eX de Medici won’t show her face for the camera – it’s clear from the start that is not up for negotiation. An eventful life in the tattoo industry – working for, with and on what the press used to politely refer to as ‘colourful identities’ – has left her reticent to have her image plastered over newsstands.

eX, her moniker an abbreviation of the confirmation name Xavier, grew up in the punk scene in Canberra, studying painting at the Australian National University before heading to Los Angeles for an apprenticeship in tattooing. Like her life, eX’s art has taken some random twists – and after hours of revealing discussion on both, it’s not too heroic an extrapolation that she thrives on unpredictability. When Australia was in the grip of HIV panic in the 1980s, eX created an exhibition that placed photographic portraits of her tattoo work next to framed blood swabs from her subjects. Now, her incredible large-scale watercolours of guns, skulls, insect genitalia and various other signifiers of sex, power and death are some of the most recognisable and celebrated images in contemporary Australian art.

Her enthusiasm for environmental issues underwrites a close working relationship with scientists at the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO). There she has enviable open access to a renowned collection of insect specimens, many extinct, representing the flawed control that human development continues to exercise over fragile ecosystems across our region.

The serious subject matter belies an enviable wit – after I reported back that the ArtistProfile crew found our interview fascinating, eX responded by SMS, turning the medium into a type of stand-up: ‘Fascinating is like interesting is like strange is like wrong. I wanna b a Barbie with long blond hair and a pink camper’.

ArtistProfile spoke to eX de Medici in her Canberra studio about art, moths and tattoos:

Tell me about your background. Canberra gets a bad wrap but you’ve been here all your life.

I was born in the Riverina [in rural southern NSW] but I grew up here – my father was an early graduate into the public service. It was a brilliant place to grow up – for Australia, it was a totally different idea of how a community operates and a lot of people felt welcome here that weren’t welcome anywhere else. There are some very nice artists, great writers, fantastic scientists – also I’m a reference freak and there are incredible reference resources here that a lot of people don’t know about. I tend to think when I hear someone
slagging Canberra out, ‘excellent, don’t say it’s great because then everyone’s gonna get it and then it’ll turn into some other horrible shit hole.’

But there’s also quite an underbelly to the place …

Yeah, hard-boiled underneath! The Canberra punks that I grew up with were notorious all over Australia. There was a reference in [Australian film] Romper Stomper [booming] ‘get the Canberra guys up, get the Canberra guys up to Melbourne to sort it out’. Bands like The Saints played here a lot and would just go “what are they putting in your water in this town? These are the best gigs we get anywhere we go”.

So coming out of that scene, you stayed in Canberra to go to art school.

I studied fine arts at the Australian National University [ANU] and then worked a lot in performance, installation, a lot collaborative work with Neil Roberts and various other artists, always involving photography.

How did you get into tattooing?

I remember meeting somebody who had a really odd tattoo – tattooing had never entered my mind until then – and I thought the surface was really interesting. I was going to Melbourne to work on a film with my friend Tony Ayres and I got my first tattoo while I was down there while I was working on that film.

What was that experience like?

An absolute disaster – the guy was drunk. The only time I could get the tattoo was after the shoot at 11pm. Tony accompanied me saying “don’t do it, don’t do it”. We got there and I was so excited that I didn’t notice how many beer bottles were rolling around on the floor. My drawing skills were a billion percent on that guy, I’m telling you.

Have you still got that tattoo?

I changed and remade it – half of it fell out. There’s a lot of technical skill you need for it to stay in there and look good over a long period. So after, I came back to Canberra to care for a friend who was dying of cancer – she was only young and her family weren’t around. In that time I researched getting [Australia Council] funding to go and live in America to learn tattooing. When I was younger I was a bit more contrary, less judicious. After I left art school I was disappointed because I thought the art world was going to be a really great place to hang out – the more I saw how conservative the art world was, the more interested I was in tattooing. A few people had said ‘oh you don’t want to do that – that is art world suicide’ and I thought ‘if you’re saying that, it must be really interesting.’ And so my contrary nature powered me on … plus I thought it was really sexy and art didn’t seem very sexy to me. There was an excitement quotient and a verboten quotient. I’d been working in decayable materials and the human is the most decayable of all things – it couldn’t be collected as an art object.

It can’t be traded on the secondary market …

No secondary market. Although I’ve just been involved in with a film project that centres on a guy who is removing his skin after he dies to gift to the National Gallery of Australia. It’s been really interesting how horrified people are. Notwithstanding, the NGA already own some Apache masks made of skins and they’re terrifying objects – you look at them and you want to run away. They look vaguely fetishistic – frankly, I think Jeffrey’s skin is much more attractive.
Was there some kind of structure to the training in Los Angeles?

It was actually called a formal apprenticeship. I worked under a woman, Kari Barber, because I’d seen the male dominated scene in Australia and the attitude to woman just appalling. I found a much different outlook when I went to L.A.

You’ve exhibited portrait photographs of tattoo work – yours and others.

