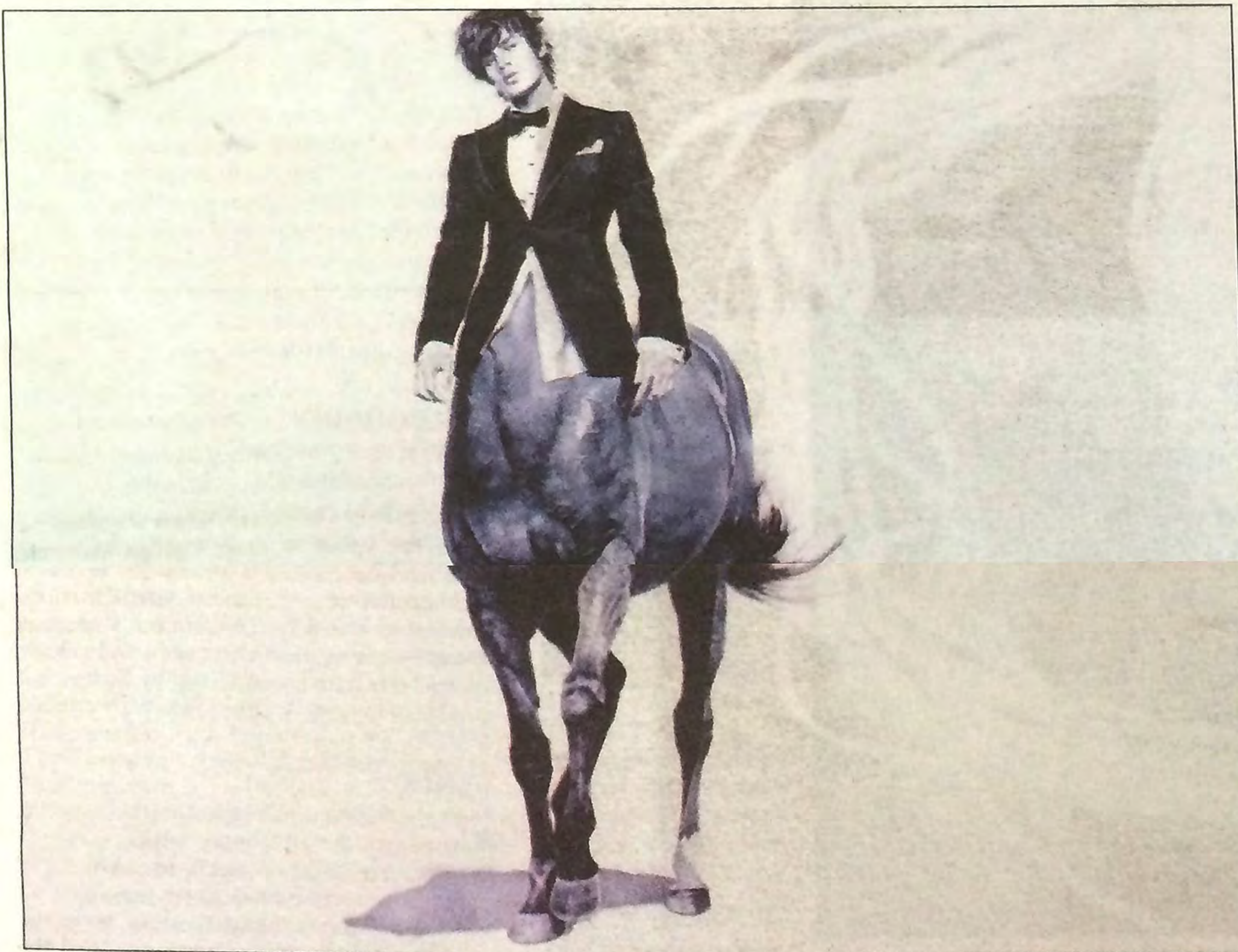


Brittle beauty

The stylishly beguiling paintings of Michael Zavros are as empty as they are perfect, writes **Sebastian Smee**



THE paintings of Michael Zavros give off the invincible calm of objects certain of their own beauty. There is something impervious, and a little cruel, about them. But underneath their immaculate facade they seem ready to crack.

