Violent Beauty: Controversial Australian Artist eX de Medici Talks War, Politics and Painting

by Nicholas Forrest
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Sydney based gallery Sullivan + Strumpf will present a solo show of new work by the celebrated and controversial artist eX de Medici during the 2012 Melbourne Art Fair from the 1st to the 5th of August.

The exhibition, titled Ton of Bricks, consists of 12 new elaborate and highly detailed paintings by de Medici that stem from the artist’s recent travels in the Middle East combined with her ongoing interest in natural history.

Focusing on a series of gas masks in various states of use and disuse, the deeply political “documents” present hazardous environments, as in You Can tell by the smell, that there’s nothing going on round here (Herd), whereby the air surrounding the masks is filled with highly decorative visual representations of pollens, gasses, viruses and other “irritants”.

“These watercolours are landscapes of complicit ideologies, unholy alliances and irrational theocracies. They are not portraits of individuals but expositions of political environments; landscapes of the machinery of power. In these works eX asks us to see what is not said and untangle the implicit undercurrents beyond the nightly 30 second news grab. Under her tutelage we focus our horrified gaze and bear witness to hideous truths, which are both known and unacknowledged. eX de Medici’s message is delivered with the finesse of a surgeon but it packs a powerful punch” Jenny McFarlane, catalogue essay 2012. 1.

In part one of this exclusive interview with Artinfo Australia Executive Editor Nic Forrest, de Medici discusses her trip to the Middle East and the significance of the resulting body of work.

How did your travels through Iran influence this particular body of work?

The last two trips to the I.R.I have been a major influence in this body of work, cleaving into my long-term interests in power through violence. There are specific references in all works. For example, Two Scorpions in a Jar (Kerman) comes out of my last trip in October-November 2011, when I travelled to Kerman, South-Eastern Iran, to visit the Holy Defence Museum of Kerman. This region is entry to the badlands of opium trade from Pakistan and Afghanistan, hosting a high military and police
presence. The museum is, in essence, a war memorial dedicated to the Martyrs of Iran/Iraq war (The Imposed War) of 1980-88, and managed by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard. The museum provides an historic background to the sequence of events leading to the Imposed War and differs from institutions like the Australian War Memorial, in as much as it presents its historic collection and the very premise of War, as atrocity. The stereo night-vision goggles (sans surface treatment) depicted in 'Two Scorpions...' are within the museum's collection.

'Spy (Qom/Tehran)' sandwiches a stucco ceiling detail from within the Fatima Masumeh Shrine in the city of Qom, with Cataglyphis altisquamis, an indigenous ant species from the Iranian scientific field collection of Entomologist Dr. Donat Agosti, a resident of Tehran.

What role does symbolism play in your paintings?
I guess you could call it symbolism. I employ a lexicon of signs which are well known, old, accessible and layered; the radiation sign...the stripes of the American Flag... the star as a military device, most people know the purpose of a gas mask, ants are diligent soldiers, scorpions and lions fight to the death. The combination of simple signs allows for more complex layering and intent. I have developed this form of 'symbolism' as a foundation in my practice in another medium in which I work, the tattoo, where the economy of the sign, or group of signs is the desired outcome. The mediums morph in and out of each other.

What do you hope to achieve with this series?
This is a hard question. I never present a full textual analysis when I exhibit a body of work so the full scope of my intent is somewhat obscured. The bad jinn in me sets up a long sequence of clues, awaiting someone with enough information to see the whole horrible human train crash. I aim to magnify persistent fatal flaws in the human species' predisposition to continuous violence and gender failure, as qualities which should demand serious, extensive examination, assessment and change to the disastrous historic model.


1. Dr Jenny McFarlane Cure for Pain Sullivan + Strumpf Catalogue Essay, May 2011