

'A loop of attraction and repulsion'

Ground-breaking Canberra artist eX de Medici continues to intrigue and stir as she opens a new exhibition.

By Sally Pryor
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This picture makes me sick. But I can't stop looking at it. This picture makes me want to throw up. I hate it, but I'm still looking at it.

To Canberra artist eX de Medici, these were some of the most satisfying comments left at an exhibition of her works some years ago. The wonder and repulsion, the feeling of having the rug ripped from underneath your feet, even as you thought you were just out for an afternoon of gallery hopping. You wish you hadn't looked, or rather, you wish you had been able to turn away once you realised what it was you were looking at.



Red Colony

This is exactly what eX de Medici wants you to feel, as you gaze at the vast and delicate beauty of her epic watercolours. To feel seduced, and then repelled almost before you realise what's happening.

It might be worth steeling yourself, then, before stepping over the threshold of the Drill Hall Gallery, which from next week is showing a large survey of de Medici's work as part of Canberra's centenary celebrations.

It's an apt choice of show in many ways.

After all, Canberra is, for all our grumbling about the negative associations, the place where politics happen.

And few artists have explored these politics with such a sharp, analytical and unsparing eye as de Medici. Contemporary society, stripped back and ugly, and the politics that define it, is her playground.

De Medici is also, as it happens, a long-time Canberra resident, and has professed, on more than one occasion, that she would never live anywhere else.

She travels frequently - she was commissioned by the Australian War Memorial in 2010, for example, to travel to the Solomon Islands as an official war artist - and has lately visited Iran several times. Her art, too, is scattered around the country, in various state and national collections, as well as, intriguingly, in several private collections.

But de Medici has her base in a house on a tree-lined street in a Canberra suburb, which is where I find myself on a sleety week-day morning. Those familiar with her work might expect the artist to be flinty, caustic or remote - she flatly declines, for example, to have her photograph taken - but she is none of these things. She chats easily and expansively about various subjects, and delights in detailing the reactions to some of her artworks.

She is passionate about politics - in the social justice sense, that is, rather than the day-to-day keruffles up on the hill. And she believes art should be a collaborative process, which is why she has the show's curator, Jenny McFarlane, and the Drill Hall's exhibition curator, Tony Oates, over to join in the chat.

We drink tea from comically large cups, and eat ginger biscuits and chocolate bullets, and the talk ranges for miles: guns, John Howard, corporate greed, Twitter, moths, Arnhem Land.

The show is by no means a complete retrospective - de Medici is a renowned tattoo artist, for example - and only covers works from the past decade and a half, as well as three new works. One is a striking, five-metre landscape of Iran - a country that fascinates her, and to which she has travelled three times.

"It certainly doesn't include everything that eX has ever done, or even an insight into the range of things that eX does, because there are huge aspects of her work that it doesn't even touch on," McFarlane says.

"There is no tattoo, there are no photographs, it's not installation, there's no performance."

Instead, there are pivotal pieces from each of the major shows de Medici has staged in the past decade.

"eX hasn't had a show in Canberra for a very long time, and she beavers away here - I don't know if that's the right word - she slaves away, works on this incredible work, and then she sends it interstate, it gets sold and we never see it!" McFarlane says.

"These are incredibly complex works, in terms of the imagery that you've caught up in them, and the meanings that are bound up in there as well."

The works are indeed complex, but at first glance, they seem to be at least recognisable in terms of subject matter. We see the detritus of combat - guns and helmets - and symbols of death - skulls and red flowers. There are also diamonds, and rusting engines.



That's a good dog (photo: Rob Little)

De Medici says she has former prime minister John Howard to thank for the direction her work has taken since he came to power in 1996.

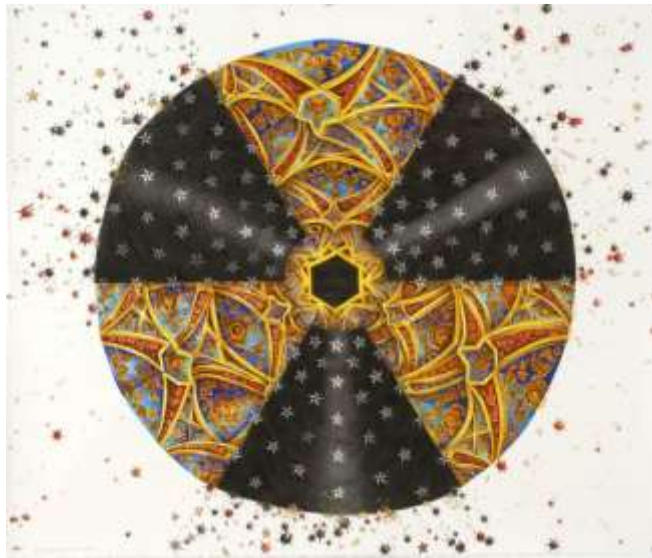
"I decided to take a tack, which was an ultra-conservative tack with the work," she says.