The original group were shown at the Canberra Contemporary Art Space – that toured for a couple of years. There were 120 portraits, sort of life sized, of both people who I tattooed and people who I photographed in various tattoo shops that I’d worked in. Sometimes they’d just be blow-ins with home tattooing. These kids would rock into the shop and or any studio anywhere in the world with Dad written across there by some friend. Sometimes you had no idea what it even was but they were fascinating – rudimentary, difficult drawing. I’d meet ex-servicemen with distinctive military tattoos, or ex-jail guys with home-style jail tattoos – it’s all fascinating. I don’t place one above the other because it’s all a discourse, how people project themselves. So the portraits just go on and on – there are thousands of them now.

So does your tattooing relate to your art now?

Yes absolutely – it feeds into it. I don’t make separations. Tattooing taught me how to be patient. But it’s also my relief from the art world. I like the dynamic that exists with the person I’m working on.

There might be similarity in practice but there are separate social identities for tattooist and artists and very different contexts. How effective do you think a contemporary artist can be in communicating big ideas like sex, death and power? Do you ever find them overwhelming?

I find the whole premise of power and violence utterly overwhelming; I think that’s why I’m obsessed with it. I’m not at all interested in art about art, or art about museums or constructions, formalist art. In Australia, if you say you’re an artist, then the instant response is that you’re a wanker and you don’t perform any useful function. That’s the first problem you have – what benefit is your position? You’ve no respect to even begin a debate that can go outside of the interest of ten people.

How do you get around that?

You need to be a blunt edged instrument. I’ll describe an incident so you understand what I mean. I went to the cinema recently with a friend of mine – I used to go to the cinema a lot but I hadn’t been in a quite a few years. I sat down and they were playing the ads before the main feature. The sound and the vision were incredible like this way and that[waving her arms about] … and everybody was just sitting there and so I thought ‘gees, this is a blunt edge instrument’. My friend couldn’t hear me but I was yelling in her ear, ‘if this is what people are used to, fuck we’ll have to change our tactics’. If people are so desensitised to everything then a mild clobbering by me is going to look subtle.

Tattoos and blood swabs are blunt because of the taboo element but recently you’ve moved into more subtle traditional media- how do you explain your move into pencils and watercolour?

After the Howard government came into power I was angry for so many reasons - refugee issues,
law and order, degradation of parliamentary processes - so decided I to do the most conservative work I could think of so [the politicians] could understand what I was saying. Also at the time the art world considered watercolour puerile, feminine, hobbyist, super conservative … I just chose a whole load of things the art world would slam. Politics and the art world are very conservative groups in different ways. You can meld anything into anything with rhetoric and so I thought it was kind of clever at the time but no one got it. A few people got it – [National Gallery of Victoria curator] Ted Gott got it and said ‘what are you doing?’ right from the beginning and Neil Roberts asked ‘what are you up to?’ and I said [grinning] ‘I’m about to subvert’.

So there’s still a punk element, questioning authority in whatever form it takes.

The power work has been going for a long time, the power of authority. And maybe the authority issue started from ‘punkdom’ – you always question authority, always, always, never trust authority because it cannot be trusted. It is corruptible. I learnt that very young and it still works to this very day - our last government proved that power corrupts.

Can you explain the political content of the watercolours?

It was a discussion on colonisation. I don’t agree with the Howard rhetoric ‘that was then and this is now’. My family were colonisers and I think there is a secret discourse that comes through generations, influencing your attitudes towards all sorts of things. The watercolours were a kind of a backhanded discussion about colonising our minds with retroactive ideas. Often it’s pure discussion and pun; one of the large images of a gun was a commentary on a particular timber company, Gunns, their complicity with government and willful deracination of the natural world for economic power. Actual guns appear frequently because nothing argues with a gun. They embody the natural tendency in human history: power through violence.

And there is also the recurring skull.

I’ve worked with the skull for years – it is the ultimate signifier in tattooing and I was always quite fascinated at that time with what the skull means. It references Vanitas painting and a lot of ideas that are pre-determined in art. Everyone knows what a still life damn well looks like so I thought I would start with the most basic of motifs. The entry is instant, swift, there’s no thinking required …

So you were trying to make the work accessible but it also required an ability to execute ideas using particular skills?

I’d gone to see one of the biennales and there was an installation with a room full of garbage bins with their sides kicked in. I just thought ‘this is just fucked up’. It was unskilled and stupid – a trip to the fucking hardware store. How many exhibitions had I been to and it was just a trip to the hardware store to buy 20,000 of something and chuck it all into a room? Tattooing pushed me into a skill debate because a tattoo won’t work if you’ve got no skill. Before I’d been more interested in the idea than the object but I was forced into skills kicking and screaming. Watercolours are usually delicate little things, and so I made this big monster works and put in a lot of really horrible ideas and references, whacked in some skulls so it would be a really easy doorway for anybody with eyes to walk in and understand.

But do some objects have a more particular symbolism?