Approach too closely and they can come over all skittish, like an anorexic conscious of imaginary cellulite. Internally bereft, they aspire to a condition of untouchability.

Zavros, who is the subject of a small show at Wollongong City Gallery, paints, draws and sometimes sculpts glistening horses, male fashion models (these two sometimes combined as centaurs), expensive men's shoes and birds with disabblingly ostentatious plumage. He does so with unerring fidelity.

Fidelity to what? The obvious answer — though not necessarily the best one — is photography. Zavros's works are based not on snapshots but on the high finish and perfect lighting of art-directed fashion photographs. The kinds of gorgeously lit, suavely cropped, disembodied and sterilised photographs that aim at bottling beauty, encapsulating desire. No note of imperfection or vulgarity may enter.

Zavros's petrified renderings of such images in charcoal or oils inspire oohs and aahs and then, hard upon these, empty shrugs. But even as you shrug and turn away, there is something about them that tugs at you. You can almost hear each picture imploring you to look again. Of course, when you do turn back they remain, uncannily, motionless as statues.

What prompts this second look? It is not the artist's technical prowess, which — even to the visually illiterate — has something banal about it, like a factory-produced Armani suit in yet one more shade of grey. Instead, it is the precious aura, the atmosphere of chosenness, around each image. So much effort, so much time, such obsessive love all funnelled into this particular

Egoiste: Michael Zavros
Wollongong City Gallery, NSW,
until April 29.

image. Why this one? What has it done to earn such dedication?

The answer is: nothing. For Zavros's vision is not directed outwards at the world and how it becomes visible. It is inner-directed. His subject is narcissism. These images correspond, quite deliberately and challengingly, to a kind of vacuum-packed vanity, as airless as it is seductive.

Zavros's painstaking fidelity, then, is more than a fidelity to the sorts of photographs you might see advertising perfume or aftershave in the pages of magazines such as *Vogue Uomo* or *GQ*. It is a fidelity to self-love.

And it is taken to a point of such knowing

The beautiful image will give the narcissist back to himself. Flesh him out. Fill him in

intensity that you are torn between prurient fascination and utter revulsion.

Zavros is in his early 30s and lives in Brisbane. He was a finalist in the Archibald Prize for three years running, between 2004 and 2006, and he has been awarded a number of other gongs, including the 2002 Jacaranda Acquisitive Drawing Award and Bendigo Art Gallery's Robert Jacks Drawing Prize. Various dealers are vying for the right to represent him and he is fast becoming a favourite in the group show circuit.

You can see why. His paintings and drawings are as intoxicating as they are sickly sweet. They are the visual equivalent of those luxury liqueurs such as Cointreau or Frangelico. And yet I find them beguiling.

As with Ricky Swallow's carving technique, Zavros's fine-tuned technical precision is more a

conceptual tool than a medium for discovery or imaginative transformation. Amazing as it may be, it has the dead hand of futility over it. You look at these images hard, waiting to interpret a message, but nothing avails.

Consider specific examples in the small show at Wollongong. *Yves Saint Laurent Le Smoking/Bay* takes its title, I believe, from a famous 1966 square-shouldered tuxedo for women that blurred the lines between style for men and women. Look at the brilliantly faithful rendering: the deep contrasts between light and shade, the feathery swoosh of the centaur's flicked tail, the immediacy of the creature's presentation: no background, no horizon line, just this magnificent, improbable beast against a sheer white vacuum.

Then think about the ridiculousness of it: the

two shoes inside cotton shoe bags marked Ferragamo. A good portion of the artist's oeuvre until now has consisted of images of shiny black men's shoes. Shoes, of course, are our most direct point of contact with the earth. As such they are vulnerable to wear and tear, ripe for defilement.

