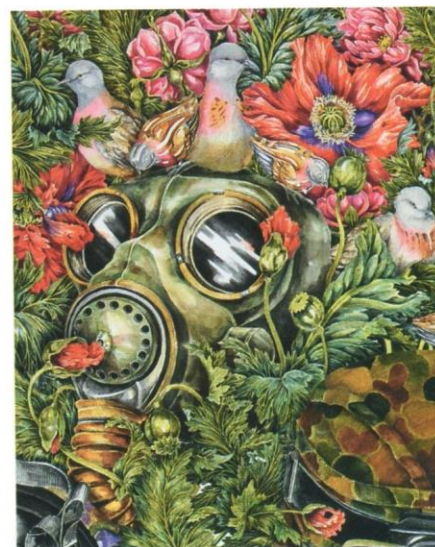


EXCESS, BEAUTY, FRAGILITY ... DEATH

KELLY GELLATLY



When presented with the wealth of images by eX de Medici that comprise this survey exhibition, I experienced something I have never felt before when looking at her work: a rush of anxiety – a quickening in the chest – somewhere between the uncomfortable sensations of nausea and panic. I assumed that this might be a reaction to the short deadline to encapsulate and explore such a complex and multilayered practice, yet, returning to the images time and again has assured me this was not the case, and that the strange affects to which I have been privy are a reaction to the works themselves. As these works scroll across my screen – without the breathing space provided by the white walls of the gallery when they are seen 'in the flesh', the known distortions of scale that come with reproduction are accompanied by a surprising awareness of the physiological effects created by the density of their imagery and the sense of urgency generated by masses of writhing and curling forms that cloak the plethora of objects on display and seem literally to subsume the pictorial space. As political tensions globally have ramped up in recent years (think, even within the last few months, of Australia's ongoing and agonising refugee debate; the difficulties arising from the withdrawal of troops in Afghanistan; the threat of the collapse of the Euro Zone, and the crisis in Syria) so too has the exquisite excess of the artist's large-scale watercolours. Against the saga of recrimination and conflict forming the backdrop to the minutiae of our daily lives, finding the "whole premise of power and violence utterly overwhelming", de Medici has employed the most old-fashioned and conservative means to make comment. At once mesmerisingly beautiful and terrifying to behold, her works offer not a glimmer of hope nor a hint of retribution. We are instead left to contemplate a kind of death-like stillness endemic to the structures of power, economics and rampant greed on which our society is built.

Initially produced as a reaction to the ultra-conservatism of John Howard's regime and its vice-like grip on this country's political discourse during the years he served as Prime Minister (1996-2007), de Medici's monumental watercolour *Blue (Bower/Bauer)* 1998-2000 [Plate 16] signalled a radical departure in her practice; inaugurating the still life genre which has consumed her ever

since this time. Constructed from a wealth of beautifully rendered 'portraits' of individual objects ranging from skulls, porcelain figurines, leg irons and Delftware (to name but a few) – skilfully woven together by an abundance of flora – this work presents the viewer with a highly codified conversation between goods and chattels that spans centuries; quietly and insistently linking Australia's colonial past with the actions and attitudes of the present.² When they are brought together in a loosely defined series, *Red (Colony)* 1999–2000 [Plate 15], *The theory of everything* 2005 [Plate 17], and *Live the (big black) dream* 2006 [Plate 18], their conversation seems to amplify to screaming pitch. These compositions shift from a palette of blue, red and glittering yellows to an endgame moment of black. Despite an escalating sense of doom and entropy in these images (*Live the (big black) dream* is surely a place from which there is no recourse), what is being said becomes increasingly difficult to de-code. However, whether we are able to understand completely the artist's iconography is beside the point. This series is like a Hollywood blockbuster franchise whose storyline becomes more complex and less easy to follow over the ensuing episodes, but whose subsequent instalments make you look at the earlier incarnations and the connections between them with renewed interest. This delicately rendered yet extreme quartet, like all of de Medici's work, eschews simple narrative and traditional tales of good versus evil. As the train-wreck finality of *Live the (big black) dream* demonstrates, the situation we are faced with and possibly assent to (the question must be asked) is more insidious, dangerous and potentially, all-encompassing.

de Medici's engagement with the *vanitas* tradition ensures that its tropes (the fragility of life, the transience of earthly pleasure and gain, and the finality of death) are skilfully embedded within her bounteous imagery. Her forays into this time-honoured, well-worn tradition extend far beyond the tendency (of course I simplify here) towards a carefully balanced and polite arrangement of plates of rotting fruit, the occasional carcass of a small animal, and an abundance of flowers in various states of decay. Works such as *Slave* 2004 [Plate 24] and *Take 5* 2005 [Plate 25] make it

immediately clear that she has not shied away from the *vanitas* tradition's most ominous symbol: the skull (which also holds the position of the "ultimate signifier" in tattooing³). Yet as the ongoing series of images of military helmets attest, this powerful emblem of death's presence can be horrifyingly registered by its absence, and by the very things supposed to shield a head from harm. To this end, *Cure for pain* 2010 [Plate 19] – which presents the viewer with a rhythmic, undulating procession of these empty vessels (also known as 'brain buckets'), serves on one level as an awe-inspiring display of de Medici's taxonomic knowledge of military paraphernalia, and on another, as requiem to the futility of war.

