

Michael Zavros: Daddy's Girl

—Robert Leonard



*Phoebe Is Dead/
McQueen*, 2010, oil on
canvas, 110 x 150 cm,
Moran Arts Foundation
Collection, Sydney

In 2008, the Australian art scene was reeling from ‘the Bill Henson case’. We spoke of little else. The acclaimed Melbourne photographer had come to the attention of the authorities when his clammy, crepuscular study of a naked under-age girl featured on the invitation for his exhibition at Sydney’s Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery. Before the show could open, the police raided the place and impounded the work, pending a child-pornography inquiry. The media had a field day. Henson was widely cast as a pedophile. The new Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, who had just been courting the arts industry at his Australia 2020 Summit, undid his charm offensive in a stroke by describing Henson’s images as ‘absolutely revolting’. A new issue of *Art World*, about to hit the news stands with a Henson cover story (including images of the girl), was pulped, and a revised bowdlerised edition issued.¹

When the police ultimately decided that Henson and the Gallery had no case to answer, child-protection activist Hetty Johnston declared it ‘a great day for pedophiles’.² But it was hardly over. Mud sticks. The affair left a permanent dent in the artist’s reputation, and, in Australia, it ushered in a new era of paranoia over representing children, with artists and galleries afraid to be singled out, made an example of. Into the mix, the Australia Council for the Arts—seemingly conflicted between its support for artists, its responsibilities to government, and needing to cover its arse—introduced its *Protocols for Working with Children in Art*, as guidelines for funding recipients.

Artist Michael Zavros would have been all too aware of all this. He was serving on the Australia Council’s Visual Arts Board at the time.³ In 2010, a year before he finished his term there, Zavros started producing works addressing children. He painted *The Lioness*, a swank interior full of trophies. It shows a moody Henson photograph of a comely girl hung above a leather Chesterfield, across which a trophy lion skin is draped. I was reminded of the name of the hotel where Humbert Humbert trophied Lolita—The Enchanted Hunters. The work

has itself become a prize; it's now in the collection of the National Gallery of Australia. In 2010, Zavros also painted a portrait of his 5-year-old daughter, Phoebe, dead or playing dead, lying naked under an Alexander McQueen skull-patterned scarf. McQueen himself had just committed suicide following the death of his mother.

His darkest and heaviest image yet, *Phoebe Is Dead/McQueen* is ambiguous. The lifesized portrait potentially implies both love and neglect. Is Phoebe dead? If so, what was the cause of death? Where were her parents when it happened? Were they responsible? Had they lovingly wrapped her in McQueen? And what does it say about Zavros, that he even imagined this, let alone depicted it? One could imagine that Phoebe had died young, leaving a good-looking corpse, and was here preserved in all her innocence. Or, perhaps the death implied was metaphoric—the death of childhood innocence itself. The work won Zavros the \$150,000 Doug Moran National Portrait Prize, Australia's most lucrative art award. For the papers, he posed in front of the painting, frolicking with Phoebe, very much alive. Curiously, the press did not make the Henson connection.



Forty, 2014,
performance,
Melbourne Art Fair
(2014)

Who is Michael Zavros? Based in Brisbane, he is something of a phenomenon in the Australian art world. He is famous for painting beautiful things: palaces and gardens; upmarket men's fashions, bottles of scent, and jewellery; luxury cars; dressage horses, pedigree chickens, and pretty boys; exquisite flower arrangements; and—the fairest of them all—himself. As one observer put it, 'Zavros is considered by many as the Derek Zoolander of the Australian art world, a ridiculously good-looking male model masquerading as a conceptual, postmodern artist.'⁴ A conspicuous consumer, Zavros's canon of beauty is aspirational, being keyed to notions of privilege and tradition, the faux-aristocratic taste of luxury brands. His subjects' quality and classiness is mirrored in his impeccable, refined, photo-realistic rendering of them. His work speaks to a desire for status, and therefore also to our fear of not having it—what the television-philosopher Alain de Botton famously called 'status anxiety'.⁵

The Australian market can't get enough of Zavros. He's become the collectors' darling. Enabled by his success, he increasingly enjoys the trophy life he represents in his art. As one of the beautiful people, he is invited to the best parties, where he parades his good looks, snappy wardrobe, and stylish family on the red carpet. As a staple of media profiles, best-dressed lists, and social pages, and the recipient of endless residencies and awards, he has become an establishment figure. Recently, he painted commissioned portraits of Australian war hero Corporal Ben Roberts-Smith for the Australian War Memorial and he's working on one of former Governor-General Quentin Bryce for the National Portrait Gallery.

