

But is it art?

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To mark her 50th, author Alison Gordon got a moose tattoo

Some people give their bodies to science; novelist Alison Gordon says she gives hers to art. Five years ago, Gordon — the first woman sportswriter on the American League beat, past-president of PEN Canada, and author of the popular Kate Henry baseball mysteries — was casting about for a suitable way to mark her 50th birthday. After much body- and soul-searching, she decided that a fine-art tattoo was the perfect way to combine her affection for art with her desire to “grow old dangerously.”

She initially considered getting one of Tom Thomson's famous pines etched into her skin, but then changed her mind: “Why appropriate something from a dead artist?” she asks. Instead, Gordon called on her friend, the profane, iconoclastic artist Charles Pachter — he of the cheeky pictures showing the Queen on a moose. Together, they decided to design a blue moose in silhouette, encased in a rounded frame.

The moose image is archetypal Pachter. The widely collected artist first used it in his 1987 acrylic painting *Tour de Force I*, which perches a proud moose on a high diving platform. Pachter has since depicted his stylized moose climbing up snowbanks, tumbling off cliffs and office towers, and calmly walking a tightrope in front of the CN Tower. The moose has become so closely identified with Pachter that he uses it on his letterhead as a logo.

Gordon augmented Pachter's moose with a garland of autumnal maple leaves, courtesy of Melanie — a tattoo artist on Toronto's Queen Street West. The final masterpiece stretches almost completely around the soft canvas of her upper left arm.

In the manner of great philanthropists who want their collections to be seen, the raspy-voiced Gordon — her throat tarnished by years of smoking — says her tattoo is for public display.

But is it art? The image itself lies somewhere between graphic design and adornment. It's difficult to separate from the powerful image of tattoo art as a symbol of teenage rebellion and biker machismo.

Gordon likes the comments she gets, revel-



GEORGE WHITESIDE

Alison Gordon models the tattoo designed for her by iconoclastic artist Charles Pachter, known for his moose paintings.

ling in the marvellous incongruity of the words, “Nice tattoo, ma’am,” from youthful admirers of the work who don't expect rebellion in someone of her age. She also enjoys it when “proper, corporate” types surreptitiously show her their own inky secrets. One apparently conservative woman was delighted to show Gordon her perfectly rendered Oreo cookie tattoo etched, with photographic and delicious precision, on her upper back.

In Gordon's case, her tattoo may come closer to the primitive branding that one sociologist called a voluntary stigmata.

When the question, “Is it art?” is put to him directly, Pachter — usually so loquacious — is noncommittal. “Art is what you call art,” he says. “I consider it flattery that Alison asked me. It's a memento, a talisman between us.”

Pachter has struggled with this “art” ques-

tion throughout his career. Despite a favourable assessment of his work in the 1992 book, *Charles Pachter*, written by noted art historian Bogomila Welsh-Ovcharov, and introduced by Margaret Atwood — both friends of the painter and subjects of paintings included in the book — he has never been warmly embraced by the contemporary art establishment. He is considered too self-promotional, too entrepreneurial, his work too much like commercial art. Placing the Queen on a moose might have shaken up Canadian monarchists, but it doesn't disrupt existing aesthetic orthodoxies.

The art world also has trouble with someone who doesn't take himself too seriously. Pachter never seems to miss an opportunity for

a corny pun: His 1985 painting of the Supreme Court is entitled *The Supremes*, his 1986 image of a seal in an aquarium is called *Sealed Off*, and his 1988 rendering of a platter of butter tarts, perhaps his commentary on the art world, is called *State of the Tarts II*. Fun yes, but fun is not always the way to woo critics or gallery owners.

Does Pachter himself have a tattoo? No. Would he be willing to design another? “If the phone rings, I'm willing to discuss it,” he says.

Of course, once the tattoo — whether it be art, craft, or stigmata — has found a home on the body, it's there for good, save for expensive laserwork.

At Gordon's age, keeping the skin where the tattoo is etched in tip-top shape is a concern. “I tone up at the YMCA,” she says. “I wouldn't want my moose to droop.”