



<http://www.tattoo-honolulu.com>

## How One Tattoo Artist Is Making Their Studio A Safe Space For Queer Clients

For LGBT people, a tattoo parlor can be an unwelcoming space—getting inked is an intimate process, and nobody wants to feel judged, questioned, or discriminated against in such a vulnerable position.



Queer New York tattoo artist Em North can speak to the uninviting nature of many tattoo shops: In their experience, homophobic, sexist, and racist attitudes and incidents are all too common. (North uses she/her and they/them pronouns.)

"I worked at one or two shops where some white artists would turn away folks with dark skin tones," North says. "After the potential client would leave, the artist would make comments about not wanting to tattoo darker skin because it wouldn't look clear in photos on social media, or would be hard 'to see' as they worked on the tattoo... Turning away clientele based on skin color is overt racism, not simply an 'aesthetic choice' as some artists try to pass it off as."



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North explains that, in the culture of tattoo shops, artists pass through thinking racist, sexist, or homophobic comments are what's expected of them. "Sadly, tattoo culture has a history of this," they add. "We need to start being overt about the fact that we will not tolerate it."

North offers something different for their clients: A comfortable, safe experience where their identities, bodies, and gender presentation aren't questioned or judged.

"My studio has intentional messaging—there is literally a sign that says that discrimination and body-negativity will not be tolerated, and clients appreciate that," they explain. "Many clients come to me excited about the intentional safe space I have created for tattooing, so I know that my efforts have not gone to waste. Many of these clients are women, people of color, queer, and non-binary folks. But I also have my share of straight white men who tell me they don't feel comfortable in a traditional shop environment."

North, a former caseworker, always wanted to pursue a career in the arts. When a tattoo artist offered the opportunity to apprentice, they said yes. For North, it was the perfect marriage of making art and working with people.

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