Well, in the first work Blue (Bower/Bauer) (1998-2000), there’s a flower referencing [Robert]
Menzies – Banksia Menziesii, to evoke John Howard’s view of himself as a new Menzies. There are secret codes in the work that don’t not necessarily need to be known, they’re my plays things, but as an overall effect the structure is easy and it was deliberately pretty. I did a matching piece, Red (Colony) (1999–2000), that was about the corporation, so as a pair they were originally set up to be read as how the colony becomes a corporation. The first work took 18 months to complete – it was torture. I used to do a study for every object and there are hundreds of objects in every picture. I didn’t want to blow it with a single object not done properly.

There’s little margin for error with watercolour, much like tattooing.

There are no mistakes. You’ve got to work with the objects straight at the front first - you can’t put something on top of something else. But it was also a serious risk in such a groovy world. I can remember people just turning their noses up at it like “oh my god where’s the garbage bins, where’s the blood?” I mean honestly give me a break. But that was kind of exciting.

You’ve done five of those large watercolours now. How did the initial idea develop into a series?

I just kept making them as each political turn got worse and worse. They have been a social commentary an a number of different issues because really you can just cram in a thousand objects into that discussion and make your own connections. In fact, they were also just an enormous amount of fun to work on …

Do you map them out or do they grow piece by piece?

I have an idea of shape and that’s all and I’ll just find stuff or objects, or people find objects for me. A friend who was travelling in the US gave me a deputy sheriff’s badge – perfect for John Howard. It was antique, a very nice piece and I stuck it in a skull. So they are quite organic.

So from that background, how did your natural history work evolve?

I was doing some tattoo work down in Albury for a biker club– I actually get a along with them as they’re quite respectful. I would drive back at night and used to collect a lot of bugs on the windscreen. I noticed how various species were swarming at various times of the year. During the middle of summer, there’s a butterfly called the Lemon Tree Butterfly – pollinators for oranges and lemons. I had a whack of them all over my front grill, I peeled them off - I’ve always had a microscope, so I had a look at them. I did a few little studies on them because they were really quite tragic, all smashed up. I was working on Blue (Bower/Bauer) and thought maybe I should put a blue insect in and a friend of mine, whose husband is a botanist at ANU, said ‘oh look I know this women who’s an entomologist over at CSIRO [Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation], I’ll introduce you.’ I went, ‘oh, all right,’ because she’d seen my butterfly studies from the car grill, just as a play thing …

So the CSIRO project was inspired by roadkill?

Exactly. I was introduced to Marion Homac, a Swiss taxonomist, at the end of 1997. She loves art – most of those scientists do – music, dancing, fieldwork, being outside in nature. They’re not stuffy people at all. I’d started putting some of the moths in Red (Colony), and they suggested I do a project at CSIRO with them and so I wrote another overseas studio funding proposal but I
sweetened it by adding 'by the way, you don't have to cover any travel or accommodation expenses cause it's in my own town!' You know my life has been incredibly noisy but at the CSIRO it was really quiet and safe - triple security and away from the outlaws. It just happened out of the blue and so I went with it with no predisposed ideas – you know I was rotten at science at school but I love science now. They’ve taught me a lot, especially about elite taxonomy – I can spot things that most mortals don’t see!

**Do you hold a formal position there?**

I’m called an Artist Fellow, which means I can be an artist, not get paid for it but go in there and hang out. It allows me to continue to look at variants – you know if my tattoo portraits are of endless variation, these nature works are also endless variation.

**What sort of specimens do you work with?**

Most of the animals I work with are unclassified, so in natural history terms, they’re brand new. It is a public collection but it’s too delicate to be out and it must be handled with great enormous care. They have an open day each year where anybody from the public can go a have a look and it’s a massive, extensive, fabulous moment of death, of mass death. These moths are all micros too, minute little things you would even notice if you stepped on it - it could be in front of your face and not see it. I worked a lot with specimens from sites of deforestation – also from the [Papua New Guinean] Ok Tedi mine area, so it’s assumed that they’re all extinct. As part of the evolutionary trail, these moths are ancient; they’re almost as old as rocks. I figure, tiny little things, I’ll make them big!

**So how do you relate to other artists and the art scene? Are there any people who have influenced you or continue to influence you?**

I like going to shows but I don’t go to a lot because they can influence you - I don’t want to be too heavily influenced by anything. I make occasional forays when I’m feeling brave. I spent a year at Bundanon before Arthur [Boyd] and Sid [Nolan] died and they probably taught me more about being an artist than any other experience I’ve had. Sid was just a groovy guy. For the first couple of months I was at [Nolan’s property] Eearie Park, they were living a life, loved their work, had a lot of fun and then they died. They didn’t care what people thought about them, they knew people opposed them but they didn’t care. And I thought, how cool is that, I don’t care either.

**Did you gain any practical lessons from them?**

You get up, do the work, have some lunch, do some more work, have a beer, do some more work, and go to bed. I’m serious. They just flogged it every single day.

**Do you have that discipline?**

Totally. I work every day and every night. I hunt where the pleasure is, I do tattoos and it’s just great. Life is great.