

## WHAT NOW?

**Your upcoming Starkwhite show is named after your self-portrait *Bad Dad*, made for the 2013 Archibald Prize (see over). In the painting, you're in the pool, checking out your own reflection.**

I was inspired by seeing Carravaggio's *Narcissus* (c1597-9) in Rome. Caravaggio simplifies things by isolating Narcissus in darkness. Narcissus and his reflection make a circle, leaving a dark void in the centre of the painting. By contrast, I pump up the background noise to heighten the sense of paralysis, the stillness.

**Where are the kids? Neglected, clearly. But we only imagine this because of the title. Are you feeling guilty?**

When you become a dad, it's almost impossible to be self-reflective – as I am too often – without feeling guilt. Once you're a father, you can never not be a one – it is defining. So that narcissistic gesture can only ever be through the lens of that experience.

**You said the pool toys are a homage to Jeff Koons. What do you like most about Koons?**

His speaking voice, it reminds me of TV evangelists. I like the way he poses in front of his work, arms outstretched, welcoming his flock. When he calls his *Puppy* “a contemporary sacred heart of Jesus,” he means it. **Koons** said he began making the joyous inflatables to reach out to his son **Ludwig Maximilian**, exiled in Rome with his ex-wife **Iiona Staller**. I love Koons's enthusiasm for his subjects and his deadpan, cheesy manner.

**The show will include *Phoebe Is Dead* from 2010. It imagines your daughter dead, wrapped in an Alexander McQueen skull-pattern scarf. When you painted it, McQueen had just committed suicide following the death of his mother. Can tragedy be beautiful?**

Perhaps not tragedy, but melancholy can be beautiful. The best pop songs are the sad ones. Last night, I was watching *56 Up*, the latest in the *7 Up* series. Its views of British middle-aged people's lives, full of failure and remorse, are intercut with poetic flashbacks to their bright-eyed youths, full of hope and optimism. And I thought, “Isn't that beautiful, isn't that sad.”

# MICHAEL ZAVROS

**You'll also be showing your 2010 video showing Phoebe dancing to Lady Gaga's *Paparazzi* while you paint. The little monster is wearing a tutu, dark glasses and mouseketeer ears. What's your position on Gaga?**

At age 4, **Phoebe** was obsessed with that song and entranced by Gaga's artifice. She saw that Gaga was not afraid to be ugly for her art. Gaga may be the perfect role model for a little girl. Phoebe is still a fan. We bought her Gaga concert tickets for her birthday.

**Are you a permissive dad?**

Yes, but I'm also a disciplinarian. “Yes, you can wear that age-inappropriate t-shirt, but tuck it in and brush your teeth.”

**You just painted a small portrait of Phoebe in sunglasses. She's getting older. Do you plan to keep painting her?**

Yes. She's my muse. She's a fantastic model. She turns it on for the camera, and for me, in a way that's

compelling and confronting. Of all my children, she feels the most like me outside of me. My Phoebe works are all self-portraits.

**These days, child protection campaigners project all sorts of anxieties onto tame images of children.**

I'm bothered by those knee-jerk responses. They seem bereft of intelligence or consideration. For me, my children are my triumph, but they also hold up a mirror to my failings. Having children has made me think more keenly about everything. Before I had them, I didn't fear death.

**You are known for painting trophies. Are children trophies?**

They can be. But you have to find the right child. It took Madonna weeks to find the right one in Malawi.

*Robert Leonard*

**New work by Michael Zavros is exhibited at Starkwhite in Auckland from 2 to 28 June 2014.**



Michael Zavros, *The artist with Phoebe is Eight/Tom Ford*, 2014. Oil on board, 15.6 x 25cm.

COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND STARKWHITE, AUCKLAND



Michael Zavros, *Bad dad*, 2013.  
Oil on canvas, 110 x 150cm.  
Collection of the artist.  
COURTESY: THE ARTIST