

Marking time: the life and work of Canberra artist eX de Medici

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eX de Medici, left, with Chinese-born Canberra artist Wei Rong Wu. Picture: Karleen Minney

Time is of the essence when talking to eX de Medici. Not in the sense that anything is rushed, but it's a concept that comes up again and again, in different contexts.

The year we've just had. Her long career spanning four decades. Her age - 62 - and why she has no concerns about revealing it. The number of days - long days - it takes to create a work. The slow path of natural evolution, versus the rapid development of high-grade military weapons - a constant theme in her work.

And then: "What a difference 20 years makes!" she exclaims, as we stroll around a gallery space filled with some of her latest works.

Double Crossed is her first commercial show in Canberra since around 2003, a series of 13 large-scale watercolours created in her spare Canberra studio on her tree-lined suburban street during lockdown. It's midway through the show's run at Beaver Galleries, but all of the works - priced at \$36,000 each - have long been sold, and mainly to Canberra collectors.

It's ironic, given the reason she hasn't had a show here for so long is that there was once a time that no one in Canberra ever bought her work.

"I would come home with the entire show, and eventually, you just get really sick to death of coming home with everything intact," she says.

"I figured that at that time, there just weren't people buying."

But that was then, and this is now. She can't quite account for the dramatic change in attitude, but sees an obvious shift in the market.

"I think Canberra has now got people who see value in collecting art, whereas potentially then there wasn't a lot of value in that - land and cars were more interesting," she says.

"But obviously, this is some kind of signifier that, you know, our cultural landscape has grown."



eX de Medici, Entangling Ground, with calligraphy by Wei Rong Wu

And this time, she has collaborated on some of her works with an artist who is right at the start of her career. Wei Rong Wu, who has her first solo exhibition in the adjoining gallery space, is a Chinese-born artist who has lived in Canberra for 30 years. Her trajectory couldn't be more different to that of de Medici's; she brought up her two children and waited until they had finished school before embarking on her own career, enrolling at the Australian National University School of Art and developing her style and voice there.

She met de Medici in a martial arts class run by her husband; de Medici was intrigued by her calligraphy work and Chinese themes, and the two eventually travelled together to China, a place de Medici, despite being exceptionally well-travelled, had never been.

"eX said, 'I don't want you to stay in the shadows', and I said, 'No, no, I'm next to the light'," Wei Rong says.

"We started as friends... she's obviously very famous, but never arrogant. So we got along well, and as she hadn't been to China, I said why don't you make time to go with me and I'll show you what the real China is like.

"So we went there and had a really good experience."

The pair collaborated initially on an exhibition in Sydney, and each have two pieces in the Beaver exhibitions with examples of the other work within.

Wei Rong's works comprise "glimpses of China and Europe during my travels, my local landscape, current affairs and works by ancient Chinese masters".

The past year, with its distinct and disturbing theme of anti-Chinese rhetoric, has weighed heavily, and much of her work is an attempt to find "harmony and peace with beauty beyond time and space in the painting".

Although two of de Medici's pieces in the exhibition have incorporated Wei Rong's calligraphy work, she hopes the two shows shine separately.

"Wei Rong has her own language and concerns and, and again, I didn't want that to be a shadow on her," de Medici says.

Wei Rong says being in the very early stages of her career, she can learn a lot from someone like de Medici, not least the intense discipline it takes to develop her craft. She now puts aside time every night to work, and the pair text each other as they work, two night owls in the Canberra suburbs.



eX de Medici, Depleted Uranium

De Medici's works in *Double Crossed* are dramatic as a whole - the 13 pieces are large and identically shaped, with the deceptively simple forms centred on a stark white background. They aren't in the vein of many of her best-known works, which are often incredibly detailed and cacophonous canvasses of multiple themes and subjects - the detritus of combat, guns and helmets, as well as vines and plants and trucks, skulls and other symbols of death, flowers, diamonds and rusting engines.

These often cause what one curator has described as "a disquieting loop of attraction and repulsion". A viewer is drawn to the intricate and endlessly fascinating subject matter, before realising, often quite suddenly, how disturbing it is up close.