The attainment of power through violence is presented as inevitable within de Medici's oeuvre; figured most prominently by the symbol of the gun. While the artist's fascination with the technical precision and fetishistic beauty of guns is reflected in her painstaking depiction of their attributes (see for example, the breathtaking *Porno Image (S+WSW99 Compact 9mm)* 2005), the horrific reality of their use continues to reverberate throughout her work. The hoard of assault rifles in *Gun(n)s 'n Styx* 2005 [Plate 1] may refer to the controversy surrounding the logging of old growth forests by Gunns timber company in Tasmania's Styx Valley at this time, but on a more abstracted level, the tumble of hardware also echoes the piles of bodies of men, women and children that appear on our screens as the outcome of war and all manner of violent interventions. As de Medici has said:

The gun operates ... as an emblem or signifier of a broader intention – the desire to control by force, not by negotiation. The gun should be re-named Destroy.⁴

The gun's starring role within her practice points to its prevalence in our society. While the world continues to do battle over guns and gun control (one thinks of the notion of US citizens' 'Right to Bear Arms' and the conflict between President Obama's bid for reform and the might of the

National Rifle Association), a count of the appearance of guns while channel surfing shows how they are part of everyday life (or at least in everyday viewing experience). Given this context, the artist's interest in military-issue fire arms also takes account of the central role that the gun plays in every 'First Person Shooter' game and the increasingly blurred function of gaming technology in military training, combat and civilian recreation. Similarly, the prominence and all-seeing presence of gun-sights and scopes – which extend beyond their intended use in *Desire overcoming duality* 2006 [Plate 4] and seem capable of infiltrating the brain; perhaps these works hint at the surveillance of civilian life and its implications in contemporary warfare, our virtual addiction to technology, and the ethical questions raised by new modes of 'remote' military combat (ie. drones).

Many of the beautiful symbols for ugly things that thrive within de Medici's work (particularly skulls and guns) are swathed in a mass of tiny frond-like forms that cover the objects like the pile of a carpet. Appearing with increasing frequency within the artist's oeuvre from 2001, these other-worldly forms are not drawn from everyday experience. During this period de Medici began working with the Entomology Division of the CSIRO's Black Mountain Research Facility in Canberra (where she remains an Artist Fellow). Over time, her study of the National Insect Collection (ANIC) and specifically, the collections of Microlepidoptera (small moths) – "a massive, extensive, fabulous moment of death, mass death"⁵ – and the magical discoveries she made within this microscopic world, bled into her creative one. Almost inconceivably, the delicate, quivering forms that both cover and seem tenderly to protect the arsenal of objects within the artist's images are in fact the 'pelts' or fine downy hairs of the wings of these tiny creatures.

It is not by chance that many of the subjects that de Medici selects for scrutiny remain unclassified and therefore, scientifically, do not really exist; and that others, like those originating from regions of intense deforestation and mining (such as Papua New Guinea's controversial Ok Tedi mine) are assumed to be extinct. As a result, the presence of these lowly and all but invisible victims

of humankind's arrogance and greed speak of the quieter, far less public deaths that result from environmental degradation, while simultaneously embodying the wonder of nature in its diversity. While de Medici's images may not quite be the "blunt edged instrument"⁶ she thinks we need to get the message, their tantalising mix of horror and beauty goes a long way towards shaking complacency and provoking thought.

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1 eX de Medici quoted in Paul Flynn, "eX de Medici", *Artist Profile*, issue 5, 2008, p. 30

2 As the artist has said, the watercolours were "a discussion about colonisation. I don't agree with the Howard rhetoric 'that was then and this is now'. My family were colonisers and I think there is a secret discourse that comes through generations, influencing your attitudes towards all sorts of things. The watercolours were a kind of backhanded discussion about colonising our minds with retroactive ideas." eX de Medici quoted in Paul Flynn, p. 33

3 eX de Medici quoted in Paul Flynn, p. 33

4 eX de Medici, correspondence with the author, 15 January 2003 as quoted in Kelly Gellatly, *Soft Steel. eX de Medici - recent work*, exh. cat., Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne, 2003, p. 6

5 eX de Medici quoted in Paul Flynn, p. 35

6 As the artist has explained: "I went to the cinema recently with a friend of mine - I used to go to the cinema a lot but I hadn't been in quite a few years. I sat down and they were playing the ads before the main feature. The sound and the vision were incredible like this way and that [waving her arms about] ... and everybody was just sitting there and so I thought 'gees, this is a blunt edge instrument'. My friend couldn't hear me but I was yelling in her ear, 'if this is what people are used to, fuck we'll have to change our tactics'. If people are so desensitised to everything then a mild clobbering from me is going to look subtle." eX de Medici quoted in Paul Flynn, p. 33