the subject of the painting. Bodypainting competitions are often about implementing abstract themes in an original way.

Camouflage describes a fourth type: bodies are painted in a way that they become invisible in a certain setting. This can be thought of as a funny effect, but sometimes, a message of integration is intended: camouflage paintings in nature, for example, are often meant to communicate that humans are part of their natural environment [19].

Action bodypainting describes a technique than a result preferably: The models, which are mostly naked or primed with a monochrome paint, are sprayed with color so that there are splashes on the skin. This often takes place as a performance.

These categories show different relationships of the paintings to the body and its staging. The painting in which clothes are painted on is still quite close to the body, while the other types change the appearance of the body considerably. In monochrome and camouflage paintings, the stagings play a more integral role than in conceptual paintings. Monochrome and camouflage paintings do not unfold their effects so much on their own but require a certain pose or a corresponding location.



**Figure 1.** This bodypainting integrates the model into another painting

### 3.3 A short look at bodypainting in different cultures

An examination of bodypainting would not be appropriate if one did not briefly consider some historical aspects of bodypainting and its relevance in different cultures. Bodypainting "has been

practiced worldwide as evidence from Paleolithic burial sites has revealed "[20]. Hence, it can be considered as one of their prime means of artistic expression [21]. Also, bodypainting appears in numerous different cultures, e.g., among the Rapa Nui on Easter Island [22], among the indigenous people of Australia, Polynesia, Melanesia, and parts of Africa, and many Native American tribes once practiced it as well [23]. In India, it is typical for Sadhus, who cover their bodies in ashes, but also for dance performances such as the Kathakali dance theatre from Kerala [24].

Today, bodypainting traditions are continued in some cultural contexts: "Bodypainting is a common form of self-expression in many indigenous cultures. Nuba men of Sudan paint their bodies white on one side and black on the other. In New Guinea, the women paint their faces red, blue and white, while young Trobrianders use black and white vegetable dyes to paint designs on their faces and rub charmed coconut oil into their skin to make it shine in an attempt to appear more attractive to the opposite sex "[25]. The Surma, the Mun/Mursi, and the Bumi have a long tradition of bodypainting and regard their skin as a means to express personal meanings. There are also patterns using warriors in order to frighten enemies and decorations into attracting the opposite sex. To make paint, local plants and fruits are used [26]. Mun clay bodypainting is described as a "unique way of engaging with the environment, for the Mun have an earth-centered habitus "[27]. Matike et al. looked at the Xhosa bodypainting practice and found out that there are certain minerals in the clay that can be beneficial [28].

Often, bodypainting signifies major events or stages in life [29], "it is commonly used in rites of passage, such as initiation rituals marking the passage of boyhood to manhood "[30]. Although this is not explicit in the bodypainting scene, several interview statements indicate that receiving a bodypainting can be a significant moment.

*"For me, bodypainting initiated a process to accept my body. "(Sarah)*

*"[It feels] great! Quite liberating. "(Hannah).*

In various cultural contexts, bodypaintings can communicate mythologies, values, and beliefs [31]. This leads to the question of whether cultural appropriation comes into play: "There may be instances [...] where ritual face or bodypainting or tattoos are used out of context by outsiders in a cruel way "[32]. In general, cultural appropriation has always occurred in history; consequently, it is nothing new or extraordinary. In the process of inspiration and appropriation, often, new meanings arise. However, a symbol having a strong meaning seems to be devalued by people sharing it for a completely different purpose. The discussion gets more sensitive if styles or inspiration is taken from another cultural context that has been or continues to be oppressed. However, if one looks at the bodypaintings of the scene, there are seldom clear similarities to the traditional paintings of indigenous groups.

In the "western" context, bodypainting was carried out by the Hippies of the 1960s and 1970s in order to demonstrate their closeness to nature, as well as their imagined closeness to tribal cultures. Also, "New York's East Village punks paint their bodies in multicolors, and European Goths paint their bodies white and their lips and eyes black "[33]. So bodypainting appears as an expression of specific cultural scenes, not of society as a whole. In most cultures, bodypainting is an element but not the central part. This aspect distinguishes the bodypainting scene from other contexts in which it occurs. The scene gathers in internet groups and meets for workshops or festivals. The first festival was held in Austria in 1998, so we look at a relatively recent trend. In Europe, the art enjoyed more public appreciation than in the US [35]. But there are now also other significant festivals, e.g., a festival has been taking place in Daegu in Korea since 2009.

#### 4 The Bodypainting Situation

Bodypainting starts with the naked body - this implies that the model either must be somewhat exhibitionistic or that she has to build up a special relationship of trust to the painter. Here, bodypainting is similar to photography: When a (hobby)model takes off her clothing, often a process begins in which she also undresses emotionally, and it quickly leads to very personal communication [35]. Here, this may be enhanced by two aspects: the painter and the model are physically closer than the photographer and his model, and bodypainting can take a lot of time. The silence is usually filled with small talk, and soon, personal topics emerge. A kind of reflection is conceivable: if one is already naked, one is already exposed in front of the painter, one can also take off the social mask and undress emotionally. In return, the painter answers in an emotional, trusting way that reminds of talk therapy. Even for anatomical bodypainting, Nanjundaiah and Chowdapurkar found out that it encourages communication, that "the students felt that the bodypainting method was fun and that lots of peer learning happened "[36]. Physical interaction also seems to facilitate verbal communication.