And these new works - stark and elegant as they are - are no exception. An intricate combination of watercolour and gold leaf, they are deeply beautiful and deeply subversive. The moths - a long-term motif in her work, leading to and stemming from a 1999 residency at CSIRO working with an entomologist who is still a mentor - have pieces of weaponry nestled in their forms, along with cheeky Covid symbols to signify the time of their creation.

The guns, too, are a long-term preoccupation, not least because in 2009, she was part of the Australian War Memorial's Artists In War program and spent time in the Solomon Islands. The guns and the moths, rather than being an eccentric pair of themes, are a useful metaphor.

"In a way, [the moths] are a vehicle to discuss two evolutionary paths," she says.

"One is the long, slow path of natural evolution, and the other one is a very swift part of the evolution of human weapons.

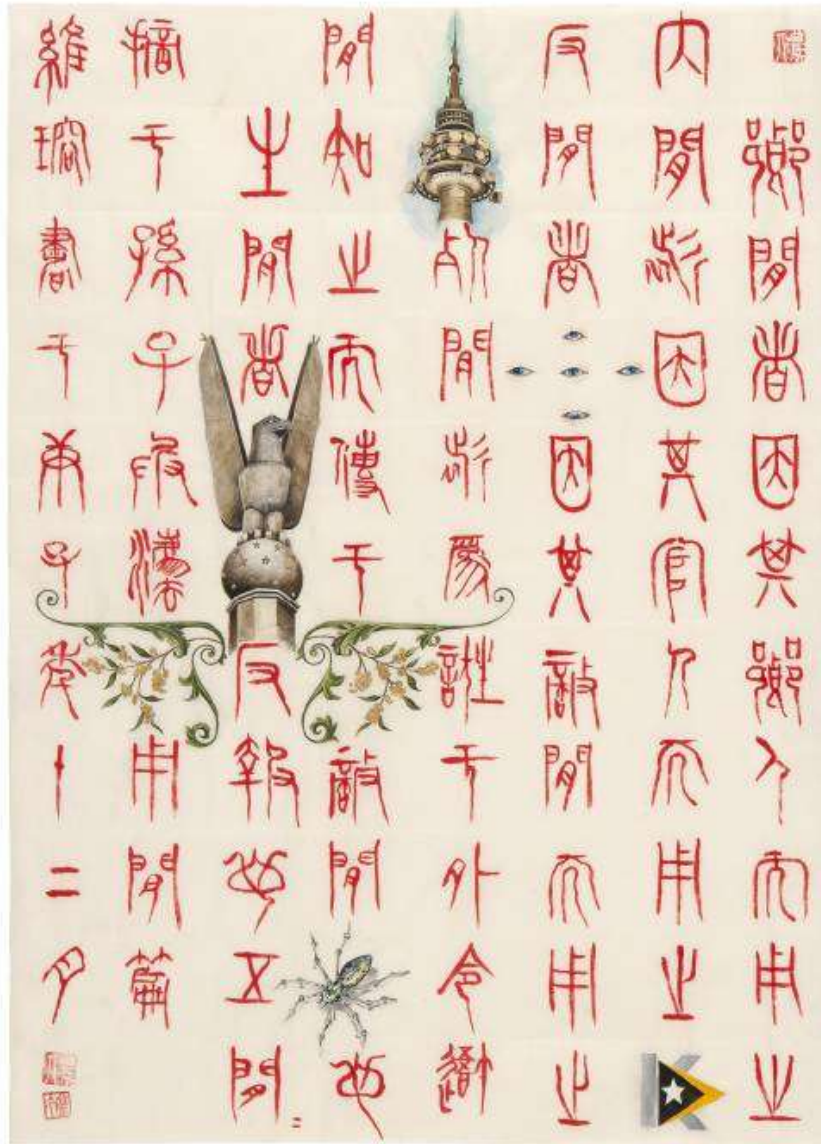
"I've worked with the weapon for a very long time now, too, so it sort of runs as these two streams that the moths have always had their weapons attached to them since I started. I think originally they were arrowheads, they were early weapons. I've sort of discussed pretty much the entire evolutionary path of weaponry."

Her work is fundamentally political, and this collection is as succinct an expression of her ethos than anything that's come before.

