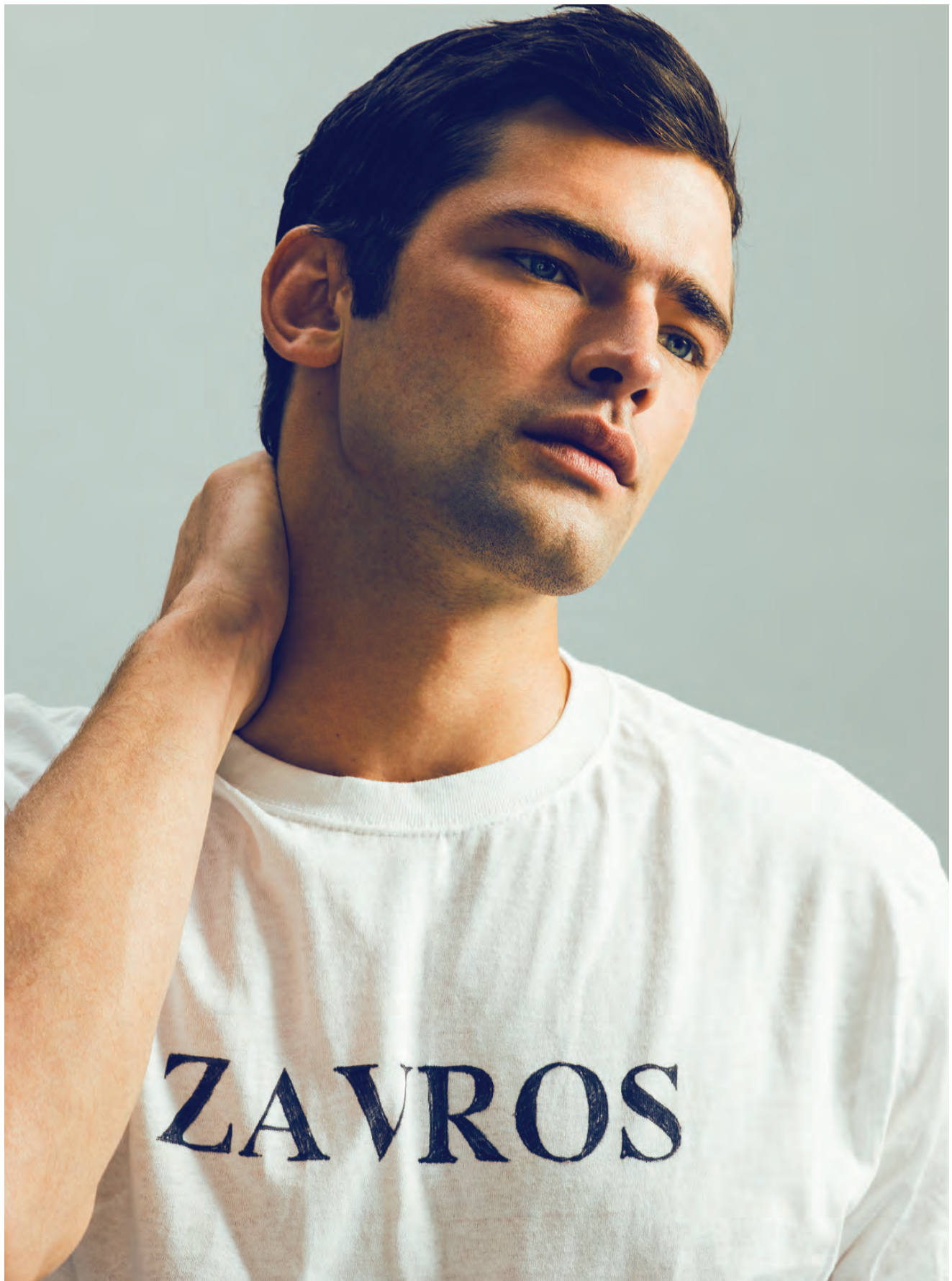


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Michael Zavros | Queensland focus issue | Lee Weng Choy on curating contemporary art from Southeast Asia



*Michael Zavros, Medusa Discus, 2015, archival ink on hahnemuhle photo rag, 60 x 60cm; image courtesy the artist, Starkwhite, Auckland, and Philip Bacon Galleries, Brisbane*

