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Because he extends his sophisticated aesthetic across all areas of his life, from his art to personal dress, and that gives him a complete signature style. Because he understands that just because you're an artist doesn't mean you can't dress well. Because he likes to stand out from the crowd and because he continues to be inspired by fashion.

Catherine Caines ¹

.....

We have inherited the idea that artists should be critical; that they should reject received ideas, shock the bourgeoisie, rock the boat. This avant-garde cliché is ingrained in the way we talk about art; every aspiring art-school student is trained to cast their work as a critique of something or other. And yet, these days, some prominent art seems to be on an entirely different track, preferring instead to be appealing, entertaining and affirmative. We are experiencing what art historian Rex Butler has described as a 'post-critical' turn. ²

Jeff Koons, Damien Hirst and Takashi Murakami exemplify the change. They produce spectacular, crowd-pleasing, high-concept art. Their works involve high production values, necessitate armies of fabricators and publicists, and are only possible because they have access to budgets, methods and platforms more typically associated with the entertainment industry than with art. They are post-pop artists operating out of the legacies of Salvador Dalí and Andy Warhol, who showed that the abrasive avant-garde artist could mellow into the mainstream showman. Immersed in the business of art, the post-critical trio court column inches and embrace the idea of the artist as brand. They are helping to fudge the once-presumed divide between high-minded art and entertainment, as art is sucked deeper into what Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer dismissed as 'the culture industry'. ³

The post-critical turn increasingly informs the conditions under which artists work, changing terms of reference, changing expectations. Michael Zavros not only feeds into the post-critical moment, in the Australian context he exemplifies it, but in a unique way – one which reframes the distinction between critical and not-critical.

Zavros is an aesthete: he paints beautiful things beautifully. His subjects include fairytale palaces, gardens and follies; up-market men's fashion, luxury cars and jewellery; Lipizzaner dressage horses, Japanese pedigree onagadori chickens and pretty boys.

Zavros's subjects seem interchangeable; they are analogous to one another. For instance, his businessmen in bespoke suits and shiny shoes echo his overbred chickens with their extravagant, impractical tails. His subjects' quality and classiness is also mirrored in his impeccable, refined, photo-realistic rendering of them.

It is often said that Zavros's subject is beauty itself, but it is, more generally, symbols of status. His canon of beauty is aspirational – keyed to notions of privilege, tradition and the faux-aristocratic taste of luxury brands. Zavros's work speaks to a desire for status, and therefore also to our fear of not having it – what television-philosopher Alain de Botton famously called 'status anxiety'. ⁴ Consequently, Zavros has become a shibboleth. People either love him or loathe him, admire him or resent him. Those who love him think his work epitomises precisely what art should be (which is what they have or want, like and are); those who loathe him think it is everything art should not be (class, ideology). The strength and clarity of Zavros's project lies precisely in his ability to polarise his audience. ⁵

By picking subjects that seem prime candidates for deconstruction and critique but not deconstructing or critiquing them, Zavros foregrounds and flaunts his lack of criticality. Nevertheless, some writers argue that there is something inherently ambivalent in his hyper-aestheticism. For instance, curator Jason Smith has written:

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 ... Another political strain and a predominating theme in Zavros's work is the interrogation of ideals of male beauty and physical flawlessness ... Zavros's works tackle the vexed nature of marketing ... ⁶

While such readings find support in the artist's own statements, they are misleading. Rather than capture our experience of the work, they reflect our inability to discuss any art without resorting to the default-setting language of criticality, wherein a work can't simply express something, it has to *elaborate*, *scrutinise* or *deconstruct* it. For me, what is so sharp about Zavros's art is how utterly, rigorously and deliberately uncritical it is. In its sheer affirmation, it calls for a different kind of reading.

Zavros does not apologise for his subjects, or for those who identify with them. But as much as his works eschew criticality, they epitomise self-reflexivity. Zavros has painted hunting trophies, playing on the way his paintings have themselves become trophies for collectors. He has painted beautifully styled interiors (that look like they could be based on images from glossy interiors magazines) that can then be hung in collectors' homes (where they can be photographed for glossy interiors magazines). He even staged an exhibition of paintings of Balenciaga handbags in Jean Brown, the Brisbane luxury retail shop. ⁷

The term *mise-en-abyme* is used to name the uncanny effect of nested representations, where paintings exist within paintings and interiors within interiors, where a picture of a trophy is a trophy, and where a painting of a handbag is displayed on the very shop shelf where you would expect to find the handbag. While the *mise-en-abyme* is routinely understood as a vortex that renders meaning unstable, in Zavros's case it has the opposite effect. It reinforces associations, as if there were no outside from which to view things differently.

