by any accounts it has been a long road—more than a decade's journey from type-cast purveyor of 'whatever revulsion you experience by the defilement of luminous skin with dull ink' to praise for 'the renowned artist and tattooist eX de Medici', portraitist of Midnight Oil. And a road that Medici, who cares little for safeguarding an art-world reputation, is the first to detonate behind herself.

After a background in experimental artforms (such as photocopy, installation and performance), eX de Medici turned in 1989 to tattooing, and was at once marginalised from the mainstream art world and, ironically, marked out as unique within it. Transgression as curriculum vitae. Across the next decade, working from a number of tattoo studios in Canberra, she found herself acting as both muse and technician for an increasing client base. Drawn by the allure of her reputation for masterful drawing, and as a woman working in a male-dominated industry, she has also become an icon for the tattooed queer communities of Canberra, Sydney and Melbourne.
A constant of eX de Medici’s creativity has been her lament for the poignant fragility of life, joined with a desire to record the beauty of those salutary signifiers in which people seek hope and affirmation. The (at times) confronting physicality of her art has always been earthed in these entwined passions. *The blood of 144 others*, 1989–96, an installation of post-tattoo blood swabs, and the ‘Godscience’ cibachrome photographs of similar swab residues, capture the essence of the vulnerability of the human body and remind us that the immune system is no longer impregnable. Such works are like tailings taken from the mine of Medici’s tattooing, a signal that her art is in no way divorced from her tattooing practice, but integral to it.

This is the case with the intricate drawings that eX de Medici has created since 1989, using ballpoint pen, watercolour or coloured pencils. Her individual drawings have a strong visual resonance – they hang on the wall like votive icons, heraldic shields, or the blazons of battle. They have their genesis in the many symbols and devices Medici incorporates into her tattooing, yet also lead an independent existence and, in turn, feed back into new tattoo work.

There is a sense, too, in which eX de Medici’s art compensates for her relentless loss of subjects, the wistful fact that at the end of the day: ‘the only physical results remaining ... after the tattoo are a personal collection of slides and the grungy swabs and patches smeared with ink and blood. The images walk out the door ...’5 The lifesized Canon laser prints of freshly tattooed ‘subjects’ in Medici’s moving 1997 *60 Heads* installation celebrate the blood pact that has taken place between the tattooist and her clients. These images have immense psychological impact, recording as they do the manner in which the experience of watching the tattoo being done – of relaxing one’s body to receive the needle and inks – is a collaborative act between artist and client, the memory of which is thereafter integral to the tattoo itself.

Other aspects of Medici’s photographic art function as an elegiac hymn to Canberra, the nation’s ‘toon-town’ capital where she chooses to live. Not the elegant Canberra framed by tourist holiday snaps – but the darker capital, heroin-ville and hoon-ville, home of the summenrants, of many kinds of speed-freaks, of bare-breasted petrol girls and drunken, loutish, sexy gits. Hence the visual lament found in her large format jet-spray photographs pairing images of floral roadside shrines with tyre burn-out marks on a mournful stretch of highway.6 Or the nexus of sex and death considered in her emblematic Nova jet-prints of classic Australian car-hood ornaments (which are known as *bodycatchers*, from their efficacy at disembowelling passengers thrown across them in a car accident), images the artist regards as ‘celibate objects without a context ... removed from their dangerous whole’.7

It was Medici’s belief in tattoos as a litany of signs that sounded an alarm concerning the number of new, unknown clients who came to her requesting antiscenal tattoos (which she refuses to create). Reflection on the allure of fascist symbols led to her enormous ‘Spectre’ drawings of 1996, in which emblems of hatred and white suprematism (such as the swastika, or the triskelion used by South Africa’s Broederbond) are considered as echoes of the immense number of encyclopedic signs that are constantly being used in tattooing. The scale of the ‘Spectre’ drawings...
and the dense foliage or worm-like masses that seethe around their tainted emblems, signify the rampant growth of fascism. Although not drawings made for tattooing, the 'Spectre' works have obvious connections to Medici's other interests. The dichotomy of these signs, for example, parallels the dichotomy of the blood given off during tattooing – a substance once viewed as friendly, but now seen as evil, and always potentially contaminated. Medici also recognises the ironic possibility for the 'Spectre' drawings to be misread as approbation rather than criticism of fascism's creeping pestilence: 'Marcel Duchamp always said that the viewer is the final phase of the work. But the viewer can also be the final twist of the knife in a work.'

In early 1998 Medici saw the touring exhibition, 'An Exquisite Eye: The Australian Flora and Fauna Drawings 1801–1820 of Ferdinand Bauer'. Drawn from the rarely seen collections of the Natural History museums of Vienna and London, the exhibition included dozens of the more than 2000 watercolours of native flora and fauna that Bauer made after sketches drawn in 1801–03 while natural-history artist to Matthew Flinders's historic circumnavigation of Australia – a voyage recognised today as one of the greatest scientific expeditions of all time.