# Michael Zavros: Beyond beauty?

PETER MCKAY







*Michael Zavros, Forty, 2014, performance views, Melbourne Art Fair 2014; images courtesy the artist, Starkwhite, Auckland, and Philip Bacon Galleries, Brisbane*

*As Zavros expands beyond his painting practice into photography and performance, something essential about our relationship to his vision changes, and we enter into a stronger confrontation than before.*

**Michael Zavros's most recent series of photographs** with Sean O'Pry – who is currently the most successful male model on measure of annual earnings – is probably the artist's most radical gesture to date alongside his recent performance for Melbourne Art Fair 2014 entitled *Forty*. Ostensibly a party in honour of the artist's fortieth birthday, *Forty* was, more broadly, a luxurious and decadent unveiling of Zavros's new still-life paintings styled for the occasion. It came complete with the product placement of a new Rolls Royce, the endorsement of the Stenmark twins – who are Australia's answer to Sean O'Pry in stereo – and an endless supply of personalised gold (chocolate) coins. Self-reflexive in the extreme, *Forty* was a spectacular about spectacle – a performance about commodifying commodities.

Perhaps working counterintuitively, these works, presenting great beauty as they do, seem not to be beautiful. This notion may confuse those lusting after the clearly handsome figures involved, and may also be a shock to the artist's many devotees given his reputation for being a great aesthete. But as Zavros expands beyond his painting practice into photography and performance, something essential about our relationship to his vision changes, and we enter into a stronger confrontation than before.

First, some background. In *Six Names of Beauty*, Crispin Sartwell notes: 'We give beauty to objects, and they give beauty to us; beauty is something we make in cooperation with the world.'<sup>1</sup> In viewing a painting by Zavros we witness his devotion to his subject. There is evidence of the beauty he feels in his infatuations, as measured in the time, care and technical know-how that he employs in painting his subject so *beautifully*. In this way, the viewer is not necessarily agreeing to love what the artist loves but, instead, appreciates the beauty felt by the artist, and can share in his emotion without committing to his specific desires. That his object of desire accords with what we desire is not important. What is important is that we recognise and relate to the nature of his feelings and, in turn, the many other people who feel the same way. This creates an interesting tension – not so much within the work, but within the viewer, as we

wrestle with our own wants and desires, or rail against the claim or presumption of value.

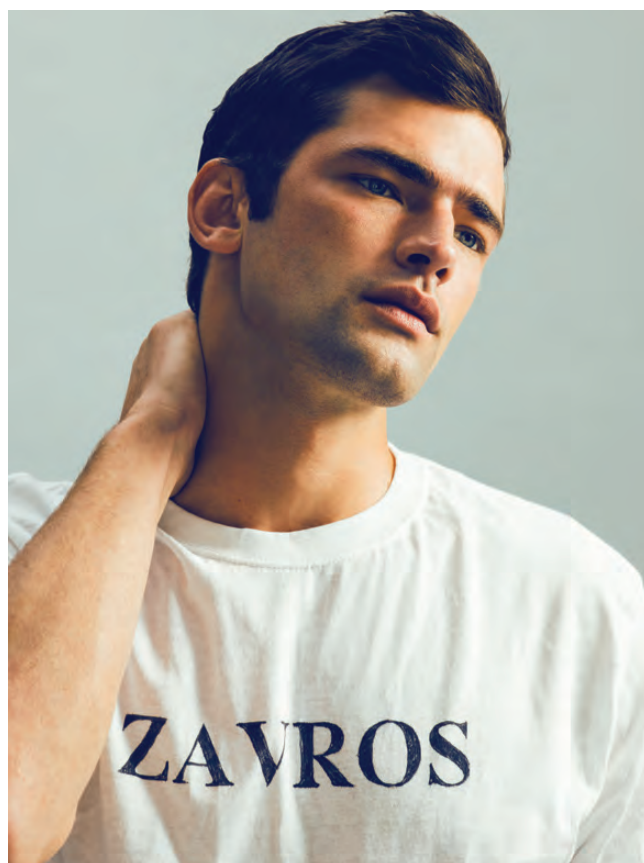
Functionally, in our day-to-day lives, it is easier and emotionally safer to appreciate beauty from a distance – safest, still, if that distance will never be overcome. The actor, singer and model, even an associate or remote figure on the street, all remain at a distance safe enough to absolve any compulsion to risk oneself in an expression of desire. Indeed, such objects of perceived perfection are perfect specifically because our devotion to them can never be violated by our own action to attain them. The boldness that it takes to capture the object of our desires is a different picture, and Zavros's 2015 photographic series with O'Pry, however, strikes a different relationship between subject and audience in its production.

