Analysing her momentous 2007 victory over John Howard in Bennelong, Maxine McKew attributed it to what Paul Keating had described as ‘the party’s innate altruism’. McKew compared this to the sentiment that had dominated Australia in the eleven years since Howard’s election; to Howard’s 1996 election promise to make Australians feel relaxed and comfortable. Quizzed then about whether feeling ‘relaxed and comfortable’ was a sufficient national agenda, Howard replied that he knew the temper of national sentiment. This embrace of apathy as a societal norm, irrespective of the reality of party politics, set this period apart. Since 1996 eX de Medici has challenged her audience to refuse the lures of Howard’s promise. Subsequent elections and increasingly explicit expressions of who was to be relaxed and comfortable only increased the stakes as Australia abandoned itself to the eddies of international forces, even embracing Pauline Hanson’s far right. In tracking this abrupt shift, de Medici determined on a strategy which would allow her to communicate her political concerns through her practice. The issue was not the negotiation of state censorship but rather her audiences’ self censorship and deliberate, self-protective apathy. The strategy drove her to extraordinary ends.

My strategy was to produce the most conservative objects I could think of. The objects had to be instantly recognisable, visually seductive, skillful, accessible, reactionary and psychologically nauseating. The objects track the emergence and unfolding of new, improved method in an old way of thinking.

Since Howard’s election de Medici has cold-bloodedly dissected the entrails of an Australia which had chosen to embrace the least attractive aspects of its character. Like some horrific picture of Dorian Grey writ on a national scale, de Medici’s portraits of the national psyche, like that of the eponymous hero, reveal the putrefaction of a spirit obsessed with self-gratification, defined by an almost pathological disregard for others and consequences. As we slowly recognise our society in these paintings they leave us stained with horror and lingering dread.

Since 1996 each of de Medici’s exhibitions has been structured around one enormous watercolour which is supported by a series of satellite and preparatory works. Sometimes it is easy to imagine the exhibitions as discrete units, but in the studio these works are part of an ongoing flow, united not only by the ephemera of daily life and snatches of radio commentary but also by the lag time of images which are not yet finished, and sketchy premonitions of future directions. De Medici works in series, long threads of which run from the earliest days of the agog gallery – and even before – and can be glimpsed whistling into the future. This exhibition brings these big pictures together in conversation for the first time: big blue, big red, big green, big yellow and big black prey on the internal space of the gallery. The creeping inanity of their nominal subjects piles up, ramps up, drives up the stakes in our wilful desire to ignore the ubiquitous banality of evil. The tone of these works can be distinctly Wildean, exquisitely sado-masochistic as the portraits putrefy while the bloom of youth and innocence miraculously remain on the face of Australia Felix. In a city that lives politics and power it should be no surprise to find an artist with de Medici’s passionate commitment to clear sight. Perhaps nowhere else is the link between unexamined ideologies and the ruinous consequences of ill-considered policy so transparent. De Medici’s works bully us into recognition, realisation and (hopefully) change in the real world. She has consistently shown less interest in the hermetic dialogues of contemporary art than in spaces offering opportunities for active engagement. Her work as a tattooist, surely the only medium more risky than watercolour, and as Artist-Fellow with CSIRO Department of Entomology, are both disciplines where clarity of thought in relation to engagement with both audience and subject are pressing and urgent. Her response to the politics of apathy is similarly focused; little surprise that her works pull few punches, piling bile on accusation, horror on horror. When de Medici spoke of her desire to ‘produce the most conservative objects …
visually seductive, skilful, accessible, reactionary and psychologically nauseating’, she was not speaking metaphorically.

De Medici opens this conversation with us in the most conservative, even reactionary language available. She seduces with her skilful manipulation of a medium of the margins, until recently strongly identified with the non-professional, female dilettante, and discounted representational strategies. The technical virtuosity of these works is quite simply stunning. We are drawn haplessly to the works by the sheer beauty of the surface and the artist’s command of ornament and excess. Our eyes linger on reflections of light caught in a volume, colour harmonies, lyrical lines and traceries, compositional complexities, and perceptive literary references. We are awed by her skill in the lost art of representation, but above all by her long-winning run in the game of bluff and dare which is watercolour. These watercolours can be over five metres long.

