Slow Art: Recent fictions by Michael Zavros

LOUISE MARTIN-CHEW

It is the most arresting of images, containing love, horror, loss on an unimaginable scale. The death of a child has become more harrowing with its increasing rarity in our contemporary age. My grandmother – who died in 1992 at ninety-five years old – lost four of her five children (one in infancy, two as children in a wartime accident, and my father, at thirty-one, to a congenital heart condition). Her stoicism was borne of endurance and acceptance. I know that she thought of each of them every day of her own long life, at the same time as nurturing the strength and tenacity of her connections with the living.

Michael Zavros has painted a life-size image of his daughter Phoebe, lying prone on a mirrored surface, naked under an Alexander McQueen skull scarf, eyes closed. It is a fiction, a ruse. Phoebe is ‘playing dead’, an archetypal child’s play and impulse to rehearse the untenable, and this is made clear to the viewer with her rosy cheeks – the healthy flush in her face and feet – an antidote to the deadly stillness in the image and the idea. Zavros confronts this issue as though with a need to defuse it for himself. Until you have children, nothing may hurt you. Parenthood renders you vulnerable at a previously undreamt-of level.

Yet Phoebe is dead/McQueen (2010) is layered with cultural depth and ideas that wrap its emotion tight and extend it beyond the personal. Its deadpan depiction in Zavros’s characteristic and increasingly finely-tuned realist style infuses it with intensity. Phoebe is Zavros’s first-born child, four at the time of the painting. We see her in reverse in the mirror underneath her prostrate body, with the reflected view darker, with less clarity, but present and prescient in its evocation of the inevitability of death.

The fine silk McQueen scarf is translucent in its blackness, printed with white skulls, and alludes to the loss of McQueen’s creative talent (the British fashion designer committed suicide on 11 February 2010, days after the death of his mother) at only forty-one years old. McQueen’s death was a reminder of the complexity and interdependence of familial relationships, but also intersects with Zavros’s own interest in the fashion world: its images exude vanity and create covetousness yet possess intense cultural resonance. And with the McQueen-designed fabric he also
raises the spectre of the Bill Henson debate and child
mutility.1 The translucence of the scarf tells us that Phoebe is
naked – her unclothed body evoking birth, death and the
profound irrelevance of material trappings – yet also refers
to Zavros’s awareness of the cultural fears unleashed by
Henson’s images.

Phoebe is dead/McQueen was painted (and judged the
winner) for the Doug Moran National Portrait Prize 2010. Yet
in its breadth, conceptual tightness and technical
achievement it describes the trajectory of Zavros’s work in
the last five years. During this time he has become a parent,
had the experience of overseeing the national reach of art’s
practice (through his involvement on the Visual Arts Board
of the Australia Council for the Arts), and continued to
develop his work. In recent years he has largely changed his
working method, moving from the use of secondary sources
(magazine articles and found imagery) to constructing his
own from staged photographs. Last year for the first time he
significantly utilised digital technologies to render as
accurately as possible the reflections in Echo (2009), which
poses gleaming gymnasium equipment, with its own
refracting images, within the Hall of Mirrors in the Palace of
Versailles).2 Shown at the recent Hong Kong Art Fair, Echo’s
dramatic scale pulled a constant crowd of onlookers.

Since 2007, representation by GRANTPIRIE,
Sydney, Philip Bacon Galleries, Brisbane and Sophie
Gannon, Melbourne, has given him a program of solo
exhibitions that might render some artists creatively
fatigued. However, Zavros at thirty-six has become
increasingly ambitious and demanding of his output. In
recent years his practice has extended from painting and
drawing into sculpture and this year, in response to the pop
challenge issued by the Institute of Modern Art’s director
Robert Leonard, he has made his first film.

On this occasion, Leonard pitted Zavros against Scott
Redford, with an exhibition titled Scott Redford vs. Michael
Zavros.3 There was, given the title and the curatorial
rationale (inspired by the Tate Modern’s Pop Life and its
embrace of artists who aim to please their publics), a mildly
combative atmosphere at the artist talks that opened the
exhibition on 5 June. Leonard’s interests in pairing these
artists probed their Gold Coast origins, their twelve-year age
difference, and the interest that both have in art that
engages with broad popular culture – Zavros at the elite end
and Redford in his celebration of the surf culture of the Gold
Coast.

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Coast and its commercial byproducts (his own 'branding', the use of decals, and fluorescent colours). They have been joined by Leonard as 'post-critical', although this term has been met with bemusement by both artists.

The exhibition recognised changes in contemporary art over the last quarter-century – such that it no longer needs to be critical of its audience, genesis or past. While Redford's work was always well received critically, he openly describes a shift in his practice since the 1990s, suggesting that he stopped making objects that people didn't want in favour of saleable art, with examples of his surf paintings, wallpaper, and sleekly patterned polar bears in multiple all included in this exhibition. On the other hand Zavros suggested that he has sought to do the opposite: 'In 2005/06 I took a good look at my practice and felt that I'd become too comfortable, it was repetitive.'