By picking subjects that seem to be prime candidates for deconstruction and critique but not deconstructing or critiquing them, Zavros flaunts and frames his lack of ‘criticality’. Consequently, he has become a shibboleth. People either love him or loathe him. Those who love him think his work epitomises what art should be (which is what they want or have, like or are). And there are lots of lovers—he now has 75,000 Instagram followers. Those who loathe him think his art is everything that art should not be (class, privilege, and ideology). When the knockers learn that Zavros has won another prize or been included on yet another best-dressed list, they groan in unison. Paradoxically, I think they are the ones who grasp his strategy best.

The strength and clarity of Zavros’s project lies in his ability to polarise the audience, and he knows it. At the opening of the 2014 Melbourne Art Fair—which coincided with his fortieth birthday—he staged a performance, *Forty*. He parked a stunning Rolls-Royce Wraith in the Starkwhite booth. From it, he had hunky male models, the Stenmark twins, dressed in penguin suits, dispense MZ-monogrammed chocolate gold coins to attendees. As Andrew Frost observed, ‘Word of mouth reaction after the performance ranged from bemused to scandalised, most shocked at the blatant nature of the gesture. Say what you will about Zavros’s work, but it somehow seemed perfectly judged.’⁶



We Dance in the Studio (To that Shit on the Radio), 2010, digital video, 5 mins

For *Art Los Angeles Contemporary*, Zavros presents an old work and three new ones. Three of the works feature daughter Phoebe.

In 2010—the year he painted *The Lioness* and *Phoebe Is Dead/McQueen*—Zavros made his first and as yet only video, *We Dance in the Studio (To that Shit on the Radio)*, starring Phoebe. In this long-take actuality, we find the artist painting in his studio, while Phoebe—wearing sunglasses, a Mouseketeer hat, and a tutu—admires herself in the mirror as she lip-syncs and strikes poses to the 2008 Lady Gaga hit ‘Paparazzi’. Gaga is routinely demonised as a bad role model, a pernicious influence on impressionable tweens, schooling them in coquettish sexuality and consumerism. However, Phoebe is not admonished by her proud father and her innocent performance is truly captivating. Is Zavros inducting his pint-sized would-be diva into the cult of preening, or simply standing by as she inducts herself, seduced by MTV? Should he be setting a better example? Not that he would know better.

The Mouseketeer hat Phoebe wears is crucial. Mouseketeer-hat imagery appears in Gaga’s original ‘Paparazzi’ clip. In it, Gaga sports a yellow Jeremy Scott mouseketeer-hat patterned unitard and Linda Farrow X Jeremy Scott ‘Mickey’ sunglasses, as she poisons her boyfriend, countering Disney’s G-rated appeal. It proved prescient. In 2013, we would see numerous former Disney child stars follow Mouseketeer Britney Spears down the raunchy road. There was Miley Cyrus with her ‘Wrecking Ball’ clip and twerking at the MTV Video Music Awards, and a pack of Disney girls in Harmony Korine’s movie *Spring Breakers*, a study in degeneracy. His film prompted a journalist to coin the term ‘mouseketeer porn’.⁷



The Sunbather,
2015, oil on canvas,
180 x 180 cm

In Zavros's video, Phoebe is a stand-in for the artist himself, his narcissism being mirrored in hers. Vanity is Zavros's favourite subject, and the crux of his new big nude self portrait, *The Sunbather* (2015), the second work for LA. This work is full of art-historical allusions, but the most obvious is to David Hockney's iconic *Sunbather* (1966), in the collection of the Museum Ludwig, Cologne. *Sunbather* is one of Hockney's Los Angeles works, in which the City of Angels becomes a manicured, modernist, Mediterranean gay utopia—a homotopia. Hockney's painting shows an attractive naked man lying, face down, arse up, on a towel on the crazy paving beside a pool. In the painting, there's a play between deep space (the figure, in the top quarter of the painting) and flat decoration (the play of light on water, below). A line of tiles separates these warring senses of spaces.

