

Surface is Everything

Michael Zavros's paintings are classical visions of the contemporary world. From the details of high fashion, to the reenactments of mythological narrative, to images that represent the West's imperial past, to his wry sense humor, Zavros's works revel in the surface of things. His images explore the nature of consumer objects, the incidental framing of shoes or clothes telling us of our cultural engagement with deep time - and to the ephemeral - while his domestic still lives reveal values and aspirations of absent inhabitants.

To say that Zavros's work is classical really means two things. First, his images are art historical in their sensibility and execution. Zavros's paintings and drawings are impeccable reproductions of his source material; to look upon his work is to be drawn into an aesthetic where the reproduction seems exact, truthful, and without unwarranted expressionist additions. While the trace of the artist's hand might be visible in these works, his aesthetic choices are continuous, engaging the viewer's attention to the subject rather than to the work's execution. In paintings such as *Tom Ford - Black* [2006] and *Burberry Possum/Bay* [2006] the shock of recognition in the images rests on the technique; Zavros's talent for illustrative effect reinforces the surreal amalgamation of horse and fashion model, balancing just the right amount of drama with the calculated eye of observation. And, by imbuing a contemporary manifestation of beauty with the mythological aura of the centaur, Zavros's deftly conflates the present and past in the manner of a classical painter.

Classical also means here that Zavros's work has an engagement with a profound sense of the material world, in terms of its appearance, but also in its implication. To understand the context of this vision we need to take a step back into the past. There was a time when the subject of a painting determined how important it was. Paintings of the real or imagined past - historical narratives, stories of the Bible, mythological subjects - these were at the top of a hierarchy of pictorial values that determined the worth of an artist's vision, while at the bottom were landscapes, paintings of animals, and still lives - subjects deemed

comparatively too banal and quotidian for serious consideration. This hierarchy was based on the belief that painting had a morally educative role and, if it was to have a meaning beyond being merely decorative, then it should tackle the essential values of Western culture. More importantly, art was meant to be an *ideal representation* of the world, whereas art that merely described reality in illustrative terms was of little lasting consequence. Of course, these ideas were eroded and largely abandoned in the wake of Modernism, as artists turned away from the values of the academy and to the reality of their everyday lives for inspiration, but oddly this hierarchy of value persists – perhaps not in contemporary art proper, but then certainly they underscore the values we collectively hold and valorize in Western society.

Zavros explores the meanings of this tradition throughout his work, from the earliest paintings included in this exhibition, to the most recent. *Tony Combs His Hair for Saturday Night* [1998] features the iconic face of John Travolta from *Saturday Night Fever* [1977]. He is caught mid-comb yet his eyes are fixed on the viewer, a glimpse of Al Pacino [as Serpico, from the film of the same name] just visible over his right shoulder. Just as Tony Manero [Travolta] idolized the style of Pacino, in part attempting to emulate him by hanging a movie poster of the actor on his bedroom wall, so too the image of Travolta evokes another layer of tribute. There is an infinite recession implied in Zavros's painting, each degree of separation from reality staged by the way the image is set up – a painting of a photograph – to infinity.

In the painting *V12 Narcissus* [2009], Zavros revisits this idea of layering, creating a self portrait as the character from Ancient Greek mythology, a figure drawn to his own reflection, then held there in love with his own beauty until he dies. In Zavros's image, the artist gazes at his reflection in the bonnet of a luxury car, embracing the body of the vehicle with his hands. This playful reenactment of the myth recalls the many treatments of this subject, from Caravaggio's version of 1599 to J.M. Waterhouse's 1903 confection. What is different about Zavros's version is that Narcissus is here pictured alone, whereas historically the image often included Echo, the nymph who had been rejected by Narcissus and

who, in various versions of the story, lured him to the water with the help of the goddess Nemesis. In Zavros's version the luxury car, a Mercedes, embodies both Echo – literally reflecting – and Nemesis, the harbinger of doom. Although Zavros's work has a deft humour, it also encapsulates a dread of the material object that ensnares the viewer in its superficial beauty, a glossy surface reflecting nothing but unrequited desire. Also painted in 2009 is *Echo*, a twin work perhaps to *Narcissus*. In the image Zavros presents us with an image of highly polished bar bells and weightlifting benches placed in the vaulted rooms of the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles Palace. The steel reflects the baroque surfaces but there are no figures here, just the possibility of a presence, the only signs of humanity visible are the tiny figures depicted in the wall and ceiling paintings. One might well imagine that, were we to enter this space, it would be filled with reflections, yet there is nothing really here but suggestion.