The fundamental accessibility of these works appeals to anyone who has admired a biscuit tin. They offer a reactionary pleasure in their nominal subjects; the bric-a-brac of everyday use and the weaponry we see routinely on our screens. De Medici paints the debris of our everyday lives, what we handle and see handled on a daily basis. The expensive trinkets longed for, the prized poppies in a neighbour’s garden, souvenirs of the battlefields; these objects are both real and part of the imagery with which we surround ourselves. In these enormous works the tumbling excess of this detritus multiplies.

Then the real subject is apprehended and we are caught in a disquieting loop of attraction and repulsion. Something happens to our experience of critical distance. The repulsion we feel on looking at de Medici’s work is not simply the subject. It is that having been momentarily seduced by the subject’s beauty, we are made to understand its attraction and its power. Even by looking at de Medici’s work we somehow become complicit in a questionable state of mind. De Medici’s work insists that we are already complicit in this unsavoury power politics – the decision to ignore it is always and already a choice. De Medici’s relationship with her audience, always generous but alternately beguiling and berating, playing with our gag reflex, goes a long way towards understanding her work.

Although we surround ourselves with imagery, we are often easily satisfied with highly processed pictures and receive them uncritically. We are content with received representations of our world that serve another agenda, whether big business, commercial gain, or news information made for purpose. Too often we fail to think how strategically these images shape our understanding of the world. Too often we quite simply refuse to engage with the imagery which invades our lives and our living rooms and threatens our domestic comfort. In de Medici’s work we are offered something very different. Contrary to the superficial strategies de Medici deploys to lure us to her work, at the heart of each work is a complex and well researched political position which deals with profoundly unpalatable truths. Doug Hall phrased it nicely:

She is politically astute, morally attuned and loathes cant and hypocrisy, and approaches us with a masterly and beguiling...
Like Dorian Grey we find it difficult to gaze on these portraits. De Medici speaks of the nausea induced by her own work in herself and others. She lures us in, seduces through the pleasures of the senses. Then we understand what we are taking pleasure in and retch. Every time de Medici shows me a new work she looks at my face to test my reaction — am I overwhelmed? Am I revolted? She watches me trace a curve with my fingers following the cherry blossoms which wreathe an instrument of death. She sees me catch my breath as I feel the shiver of the petals on the breeze and she sees my face close down as I struggle to respond to the implacable presence of gun metal and plastics, smell the rich iron clots pooling around its past and see the cherry blossom pink turn the colour of diluted blood before my eyes. Are we still relaxed and comfortable? Are we feeling nauseous yet? Have we started to think about the issue at hand?

When the works of the last fifteen years are brought together in conversation, they chart turning points and tensions. Kelly Gellatly explores this more fully in her catalogue essay. The theory of everything, (2005) and Live the (big black) dream (2006) hold a central role in this conversation. One work drowns in this excess of luxurious visuality and the other anticipates the inevitable consequence of such intemperate consumption. The inevitable crash consequent on the Theory of everything is realised in the prescient Live the (big black) dream. In the space between these two works we see the implosion of late 20th century global capitalism, based on a financial system that laundered unrepayable debt into get-rich-quick schemes and pocketed the difference. The tsunami unleashed by such institutionalised veniality is not yet exhausted as tidal surge and backwash follow each other still too fast to predict the outcome.