The artist is now artistic director, positioning his muse, directing the emotional content, and actively producing that advertising imagery which he hitherto consumed from a safe distance. Elite model, commercial photographer, post-production artist, lighting technician and make-up artist at his side, Zavros here abandons the safety and idealism of his (thin) remove, and actively participates in the world of luxury goods and high-end fashion. Crucially and profoundly pushing beyond a daydream of embroidered initials on bespoke loafers, Zavros's labour of love is now a love fulfilled.

As Zavros collaborates with his subject, a reciprocal endorsement materialises: instead of feeling Zavros's devotion, we bear witness to his apotheosis. We are cognisant that this world of art, once regarded for its critical distance and facility for novel thinking, is now entirely complicit with the power hierarchies that govern our society. The (narcissistic) public strategy to sell a product is now positioned as a commodity, vanity, or 'end' in itself. This isn't a new understanding, but such an unflinching evocation is a rare occurrence.

In *Self portrait as saint with Sean O'Pry / Versace*, for instance, Zavros uses O'Pry's market-validated image of perfection to create his own self-portrait and begins





*Michael Zavros, Self portrait with Sean O'Pry, 2015, archival ink on hahnemühle photo rag, 120 x 90cm; image courtesy the artist, Starkwhite, Auckland, and Philip Bacon Galleries, Brisbane*

actualising as his own subject. Smooth and polished, this work is conflicted in a productive way, the artist noting 'beauty is the new religion, and the ultimate currency'.<sup>2</sup> Yet Zavros worships at the temple with gentle irreverence: if Jesus sat with us today, he surely would have Versace decor for all his best suppers. Likewise, though I can glimpse O'Pry's good looks out of the corner of my eye in *Self portrait with Sean O'Pry*, I am hesitant to give my 'cooperation' and receive his beauty in this setting. Harnessed, repurposed and transacted in the mode of a (fashion) empire, other qualities of beauty such as temperament, character and wisdom are drawn into question by the motive for production – such an image conveys something extra to what is beautiful in the world. In emblazoning his name as author on the slightly ragged T-shirt worn by O'Pry, Zavros produces an image that would usually cost a fashion house tens of thousands of dollars, if not more. Yet judging from the T-shirt the 'label' looks rather homemade, skint even. This to some extent improbable endorsement is perhaps constructed precisely to illustrate the role of money in the creation of beauty, as well as to fashion a shock of complicity on both the count of artist and model. Perhaps the artist and model are hesitant to grant the viewer their beauty in this context, too, and instead mildly taunt the system that they do so well by.

Zavros's earlier paintings and these most recent collaborations can each be appreciated as art because they so thoroughly picture the values and emotional life held by a good many in our culture. Rex Butler has called such artistic gesturing post-critical by 'doing its best to ignore the suffering going on around it', and acknowledges Zavros's work is all the more valid for its refusal to see anything of the world beyond its own pleasure and interests.<sup>3</sup> Appealing and as assenting as the Sean O'Pry works may be, the coalescence of neo-liberal globalist agendas and our symbolic expression of what it is to be human is confronting and undermines the romance of the images. The apparent lack of criticality is perhaps only a superficial view. In limiting the presence of beauty to their surface, Zavros's portraits offer startlingly frank insights into the means and messages of our time, and they aren't that pretty.

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1. Crispin Sartwell, *Six Names of Beauty*, Routledge, New York, 2004, p. 5.

2. Michael Zavros, personal communication with the author, 30 March 2015.

3. Rex Butler, 'Modernism: More popular than populism', in *Broadsheet*, vol. 43.4, Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia, Adelaide, p. 26.



*Michael Žavros, Self portrait as saint with Sean O'Pry / Versace, 2015, archival ink on hahnemuhle photo rag, 120 x 90cm; image courtesy the artist, Starkwhite, Auckland, and Philip Bacon Galleries, Brisbane*