

HEALTH & SEX

Innovative nipple tattoos restore breast cancer survivors' confidence

Special effects makeup artist Carla Fourie gives back what surgery takes away

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BY CLAIRE KEETON



Carla Fourie tattooing a nipple for a client.

Image: *Ruvan Boshoff*

Special effects makeup artist Carla Fourie crafts gory wounds and injuries on film sets but, off set, her skills veer in the opposite direction, creating personalised "nipples" for women who have lost theirs.

A breast cancer survivor, who had a bilateral mastectomy at 35, Fourie has personal experience of how it feels to be without nipples - which is why she uses her talents to do nipple tattoos with a 3D appearance, temporary nipple tattoos and customised silicone stick-on buds.

"In the past I would always notice that flat Barbie boob when I walked past a mirror and now I do not," said Fourie - who did a tattoo course because she wanted to ink on and shade in her own nipples herself.

"They look real and it made such a difference to me," said Fourie, based in Cape Town. "Often women have a bit of a bump in the flat skin which enhances the 3D effect."

Women come from other cities in SA and even neighbouring countries like Namibia and Zambia to get customised nipples from her. Her stick-on buds have gone as far as Hawaii.

"Women of 30 come to me and my oldest client is 74 years old," she said.

Her service allows women who have had a single mastectomy or lost a nipple for other reasons to get a tattoo or stick-on bud, which matches the other nipple as closely as possible. The two-hour procedure involves careful measuring and colour mixing, said Fourie.

"I use a strong anaesthetic cream which makes the half hour of tattooing completely painless," she said.

The tattoo is not invasive like surgery so women who don't want breast or nipple reconstruction can still get the appearance of a nipple. They could go later for fat injections to plump it up.

A 62-year-old mother and businesswoman, who looks younger than 50, came to Fourie after having two breast reductions. In the first operation 16 years ago, one of her nipples died because of a botched procedure. Three years later she had a skin graft from inside her wrist, to make a round nipple.

In January she went for an initial nipple tattoo with Fourie, in September she had a second breast reduction after losing lots of weight and, in December, Fourie finished creating the nipple.

"This has been life changing for me - not only ending up not looking or feeling disfigured but doing this with Carla - she is an angel. She is empathetic, calm and she really cares about how you feel and will not stop until you are happy," she said.

"I think it's important as a woman to do what makes you feel great, if it's getting your boobs upped or down or getting nipples."

She said that going for her tattoo felt like going to a therapist. "Carla looks like Barbie but she's so unBarbie like."

Fourie doesn't know exactly why but she made a cast of her chest before her breasts were removed. Working in the film industry with prosthetics, she thinks she may have wanted to have an exact cast for the reconstructive surgeon to copy. This meant she had an exact shape when she wanted to recreate her nipples after reconstruction.

Her business, Budnipples, has been growing since 2013 when she started it and spreads mostly by word-of-mouth referrals. The temporary tattoo, which lasts about a week, gives women a chance to see if they like the colour and texture before committing to a permanent shaded nipple.

"I have had ladies who have walked around for four years without nipples and, when I do the final colour, they are in tears. They say they want to walk around topless after this."

With the Free the Nipple campaign - supporting women breaking legal and cultural taboos and doing what they want with their bodies - gaining impetus, these women wouldn't be the only ones.

Tattooing nipples is her "real feel-good work" said Fourie, who still works occasionally in the film industry - where she has been involved in big-budget productions like *Inside Man 2*, *Free Willy 4* and *10,000 BC*.

Alluring nipples beat burly cavemen any day.

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- Carla Fourie, makeup artist



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