

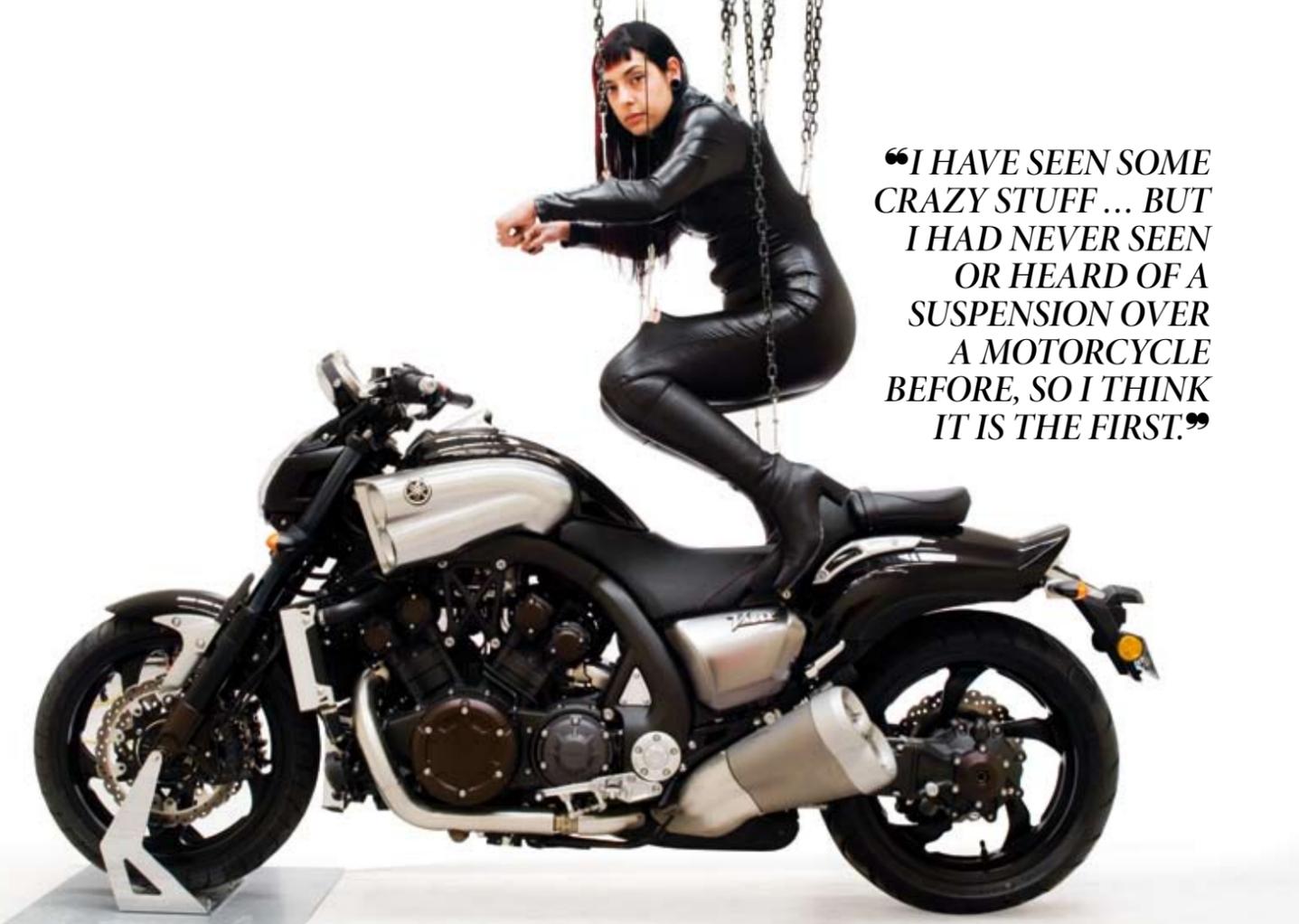


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ASCEND WITH US INTO
THE BLACK ART OF
SUSPENSION...

