"I don't borrow imagery," declares eX de Medici with scintillating brusqueness in a conversation about the gothic death's heads and militaria that populate her work, "because that would be like casually picking up an image and walking away with it, taking something from a context that leaves you untouched. My relationship to those sources, instead, is parasitic." A parasite is an unwelcome guest, I suggest; it literally means eating alongside, like someone who consumes another's food and moves in on their host to live off them. "Like a wasp," she unhesitatingly adds.

Don't miss the exquisitely macabre cruelty in this allusion to the wasp that lays its eggs inside a living host, whose flesh then becomes fresh food for the brood that hatches inside it. It's the sort of ferocious femininity unforgettable invoked by the maternal predator of the movie Alien. And it's a stinging rebuke to the blithe consumer practice of strategic scrounging or mischievous sampling of imagery once called appropriation — now more politely called remediation — and from which we might distinguish de Medici's ambiguously alluring art laced with menace in the way that hacking secretive diplomatic correspondence is different from shoplifting. When de Medici configures handguns to form the swastika or the Celtic triskelion, when she adopts a motif from fascist biker culture or from baroque Catholicism, it's not like borrowing a book from a library but like burrowing into another body.

And the likeness to the wasp has an especially provocative poetic impact in de Medici's case. How can one fail to picture this artist — who since 1990 has also worked as a tattooist, having done an apprenticeship in Los Angeles — drawing and painting in the same way that she might be arched over a sensitive, naked spot on the body as she meticulously operates the tattoo needle? A stinger that impregnates the skin with line and colour and pattern; that punctures and injects and in a sense infects flesh with the bloom and blossom of its ink. The tattoo, explains de Medici, lives in the skin and with the skin's complexion, its suppleness and all its incidents. And tattooing is a physically intimate performance: "You're up close to another body, whose bare skin is bleeding on you." Evidently, de Medici considers this exchange of ink and blood an aesthetic (and almost sacramental) form, collecting and exhibiting her bloodstained surgical gauze swabs that — pungent as they may be — are erotically charged residue, as indexes of haemo-eroticism — carry the delicate and elusive imprint of artistic work in progress.

It's this combination of delicacy with erotic force that makes de Medici's preference for watercolour — a medium that would be otherwise considered traditional and demure — compellingly transgressive. Conventionally the idiom of evanescent, luminous landscape sketches or...
patiently observed and detailed natural history illustration, watercolour is unforgiving and so demands as much precision; as it permits buoyancy and deftness. Either way, watercolour invokes intimacy, suppleness and translucency; features, in another pitch, of the tattoo. And de Medici’s discipline with tattooing is commensurate with her dedication to natural history illustration, having now studiously worked for about 12 years with the CSIRO’s entomology collection in Canberra. But this is, of course, the parasite at work, Her intricate studies of moth specimens, scaled up to gargantuan size, reveal them to be fitted out with ordinance and body armour, as if they were transgenic, cyborg suicide bombers – and also, pinned out in heraldic poses, to be luxuriously adorned emblems of militaristic state power, insignia as potent as the Nazi eagle.

For all its lush and decorative vitality, the foliage that swarms through de Medici’s scenery has a diabolical complicity with the industry of warfare, and consequently has a moral duplicity. The garlands that festoon machine guns don’t just pacify the weapon; they camouflage it, or they embellish it with ceremonial honours. The unsettling yet captivating effect is reminiscent of those bizarre images left behind by Taliban warriors fleeing Kabul who, having raided the stores of cosmetics and props in the commercial portrait studies they had forcibly closed down, photographed themselves wearing lipstick and eyeliner and holding plastic bouquets beside their Kalashnikovs. In the monumental work Cure for Pain, which will be the centrepiece of her forthcoming exhibition in Sydney, a panorama of forlorn combat helmets and gas masks that resemble human skulls strewn about on a killing field, poetically reclaimed by flowering undergrowth that cushions them. But this is not just a cemetery; the masks become monstrous insect death’s heads looming out of a choking jungle, the helmets become carapaces shed during some kind of metamorphosis. Nature thrives on this violence, Its crimson flowers are flecks, blotches and stains of blood. Where there’s the smell of a war machine and the scent of flowers, you’ll find a wasp.

eX de Medici’s next exhibition Need Head, which includes the major piece Cure for Pain, will be staged at Sullivan+Strumpf Fine Art in Sydney from 3 to 21 May 2011.

