

Over the past decade Michael Zavros has produced super-real, highly seductive images that have elaborated a contemporary culture of narcissism, and that have scrutinised and deconstructed popular concepts of beauty and physical perfection, as well as what he observes as an *ennui* pervading consumer markets: a disaffected desire that actually loses touch with the beautiful.

In *Calling in the fox* Zavros combines images of baroque architectural splendour with some of the accoutrements of a contemporary hyper-masculinity: the 'Hall of Mirrors', the throne, the bench press, the Prada shoe, and designer scent – not just *for* but *of* a man. The title of the exhibition derives from hunting decoy whistles that lure foxes from their lair with sounds that mimic distressed prey or, in the decoy's most potent form, the sound of a female fox. The slyness of the hunter's trick finds its ultimately tragic counterpoint in the famously wily fox's wilful abandonment of his innate caution. On both sides emerges a vain gloriousness that can be fully realised only at the bagging of the prize.

Desire and vanity are different things but inevitable bedfellows. The lure of the trophy can unleash in the ego a stunning capacity for selfishness and self-aggrandisement. In so many sectors of 21<sup>st</sup> century western capitalist culture the celebration and promotion of narcissism that Zavros critiques in his fastidious images is harrowingly at odds with what we *know* is a requirement for a great measure of selflessness, and a constant awareness of our place in the ecological (forget economic) order of things in the contemporary world.

Part of Zavros's critique is that awareness is inconstant. This is why his pictures, toying with recognition and desire, are deliberately seductive and simultaneously unsettling. Recoding imagery drawn from advertising, product design, health and fitness lifestyles, and architectural and cultural histories, Zavros's

work explores an aesthetic of 'hollow baroque and a mood of decadent disquiet'. None of us are immune to the lure of beautiful things and degrees of covetousness, but one political strain in Zavros's art is to alert us to the pleasures and the pitfalls of consumption and vanity.

Another political strain and a predominating theme in Zavros's work is the interrogation of ideals of male beauty and physical flawlessness. The hyped marketing and selling of the idealised male in mass media and culture generally has been under examination for the many ways in which interpretations of male beauty effect the self esteem of men and the self worth of women. An increase in the number of eating disorders affecting men for example, results from an idea that only good-looking, muscular men are acceptable. Wanting to look good, and wishing to enjoy the benefits of being desirable, are not in themselves irrational desires. Zavros's concern in *Calling in the fox* is the apparent ease with which individuals, in a society of mass consumption, can be conditioned fundamentally to consider material possessions as the primary evocation of their personality.

If Zavros wanted to extend a 'bigger-is-better' theory in his challenge to male narcissism, he does so in *Echo*, his largest and most elaborate painting to date. Louis XIV, the Sun King, expanded the hunting lodge of his father Louis XIII to build the palace of Versailles, one of the great artistic achievements of which was the opulent Hall of Mirrors in the Grand Apartments of the King and Queen. Relocating the Royal Court and Government of France to Versailles in 1682, it was in the Hall of Mirrors that Louis XIV enacted his most ostentatious displays of royal power in order to impress visitors. As an expensive and coveted decorative form in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the mirrors reflected the conspicuous wealth and vanity of the King. The theatre and opulent veneers of the Sun King's Court are

recast by Zavros in a painting that questions the nature and veracity of surfaces, and the theatrics of body-building.

It is Echo who, spurned by Narcissus, dooms the subject of her unrequited love to look forever at his own reflection. Throughout this Hall of Mirrors, Zavros scatters gleaming chrome gym equipment, infinitely reflected in the Hall's mirrors and polished parquet. In the myth of Narcissus, the handsome young god spurns the forest nymph (who eventually metamorphoses into the goddess Echo), and spurns reason in favour of an ill-fated entrancement with his own, ungraspable reflection. In its endless reflections, Zavros's *Echo* recalls the tragedy of the myth and the bitter emptiness of Echo herself. An infinite narcissism captured within the mirrors of Echo references a hunger for power and glory across time. With its bench presses, Zavros's version of the Hall of Mirrors is an apt setting to suggest something of the folly of narcissism, of the quest for a 'body by God'. And here I can't help remembering a religious invocation (from the Ash Wednesday service within the Easter rituals) etched into my memory from childhood: 'Remember Man that you are dust, and unto dust you shall return'.

There is a quiet but determined humanism in these recent works. The underbelly of narcissism is a dark irrationality, and the value of humanism is that it concentrates our capacity to reason. Zavros's works tackle the vexed nature of marketing and the inevitability of mortality. They examine aesthetics and artifice, and play with scale to counterpoint or exaggerate grandeur. His labour intensive painting pays homage to the extraordinary artistic achievements and cultural enterprises that are the subject matter of his work. And echoes of *memento mori* remind us that the essence of human beings cannot be measured by their possessions or their physical attributes.

**MICHAEL ZAVROS**  
ESSAY BY  
JASON SMITH

**Note:**  
this essay draws on the artist's October 2009 notes to the author.

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MICHAEL ZAVROS | **CALLING IN THE FOX** | NOVEMBER 2009

YOUR INVITATION  
TO ATTEND THE  
OPENING OF  
**CALLING IN  
THE FOX**  
6PM – 8PM  
THURSDAY  
26 NOV 2009

**MICHAEL ZAVROS**  
**CALLING IN THE FOX**  
**GALLERY 1**  
**GRANTPIRRIE**  
**26 NOVEMBER –**  
**19 DECEMBER 2009**



**Michael Zavros  
Calling in the fox  
Opening:  
6pm Thursday  
26 Nov 2009**

**Exhibition:  
26 Nov –  
19 Dec 2009**

To preview the work prior to the opening please contact the Gallery on (02) 9699 9033 to arrange an appointment.