The other major works of this period are similarly open to close reading. In each work de Medici’s keen intelligence seizes the heart of an issue and makes it visible. Often we are made to see an ethical choice which can be phrased very simply, perhaps brutally. In de Medici’s hands the thin membrane which divides life and death is explicit. From about 2002, following the self-disciplined apprenticeship described in the catalogue so beautifully by Dr Marianne Horak, de Medici created an extended metaphor for this fragile balance of life and death, delicacy and violence. As she feathered the skulls and guns with the scales of the tiny moths she studied, the surfaces acquired an almost visionary oscillation. The moth’s vigorous variation in response to opportunity forms pelts over the cold sterility of the gun or bony ridges of the skull. This juxtaposition of irreconcilable elements is exquisitely deployed in Skinny day ambush (Superfamily) (2007) where the vanity of a society which consumes to excess and glorifies emaciation is driven to its logical conclusion. In Eutelost has turned you off (2013), which references Operation Vigilant Resolve — the failed US capture of the Iraqi city of Fallujah in 2004, the feathering transforms again to become an exposed, blood-pumping artery, as incongruous as the prayer beads and cherry blossoms to this tactical weapon. In the painting the intersection of religion, life and death seem incongruous, not so in real life.

De Medici’s most recent work in this exhibition is the result of a remarkable exchange with the scholarly Master Calligrapher, Mahmoud Rahbaran, based at the Jame (Friday) Mosque in Yazd, Iran. Defying the intellectual apathy of our society de Medici sought out the people so
demonised by the West. De Medici’s travels in Iran have inspired in her a deep respect for this country, its people and its contradictions. During her penultimate trip in 2012 de Medici visited, sketched and photographed the Shir-Kuh mountains, the mythic heartland of Persian virtue. At home in Canberra she worked this harsh refuge up as a massive landscape measuring over five metres, an expression of good faith in the Persian culture she had come to appreciate in previous visits, with the intention of returning with it to Iran. On her most recent trip Mahmoud Rahbaran took up de Medici’s challenge and wrote the sky. He chose a couplet from Ferdowsi’s classic 11th century Persian poem the _Shahnameh_, and de Medici completed the associated traditional decoration under his authority. The lines Mahmoud Rahbaran chose to illuminate for this work have been translated recently as:

  Count Persia as a ruin, as the lair
  Of lions and leopards, look now and despair

It is the moment in the great epic when a king is deposed by his son and the faithful musician bewails what he sees as the inevitable future. This section of Ferdowsi’s text is often read as a lament for a lost mythic past. The _Shahnameh_ occupies an ambiguous place in contemporary Iran. It is the nation’s most revered literary text, a statement of nationalist purity, yet it was written for the pre-Islamic nation, a paean to what was treasured in a contested culture. Like Shakespeare, the _Shahnameh_’s political versatility is key to its eternal relevance. How should we choose to interpret these gilded words written across _Real Estate_ (2013)? Is it enough to find present comfort in the classic poetry of an 11th century author or should we listen for the voice of the individual through this weighty tradition inspiring and warning of the price of failure?

2. Liz Jackson’s interview with John Howard, during the 1996 Election Campaign, for ‘An Average Australian Bloke’, _Four Corners_, ABC TV, first broadcast 19 February 1996; abc.net.au/4corners/content/2004/s1212701.htm
3. Ibid.
5. eX’s work as a tattoo artist is the subject of _Skin_ (2008), one part of a 4-part documentary directed by Rhys Graham and produced by Michael McMahon and Tony Ayers; _Skin_ was shown at the 2009 Tribeca Film Festival, New York; see also Maurice O’Riordan, ‘Gotcha ... under my skin: eX de Medici’, _Art Monthly Australia_, no.212, Aug 2008, p. 32-33.

This article is a reprint of the curatorial essay for the catalogue accompanying the exhibition _Cold Blooded_, eX de Medici, curated by Dr Jenny McFarlane, currently showing at the ANU Drill Hall Gallery, Canberra, 28 June to 11 August 2013. _Cold Blooded_ is the artist’s first survey exhibition; the hard-cover catalogue (96pp) also features writings on the artist by Terence Maloon, Doug Hall, Kelly Gelatly and Marianne Horak.

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