From far left:
eX de Medici. Cure for Pain, 2010. detail, watercolour on paper, 415 x 114cm.
eX de Medici. Skinny Day Ambush (Super Family), 2007. Watercolour on paper, 114 x 192cm.
COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND SULLIVAN+STRUMPF FINE ART, SYDNEY
JOANNA STRUMPF
DIRECTOR, SULLIVAN+STRUMPF FINE ART

"Her work is like a package," says Sullivan+Strumpf Fine Art co-director Joanna Strumpf, "a package containing something dangerous. It's a beautiful package [but] unwrap it and it holds a disarming message about the nature of violence and power.

eX de Medici is recognised for responding to particular contexts in such work. For example in the late 1980s when HIV panic hit Australia she exhibited portraits of tattoos alongside framed blood swabs. More recently in 2009, while participating in the official war artist program, she produced watercolours of war memorabilia including guns, bombs and skulls.

Strumpf and her co-director Ursula Sullivan first saw Medici's work in the fringe component of the Melbourne Art Fair. "We encountered this extraordinary work. The Blue Bower ... it's a crazy arrangement of blue coloured objects. It was constructed rather like the way a bowerbird collects anything to create something. She does these tableau pieces about every 18 months." One of these large-scale works will be on show in her May exhibition, her first in Sydney since 2007. The exhibition will also include 25 watercolour studies measuring 57 by 72 centimetres, each selling for just under $10,000. By comparison, works on paper measuring 30 by 40 centimetres sold for around $1,000 in 2000.

To date, eight of de Medici's works have been put forward for auction in Australia. The highest price was achieved at Deutscher+Hackett in 2008 for the work on paper A Cool Hand With Dice. It sold for $52,000 at the lower end of its $50,000 to $70,000 estimate.

With 15 solo shows to her credit and inclusion in significant collections such as the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Australian High Commission, CSIRO, National Gallery of Australia, National Portrait Gallery and Queensland Art Gallery, Strumpf is very confident of Medici's future. "She is meticulous, articulate, erudite and generous. She extends herself beyond average and that's what makes her extraordinary."

Courtney Kidd
"eX de Medici must be the only Australian tattooist to get a grant from the Australia Council," says Canberra Museum & Gallery curator Deborah Clark, who first sighted de Medici's work in the 1980s. Clark admired Medici's early tattoos, installations and large format photocopies and became intrigued with the capacity of her work to straddle popular culture and high art.

Clark clearly admires de Medici's drawings and watercolours. "They bring a contemporary perspective to the vanitas tradition ... [they are] extraordinary layered compositions that employ motifs and symbols both historically loaded and yet completely current. And her exquisite versions of natural history illustrations have been created at a time when humans are profoundly reconsidering our relationships with the natural world."

She predicts de Medici will be regarded in time as one of the most important artists of her generation. Indeed, Clark and her husband were thinking of taking out a second mortgage so they could buy "the big and unbelievable Yellow Skulls" but "David Walsh beat us to it, bought it for MONA [the Museum of Old and New Art]."

Courtney Kidd

From far left:

eX de Medici, Sleepwalking with Bishard's Needle, 2011, detail, watercolour on paper, 120 x 114cm. COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND SULLIVAN+STRUMPF FINE ART, SYDNEY

eX de Medici, Big Skull, 2005-6. Watercolour on paper. COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND SULLIVAN+STRUMPF FINE ART, SYDNEY

eX de Medici, Sent more meat, 2008-9. Pen, ink and mogra on paper. 114 x 293cm. COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND KAREN WOODBURY GALLERY, MELBOURNE