eX de Medici

When New Zealand artist eX de Medici got her first tattoo in 1988, she was surprised by the conceptual and technical potentialities of the medium, which was then reviled by the art world. She then moved to Los Angeles, where she practised as a tattooist for 12 years, and realized that the underworld surrounding the tattoo industry mirrored on a micro scale the violence ingrained in institutionalized political acts. Today, the artist translates her critique of war, violence and death into watercolours, executed with the patience and technical precision she developed through tattooing.

By Margherita Dessanay

From Tattoo to Watercolour
After tattooing for 12 years, I developed an interest in the history and machinations of the fascist impulse, due to the rigours of the very difficult political situation in the tattoo industry. Tattooists are chained to organized crime’s lucrative protection rackets and no one walks away without serious repercussions. The environment took its toll and, in early 2000, I walked away. Distinctive parallels emerged between underworld masters of the tattoo/sex/arms/drug/motor industry and legitimized above-world systems of business and law and government. The two worlds utilized remarkably similar techniques in achieving their common ends – power, wealth, sex and authority. I set about critiquing these ‘above’ and ‘below’ worlds, tricking the eye with polite confections, within an absolutely conservative structure, hiding in plain sight. The politeness of watercolour seemed a suitably ironic method. It took some time to make the watercolour works look authentic and competent. I wanted a hyper-conservative vehicle that acted like a 50-calibre sniper rifle.

From the Skull to the Helmet
I started working with the skull symbol when I started tattooing. Irony was the motivating force. The image of a skull inside living flesh became, in my mind, the ultimate signifier of the vanitas tradition. All of a sudden, around 2008, the image of the skull was stormed by the art world, and I couldn’t work with it anymore. So I felt the helmets were a good replacement of the skull. My close friend Jesse Whyte, a soldier returned from the illegal war on Iraq, loaned me some of his helmets to work with – colloquially named Brain Buckets due to skull compression fractures caused by bomb blasts. In 2010, my weapon and helmet work attracted the Australian War Memorial to invite me to engage in the Artist in War programme. The soldiers and veterans of different wars that I met began to lend me various kinds of helmets and gas masks. I put them all together, nesting in a claustrophobic bloom of opium poppies in Cure for Pain. The helmet and gas-mask work has continued with three self-funded research trips to the Islamic Republic of Iran to visit 1980–88 Iran/Iraq war memorials across the length and breadth of the country, with a particular focus on the western border where chemical weapons were used by Iraq against the Iranian people. The gas masks issued to the Iranians afforded them no protection against the new VE gases deployed by Saddam Hussein, which were delivered through the skin.

Showcase

That’s Good Dog, 2013, watercolour on paper, 113.5 x 204.5 cm, courtesy the artist and Sullivan+Strumpf

That’s Good Dog (detail), 2013, watercolour on paper, 113.5 x 204.5 cm, courtesy the artist and Sullivan+Strumpf

Australia, Special Forces Australia (Everywhere Current), 2010, watercolour on paper, 57 x 76.5 cm, courtesy the artist and Sullivan+Strumpf
Insects and Weapons

I was introduced to evolutionists and taxonomists Dr Marianne Horak, Ted Edwards and Dr Tom Weir and this led to a 13-year relationship with the conservation scientists in both Lepidoptera (moths) and Coleoptera (beetles). It was a case of not having any particular interest in the field, but connecting to thinkers and getting carried along on their rivers of compulsion and obsession, and applying that to my own concerns. Weapons come with their own genealogies, timelines and migratory spread, as do the insects. It took some years to get a grip on yet another new discipline, that of scientific description, before I could apply it to my own ends. It must be noted here that scientific illustration is also an exploration into miniature precision. Tattooing had prepared me well for that.