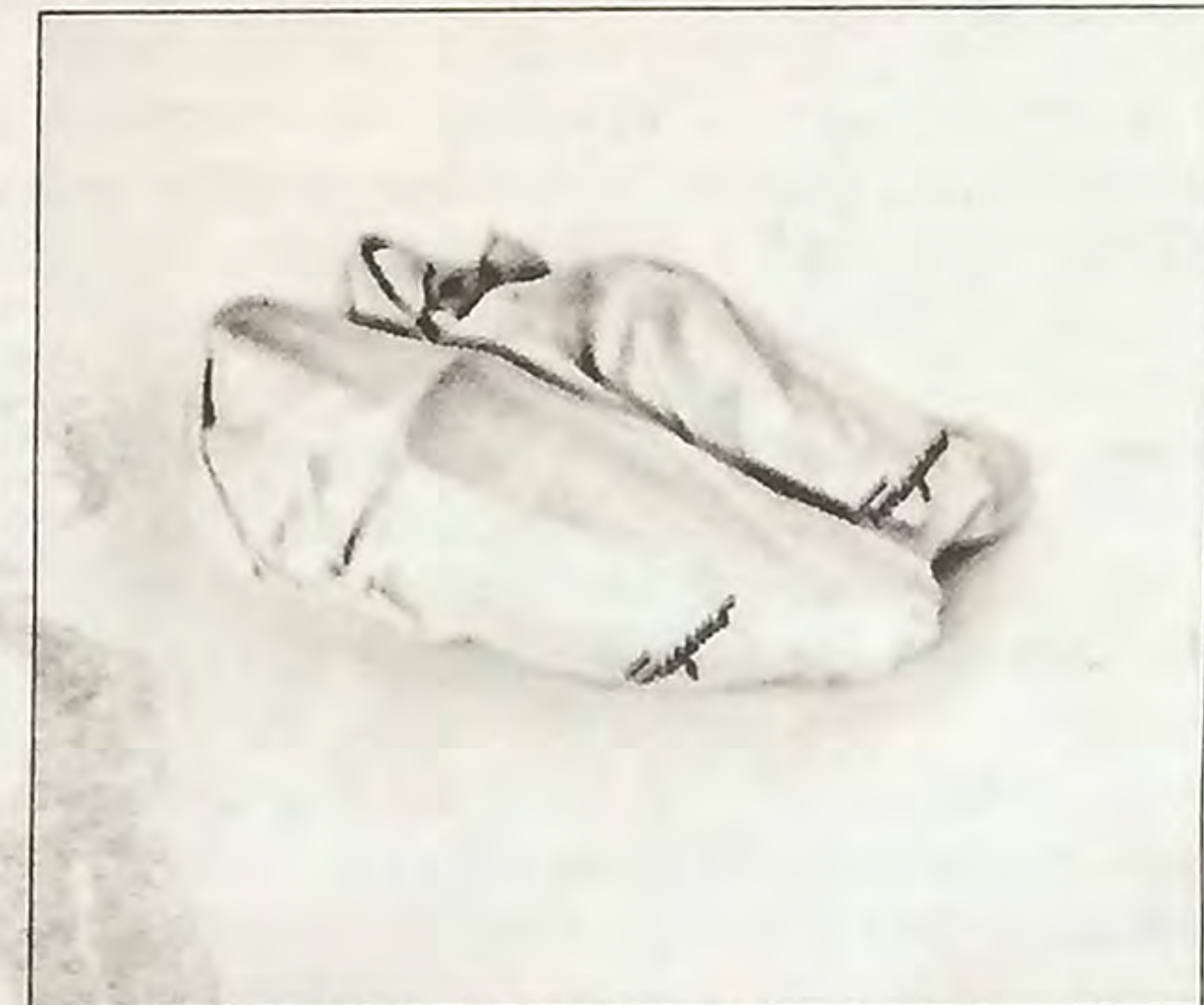
But in Zavros's world, the world of the narcissist, defilement is not allowed. Hence this image, with its sly nod to Christo and Jeanne-Claude's wrapped objects, elevates the new pair of shoes from objects of desire into a thinner realm: an almost Platonic state of pure, brand-infatuated desire. Who is going to break the spell they cast? Who will dare bring them down in the world by opening the bag and putting them on?

