

Self Portraiture and the Perfect Strangeness of Realism

—An interview
with Michael Zavros

Conducted via e-mail, between 25 April and
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Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki.

Is there a place for traditional realist painting, drawing and sculpture in the 21st century? What forms should self-portraiture take? How can nature be visualised and improved upon, and what is art's role in this? How can art address consumerism when art itself is a hotbed of consumer desire? Michael Zavros's work raises many prickly questions, and yet, despite them, we feel compelled to keep looking, to keep enjoying. Combining disquiet, unearthly beauty and allusions to consumer excess, Zavros fuses a mastery of traditional art techniques with a sense of the current moment.

Born in 1974, trained at Queensland College of Art, and working in Brisbane, Zavros has carved out a distinctive practice that has earned him studio residencies in Sydney, Milan, Barcelona, Paris and New York, and numerous awards. His work has been exhibited throughout Australia and internationally, and is held in most major Australian art museums. His work occupies an unique space in contemporary art.

Rhana Devenport (RD): Your self portrait *Bad Dad* (2013) combines references to the Greek myth of Narcissus and to Jeff Koons's faux-inflatable sculptures. The scene is set, with you amidst pool toys in a chlorine-impregnated backyard pool, on a lazy, hot Queensland afternoon. What's your relation to self portraiture and autobiography?

Michael Zavros (MZ): Much of my work is self-referential. Most of what I make is about me or about my relationship to things. Even when I am not depicting myself, I am depicting myself. *Phoebe Is Eight/Tom Ford* (2014) is part of an ongoing series that concerns my eldest daughter. She is the closest person to me; she is me outside of me. Her presence – or rather absence – is implied in *Bad Dad*.

RD: Ingmar Bergman once said, 'Self-portraiture is something one should never get involved in, since it is wrong to lie even though one endeavours to tell the truth.' But perhaps all art is, to some extent, self portraiture.

MZ: Social media is redefining self portraiture. The traditional self portrait seems redundant in the age of the selfie. It's now less clear what the purpose of a traditional self portrait might be.

RD: The last time your work was seen in Auckland was in *Uncanny (The Unnaturally Strange)* at Artspace in 2005. That exhibition included a suite of small paintings, including *Forever* (2005). Its subject was the onagadori or long-tail fowl. In Japan in the Taisho period (1912–26), these birds were selectively bred to dramatically extend their extravagant tail feathers. They epitomise the extreme human manipulation of nature, our desire to improve on what is. But there are dangerous implications, not least for these ungainly, genetically distorted creatures. Your tiny paintings of them bring this to the fore.

MZ: I don't make work *about* nature, but rather about *our views of* nature. The words 'natural' and 'nature' are much abused. People fantasise about a life lived 'naturally', alongside nature, via chia seeds and quinoa,

sugar-free and free-range. It's a hipster pose that I reject. My work is an unashamed attempt to make nature better than it is – more extreme, more beautiful. In my work, nature is not the subject of environmental concern.

RD: In this exhibition, new still lifes feature prominently. *The Poodle* (2014) depicts hydrangeas arranged in crystal vases to emulate a poodle. Another still life represents a comical rabbit. You have always understood beauty as involving nature and artifice. How do you see this interest playing out in the new works and where do they intersect with notions of mortality?

MZ: To create *The Poodle*, *The Rabbit* and *The Greek*, I bought vast armfuls of flowers to the studio. I contrived the forms like an old-fashioned florist, using wire and various props. Flowers are short lived in the Queensland heat, and it's hard to find certain blooms at certain times, so there is a rarity to the work, an almost imperceptible layer of luxury that I am very conscious of. The constructions were involved. They took hours to create, before I could make photographs of them to use as the basis for the paintings. I see the paintings as the culmination of a performance. The whole confection is a baroque folly, nature made better, more pretty, but also evidence of pointless excess. I'm reminded of the mythical hybrid creatures made for feasts in the Middle Ages; peacocks, ducks and deer would be fused into culinary fabrications for the amusement of guests. Regarding mortality, these still lifes are a meditation on the memento mori tradition – beauty spent.

RD: Another thread in your work is the fetishisation of high fashion. Men's neckties – an unlikely subject for realist painting – are poised to attack (or are mesmerised into submission) in your series *Charmer* (2013). They mostly come from your own collection of vintage designer ties. The labels are revealed upside-down as a visible hallmark of costliness and desirability. What keeps drawing you to the aura and allure of high fashion as subject matter?

MZ: Fashion consumes itself. It constantly makes itself redundant, in order to renew itself. Art holds fast to the idea that it is relevant, important and enduring. I find this lofty self-importance tedious, and yet I am complicit with it. Fashion appeals because it doesn't take itself too seriously; unlike art, which takes itself very seriously. Fashion isn't going to save the world, but neither is art. I like fashion and I enjoy the fantasies that fashion magazines create. More than anything else in popular culture, fashion articulates a utopia, a perfect world. I'm seduced by this.

RD: *Body Lines* and *The Python* (both 2011) are contrived still-life interiors. The former shows a painting by Emily Kame Kngwarreye, the latter a Richard Prince. Both include animal skins: a zebra skin rhymes with the Kngwarreye, a snake skin with the Prince. Meanwhile, *Echo* (2009) portrays the dazzling interior of the Hall of Mirrors at the Palace of Versailles, colonised by reflective gym equipment. These references span countries, centuries, and cultures. How would you describe your treatment of the art that precedes you?

MZ: Recently, at an exhibition opening, two punters were enthusing about my reappropriations of Richard Prince's Marlboro-men photographs. The curator from the University collection, who'd bought one, loved the 'witty interrogation of this postmodern master'. But my next-door neighbour was equally excited about their first art purchase. 'I just love these new cowboys!'

RD: Whether the materials are bronze, charcoal or oil paint, realism holds a continuous fascination for you. Why do painstakingly-crafted photo-realism in a world marked by the omnipresence of photographic imagery and the instantaneousness of online distribution and reception?

MZ: For me, painting realistically is about authenticity. It is what I know how to do. I can't unlearn it. To make art any other way would be inauthentic. I am interested in the

arguments about the redundancy of realist painting in the wake of photography. On the other hand, I agree with Gerhard Richter, who says, when he paints from a photograph, the original is diminished. He says he feels sorry for the original photograph. My studio is littered with source images that I carefully hunted down or manufactured and have now discarded. I used to work almost exclusively from found imagery, which informed my work with serendipity. Now, I spend considerable time creating the tableaux that form the basis of my paintings. This is an important part of the work. It's a creative moment. But, for me, the photograph is not sufficient. The lovingly rendered paint adds something to the subject. There is a luxury to it that printer's inks can't match. If for nothing else, the millions of paint strokes mark time and our awareness of this creates pause in our lives.

I did make a video once, *We Dance in the Studio (To that Shit on the Radio)* (2010). It was because the moment presented itself and was perfect in itself. It required no embellishment. That film was completely true to Phoebe (who stars in it) and to that moment in my life. Again, I think my work is less about realism and more about the subject. It is the subject that holds relevance; realism is just the vehicle.

RD: What is art for?

MZ: Art's value has shifted. These days, people discuss art's commodity value rather than its merit value. There are endless articles about the art-market bubble and astonishing prices at auction. But for me, art is everything and nothing.

RD: What are you working on now?

MZ: I'm making a massive painting of an octopus for the Melbourne Art Fair this August. I'm also excited about a new chicken run I'm building. I have many chickens and I take hourly painting breaks to watch them go about their business. Equally, I love my garden. But I do not like my chickens in my garden.