Beyond any form of botanic work that Medici had ever encountered, Bauer's watercolours led her to a surprising decision to 'retrograde' herself. For some years her intensely skill-based tattooing work had been moving Medici away from the anti-skills attitudes that once had informed her art, and this sea-change was mirrored by her increasing opposition to what she terms the 'K-Mart avant-gardism' of much contemporary art. The beautiful craft inherent in Bauer's work re-ignited Medici's desire to make something of value in an art climate where everything seemed so deliberately devalued. With complicit irony, she chose to work (like Bauer) in watercolour, a medium that in many ways remains valueless in the art market.

Thus began three years of obsessive work on two colossal watercolours. An epic journey on a Lilliputian scale. Every inch of Blue bower, 1998–2000, and Red colony, 2000, is filled to the brim, the works depicting hundreds of objects, along with dozens of species of plants, animals and insects. Each watercolour, cast predominantly in the sickly hues of its respective title, assaults the viewer with a vertiginous cascade of 'giant piles of crap'. Medici wanted the viewer's first reaction to these works to be directed not towards their representational aspect but to a more simple and visceral 'that took a long time to do'. Blue bower and Red colony are first and foremost Medici's contribution to art's debate about skill, which she sees as a vanishing quality. Beyond this, deeper meanings proliferate within them. Knowledge that Bauer had spent eight months drawing on Norfolk Island at the end of his voyages with Flinders led eX de Medici to return to Norfolk Island herself during the making of the watercolours, to explore her family's ancestry in Australia's penal colonies. The tumbled skulls and leg shackles that send a blue chill through Blue bower create a potent vanitas subtext with uniquely Australian overtones.

During the three-year gestation of these morbidly intense, red and blue watercolours, Medici both withdrew gradually from tattooing (she no longer works commercially, and now tattoos only personal...
friends), and developed deeper interests in natural-history illustration.

At the close of 2000, eX de Medici received an Australia Council Visual Arts and Craft Award for research at the Australian National Insect Collection (ANIC, which is managed by the CSIRO's Entomology-Division at Canberra's Black Mountain complex). For more than seven months in 2001 she worked up intricate watercolour studies of dozens of species from among the thousands of unclassified and endangered Australian moth specimens held at ANIC. She was attracted to those species that remain unnamed and unclassified, and was also drawn to microlepidoptera, Australia's smallest moths. To the pleasure derived from exploring these vast terrains of the infinitesimally small was added her growing interest in natural-history 'illustration', an unfashionable discipline in today's art world: 'In art, this form is not considered art, which is always an attractive reason to get curious.' For Medici this was painstaking labour, observing minute moths through a microscope, and then recreating their patterns and forms in meticulously slow watercolours. Deliberately reactionary, each one of her time-consuming and refined moth studies took some ninety working hours to complete. The results of Medici's research residency, fifty-four watercolours documenting twenty-seven species of microlepidoptera, were unveiled in her exhibition 'Sp. eX de Medici' in November 2001.

eX notes modestly: "Sp." rides a boundary between art and science. Natural-history illustration is a scientific discipline, of which I have no training, and these works are not accurate on that level, but useful in terms of pattern and the constructs of evolutionary mapping.² The 'Sp.' watercolours are a love letter to Ferdinand Bauer from an artist working in synergy, not competition. Where Bauer sought perfect specimens, Medici remains drawn to the imperfect and the damaged. Interspersed among the immaculate 'Sp.' specimens are images of insects with broken wings and crushed abdomens, impaled seemingly brutally on dissecting pins. These look back to one of eX's earliest naturalistic watercolours, made before her tenure at CSIRO, a study of a broken butterfly that a friend had retrieved from the grille of a car.

It was this difference in approach that caught the attention of Dr Marianne Horak, a CSIRO taxonomist specialising in the study of microlepidoptera and collaborator on the 'Sp.' project, with whom eX de Medici has formed a close friendship: 'All I did was seduce her with the beauty of my small moths ... I think a large factor in the satisfaction of this project is the revelation of this usually hidden world, this wealth of colour and pattern in animals so small that they are revealed only under a microscope, and who fly at night in the dark where they cannot be seen.'²³ Horak was also fascinated by the way in which Medici chose to pair each naturalistic moth study with a more abstracted watercolour, reworking the distinctive, vividly coloured markings of the species in an arrowhead form. Appearing almost to be a new genus, these arrowhead blazons trace a lineage back to Ferdinand Bauer through their evocation of the broad arrow of colonial authority that was stamped everywhere in Norfolk Island's penal history. Their emblematic presence also has links with Medici's tattooing practice as, of course, the 'Sp.' project recalls the artist's many tattoo designs incorporating butterflies, scorpions and other insect-like
eX de MEDICI, Blue bower, 1998-2000, watercolour on paper, 100 x 175 cm, courtesy the artist and Helen Maxwell Gallery, Canberra. Photograph David Paterson.