The questions are petty and absurd but Zavros, via his draughtsman's dedication, invites us to feel them with force.

Note that Zavros focuses his interest in consumer fetishism on men's fashion rather than women's. Perhaps it is because male narcissism in high-end contemporary fashion is particularly absurd. Its vocabulary is so restricted: suits, shoes, ties, the same square jawline, the same straight nose. It is all about standardisation, whereas women's fashion (and here I am generalising), from shoes to dresses and hair, tends to be more about differentiation. Thus, the world of the male narcissist can seem even more trapped and airless.

Recent works by Zavros are encouraging. They open his world, make it more richly ambivalent but with no apparent loss of intensity. I am thinking in particular of two tiny paintings in oil on board. *Love's Temple* shows Marie Antoinette's lakeside architectural folly in the gardens of Versailles, the Temple to Love. Again, the rendering is a banal, untransformed copy of a photograph. But Zavros introduces colour of such intensity that the atmosphere becomes super-saturated in romance. Fantasy here threatens to spill over into reality: it is too much to bear. In the same way, another miniature image called *Blind*

One of the symptoms of narcissism is the hyperdramatisation of the pettiest emotions. Look with this mind at Zavros's small drawing of



Improbable beast: From far left opposite page, Michael Zavros's *Yves Saint Laurent Le Smoking/Bay*; the intensely coloured *Love's Temple*; *White Onagadori*; a sly nod to Christo in the untitled drawing of two shoes in bags

depicts the fantastic plumage of a bird, spread out and reflected in water. It has an intensity unmatched by anything Zavros has yet done.

Zavros's Archibald entries are not on show in Wollongong. But it is worth recalling his 2006 entry, which was called, rather clumsily, *Michael Zavros can't paint/the wind is whistling through the house*.

The painting itself was nothing to crow about — too clumsy a combination of private intimacy and frozen execution — but its depiction of

creative blockage seemed to chime with a theme that runs all through Zavros's work: internal emptiness. "The wind whistling through the house."

In Zavros's world, it is as if invention, imagination and transformation are too much to hope for. The best the artist can do is obsessively nail down found images, borrowed images, images of such airless beauty that they hold out a promise — however impossible to fulfil — of something surpassingly lovely, pristine, untouch-

able. The hope — a vain one, in both senses of the word — is that the beautiful image will give the narcissist back to himself. Flesh him out. Fill him in.

Zavros's paintings of onagadori, mutant Japanese roosters bred to encourage the overgrowth of their tail feathers, perfectly echo the note of forlorn yearning in his work. Like his other paintings, they aspire to a kind of lightness. They want to float and not to drag. And yet something mutant and unnatural about the images keeps

catching in reality's current, like a wayward oar, causing the vessel to drag and go in circles.

The tendency in recent art towards literalism (not a sculpture of a shark, but the shark itself; not a painting of a pregnant woman but a Madame Tussaud's-style copy, replete with individually inserted body hairs) is extended by Zavros into the world of images. We don't, in other words, get a painting that uses photography as the basis for imaginative transformation but a painting that is as close to photography — even to artificially manipulated, art-directed photography — as it is possible to get. We get a reproduction, a copy.

This literal tendency in recent art comes out of minimalism and a contemporary suspicion of symbols and metaphors. No question, it can be depressing. But Zavros's literalism, like the literalism of James Angus, may be richer than it first appears. In his case, the fidelity of the copy implies a kind of obsession, an infatuation. The intensity of the infatuation jams up against the banality of the original image, and this jam perfectly encapsulates the narcissist's condition: the fatigue of it, the ache, the never-enough.

When I think of Zavros at work, getting every pencil mark, every dab of paint, just so, I think of the young woman in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Tender is the Night* brushing her hair 150 times before bed, then 150 more. "She brushed it until her arms ached, then she changed arms and went on brushing."

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