Zavros welcomes his audience into the enclosure. In the small painting, *V12 Narcissus* (2009), he admires his reflection in the bonnet of his Mercedes Benz SL600 sports car. The title refers to the Greek myth of a beautiful boy who, spurning the affections of Echo, preferred his own reflection. But Zavros's painting does not spurn lovers; it beckons them to join in. If the painting shows Zavros enjoying his good person reflected in the bonnet of his prized car, it invites the painting's self-satisfied owner-viewers to enjoy their own selves similarly, metaphorically reflected in their prized painting.

Mirror imagery is recurrent in Zavros's work. In *Echo* (2009), new chrome weightlifting equipment is stationed somewhat incongruously in the famous mirrored hall at Versailles. Back in the seventeenth century, mirrors were prohibitively expensive, and the extravagant hall was Louis XIV's investment in his own power and magnificence – its mirrors reflecting paintings that celebrated his life and person. Zavros's painting suggests that this gym gear – symbolising the widespread desire for the body beautiful – is the contemporary echo, reflection or heir to aristocratic vanity.

Of course, *Echo* is also an echo of the art world's own Sun King, Jeff Koons – Zavros's patron saint. When Zavros painted it, Koons had just had his big vanity show at Versailles.⁸ Zavros and Koons both emphasise traditional craftsmanship (although Zavros does the work himself). Zavros's shiny barbells can be seen as a nod to Koons's stainless-steel sculptures such as *Rabbit* (1986), which similarly sucked in its surroundings at Versailles. However, the differences between Koons and Zavros are more telling. Throughout his work, Koons plays on and scrambles the space between high and low in order to address kitsch – the dissipation of old forms of aristocratic high culture in the sentimental bad taste of the masses. But that's exactly what Zavros isn't interested in. He suppresses kitsch associations, so beautiful ideology can be enjoyed at face value.⁹

While uninterested in kitsch, Zavros does inject taints of negativity into his works. In *Man* (2009), a skull is suggested by a still-life arrangement of luxury products that Zavros owns – Carrera sunglasses become eye cavities and Prada shoes nasal ones, while a line of fragrance bottles (including Calvin Klein's 'Man' cologne) stands in for grinning teeth. *Man* could be seen as a vanitas or *memento mori*, but really it's a stretch to understand it as a warning against worldly trappings; it's more an advertisement for them. Similarly, *Phoebe is Dead/McQueen*, 2010 – where Zavros imagines his demised daughter shrouded in an Alexander McQueen skull-patterned scarf – is not really belittling fashion, even if the depressed designer had just committed suicide. It's no 'Et in Arcadia Ego.' More the opposite: 'Fashion, even in death!', it pledges.¹⁰

When Zavros makes reference to conventional moralities, it is usually to invalidate them. *V12 Narcissus* may refer to a myth that warns us against vanity, but the painting embraces vanity. And although the erasing of the faces of male models in the 'Debaser' drawings (2007) could remind us that we are fashion victims, actually it makes its subjects seem even more sublimely remote and beautiful (in the process suggesting that they actually had identities to rub out). On a similar note, in a 2011 set of photoetchings, *Disappear Here*, Zavros's monogram 'MZ' is written, apparently in cocaine, on the black non-reflective face of a hand mirror. The monogram disappears as the powder is chopped into lines and consumed, leaving no monogram and no reflection. A nod to American writer Bret Easton Ellis, here Zavros suggests that the high life may come at the cost of one's very self. However, being more stylish than scary, these images enable us to entertain this possibility without being too put off. Perhaps loss-of-self is just collateral damage.