Yet, being naked in front of strangers may feel strange: "When we dress, we do so to make our bodies acceptable to a social situation "[37]. There are certain social situations where nudity becomes the norm – in the sauna, on the nudist beach – but being the only person to be undressed is an unusual situation. However, many interviewees emphasized that they did not feel naked when painted or at least once the painting was in process.

*"I actually never feel I'm naked. "(Analía)*

*"Once some paint is put on, it does not feel like being naked. "(Daniela)*

As it seems, a layer of paint helps to feel no longer undressed. This corresponds to the fact that numerous (hobby)models are happily available for bodypainting but exclude the photo genre "fine art nude" - which may be surprising at first glance. Perhaps one reason is that the models feel less recognizable and therefore feel less "themselves."

*"Bodypainting's okay for me because it's like a different skin. But I don't like nudes. "(Lou)*

Astonishingly, many models are not confident about their bodies, yet get naked to be painted and pose without clothes once the painting is done.

*"I never liked my body. However, both body painting and photography have given me a new outlook, to understand my body as raw material which can be designed. It's a freeing feeling. "(Katharina)*

A mutual adjustment of painter and model is necessary during the painting process. The painting idea is usually coordinated with the model beforehand, possibly also (further) developed by both. This is mostly done via the internet, i.e., without real-life meetings. When painting, the idea must be adapted to the model's body, its bumps, strengths, and weaknesses. The posing or acting skills of the model also matter, as does her persistence and patience. Painted images are "copies of natural forms that have been reinterpreted in new 'living' forms, as they are painted onto and in relation to a living body "[38]. The painting process itself was sometimes described as a kind of sensual relationship and thus resembles descriptions of hairdressing [39].

*"I love the feeling of the brushes on my skin "(Lucy)*

However, this should not hide the fact that standing still for a long time is tiring and that the wet color on the skin often feels cold, that being painted can be exhausting. For both the model and the painter, bodypainting also includes flexibility, as it contains uncontrollable factors - not only because the painter may not know the model's body or the model cannot assess how persistent she is, but also due to the time pressure: with a bodypainting one cannot – quite literally – postpone the work until tomorrow. There is often a special time pressure at festivals, and the clock also ticks for paintings that are done for photoshoots: "Bodypainting demands talent from the artist and patience from the model. A full body piece can take up to 14 hours to complete, time that the model must spend entirely still and, usually, completely nude "[40]. For the model, being painted is in the area of tension between tactile enjoyment and emotional and physical effort.

"Interaction in photography accepts the power of the photographer's status. That status always has the edge over that of the subject" [41]. Is this comparable to bodypainting? First of all, from a photographic point of view, I would not support Beloff's statement. Depending on the topic of the photoshoot, the team composition, and the daily form, different power structures can arise. For the artist, the model's body is used as an inspiration [42], but it is also important that the model agrees to the painting, especially because the models are almost never paid (well), so they must be driven by intrinsic motivation. At this point, the question of the model's identity gets in focus: Why doesn't she just want to enjoy a painting, but rather experience it on her own body, in a way become the art?

Identity has been discussed for a long time in a multitude of disciplines. For our context, identity must concern the "self-image as a coherent being with certain characteristics and a history "[43]. Identity can be understood as a self-understanding, understanding who you are, what your plans are, etc. [44]. "One general line of consensus in [...] recent social theory is that – in conditions of intensive globalization – individuals are increasingly required or called upon, to become the 'architects of their own lives', to engage in continual do-it-yourself identity revisions and to plot and re-plot individualized solutions to wider systemic social problems "[45]. In this general situation "the body becomes a guarantee for unity and individuality, a bastion of autonomy and self-determination. This is also an inheritance of the Enlightenment: Because the awareness of permanent change has become part of the modern attitude towards life and the construction of identity par excellence, the idea or hope remains of physical continuity (such as stopping aging processes) as one of the few stability refugees "[46].

*"It is great to witness the transformation of the own body. "(Elli)*

*"It seems like anything can be done! Its amazing to be a living painting myself. "(Analía)*

With bodypainting, the model slips into a new skin, so to speak, and can become not just someone, but even something completely different – a non-human creature or just a concept. Consequently, a particular tension arises: The model is not "costumed ", but also not recognizable and not "herself. "



**Figure 2.** A conceptual bodypainting inspired by "Alice in Wonderland".

## 5 The Photography Situation

As a non-permanent art form bodypainting presents the team members with the problem that their works cannot be stored, traded, or presented over a longer period of time. Unlike paintings, one

cannot sell or exhibit bodypaintings. They only exist in the context of the situation for which they were created. Yet, the fact that art cannot have its effect without a certain context is easy to overlook: "However it would be a great mistake to move from that position to one in which it is argued that the only way art can be appreciated is on the basis of form alone untrammelled by art history or free from the knowledge and expertise of the creator [...] Except in certain experimental situations, curatorial experience about the works and their significance has always been vital "[47].