Words by ALEC SIMPSON, photography
by ALEC SIMPSON & KIK GOLLINGS





“I HAVE SEEN SOME CRAZY STUFF ... BUT I HAD NEVER SEEN OR HEARD OF A SUSPENSION OVER A MOTORCYCLE BEFORE, SO I THINK IT IS THE FIRST.”



How a bike hooks up usually refers to how well its tyre grips the road as it launches off the line, not how it might look with a voluptuous young woman suspended above it, her skin pierced by hooks. Melanie is a professional sculptor, motorcyclist, one of the Mischief Makers motorcycle customising crew and an extreme performance artist. She has been performing suspensions with flesh hooks for more than two years. Not surprisingly, it isn't something she does everyday.

Performance artists who conduct suspensions might be rare, but they are not unheard of. And most of you will know people who indulge in other forms of body modification, from tattoos and piercing to more socially acceptable forms such as face lifts and breast enhancements.

Fundamentally, flesh hook suspension is just another form of body modification, undertaken by consenting adults for their own satisfaction and gratification. Of course, you should not try this at home.

Days after watching Melanie being hooked and hoisted, I was still struggling to come to terms with what I'd seen and had I not been using the camera I doubt I could have watched it. The camera allowed me to observe remotely and provides some clue as to how an act like this can be performed: by compartmentalising your intuitive responses and watching almost

as an outsider. According to Melanie, the ability to concentrate the mind on what your body is doing in response to the suspension, rather than just reacting to the undoubtedly painful process, is critical to its success.

The first time Melanie showed me a picture of herself being suspended from flesh hooks, I was shocked into silence. Yet the transition from that initial surprise to photographing her in suspension over the V-Max told me I was achieving some sort of understanding, although I suspect acceptance is a better term.

Melanie remained her bubbly and amusing self throughout the entire process, with only the occasional wince betraying the pain and discomfort involved. While suspended she was able to have normal and unstrained conversations with everyone around her, even smoke a cigarette. The V-Max was Melanie's choice as, aesthetically and mechanically, it is an extreme motorcycle, a motorcycle that would complement her extreme performance art.

Human skin is remarkably tough and it takes Timb, Melanie's piercer and suspension performance partner, considerable effort to force the large sterilised shark hooks through the piercing points. Once the hooks are all through, the chain and cables are connected and the lengths adjusted to ensure an even distribution of weight as Melanie is lifted. This process was critical to ensure that she retained



the position she was in when sitting on the V-Max, and didn't twist or spin as her weight was borne by the hooks.

While the preparations were time-consuming, the actual lifting process took mere seconds and the moment of realisation that the suspension was successful, after the drama of the lifting, was quite breathtaking. I recall muttering something



like, 'that looks f----g awesome', and it did. She did appear to be floating above the V-Max, her skin stretched unnaturally upwards through the tight black catsuit where the hooks were placed. Remarkably she was in exactly the same position that she had been while sitting on the bike.

Melanie's suspension above the V-Max is the first time someone has performed this in the riding position above a motorcycle. She said

this was one of the reasons she was so excited by the prospect of doing it.

"I have seen some crazy stuff and done some full-on silly stuff, but I had never seen or heard of a suspension over a motorcycle before, so I think it is the first."

The suspension Melanie performed is a mix of a few recognised styles: the 'fallen angel', characterised by the six hooks in her back which result in a forward leaning position; and the 'chair' because there are hooks in the knees and wrists producing a sitting position. The hooks in her boots did not pierce the skin. Melanie and Timb have christened this style of suspension 'The Marionette' after French marionette puppets, although 'The Rider' was a strong contender.

MIND OVER MATTER

Melanie grew up in the northern suburbs of Paris. Not the romantic Paris you encounter as a tourist, but, to paraphrase, more of the ghetto Paris. She recalls seeing her first piercing when she was just 10 years old; it was a lip piercing worn by a German tourist.

