

64

Gd

Gadolinium

157.25

Tattoos

The trouble with tattoos is that people can see them. All the time. Whether you want them to or not. Let's face it? America in the twenty-first century is in the grips of an extremely primitive culture. People are judged by inessentials. Sometimes you're forced to choose between a position as financial advisor to the World Bank and getting really cool Maori blackwork tattooed across your face. This is a choice no civilized person should have to make. Now you don't. Utilizing a technique employed by oncologists in the early parts of the century, fluorescent gadolinium is injected into the tissues, and then moved into place (gadolinium is naturally magnetic) by hand-held MRI wands. It's an easy and inexpensive operation, which hurts no more than getting vaccinated does. If you grow tired of a design, the tattoo artist can shift the dye into another configuration. The colors are bright, and tunable across the spectrum. Best of all, the resulting tattoo is invisible! Until, that is, you bathe it with ultraviolet light. Then the ships and swirls, roses and tigers, naughty mermaids and noble dragons spring to life! As the lights dim, our faces fade and those images we have made of ourselves take over. In the dance clubs at night, when the lights go off, the tattoos bloom, like stars in the darkening sky. The constellations wheel about the room, and naked feet dance on a soft forest carpet of discarded clothing. We all become as gods, without inhibition or hesitation. We take our

Michael Swanwick's Periodic Table of Science Fiction

64

Gd

Gadolinium

157.25

Tattoos

The trouble with tattoos is that people can see them. All the time. Whether you want them to or not. Let's face it? America in the twenty-first century is in the grips of an extremely primitive culture. People are judged by inessentials. Sometimes you're forced to choose between a position as financial advisor to the World Bank and getting really cool Maori blackwork tattooed across your face.

This is a choice no civilized person should have to make. Now you don't. Utilizing a technique employed by oncologists in the early parts of the century, fluorescent gadolinium is injected into the tissues, and then moved into place (gadolinium is naturally magnetic) by hand-held MRI wands. It's an easy and inexpensive operation, which hurts no more than getting vaccinated does. If you grow tired of a design, the tattoo artist can shift the dye into another configuration. The colors are bright, and tunable across the spectrum. Best of all, the resulting tattoo is invisible!

Until, that is, you bathe it with ultraviolet light. Then the ships and

swirls, roses and tigers, naughty mermaids and noble dragons spring to life! As the lights dim, our faces fade and those images we have made of ourselves take over.

In the dance clubs at night, when the lights go off, the tattoos bloom, like stars in the darkening sky. The constellations wheel about the room, and naked feet dance on a soft forest carpet of discarded clothing. We all become as gods, without inhibition or hesitation. We take our pleasures without regret.

In the morning, of course, the light will be pitiless and our tattoos sunk back into our skins. Our heads will throb and our guts will ache. There will be a horrible taste in our mouths. Pallid as

grubs, we'll desperately search among the acres of clothing, down on all fours, for what we wore here. We will none of us look any other in the eye. We'll regret every word and every deed of the night before.

But tomorrow is not here yet. Tonight, we are as beautiful as our tattoos, fearless and free. What do we care about our workaday selves?

What do we have in common with them?

© 2002 by Michael Swanwick and SCIFI.COM.