Opposite page top: eX de MEDICI, Celibate object (Falcon), bodycatcher group, 1998, Nova jet-print on paper, 160 x 120 cm, courtesy the artist and Helen Maxwell Gallery, Canberra. Photograph eX de Medici.

Opposite page bottom: eX de MEDICI, Leslie (Red), 2001, Nova jet-print for a bus shelter on paper, 100 x 80 cm, courtesy the artist and Helen Maxwell Gallery, Canberra. Photograph eX de Medici.
signifiers. Given these connections, it is not surprising that the ‘Sp.’ arrowhead designs can also be read as shroud forms, cloaking in death the astonishing beauty of the species.

Microlepidoptera adorn the necks of the five band members in Midnight Oil: Nothing’s as precious as a hole in the ground, 2001, eX de Medici’s monumental (nearly two-metre wide) National Portrait Gallery-commissioned depiction of the rock group. The artist placed Midnight Oil before the alien moonscape of Kakadu’s Ranger uranium mine, and patterned their throats with the markings of five minute moth species known to have once lived in this ravaged landscape – an inspired touch whereby these activist musicians are enabled to speak visually against the destruction of our natural environment. These tiny, unclassified, endangered animals, seemingly insignificant fauna in the landscape, became the small voices of their five big hosts. Notwithstanding, moths gather around the flame burning at midnight.

As a tattooist Medici embraces the ephemerality of her work, the knowledge that it will pass from this world along with its many living canvases. And she feels ambivalent towards the Japanese practice of excoriating a deceased tattooee’s skin – disliking the manner in which flayed skin darkens and shrinks as it becomes vellum, changing the colours and patterns of the tattoos supposedly preserved upon it. Covering what has been described as ‘an obscenely large sheet of vellum,’ the Midnight Oil portrait was fleshed out using quills fashioned from wedge-tail eagle feathers, and transfused with pigment from the sap of mangrove trees native to the Kakadu region. The artist has noted: ‘Curiously, that particular mangrove dye is usually used as a poultice on skin diseases and lesions. It was almost like a balm or medicine in the work.’ In one sense, this haunting group portrait has been approached as though defying the post-mortem evanescence of Medici’s other ‘skin’ work. By applying her mangrove salve to the dead skin of the supporting vellum, the artist was virtually painting a permanent portrait ‘tattoo’.

eX de Medici remains a controversial figure for the art world; she doesn’t fit. And her work remains problematic. Only last year, two of the five photographic images she designed for placement along inner-city tram routes during Melbourne’s 2001 Midsummer Festival were excluded by the Roads and Traffic Authority for their ‘unacceptable’ imagery. Medici’s most recent works may fare no better when they reach the public domain. The artist has a collection of shotgun shells that she has picked up from Canberra’s main streets. Disturbed by the current attempts of western governments to dismantle individual rights and get people to return to order, even if at gunshot, Medici is engaged on a long-term project involving frottaged guns, knives and swords. Like tattoos, weapons are beautiful, and powerful; but in the wrong hands they are very dangerous indeed.

1 Robert Nelson, ‘Scratching beneath the aesthetic. Visual art: Indelible; 60 Heads,’ Age, 5 February 1997, B 5, p. 9. While written from the premise that ‘All tattoos are ugly, even when the motif is quaint or friendly’, Nelson acknowledged that the two exhibitions he was reviewing ‘have to be seen and deserve to be debated by people more sympathetic than me’. On the dichotomy of Medici being either ‘celebrated, or reviled’ within the art world, see Gordon Bull, ‘The scandal of ex de Medici,’ Photofile, no. 56, May 1999, pp. 12–19.


4 On this aspect of Medici’s practice, see Feona Studdert, ‘X marks the spot’, Outrage, no. 166, March 1997, pp. 48–52.


6 These were included in ‘Close Quarters’, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art and Monash University, Melbourne, 8 October – 28 November 1998.

7 eX de Medici, letter to the author, 22 October 1999.

8 Interview with eX de Medici, Canberra, 31 January 2001. There are many riddles contained within this complex watercolours. The title of Blue bower, for example, has been aptly described as ‘a hybrid of the official colonial artist Ferdinand Bauer, and the Australian Bower Bird, which adorns its nest with anything blue’; see Christine James, ‘Vainglorious’, Art Monthly on-line, 26 November 2000. Blue bower and Red colony were first shown in eX de Medici and Eve Sullivan’s joint exhibition, ‘Vainglorious’, Canberra Museum and Art Gallery, 2 September – 19 November 2000.


11 Dr Marianne Horak, speech delivered at the opening of ‘Sp. eX de Medici’, Helen Maxwell Gallery, Canberra, 16 November 2001.


14 eX de Medici, quoted in Low, op. cit.

15 Ted Gott is Senior Curator of International Art at the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.