"I remember thinking it was insane and how much I liked it, but I never got shocked and I was never afraid or scared of it. Also where I grew up there were a lot of African people with tribal scarring and other adornments, like stretched ear lobes, but this was traditional for them and I never thought of it as being strange or weird."

As the day came closer I had broken down the process of suspension into three main areas: the anticipation of being suspended, the action of being suspended and the participant's recovery from it. It was going to be the basis of this story. However, Melanie suggested that it is more likely to be four areas.

"Because that period just after the suspension is a period on its own. That first week after a suspension is special, nothing matters."

I was especially curious to know how she could deal with the anticipation, knowing that 10 sterilised shark hooks would be pushed through her skin without anaesthetic. For the V-Max suspension there would be no motivating crowd to excite her, no mania to psyche her up, just a desire to do it.

"The V-Max is my seventh suspension. Six have been successful, one has not. The success depends on your state of mind. For the V-Max I was very excited about it, I was looking forward to it, I made it possible.

"Of course you are nervous, even if you have done it several times, you know what is going to happen. But you are not scared because you have had the experience, you know your skin is not going to tear out, you know your heart can take it. You might be excited, but you're not going to die of a heart attack. You know that physically you can take it, so they are apprehensions not fears.

"Then there is the mental part. Because I wanted to do it so much I just focused on



putting all my energy and will into making it happen. The less you fear the more comfortable you are going to be, it's that simple – more fear means more stress and tension.

“There is no mental recipe for success. You must detach yourself and become an observer. Somebody else is doing something to you. If you become too mentally involved in it you will get worked up and become scared. If you let scary thoughts come up you are going to freak out and then you will not be able to do the suspension. You know it is going to hurt, that is part of the experience.

“The fact that I have people around me who know what they are doing helps me not to become stressed and not to freak out. It's very relaxing to let someone else do the work, I am just there to be suspended.”

The pragmatics of the V-Max suspension involved finding a suitable location, getting a V-Max to the venue and building the rig from which Melanie would be suspended. Given that this style of suspension had not been done before, some aspects of it, such as the location of the hooks, had to be worked out on the day with Melanie sitting on the bike.

“Being involved in the whole process of the suspension helps a lot. After I decided to go for it, I had to do quite a bit of logistics ... so the stress is not in the piercing and suspension part of it, it's the bringing together of all the different parts so we could perform this suspension.”

It has been suggested that suspension participants have an out-of-body experience and this is what draws them to it. Melanie said she hasn't had anything she would call out-of-body, but describes a process where she is looking at herself from the outside. She considers it to be a rational process of mind over body, not mystical.

“You distance yourself from the physical part of the experience, and you are very much into your own mental bubble, you can meditate quite easily in that situation. It's very easy to not even notice what is going on around you. I have done performances in front of hundreds of people and I wouldn't have had any idea because I was lost in my mental bubble.”

“When I do suspensions I try to see myself, but objectively. I make a cut between my emotions and feelings and my thoughts. I cut myself in half, but not in a mystical sense.”

Yet Melanie does feel that suspensions provide her with enlightenment and empower her to face life's challenges.

“There are two different things. There is a temporary enlightenment or bonus and there is the long-term evolution that comes from suspension. I have become less shy, I feel I can do things I would not have done otherwise because I was scared to. It brings you things that are very hard to describe. It brings you confidence, it brings you strength, you realise that if you can do that you can do anything and you have no



“MOTORCYCLING AND SUSPENSION ARE ABOUT THE SAME THINGS: YOU HAVE TO PUSH YOURSELF, YOU HAVE TO PUSH YOUR BOUNDARIES...”

excuse not to do the things you want to do.

“It is enlightening because you understand yourself better, and so deal with life better. You

open your mind a lot more, and so you see things that you wouldn't have noticed before.

“The short-term benefits are awesome, because when you get suspended your body reacts. You can control your mind, but the body is a cause and effect machine

so it kicks in and produces the adrenalin, the endorphins and the funny things that are probably natural drugs.



