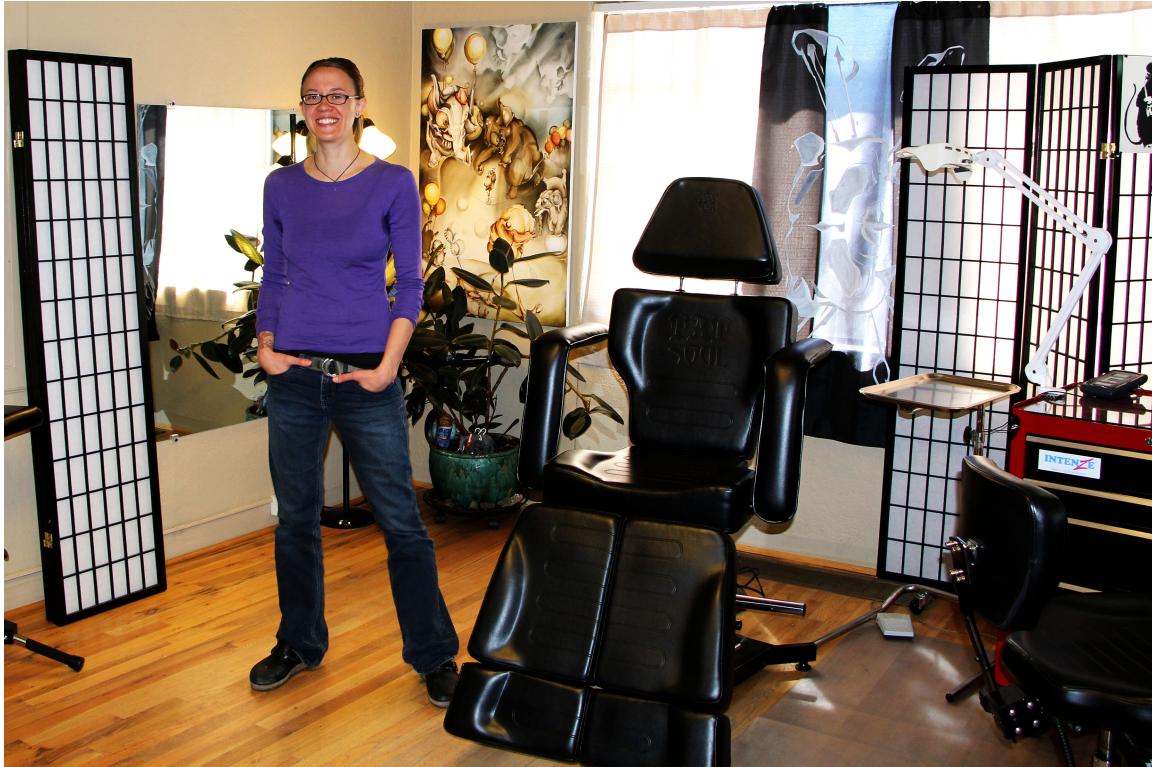


The buzz of the tattoo gun, the smell of alcohol and sterilizing chemicals, you know it well. Most tattoo shops slap you in the face with that chemical smell when you walk in the door, but not Tightrope Tattoo in Salida, Colorado. Katie Maher, owner and artist at Tightrope uses an autoclave to sterilize her equipment, so when you first walk in the door there is more of a weed smell mixed with a clean one. But don't worry, she's not in there getting high on the job. Her shop shares a building with a recreational marijuana dispensary.



Katie in her studio. "I still don't have all the skills I want and I don't think I ever will. But what I can do now is pretty broad and I'm confident." Photo by Anna Tessitore

Katie grew up in Iowa and spent most of her childhood playing video games, watching Disney movies and drawing. "I liked to hang out alone. I think I was the only kid in the world who would just rather be alone and drawing." As Katie got older she kept her interests but didn't plan on going to school for them.

"I was that spoiled rotten kid whose parents said, 'you're going to college', I said 'no I don't want to' and they insisted. I said, 'okay, well, f*** you I'm going for art, how do you feel about that?'" She says she panicked half way through and realized how much money she was spending so she tacked on a business and psychology minor. "I'm using all three, I think this is probably the only profession I would have found that I get to use all three."

