Slow Art:
Recent fictions by
Michael Zavros

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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 deathly 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 nudity. 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). Shown at the recent Hong Kong Art Fair, *Echo’s* dramatic scale pulled a constant crowd of onlookers.

Since 2007, representation by GRANTPIRRIE, 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*. 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.

![Michael Zavros, V1-2 Narcissus, 2009, oil on board, 20 x 59cm.](image1)

![Scott Redford, Gold Coast Style 2005. Courtesy the artist and Heiser Gallery, Brisbane. Photograph by David Sandison.](image2)

All works this article by Michael Zavros are courtesy the artist, GRANTPIRRIE, Sydney, and Philip Bacon Galleries, Brisbane.
present in strikingly different ways in work by both artists. While Redford’s imagery is faithful to and ironically reverses the Gold Coast phenomena of glitz 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 – Reinhardt Damn: 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.²

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 humour. Zavros moves 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.

Other works in the IMA show included Zavros’s painting that assembled male sunglasses, shoes and cosmetics into a skull-like image. Man (2009) evoked the connection between art, life and death, and the human drive, traditionally male, for a legacy. Its juxtaposition with Redford’s imagery of Reinhardt-like Boy Wallpaper (2010), his Surf Painting / SURF (2001) painting and Anytime Baby (2008) was striking and dramatic.

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 vanitas 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.’³

Zavros has been a highly collectible 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, dalliance 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 what 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.

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