Zavros's painting doesn't just refer to the Hockney. It's really a cover version, reiterating Hockney's compositional logic and spatial gambits, right down to the tan lines. Zavros's title is almost identical and his painting is almost the same size. But the differences are the point. Zavros redoes Hockney's idea in a painstaking photo-realist style. (There's a contrast between the labour implicit in his rendering and the indolence represented.) Zavros relocates the action from sunny LA (which was exotic for Hockney, as a Londoner) to his own native, even-more-sunny Queensland. Also, Hockney is an openly gay artist, while Zavros is married with children. If there is any confusion, in the painting we can see his wife's name 'Ali' (short for Alison Kubler) tattooed near his nether region. And, finally, crucially, he makes himself the subject, replacing Hockney's voyeurism with his own narcissism. Where Hockney's bare-bummed subject was presented for the artist's and our pleasure, Zavros offers up his own pert bum for his and our pleasure, but he also splits the gaze. While we enjoy his bum—its glowing, untanned white skin drawing our gaze—the painting shows him admiring the reflection of his own face.

Zavros's *The Sunbather* also nods to Caravaggio's *Narcissus* (1597–9) and Zarvos's homages to it, *V12 Narcissus* (2009) and *Bad Dad* (2013).⁸ In the Caravaggio, a beautiful boy is trapped with his own reflection in a closed-circuit of self regard. It's a cautionary tale: unable to tear himself away, he will starve to death. (Although, in the painting, of course, he never ages, never dies.) In *V12 Narcissus*, Zavros similarly stares into his reflection in the bonnet of his new Mercedes Benz SL600 sports car, entranced. In *Bad Dad*, he languishes in the pool, admiring himself reflected in the water. The title (and only the title) implies that his vanity is causing him to neglect his children, if only for a moment.



V12 Narcissus,
2009, oil on canvas,
20 x 29.5 cm, collection
of the Art Gallery of
New South Wales,
Sydney



Bad Dad, 2013,
oil on canvas,
110 x 150 cm



The Mermaid,
2015, oil on panel,
40.5 x 31.5 cm

The third work for LA is *The Mermaid*, a tiny, intense portrait of Phoebe. It is easy to see it and *The Sunbather* as a pair. Both were painted last year, both are set in the family pool. In *The Mermaid*, it's hard to tell how old Phoebe is. She's a beautiful girl, growing up fast. She's at that age. Adolescence calls. It is wrong to see her as a child but inappropriate to consider her an adult. In this context, the painting seems inappropriately erotic—Henson territory.

The Mermaid recalls John Everett Millais's morbidly erotic *Ophelia* (1851–2)—a portrait of a beautiful woman, pining, drowning, poised between life and death. But while Ophelia is overdressed, dragged down by her wet clothes, in *The Mermaid* Phoebe is barely dressed at all. You can see nipple. Zavros's work is coy. It's hard to see whether his daughter is naked or not. Is she wearing a sheer top, or is it all an effect of the way the light plays on the water lapping around her? If she is wearing a top, where does it begin and end? For painters, water and wet-look drapery have long provided occasions to demonstrate their virtuosity. Wanting to determine whether we are seeing fabric or flesh, we draw in intimately close to this tiny painting. It makes us look.

Zavros's works cross-reference: new works add twists to the others, recontextualising them. *The Mermaid* and *The Sunbather* talk to each another. In *The Sunbather*, Zavros stares into the water. Perhaps *The Mermaid* is Phoebe as his reflection, miraculously staring back from the water, captivating, completing the loop. Zavros admits the Phoebe works are all about him, about his relation to her. He says, 'She's my muse. She's a fantastic model. She turns it on for the camera, and for me, in a way that's compelling and confronting. Of all my children, she feels the most like me outside of me. My Phoebe works are all self-portraits.'⁹ But is it okay to see ones children as reflections of oneself?

