Needlework ... de Medici in her Canberra studio (above) and a detail from her work Cure for Pain (right). Photo: Marina Neil
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eX de Medici

By CATHERINE KEENAN

There are powerful reasons why artist eX de Medici shut her tattoo studio to focus on her “straight work” but she doesn’t want to discuss them. Nor does she want identifying photos of herself published. Tattooing, she says carefully, is a very difficult industry, largely run by bikie gangs. Let’s just leave it at that for now.

De Medici still tattoos but only full-body suits for a dozen or so clients at her home in Canberra. These are long-term projects that might take 15 years: up to three years to plan a design the people will be happy with for the rest of their lives, then short sessions limited by the pain a person can stand at any one time. “One woman comes up from Melbourne and has a two-hour window and that’s it,” she says. “It’s a very slow process.”

Yet de Medici much prefers it to working in a tattoo studio. Don’t get her started on how much she hated doing unicorns.

De Medici became a tattooist in her late 20s, when she was making no money out of installments and performance art. She was funded by the Australia Council to apprentice herself to a female tattooist in Los Angeles and was shocked by how difficult the work was. She thought she could draw but now her canvas was alive, moving and varied. She reckons it took 10 years to become good at tattooing.

“Black skin is so soft – it’s like a hot knife through butter,” she says. “White skin is like a chainsaw through a tyre. Asian skin is the best of the best. It’s incredibly refined skin. It’s virtually pore-less. Virtually no hair, so no hair follicles. We always pray for Asian skin.”

De Medici, 52, is thin, with raked-back grey hair and a smoker’s throaty laugh. She wears no makeup, minimal jewellery and has a raw, unpredictable authority about her, with brief flashes of tattoos creeping out from under her black shirt and baggy jeans.

We’re at her red-brick home in an outlying Canberra suburb and it’s about as far from anyone’s idea of artistic Bohemia as you can get. The house is spotlessly clean and Spartan, with a single picture in the living room.

De Medici was born and raised in Canberra and loves it. “Canberra really appeals to my aesthetics,” she says. “Like Singapore, too. Make it clinical!” Only little things give her away, like a skull-and-bone lampshade in the centre of the ceiling.

In the next few weeks, de Medici’s “straight work” will take the spotlight, when her exhibition, Need Head, opens in Sydney. The two sides of her work share many characteristics, most notably a painstaking attention to detail. In her art this is played out over giant surfaces, with one picture in the exhibition four metres across.

Much of her recent work came out of a stint as an official war artist in the Solomon Islands and travels in Iran. There’s plenty of meticulously rendered foliage incongruously winding around gas masks, guns and helmets.

Her recurring use of violent imagery is all down to John Howard, she says. On the night he was elected prime minister in 1996, de Medici sat in a hotel room in Adelaide thinking: “This is really bad news.”

“I felt that he was just an out-and-out fascist, actually,” she says.

So she made a decision to radically change her artwork. Until then she’d been into photography, installations and performance art. Some of it related to tattooing, such as the 120 photographs she took around Australia and Europe of people in those dazed moments after she’d given them a tattoo. Or the imprints she would take of new tattoos.

“If a person was a really good bleeder I’d take a swab of their tattoo, which would be a picture in blood,” she says. “They were exhibited at the first Adelaide Biennale, a giant wall of them.”

De Medici is opinionated about politics, to say the least, and decided that this kind of work would never get through to the people she wanted to talk to: the ones who had voted for Howard. So she changed her practice. “I wanted to use a language which they understand, which is in your face, it’s plain as day, nothing difficult, because they’re not up for anything difficult. I wanted to do things they can get.”

So she started painting her lovingly rendered guns and hand grenades, her skulls and historically accurate war helmets. Her theory was, once these putative Liberals engaged with the picture they would be jolted by its subversive message, which is, she says, that fascism and gangsterism are not that far apart. She thinks of her pictures as “incendiary devices”. “They get sucked into looking at it but then it will blow up in their face,” she says. “It’s like making it easy for a kid. I’m making it easy for the Liberal Party.”

Isn’t there a danger in strategy, I ask, of people missi
As she says, boys and soldiers tend to love her work; girls, not so much. Isn't that because they're responding to the guns? "Often they do. They'll go, 'Oh cool!' But then, 'Why is that?'"

She says she still feels queasy when she looks at her pictures. "It totally makes me sick," she says. "Because in many ways it goes against my aesthetics in every way."

Tattooing, in contrast, is easy for her to love. She doesn't have many tattoos herself and her favourite is a malu, a traditional Samoan tattoo that she got over both thighs 18 years ago. It was done in the traditional manner using little combs, like rakes, made of shell or bone, that are banged into the skin with soot. "It takes three knocks to get it to penetrate the skin. It's utterly brutal," she says. "It's like torture."

It's usually done over two days, one leg for each day. "But I just said at the end of one leg, 'You'd better do the other leg now, because I will not come back tomorrow.' You can't walk for a couple of days. You've got to squeeze the soot out of every hole every day."

She hasn't had what she calls a "serious tattoo" since, though she's let a few apprentices practise on her. "It was a very profound experience."

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Skin deep

Can someone donate their tattooed skin to a gallery after they die? This is the question eX de Medici is exploring with Geoff Ostling, now in his mid-60s. For 15 years, de Medici covered Ostling's body with tattoos of native Australian flowers and they want to give his skin to the National Gallery of Australia when he dies.

In Japan, they found out it's possible to preserve the skin, if gruesome. Flaying takes about four weeks but the more difficult thing is that the flayer must get the body in peak condition. "Technically, he needs to die in a controlled situation," de Medici says. "In NSW, close to a refrigerator. If he dies overseas, there's probably no hope."

De Medici has discussed the project with the National Gallery of Australia but a decision can't be made on whether the gallery will accept the gift until it is presented as an object to the board. De Medici hopes that will happen one day. CK
It's a very profound experience, because you have to control yourself," she says. "You have to control your mind ... I think it was the extremeness of it that satiated me in some way for ink."

There is, as is probably obvious by now, something a little obsessive about de Medici. (Her first name is an abbreviation of her confirmation name, Xavier; her surname is a joke derived from her time in the Canberra punk scene.) She is utterly gripped by what she does and always has been. "And that does not make for good relationships," she says. She doesn't have children and while she's had partners, is single now. "I always say, 'Don't make me make a choice.' But they always do."

Before meeting her, I wondered whether her fear of bikies and rules about photographs were a little paranoid, or at least overplayed. It's hard to be sure but if even some of the stories she tells — strictly off the record — are true, then she has good reason to be wary. She's a person who digs her heels in and this is an issue she's taken a stand on: refusing to give in, standing there with her chest puffed out, a sense of righteousness glowing off her.

She'd never give up tattooing altogether. She loves it too much. "It's very different from the gallery work," she says.

"I don't treat it as a business in any terms. I call it my service to other people. Probably because art is so self-centred and so singular for a luxury group and the tattoos counterbalance that, to a degree."

Need Head opens at Sullivan + Strumpf Fine Art, Zetland, on Tuesday and runs until May 21.