Michael Zavros
CHARM OFFENSIVE
Robert Leonard
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.  

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’.

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; upmarket men’s fashion, luxury cars and jewellery; Lipizzaner dressage horses, Japanese pedigree onagadori chickens and pretty boys.

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Zavros's subjects seem interchangeable; they are analogous to one another. For instance, his businesswear in bespoke suits and shiny shoes echo his overlived 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’.

Consequently, Zavros has become a shibboleth. People either love him or loathe him, admire him or resent him. Those who love him think he’s working epistemically 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 lie precisely in his ability to polarise his audience.

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 work, and that has to do with a work’s ability to polarise its audience.

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 uncritically 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 his way his paintings 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. The term mise-en-abyme is used to name the uncanny effect of nested representations, where paintings exist within paintings and interiors within interiors, is used to name the uncanny effect of nested representations, 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, It’s Narcissus, 2005, he adorns his reflection in the bonnet of his Mercedes-Benz SLK sports car. The title refers to the Greek myth of a beautiful boy who, spanning the affections of Echo, preferred his own reflection. But Zavros’s painting does not span lovers; itbeckons 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, metabolically 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 personage. Zavros’s painting suggests that this “mirror” – embodying 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’ 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 dissolution 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.

While uninterested in kitsch, Zavros does inject taints of negativity into his works. In The lioness, 2010, 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 moment mori, but really it’s a stretch to understand it as a warning against worldly trappings; it’s more an advertisement for them. Similarly, Piece of Echo is dead/McQueen, 2009, 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 pleads.

When Zavros makes reference to conventional moralities, it is usually to invalidate them. It’s 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, 2007–9, 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, Disappend 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 painting interior The lioness, 2009, is a Bill Henson photograph in which a young girl playfully 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

page 100
Echo, 2009
Oil on canvas, 72 x 54 cm
Private collection, courtesy the artist and Guangzhou Gallery, Sydney
page 103
V&A, November 2009
Oil on board, 69 x 95 x 3 cm
Courtesy the artist and Guangzhou Gallery, Sydney

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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. 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 these 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.

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.

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 – watches 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. 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 gulfs 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. It is a performance. But is it a performance that opens out art or closes down life?

In the consistency, coherence and cunning of his post-criticality, Michael Zavros cuts an unusual figure. Other artists are post-critical. 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 tag 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, some aren’t. They know exactly what they want, they are unrepentantly shameless and conservative. Criticality and conservatism are intertwined, making the standard speak about criticality in contemporary art, we are essentially exactly what they want; they are focused. These days, when we are exceptional: they have no ambivalence; they know 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. When 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 what we are all supposed to want) into an art world stacked with envious, bitter neurotics. Which is why Zavros – without being the least bit critical – accidentally engenders a critique of criticality.