With the fourth work for LA, *White Fox* (2015), we've gone from wet to furry, from underdressed to overdressed. Phoebe is enveloped in her mother's expensive, white fox-fur coat—it's way too big for her. The painting is a loving texture study of fur, hair, and skin. Phoebe poses, hands on hips, with the hauteur of a supermodel in waiting. As fetishists will confirm, fur represents power, and here, Phoebe is awesome. She is posing, for her father, for us; she looks away, but knows we are looking at her. It's five years since Phoebe was filmed, in Zavros's studio, channeling Gaga—more than half her lifetime ago. Now her precocious performance is almost plausible—we've crossed a line. But is Zavros just observing a daughter growing up or is he actively constructing her? Is she his mini-me?

Zavros's Phoebe works ask to be read in the context of one another, of his wider project, and of his shameless embrace of the good life. They don't speak of a neglected child, but of a pampered one—an accessory. Zavros knowingly thrusts us into a sensitive area, the depiction of children. People may not think of Zavros as an overtly edgy, transgressive artist, like Henson, but this only makes his Phoebe works more confusing—harder to place. Zavros cues and scrambles our desires and anxieties about children and class.¹⁰ What was he thinking?

Robert Leonard is Chief Curator at City Gallery Wellington. In 2005, he co-curated *Mixed-Up Childhood* at Auckland Art Gallery.



White Fox, 2015,
oil on panel,
40.5 x 31.5 cm

Endnotes

- ¹ *Art World*, no. 3, June–July 2008.
- ² Corrie Perkin and Michael Pelly, ‘Bill Henson Fight will Rage on Despite the Law’, *The Australian*, 7 June 2008. www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/henson-fight-will-rage-on/story-e6frg8n6-1111116564757.
- ³ Michael Zavros served on the Australia Council’s Visual Arts Board from 2007 to 2011.
- ⁴ Andrew Frost, ‘Melbourne’s Tale of Two Art Fairs: Paintings, Perfume and a Rolls-Royce’, www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/australia-culture-blog/2014/aug/18/melbourne-art-fair-paintings-perfume-rolls-royce.
- ⁵ Alain de Botton, *Status Anxiety* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2004).
- ⁶ Andrew Frost, ‘Melbourne’s Tale of Two Art Fairs: Paintings, Perfume and a Rolls-Royce’.
- ⁷ Mike Bertha, ‘“Spring Breakers” Mousketeer Porn or Commentary on YOLO Culture?’, www.philly.com/philly/blogs/trending/Spring-Breakers-Mousketeer-porn-or-commentary-on-YOLO-culture.html.
- ⁸ It also echoes an Aussie icon, Max Dupain’s photograph *Sunbaker* (1937).
- ⁹ Michael Zavros interviewed by Robert Leonard, ‘What Now?: Michael Zavros’, *Art Collector*, no. 68, April–June 2014: 68. To date, there are three other Phoebe paintings. In *Phoebe Is Eight/Tom Ford* (2013), she is 8 going on 18, in Tom Ford sunglasses. In *The Artist’s Daughter* (2014), she poses holding Zavros’s monogrammed gold-foil-wrapped chocolate coins over her eyes. And there’s *Royals* (2014). (See footnote 10.) Phoebe also appears, with her sister Olympia, in Zavros’s photograph, *Homework* (2014).
- ¹⁰ Zavros has a profound sense of irony. In 2014, he painted a portrait of Phoebe dangling a string of crystals from a chandelier over her mouth, as if ready to swallow. *Royals* was painted for a charity auction at the Art of Music Gala at Sydney’s Art Gallery of New South Wales that year. All the auctioned paintings were based on songs, with Zavros’s based on Lorde’s hit song ‘Royals’. It was a perverse pick, as her song criticises the affluent lifestyle he celebrates: ‘I’ve never seen a diamond in the flesh ... But everybody’s like Cristal, Maybach, diamonds on your timepiece. Jet planes, islands, tigers on a gold leash. We don’t care, we aren’t caught up in your love affair.’ Zavros’s work fetched \$18,000 AUD for its cause—music therapy. On 7 November that year, Lorde turned 18, and could legally take control of her finances, making her a teenage millionaire. Her career had already seen her earn at least \$11 million NZD. Paradoxically, much of that money came from the success of ‘Royals’. (Matt Nippert, ‘Birthday Girl Lorde’s Earnings Estimated at \$11m-Plus’, *New Zealand Herald*, 7 November 2014, www.nzherald.co.nz/business/news/article.cfm?c_id=3&objectid=11354524.)

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