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most potent form, the sound of a female fox. The slyness of the hunter's trick finds its ultimately tragic counterpoint in the famously wily fox's wilful abandonment of his innate caution. On both sides emerges a vaingloriousness that can be fully realised only at the bagging of the prize.

**Images:**

- 01. *Fontainebleau* 2009 (detail) Oil on board 25 X 20cm
- 02. *Man* 2009 Oil on canvas 210 X 167cm
- 03. *Untitled (bench press)* (detail) 2009 Oil on board 26 X 23.5cm
- 04. *Obelisk* 2009 (detail) Charcoal and gold spray paint on paper 50 X 32cm
- 05. *Winning Is Easy* 2009 Bronze 33.5 X 50 X 22cm Edition 1/18
- 06. *Echo* 2009 210 X 320cm oil on canvas

**Cover:**

*Orpheus* 2009  
Bronze  
13.5 X 23.5 X 1.5cm

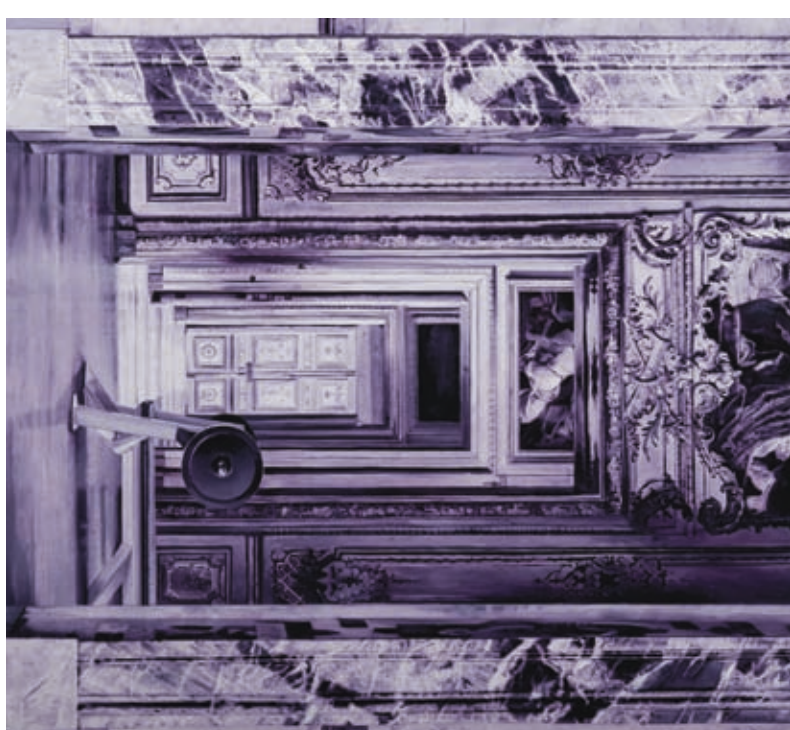
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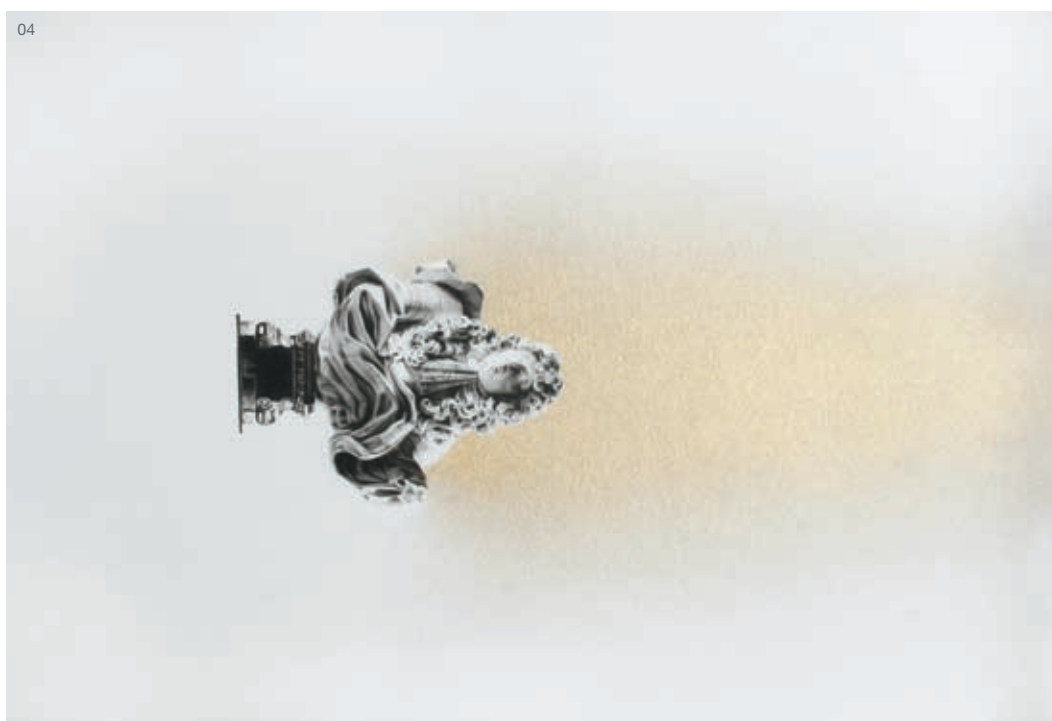
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