"In all of eX de Medici's recent art there is a desire to dazzle the eye and engage the intellect," says *The Canberra Times* art critic Sasha Grishin. "In her philosophy, in all of humankind as well as the natural and

the built world, there is a struggle going on between those who have succumbed to greed, violence and avarice and those struggling to maintain the dignity of life, to save the planet from destruction and who have devoted their lives to resist violence and all forms of coercion."

The fact that the majority of these works have been bought by private collectors is testament to her success in conveying her message; these works, especially the moths, would liven up a living space in the most dramatic way possible. But picture the faces of guests as they peer closely at what's embedded in the moths' fluffy exteriors.



Wei Rong Wu, Use of Spies, with painting details by eX de Medici

Astute observers might also notice, in a lower corner, in faint pencil, that de Medici has recorded exactly how long the work has taken to create.

It's that theme of time again, and never more explicit as the length of the exertion that has gone into a piece (approximately 27 - very long - days for each of these works).

"That's proof of life!" she says. "I've done that from the get-go."

After studying at the Australian National University School of Art in the 1980s, during which time she was part of Canberra's punk underbelly, de Medici was a tattoo artist, learning her craft in Los Angeles, and exhibiting photographs and drawings relating to this work during the 1990s.

She shifted to watercolour when she saw a discipline similar to her own. She especially liked the idea of subverting the traditional feminine and conservative reputation of the medium.

But it required, she says, a new kind of discipline.

"In the beginning, doing these was a torture for me, you know, working this way," she says.

"I've worked in this way for a long time now, but originally it was like time in prison because they're very conservative, and they were deliberately conservative.

"I just pulled it all back... to actually look at what I was discussing, rather than how I was discussing.

"So that's a style issue. But it was hard for me to sit down.... I have a high agitation level. And so to sit down and just do things for hour after hour was a total discipline for me."

Recording the time, then, is systematic.

"A lot of people have children, which is their proof... that's the proof of your existence, in a way, and your work, how much work you've put into that child. Well, I don't have children," she says.

"And I don't consider my work children either, by the way, but it's proof that you existed."

And throughout her evolution, she can see that perhaps, like many artists she has spoken to over the years, including Wei Rong, that the same concerns have been there all along.



eX de Medici, VE Gas

"The same things that you feel strongly about will be with you all the way. You might tweak it here and there, but if you look at individual artists, or through art histories, often they follow a path," she says.

"But I think ultimately, you have concerns that are probably founded in childhood, I'm not sure, but you know, you can get a bit of hindsight when you're 62."

Hindsight and, as it turns out, a bit of foresight, too. She's often had a bit of the soothsayer about her, predicting the Global Financial Crisis years before it happened, and, when she first heard about Facebook, foreseeing a discourse of darkness and hate well before that became a reality of social media (she has firmly eschewed online interactions from the start).

But while she chooses to stay in the city she grew up in - the city she loves above all others - her career has not suffered in any way from choosing not to exhibit here for so long.

On the contrary, she's one of the most important artists practising in Australia today, with works in most major national collections, including the National Gallery of Australia and the National Portrait Gallery.

She also has an international reputation, and her work commands high prices across the board.

In the lead-up to a major retrospective at the Drill Hall Gallery to mark Canberra's Centenary in 2013, curator Jenny McFarlane bemoaned the fact that so few of de Medici's works were actually in the capital.

"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!" she said.

It's a nice change, then, to see this series remain largely in the capital, not least to gallery co-owner Susie Beaver, who has long witnessed a curious reluctance on the part of Canberra art-lovers to actually buy locally.

"We have long admired eX de Medici's paintings and always felt that there was a Canberra market for her work," she says.

"It is rewarding for both the artist and the gallery to know that an exhibition of this quality is so well supported and appreciated in her home town."

For her own part, de Medici doesn't see it as a wholesale embrace from her own city, as she's never felt the need to take the previous lack of interest in collecting personally.

"I've never really felt like that. I always figure, you take this path forward and don't sit on the bad stuff or things that you might feel are disappointing," she says.

"So I just keep moving forward. I don't sort of go, 'oh, why doesn't Canberra support me?' That's never been a concept for me at all.

I love the city. It's my city, and it's a great place for me to work."

- Doubled Crossed, by eX de Medici and Glimpses, by Wei Rong Wu, are showing at [Beaver Galleries](#) until May 30.