Recently Zavros has been upping the ante by incorporating politically contentious references into his works. The first eye-catching feature of his painted interior *The Lioness* (2010), is a Bill Henson photograph in which a young girl plaintively eyes us from the darkness. We are initially compelled to assume she is the lioness of the title, only later noticing a lion skin draped over the sofa. In the wake of the witch-hunt over Henson's sexualised depictions of underage girls, there's something creepy in associating a doe-eyed ingenue with skinned wildlife.¹¹ A study in endangered species and isomorphism, the interior *Body lines* (2011), juxtaposes a striated painting by the late Emily Kame Kngwarreye with striped animal skins (from a tiger and its possible prey, a zebra). While we recognise the Kngwarreye as blue-chip trophy art (like Zavros's own paintings), it's hard to forget the dispossession of Australia's traditional owners – the fact that her works were produced in a situation of abject poverty.

As the striped Kngwarreye was based on ceremonial body painting, the juxtaposition also suggests a distasteful link between Aboriginal skins and trophies of the hunt.¹²

The apolitical might simply enjoy these interiors as stylish arrangements of self-evidently nice things. But those who make political connections will do so quickly. However, beyond prompting these political points, the paintings have nothing to actually say about them. The politics are quickly done-and-dusted; they sit in parentheses. After recognising them, we are left to disconnect from them and simply marvel at the works' skilful rendering of diverse and luxurious textures. In such works, Zavros isn't denying politics so much as overriding them. It's like those fashion-house window displays that present beautiful clothes on blindfolded, dismembered, trussed-up female mannequins – not because they haven't heard of feminism, but to show that they have and yet prefer to argue their preference for a higher principle. It seems pointless to subject them to a critique they have already absorbed. The presence of critical references in Zavros's works similarly serves to inoculate his work against critique.¹³

This principle is also at play in Zavros's video *We Dance in the Studio (to that Shit on the Radio)*, 2010. Here we find the artist painting in his studio, while his young daughter Phoebe – wearing sunglasses, Mouseketeer ears and a tutu – admires herself in the mirror as she lip-syncs and strikes poses to the Lady Gaga hit 'Paparazzi'. Gaga – herself a paragon of inoculation – is routinely demonised as a 'bad example', a pernicious influence on impressionable tweens, schooling them in coquettish sexuality and consumerism. However, the girl is not admonished, but encouraged in her pursuits by her proud father – and her innocent performance is truly captivating. She is, of course, a stand-in for the artist himself.

6.

Zavros's project encompasses references to his life – his love of horses and chickens, his children, his possessions and pleasures. But more than this, it encompasses his life itself. While some rail against the false consciousness created by advertising, pointing to the gulf between its representations and life as lived, Zavros's real life proves them wrong by catching up with his fantasy. Zavros is increasingly able to enjoy the lifestyle he depicts, to become what he paints – life imitates art. He is his own consummate artwork. The handsome, well-groomed and well-heeled artist has become a staple of stage-managed personality profiles, best-dressed lists and VIP rooms. This charming man enjoys a symbiotic relationship with lifestyle magazines. The admiration is mutual: the magazines affirm the artist that affirms them (Zavros was *GQ* magazine's 'Artist of the Year' in 2009). Zavros's media visibility is currently so high that we cannot see the work 'in itself'; we must read it in relation to the life (albeit a life totally mediated by the media). Thus, for all its appeal to the old-school virtues of fine draftsmanship and patient rendering, Zavros's work could also belong to a lineage of conceptual-art projects that explore the collapse of art into life.¹⁴ It is a performance. But is it a performance that opens out art or closes down life?

The heart wants what it wants.
Woody Allen¹⁵

In the consistency, coherence and cunning of his post-criticality, Michael Zavros cuts an unusual figure. Other artists are postcritical. Other artists make likeable art. Other artists are rated, curated and collected. Other artists are profiled in the glossies, are well connected and live the good life. Other artists nag the boundaries between life and art. But Zavros has tied these thoughts together and granted them the force, clarity and self-consciousness of a project – a paradigm. In doing so he has become a reference point in Australian art that other positions must be read against.

Because of this, his art is as much about what it is not as about what it is. It can be read both in itself, as a self-contained system (a hall of mirrors), and in terms of its relation to other work. The art world looks different with Zavros in it.