Katie is also a painter. But ten years ago, shortly after college, she would have never thought she'd be where she is today. "I had been fired from almost every job I'd had, so I thought I was probably just going to fail at life." She threw a dart at a map of

Colorado and moved out to Almont. She lived in a cabin and was determined to “be an artist, damnit”. So she painted every day and sold some artwork in the nearby town of Crested Butte. “I did okay, but about six months later, someone said I should try tattooing. It was terrifying. It’s surgery, not just the art aspect.” But when the machine was put in her hand and she tried it, “It was the funnest thing I’ve ever done in my life and I haven’t stopped since.”

Katie says there aren’t huge cost differences in the painting world versus the tattooing world. But “the type of people that pay for tattoos are everybody. It’s little old ladies coming in after church getting a cross to college students getting full sleeves.” The painting community is a little different. “The people that have bought my paintings have been more upper class, wealthy, like they’re trying to decorate a mansion, type people. Maybe that will change but that’s my experience so far.”

Katie uses her painting skills to help her in tattooing, but she is grateful that they are different. “Tattooing is such an uptight, close, precise thing. And painting, I can stand back and sword fight with it, get loose and wreck it, and it doesn’t matter. Tattoos always matter so much and it’s so serious. Thank God there’s painting.”

She has had Tightrope Tattoo for four years but the year and a half prior, she spent every day working on her two brothers in a clean room in her house. “I realized very quickly that the guy that taught me didn’t really know what he was doing even though he had had a shop for years.” She decided to take some time out for extra practice.

Now she can charge 100 dollars an hour and spend all day doing what she loves. Three years ago, she wasn’t so confident in her skills. She was still going into the bathroom before starting a tattoo and telling herself it would be okay. “The minute I started that would disappear. You flip over to the right side of your brain, you’re in the zone. That doesn’t happen anymore thank god.”

She loves tattooing because, “It makes art social. People have to talk to me and I get to dig. They get this small amount of pain going, there’s this trust thing and they’re like instantly a good friend and they will tell me anything they want to. I can just be a nonjudgmental third party to listen and possibly help.”

Speaking from experience of being in Katie’s chair, that is completely accurate. I’ve spent many hours in her chair, and we have developed a friendship. She’s easy to talk to. She’s empathetic and really cares about her work and the people she gets to tattoo. She worked on my arm for a memorial sleeve for a friend who passed away almost a year ago in a rafting accident. I gave her a concept and a few ideas of what I wanted and she drew it up exactly how I was picturing it. I was able to open up and tell her the whole story and why the image permanently on my arm is so important to me. It served as a part of my healing process and I’m grateful for Katie’s dedication to her work. She’s an amazing artist.



Photo By Anna Tessitore

On a typical day, Katie will wake up, do some yoga, maybe talk to a client or two and make some plans before going to her shop and spending anywhere from one to six hours tattooing. "Yoga is super important. It's such a confined, contained muscle weirdness to do tattoos. You're hunching over people, pulling on skin and making tight little circles with your fingers." After a long day of tattooing, she goes home and draws more tattoos.

The time she spends preparing for a tattoo is multiplied by ten compared to how much time she spends actually tattooing. "I spend a lot of time drawing and preparing, I think mostly for me. I'm making sure I'm ready to perform and do it as fast as possible when the client gets here." Katie says it's exhausting work, both physically and mentally but also fulfilling. "It gives me another perspective of the human condition."

What sets Katie apart from all the other tattoo artists is the experience. "I care more about other people's tattoos. I'm so appreciative that somebody is giving me their skin to color on." She treats every tattoo like it's going to be on her body forever. "I won't do it if I don't love it."

Katie doesn't plan on making this a life-long career. "It disturbs me to create so much trash doing it the clean, necessary way. And I'm not convinced that putting plastic in people's skin is a good thing. So I probably won't do it forever even though it is incredibly fun," she laughs.



Some of Katie's work. Photos courtesy Katie Maher