However Leonard's juxtapositions of these two artists' works were pithy, and showed up some intriguing bounce in surface and imagery. Cars, skulls, mirrors, commerce and vanity are present in strikingly different ways in work by both artists. While Redford's imagery is faithful to and ironically repossesses the Gold Coast phenomena of glam and commerce, Zavros's touchstones are more exotic and underground, influenced by old European cultural heritage rather than a homegrown version.

Redford's luscious interior with pin-up portrait, Gold Coast Style (2005), and a sculptural giant model plane (as generally made from paper) with a mirrored surface – Reinhartt: Damns: Power Mirror (2010) – were juxtaposed with both Echo and Zavros's small-scale self-portrait in V12 Narcissus (2009). In this image Zavros stares into the shiny reflection of his black car bonnet, evoking the Greek legend of Narcissus, the increasingly high-profile psychological disorder, and an influential Sebastian Smee review of Zavros's work from 2007, in which his interest in beauty, detail and designer objects was described as reflective of an emptiness akin to narcissism.

In the second room Zavros's first artist film, We dance in the studio (to that shit on the radio) (2010) used Papparazzi (Lady Gaga) as a soundtrack. It signalled an increased interest in memoir, given that Phoebe is again the main act, and deadpan humor. Zavros aperitif around the studio, engrossed in his own work, not engaging with the unscripted antics of Phoebe dressed in a black tutu, Mickey Mouse ears and sunglasses, except to pass her a paint brush (for a microphone) and acceding to her other demands of outfit adjustment as required. It is tender and funny, a portrait of a relationship of parent and child, but also artist with family, and the often inevitable necessity of engagement with art over family – and of the resilience of childhood in its simple accommodation of what is. And Henson's legacy was acknowledged in this exhibition too, like a talisman across the two spaces. Painted into The Lioness was a Henson photograph of another young girl, part of a dramatic still life of Chesterfield-style leather lounge draped with a huge lion skin.


Zavros's interests draw us into the rare, the exotic and the arcane. Historic oddities like Onagadori roosters, the narwhal, and Pigmy Pouter pigeon are mingled with a fictional centaur (Zavros's blend of performance horses and male fashion), infused with the collections of animal skins and the buffalo, deer and elk heads that grace the walls of his home. And mired and mirrored in all of this exotic beauty is an engagement with the collectors who buy his work as he acquires his own trophies.

The much-admired opulence of Versailles evokes knowledge of the resources sacrificed there (i.e., the 'slave labour') to an obsessive taming of wildness. Zavros's pursuit of realism in paint – 'a slow art' – during the age of photography provides a similar contradiction.

It is a cycle that operates much in the same way as our gaze at his work – its beauty is compelling, alluring yet feels like a dangerous pleasure, a sustenance that seduces and corrupts, a mirror held up to our need for objects of desire, noting and revering an addiction to which we are all subject. Wayne Tunnicliffe wrote of Zavros: 'While mirroring may imply narcissism and a myopic self-regard, it can also suggest reflection, self-examination and, in this instance, an exceptional adaptation to circumstances.'

Zavros has been a highly collectable artist for some years, and his work offers up much of what comprises the Zeitgeist for art now – an interest in transience, death and morbidity, a shiny allure, daillance with photomedia, a seductive realism at odds with its fiction. He has been
recorded as the subject of multiple short films, including *The Good Son; Michael Zavros* (by Alex Chomitz) made to accompany an exhibition at Gold Coast City Art Gallery in 2009. Yet a daily existence that revolves around being in the studio, caring for exotic chickens, solving the technical issues of applying paint to canvas, making aesthetic decisions, and spending hours executing them, is evident in the strength of the recent work.

Zavros has recently painted portraits of American icons for Tommy Hilfiger’s 25th Anniversary ICON Collection launch. The global campaign offered Zavros an opportunity to go full circle, to become part of the images and ambience he copied from magazines in his early years as a painter. In the film about this work, he suggested, 'I love that fashion is this perfect place to begin a fantasy, or a perfect world'. It is the flip side to the darker realities where he also clearly dwells.

1. Henson’s 2008 exhibition of photographs of teenagers, some unclothed, became one of the handful of moments in Australian history when the visual arts was front-page news. New protocols for working with children were developed in direct response to this incident and released in 2009 by the Australia Council for the Arts, and this is an issue with which Zavros was involved as a member of the Visual Arts Board.

2. To construct this image, Zavros commissioned two 3D visualisation designers to build the gymnasium into the Hall of Mirrors, piece by piece. Their computer renderings allowed the equipment to be moved to any position up and down the hall and the program helped emulate the hall’s lighting and shadows, and perspective. When he started to work on the chroming of the surfaces of the weights, they utilised existing images of the hall, gardens outside the windows and rooms adjacent to generate the reflections would be, and these were mirrored infinitely in the hall’s mirrors and reflections on the floor and metal work. Zavros then utilised simple devices in Photoshop to add dust and scratches and to make a convincing image.

3. Scott Redford vs. Michael Zavros was shown at Brisbane’s Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, 5 June to 31 July.


The Doug Moran National Portrait Prize is showing until 5 September at the State Library of NSW, before touring nationally. Michael Zavros’s next solo exhibition is at Philip Bacon Galleries, Brisbane, 16 November to 11 December 2010.

**Louise Martin-Chew** is a freelance writer based in Brisbane. She is currently undertaking research toward a book on sculptor Linde Ivimey.