

Michael Zavros: “Everyone wanted to be alternative but they all looked the same.”

Posted by [Sharne Wolff](#) • November 12, 2013 • [Printer-friendly](#)

Michael Zavros latest solo exhibition opened recently in Brisbane. **Sharne Wolff** asks the artists some tough questions about fashion, appropriation and the rough critical ride his recent work has received from former wedding guests...



Michael Zavros, *Warhol/Richter/Zavros*, charcoal on canary yellow paper, 59.5 x 84cm?

SW. Were you always going to be an artist?

MZ. Yes.

SW. It's like there are two versions of Michael Zavros – the down-home kind of guy who paints in Crocs and singlet in the farm studio with the kids hanging around, and then the MZ who wears lurid designer jackets and fancy shoes to openings. Are they the same person?

MZ. Lurid? I guess I don't see the disconnect. I just wear what feels right at the time. Crocs are great. They're tough but very soft to wear, like getting a foot massage all day while I stand on concrete. And they're snake proof. I'm

hoping to be sponsored by Crocs. The art world reminds me a bit of art school. When I got to art school (Queensland College of Art) in the mid 90s most of the girls wore nighties with Doc Martens and guys wore old menswear from the 70s with Doc Martens. I just wore gym gear cause I liked going to the gym at lunch. Everyone wanted to be alternative but they all looked the same.

SW. The new exhibition is titled 'Charmer' with a large part of the series dedicated prestige-branded ties painted to resemble dancing snakes. Who is the Charmer?

MZ. The charmer is the snake. It's my eyes that glaze over. The self-satisfied seductive cobra hypnotizes me. I don't think about my audience so much.

SW. Where did you get those ties?

MZ. I have collected them for years. Alison buys them for me or people give them to me. Most of them are vintage, beautiful pieces of silk, and out of fashion.

SW. As the only son of a Greek migrant father and an Irish mother who grew up in Brisbane with "wog like" looks [your words] – do you think your art deals with your Greek identity and/or with a specific masculinity?

MZ. Yes, what you said. I read that everything I make is a quasi self-portrait and I think this is probably true.

SW. You've been described as "an aesthete [who] ...paints beautiful things beautifully". Is beauty the (only) subject of your art? Why are these objects not simply decorative?

MZ. The beauty of things does not preclude their intellect or content, for me anyway. I do think it is interesting that beauty is still a pejorative term in contemporary art.

*SW. Your art often appropriates or comments on the work of well-known artists – Richard Prince, Jeff Koons etc. In this show (and the previous exhibition at Griffith University), there are several paintings that reproduce Prince's cowboy photographs – which are themselves appropriated works. **Rex Butler** called this "**an idea pushed too far**", while the wall text for the Uni show (quoting **Robert Leonard**) states that by not deconstructing or critiquing your original subjects, "Zavros flaunts his lack of criticality". What's your response?*

MZ. I don't respond. I don't think it's my place. I just make the stuff and I have no interest in defending it. But I do think criticism is a good thing. It helps you build a framework around what you do and why you do it. Generally if your work is very bad, it's just ignored. I've learned that if criticism is unfair someone else will defend it. Nearly a decade ago **Ashley Crawford** responded in *The Age* to a nutty Butler on Zavros catalogue essay saying 'its

bizarre at best...its like Butler hasn't even seen the work in question'. Robert and Rex make a similar argument but just come down on different sides. One thinks the work is good, the other reckons it's bad. Actually I don't think Rex thinks the work is bad; his flimsy platforms have nothing to do with the work. There is a level of spite that goes to the personal nature of the writing. It's sad you know. He came to our wedding. Hang on did I just respond? You tricked me Art Life.

SW. Warhol/Richter/Zavros is a drawing of a skull on canary yellow paper. The title suggests you see yourself in the same company as those famous artists. Is this a narcissistic gesture or are you mocking yourself?

MZ. On a good day, the former – on a bad day, the latter. Mostly the title is just a didactic reference to the lineage of an image like that. Lovingly rendered pop. Maybe it rescues it from being just another skull.

SW. What are the best and worst things that have been said in the press about your work?

MZ. I was definitely more elated or horrified early in my career when what was being said seemed to matter. Approbation, sometimes over pages by people like **Bruce James** or **Benjamin Genocchio** or **Sebastian Sme** really excited me especially because at the time nobody was making anything like what I wanted to make. I don't remember much of the 'worst'. In recent years I was naively upset by some of the non-art world press responses to the painting of my daughter Phoebe that won the Moran. A lot of people hated it and I made the mistake of wading through pages of comments on various online articles. What upsets people is actually what the work drew its strength from. It got to me because the work was collaboration between Phoebe and I, and I guess I felt exposed and protective.

*SW. Australians are well known for their distaste of anyone whose success elevates them over their peers, deservedly or otherwise. Artists like yourself, **Ben Quilty** and **Shaun Gladwell** are sometimes criticised for being too popular. Do you ever feel like an art world tall poppy?*

MZ. Yes. I love that **Morrissey** song 'We hate it when our friends become successful'. It's no coincidence that most successful artists get out of town. I much prefer to live and work in a vacuum. My work can be a part of the art world; I don't have to.

SW. You're a leading Queensland artist and your shows pull in the crowds yet QAGOMA has only ever acquired one small painting (with several more donated this year). Has this been a disappointment for you?

MZ. Yes. For whatever reason, the Gallery doesn't recognise my practice. As an emerging artist it felt like a problem that the Gallery should refuse to show or collect my work. It's no longer my problem. My first state collection was Tasmania in 2005 and by 2010 the National Gallery had made a big

acquisition with *The Lioness*. Last year AGNSW used their \$80k Bulgari Art Award to acquire a work. With experience though I've resolved to go where I'm wanted rather than beat my head against doors that won't open.

SW. How does it feel to be an artist in Queensland these days – do you think that we're witnessing a return to the 'bad 'ol days' of the 1970s and 80s?

MZ. I have read only today about a suite of new cuts to Queensland visual arts. It's certainly a difficult time to be an arts organisation in Queensland but it might be useful to look at it as a call to arms, to raise the bar and to turn the negative into a positive. So much great art came out of Queensland in those 'bad old days'. It was an active politicised art scene. Artists can thrive in adversity. Artists are programmed to be problem solvers, to think outside the square, to be resilient. We need to find that resolve now.

*SW. Last year you and **Alison** [Kubler] made number 3 on *The Art Life's* list of the **Hottest Couples**, with **Carrie Miller** naming you "the Australian art scene's equivalent of *Posh and Becks*". Are you aiming for number 1?*

MZ. Of course I dare to dream but number three is pretty good for Queenslanders. I would like to say at this point that Carrie Miller is very pretty and very smart.

Michael Zavros Charmer **Philip Bacon Galleries**, Brisbane Until November
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