“Nothing matters after that. As I said at the beginning, that first week after suspension is incredible. You are not floating, and you are not walking on earth like a god among mere mortals, but you feel that nothing can touch you. Nothing matters.”

Melanie pointed out that physically she is very sore after a suspension and that her body needs to rest. However, the psychological high is so great it makes it all worthwhile.

“Everything is put into perspective, everything is in balance, you feel so grounded.

Pins and Needles

Timb Wilton performed the piercing for Melanie's suspension, and he's been doing piercing and other forms of body modification for more than five years.

“I just really enjoy doing it, it's a great challenge and every single person is different. I have to make a piece of jewellery fit in somewhere and make sure it looks good and heals well, so there are a lot of things involved.”

Piercing the skin, especially on the back, takes a lot of effort. When they are inserted the hooks follow a piercing blade, which is of a slightly smaller diameter. This difference in diameter is what prevents a lot of the bleeding.

“The hooks are a shark/marlin hook with the barbs taken off ... they are 4mm thick. That's a lot of tissue, and the skin on your back is pretty much like a hide, so it is really tough and you have to use a lot of force.

“It is very much how you do a regular piercing. Needle then jewellery, such as a ring or a barbell, but a lot bigger and deeper.”



Hygiene is crucial, for the safety of the participant and the piercer.

“With piercing we are not going to get any (blood) splatter, and as this performance was only with Mel it makes it easier. If it involved two or more people that would be totally different, a lot harder.

“I am constantly changing my gloves, because the areas I touch on Mel have to be clean, along with the sterilised hooks and clean tools. So if I touched Mel's costume or the chains I had to change my gloves. It would be easy to mishandle something and that could lead to nasty things like infections.”

After a suspension Timb must also massage the pierced areas to remove any air.

“Gaps form where the wounds are and it draws air in ... if this remains trapped it is called a subcutaneous emphysema. If you don't massage the bubbles out they can collect around your neck and shoulders. It doesn't really hurt, but they make awful noises, popping, cracking and crunching. They go away in a few weeks, but it's not a cool thing to leave air under the skin.”

Other risks include tearing, which can produce more bleeding, and scarring.

When not performing with Melanie, Timb works from the Third Eye Tattoo and Piercing studio at 700 Nicholson St, North Fitzroy, Victoria and can be reached on 03 9486 1333.

Nothing scares you anymore because you felt something that big.”

Melanie has only been riding motorcycles for a relatively short time, but she feels it has started to take over from suspension as her source of excitement.

“On the mental side, people don't ride motorcycles because they want to be comfortable. People ride bikes to challenge themselves, they do it to have the freedom to have thrills, something that talks to the heart, something that really moves them.

“Motorcycling and suspension are about the same things: you have to push yourself, you have to push your boundaries, push your limits and challenge your mind to go further because you can't be scared in life.”

And Melanie feels that those who modify their bikes have an even closer connection to those who indulge in body modification.

“Let's just look at the physical aesthetic: we might modify our bodies, others enjoy modifying their bikes. They make them look different from what they were, the bike will become more like them, the bike is an

extension of you. People modify their bodies in order to make them look like they think they should. They try to match the physical image to the mental image. It comes from the heart.

“I accept that what I do is pretty extreme, but I think body modification and motorcycling appeal to people for the same reasons.”

So what would Melanie have in the garage should money be no object?

“In a perfect world I would have a V-Max, an MT-01, a Drysdale V8, a Y2K jet bike and a Norton Dominator. But I suspect I am becoming a little bit of a power freak, and yes, I would very much like a ride on the new V-Max rather than just above it.” **tw**

To find out more about suspension and other forms of body modification, get hold of a copy of Modern Primitives, published by RE/Search. Online sites such as <www.suspension.org> have details on where suspensions are being performed. Those just wanting an extreme motorcycle can drop into a Yamaha dealer to order a V-Max – it hooks up in a more conventional sense.