Perhaps we could understand this better if we swapped the terms 'critical' and 'uncritical' for 'neurotic' and 'pervert'. Neurotics don't know what they want; they are repressed, ambivalent, conflicted. They don't know whether to have an affair or stay faithful, whether they are gay or straight, whether it would be fun to have sex in a raincoat or not. They spend all their time dithering. Most of us are neurotics – it's quite normal. However, perverts are exceptional: they have no ambivalence, they know exactly what they want, they are focused. These days, when we speak about criticality in contemporary art, we are essentially talking about ambivalence – neurosis. Within the art system, criticality and conservatism are intertwined, making the standard art-worlder shamefully complicit. By contrast, as a proud pervert, Zavros is shamelessly complicit. He knows exactly what he's into: this type of sports car, this kind of horse and his own reflection.¹⁶

The Zavros Effect occurs when you throw a well-heeled, high-functioning pervert (whose desire is paradoxically aligned with what we are all supposed to want) into an art world stacked with envious, bitter neurotics. The neurotics are not only shocked by his shamelessness, sooner or later that also forces them to confront their own shame. Which is why Zavros – without being in the least bit critical – accidentally engenders a critique of criticality.

(1) Catherine Caines, 'Best dressed 2011', *The Australian's Wish Magazine*, 1 July 2011, p. 30.

(2) See Rex Butler, 'GOMA, the APT and the contemporary', *Eyeline*, no. 63, Winter 2007, pp. 32–34; and 'Candide in Brisvegas', *Broadsheet*, vol. 38, no. 1, 2009, pp. 31–33. See also Jack Bankowsky, Alison M. Gingeras and Catherine Wood (eds), *Pop Life: Art in a Material World*, Tate Publishing, London, 2009, and Isabelle Graw, *High Price: Art Between the Market and Celebrity Culture*, Sternberg Press, New York, 2009.

(3) Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Stanford University Press, Palo Alto, 2002.

(4) Alain de Botton, *Status Anxiety*, Hamish Hamilton, London, 2004.

(5) Zavros gets overwhelmingly positive press, both in the lifestyle glossies and in art's trade magazines. But for an indication of the resentment that his work provokes, you can't go past the 2009 special issue of Brisbane's bitchy art broadsheet *The Incontinent Goat* devoted to him. 'Lifestyles of the rich and famous artists special: Wankers edition' parodied a Matthew Condon profile on Zavros ('Glitter stripped', *Qweekend*, 1–2 August 2009, pp. 14–17), to imagine a parallel world in which he was a VB-drinking bogan.

(6) Jason Smith, 'Calling in the Fox', in *Michael Zavros: Calling in the Fox*, exhibition catalogue, Grantpirrie, Sydney, 2009, n.p.

(7) Balenciaga has cult status for fashionistas. Considered works of art, their bags are the subjects of blogs and obsessive collecting.

(8) Koons's show ran from 10 September 2008 to 4 January 2009. Before that show opened, Zavros had already made works about Versailles.

(9) The closest Zavros gets to Koonsian kitsch is *I ♥ Versailles*, 2007, in which a flock of birds flies in a heart formation above the picture-perfect palace.

(10) This painting won Zavros the prestigious Doug Moran National Portrait Prize in 2010 and \$150,000.

(11) In Vladimir Nabokov's 1955 novel, Humbert Humbert first bedded Lolita in a hotel named The Enchanted Hunters.

(12) Of course, tiger-skin trophies are a reminder of the British Raj period of imperial rule in India prior to independence.

(13) I borrowed the idea of inoculation from Roland Barthes's *Mythologies* (1957).

(14) I think of American dandy artist James Lee Byars and, at the other end of the style spectrum, his friend Joseph Beuys.

(15) Woody Allen on his relationship with Soon-Yi Previn, in an interview with Walter Isaacson. 'The Heart Wants What It Wants', *Time magazine*, 31 August 1992. www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,976345,00.html.

(16) Thanks to Edward Colless for drawing my attention to the relevance of the neurotic/pervert dichotomy.

02.

Self Portraiture and the Perfect Strangeness of Realism

—An interview with Michael Zavros

Conducted via e-mail, between 25 April and 7 May 2014, with Rhana Devenport, Director, 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 Milan, Barcelona, Sydney, Paris and, soon, New York, and numerous awards. His works have been exhibited throughout Australia and internationally, and are held in most major Australian art museums. His work occupies a 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.' 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. These birds 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 work 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 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 formed 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?

10.

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!'

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.

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: 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 for 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.

(1) <http://www.art-quotes.com/getquotes.php?catid=234>

below:
We Dance in the Studio (to that Shit on the Radio)
2010
digital video on DVD,
5 minutes



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