One of the notable aspects of Zavros's work is his use of colour. In many works the palette is monochromatic. This has two effects. One is the feeling of sumptuousness and glamour. In the oil painting *Secret Men's Business* [2000] the black and white image of expensive shoes striding toward the viewer has the aura of a men's fashion photo spread, or perhaps a TV ad that appropriates the look of the film *La Dolce Vita*. But the second effect is the distancing created between subject and treatment. This is an image of shoes, but one wholly created - artificial, styled and unnatural in every respect, from the "camera" angle of the image to its treatment. Zavros's irony here is the play between what is seen, and what we know. This is a moment without narrative context, an idea of something that is not quite there. Zavros uses this irony repeatedly, from *Skull Horse* [2010] with its skull and polished table, and *Body Lines* [2011] featuring the skins of tiger and zebra, to *Fontainebleau* [2009] and its throne room, and *Stark/Bawden/Zavros/Nell/Stark* [2008], a still life of art works arranged just so, [the title referring to the artists who made each object]. When colour does arrive it is explosive, such as the electric green that glowers over the pavilion in *Lime Spider* [2009] or the weird infrared spectra of *Love's Temple* [2006] and *Temple of Love* [2007]. None of the colour treatments in Zavros's work is naturalistic. These paintings and drawings have the feel of reproduction even when the artist

might have created the source imagery himself. They retain the quality of their “look” – you gaze at these paintings and see that they might have come from fashion magazines, architecture journals, from snap shots and glossy reproductions in weekend supplements. The odd impersonality of the images are both soothing and eerie; soothing because they are like the untouched perfection of a five star hotel room, yet eerie because the absence of the object is utterly unreal.

The humour in Zavros’s work is subtle and often hidden. Paintings such as *The Loved One* [2005] with its hypnotic peacock tail and *Python* [2011], a still life featuring a python’s skin - and a reproduction of a work by the American artist Richard Prince that famously appropriated a cigarette commercial for its image - contrast their style of humour. In *The Loved One* the image addresses the nature of attraction, the peacock’s tail fanned in a gesture of display, whereas in *Python*, what is absent again makes itself apparent, in this case the python itself, and in the picture hanging above, the author of the “original” image. The large quasi-portrait *Ars Longa Vita Brevis* [2009] is immediately recognizable as a face, done in the manner of painter Giuseppe Arcimboldo, but there is something else behind the joke. The Latin title roughly translates as “art is long, life is brief”, the artist admitting that what he leaves behind is perhaps more important than himself. This idea is touchingly addressed in the work *We Dance In The Studio [To That Shit on The Radio]* [2010] as Zavros’s daughter Phoebe, in black ruffled skirt, sunglasses and Mickey Mouse ears, struts her stuff in the artist’s studio as Zavros works quietly away in the background. It reminds us of another saying, one not in Latin, but just as memorable: we’re not here for a long time, we’re here for a good time.

Symbols of death and mortality appear and reappear throughout Zavros’s work. The skulls, skins and *memento mori* are held in the stasis of an artwork, memorializing a moment in time, and of time passing, reminding us of some uncomfortable truths. The sculpture *Black Orchid – Paphiopedilum Vanitas* places the flower in the centre of a weight inscribed with the words “Olympic Body Building”. The connection is straightforward – the body is built, only to be wasted by time. The orchid, popularly thought of as a symbol of death, stands as

in the centre of the disc. *Paphiopedilum* translates as *candor*, or *truth*, while *vanitas* seems familiar as *vanity* but in fact means “emptiness”. Although Zavros’s work, in this sculpture and elsewhere, connects to the symbolic language of mortality, it also celebrates the beauty of the ephemeral and the fleeting, ironized as an object with an improbably long life, the delicate shape of the flower cast in bronze.

As much as we might believe that we live in the modern world with plenty of evidence of our contemporaneity to back it up - from technology to world events to the changing circumstances of the planet itself - that hierarchy of values that informs Western society play out at every level of our collective imagination. Value and worth are embodied in symbols that are centuries old, themes of life and death, of love, mortality, longing and loss, all timeless subjects of art. Zavros claims the language of art history as his means of bringing these ideas into contemporary painting. In *The Wanderer* [2011] Zavros makes reference to the work of German Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich and his *Wanderer Above The Sea of Fog* [1818]. In Friedrich’s painting the artist himself is seen atop a mountain peak gazing out over a shrouded valley to mountain peaks in the distance. Friedrich’s painting invested intense emotional significance into the landscape, a symbolic rendering of the relationship between man, nature and god. In Zavros’s picture, a wintry mountain landscape is seen layered with crisp snow and harsh sunlight. Drawn precisely in charcoal, Zavros’s image is significantly different to Friedrich’s - there is no figure here, no artist to be seen to be contemplating the majesty of nature, no heroic imagination beyond the picture itself. Zavros removes the figure and places the image before us for our own contemplation, equal to the artist in the sense we both see with his eyes. Like all of Zavros’s work there is a sense of great time, of majesty and importance, but cool and beautiful and perhaps unattainable, except as an ideal. Zavros reminds us, the old symbols have meaning.

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