"We had achieved an ultra-conservative government, and so I wanted to make the work as a discussion of that. I'm probably the oldest person in this room, Howard was the treasurer under Malcolm Fraser, and I was coming out of high school when their full blasting plans were already under way. You know, their hatred of youth, the mass unemployment, the blaming of youth for every trouble that this country was having. It was like a horror show for me, the fact that he was coming back as the boss. So I wanted to make work that conservative eyes would see. See and blow up in their face!"

Her work has been succeeding in this mission - for viewers of any political persuasion, really - ever since.

In an essay written for the show's catalogue - beautifully produced, with a blush-pink cover adorned with a glistening black AK-47 - McFarlane describes the artist's signature mode: "De Medici paints the debris of our everyday lives, what we handle and see handled on a daily basis," she says.

"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."



Proximity to Authority (Isfahan)

In the soothing surrounds of de Medici's spare and orderly studio, Oates reflects similarly on the delicate balance in de Medici's works.

"There's the delicacy of a watercolour... that attracts people in an instant, but then the brutality hits them once they get past that first step," he says.

"The subject matter comes to the fore before anyone's got a chance to turn away, and get away from it. So they're engaged before they have a chance to be repelled."

McFarlane likens the work to unexploded ordnance, concealed in the undergrowth, that you don't notice until you step on them.

In fact, nothing could please de Medici more than hearing how disconcerted people are when viewing her work.

"I think some of them have quite particular effects," she says.

"The Red one is the earliest discussion I had discussing the corporation, that sort of seizure of fertility, the seizure of nature in many ways. There were many comments, because that was originally shown at CMAG ... and then it went to Melbourne, because I submitted it to the works on paper prize at Mornington. There were a lot of comments in the comments book, and every one of them was 'This picture makes me sick', and it was absolutely the exact response I wanted."

Oates says the exhibition reflects the country's political trajectory in the years and governments since.

"Those paintings go over a series of time, but you get to that death painting that's all black and kind of blown up," he says.



The theory of everything (photo: Rob Little)

De Medici loves the story behind this one - part of a pair that begins with a diamond-encrusted poodle and ends in a grim train crash. This image, she later realised, foreshadowed the global financial crisis by 18 months. "They're a nice pair, and I was absolutely conscious at the time I was making the poodle that there was this absolute excess," she says.

"The one thing that really drove me with the poodle was that Howard had organised with the Commonwealth Bank for mums and dads to borrow money to buy shares, only for shares. So they could borrow a minimum of \$20,000, and these are people with no bloody money, or still owing massive amounts to the banks, to have an extra part of their mortgage to become a nation of shareholders, and I thought that this was pure folly ... that everybody thought that they would have exponential growth. The only thing that can come from that is the black one."

She recounts how in an interview at the Queensland Art Gallery, which owns the work, after she had explained the significance of the diamond-encrusted poodle and chandelier among a litter of skulls, pills and guns, she was asked about the black companion.



Live the (big black) dream

"I said, 'Well, the black's going to come, the black hasn't happened yet!' And [the curator] laughed, and said, 'You are such a paranoid freak, eX!'"

De Medici was, of course, wickedly delighted when the global financial crisis hit the following year.

"The day that that was announced, I shot her an email and said, 'Who's laughing now? I want an apology!' " she says, with a throaty laugh.

McFarlane says one of the challenges in putting together the show was that much of de Medici's work is held interstate, in both private and state collections. De Medici, it would seem, is too successful for her work to stay put in Canberra, although the artist herself has proclaimed many a time her love for her home town, where she has chosen to stay.

Although the Canberra art market is limited in terms of commercial opportunities - de Medici says the city has no collector's mentality when it comes to art - the Drill Hall has chosen to honour Canberra in its centenary year by honouring one of the city's most significant living artists.

"The specific reference for us is to show a Canberra artist who's been working and living here for a long time," Oates says, to vigorous nodding from de Medici.

"And stayed!" she says.

"I will stand by this. I've done a lot of travelling outside of Australia, and I think Canberra is truly one of the most beautiful cities in the world."

But McFarlane thinks the Canberra connection goes deeper than just a love for the winter skies and open space.

"It's not just that, it's also the politics of the place," she says.

"Ex's work is fundamentally political. You are not supposed to stand by and say, 'That's pretty.' If you left it at that, then there would be something wrong with you. My interpretation of the way eX operates, as she's intimated already, is that she really wants you to be drawn in by the beauty of the work, but she wants you to act, to take check."

De Medici agrees, but points out that she has also changed the way she perceives the issues and themes that she constantly returns to.

"The older I've gotten, the more complex everything is," she says.

"I think you don't maybe know the endless layers that sit behind everything, so I think with these [works], they kind of embody this endless complexity and endless kind of mistake, blunders over blunders over blunders."

So is that she's more accepting of the inevitability of blunders and compromise in Australian politics?

"Blunder equals human. So there's still a pattern in blunder," she says.

And in case you want to take away more from the show than an oblique feeling of shame and nausea, de Medici has also designed a T-shirt for the exhibition.

"While you talked shit on Facebook, they blew up our world," it reads.

De Medici laughs wickedly at the thought of people embracing the message.

"I want children to be wearing them!" she says.

***Cold-blooded: eX de Medici* opens at the Drill Hall on June 28, and runs until August 11.**