No matter for which purpose it is painted, taking pictures is almost always an integral part of the painting. At festivals, "once complete, the model poses for photos or, if he or she is acting in a film, will complete their scene "[48]. Commonly, extra sets and lamps are installed so that the paintings can be photographed in the best possible way. Photo tickets at the World Bodypainting Festival, therefore, cost extra. Photographing the works also plays a central role outside of festivals: painters who practice can record their progress and create a chronicle of their paintings. Often bodypaintings are explicitly done for the camera, as it offers exciting and diverse motifs to people who are into staged photography.

The intention to photograph or to have the painting photographed already influences its creation. If the photoshoot is the main reason for the painting, the paintings are often created differently than for competitions. It is less about showing mastery and thus optimally using flat surfaces such as the back, but rather about designing the body as good as possible for the camera. Posing options and light settings are also considered: if the model is to be photographed from the front, elaborate back paintings make no sense. If the light is to be set from high up or to the side, shadow casts must be considered.

*"Even as a painter, you have to learn to understand the possibilities of photography in order to create paintings that can be photographed well. "(Peter)*

When bodypaintings are photographed, a staging takes place, just like in a normal fashion or portrait shoot. The photographic stage in the narrower sense sees the two-dimensional picture as the "defined objective "[49]. However, my experience and other studies [50] have shown that for many people, the image result is not the most or the only important goal of photography: Mindfulness plays a role when taking pictures [51], as does the joyful feeling of being active and being truly involved in something, which has been characterized as "flow" [52]. The opportunity to collect new experiences through photography also plays a role, as does the expression of creativity, which is associated with empowerment and personal development [53] and can lead to pride, self-esteem, and mental health [54].

Just as the painting situation, the photography situation is characterized by communication, the model and the painter must articulate their ideas. Personal information is often communicated

here – not surprising, since portraiture is considered to be closely interwoven with the person portrayed [55].

As with bodypainting, there is also a close connection to identity. Through bodypainting, the person has become something else and poses as such in front of the camera. The posings and movements are adapted to this new being.

*"When I'm fully painted, I am different, I behave differently. Funnily enough, this seems natural to me." (Jenny)*

So bodypainting and photography enter into a symbiosis and resemble each other in some aspects with regard to the model. Consequently, the assumption is that the effects can be intensified.

## **6 A Canvas in a Photograph**

A two-dimensional image becomes something three-dimensional on the body and then, through photography, again, something two-dimensional. In the process, the living canvases "change the contextual interpretations of the original painted images in integral ways" [56] and so does the photograph. In addition to bodypainting, photography also offers a new experience of oneself, comparable to the mirror experience.

*"It gives me the opportunity to see myself from an outside perspective without judgment, which often appears whilst looking into the mirror "(Lucy)*

*"I am in the photo, but somehow it's not myself. "(Alisa)*

Due to the lack of similarity, it is easier to appreciate the pictures as works without immediately bringing one's person into play, to look at them detached from oneself. When looking at the process, there is an absolute dichotomy, as, on the one hand, the body is in focus, on the other hand, it is overcome in two ways: to become a "living canvas ", the model has to endure the process of getting painted – this can be emotionally and physically challenging. In addition, the model is transformed into something else. The painting "transforms the wearer into a (temporary) work of art "[57]. Although this is sometimes the case with ordinary photoshoots as well, it is usually much more present in bodypainting due to the greater difference. This becomes particularly clear when the painted model represents something non-human or even abstract.

*"It feels like I can be anything, literally anything. "(Leonie).*

*"When I look at the pictures, I can barely recognise my body, yet I feel a strong connection to the photograph, as important and vivid memories are linked to it. "(Laura)*

Bodypainting has become a second-level work of art through photography: the painting is an artwork already, and together with the photographic process, it becomes yet another kind of art also.

Almost all models confirm that they experience it as an uplifting feeling to perceive themselves as art. Photography manages to detach the painting from its context and make it durable. Furthermore, the resulting picture hides a lot: photographs are taken in front of a background paper or in a set, maybe even lights are mounted - in most cases, however, the result shows something that does not fully correspond to the memory of the shoot. This is already the case because one cannot perceive oneself "in real life" from the outside, but it is reinforced by the fact that the photographic result is based on staging and is probably retouched.

This way, the model has the chance to merge into the painting and the resulting photograph and leave her body behind, to identify with something that at first glance has a lot to do with her body. Still, at second glance, it makes the actual body secondary. She can enjoy the artwork without necessarily relating it to her body, but understanding it as teamwork between herself – her physical and psychological qualities – the painter, and the photograph: the body as canvas as picture as art.

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