

Destroying wickedness with beauty: Canberra artist eX de Medici has a major survey show at GOMA

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eX de Medici, *Desire Overcoming Duality*, 2008.

eX de Medici: Beautiful wickedness. GOMA, Brisbane, closes October 2

Canberra's eX de Medici attracts a cult following with sold-out exhibitions and queues forming to see her work.

The exhibition in Brisbane is a survey show of over 100 works drawn from a career spanning 40 years - her largest exhibition to date. It is truly amazing and ranges from her 1980s photocopy work and clenched-fisted posters from early days at the Bitumen River Gallery in Canberra, through her experimental photographic art and the blood swabs, particularly in the age of AIDS, and her signature pieces with meticulously worked watercolour drawings and their encoded imagery.

Although she is an artist who constantly reinvents herself, rather than working in a repetitive, even if lucrative, rut, what runs throughout her exhibition is what could be termed a punk aesthetic and a commitment to a philosophy that for art to be valid, it has to be subversive. She is an artist who believes strongly that art can change lives and has the power to chip away at the edifice of global capitalism and the internationally disastrous American foreign policy.

The title of the exhibition, "beautiful wickedness", refers to an episode in *The Wizard of Oz*, when the wicked witch screams at Dorothy, "Who would have thought that a good little girl like you could destroy my beautiful wickedness?" Then the witch melts into nothingness. De Medici is the new good little girl who sets out to destroy the wickedness in the world through the beauty of her art.



eX de Medici, Pure Impulse Control, 2008

The exhibition's curator, Samantha Littley, the gallery's curator of Australian art (and formerly a Canberra girl), has done a brilliant job in allowing the artist to have her way and in giving the work its own space in which it can develop its own voice. The exhibits have room to breathe and are beautifully lit so that within the generally darkened spaces, dimmed for works on paper and dramatic intent, they appear on the walls within a luminous glow.



eX de Medici, Nothing's As Precious As A Hole In The Ground, 2001

Crucial for de Medici's development as an artist was her training in the US with a feminist tattoo artist Kari Barba; it was an element that was to give her subsequent art a distinctive edge. She has practised for many years as a tattoo artist alongside her other art practice, and this practice has continued to feed her work.

For a socially engaged artist, de Medici constantly responds to unfolding social, economic and ethical dramas in the world - she is the only artist I know who is addicted to listening to parliament on radio while she works - and it was a political event that precipitated a major change of direction in her art. This occurred on March 2, 1996, when the Howard government was swept into office with a large majority and the artist foresaw the start of a new dark age for Australia in terms of its treatment of refugees, the arts, education and life for the working classes.

This inspired her to seek an alternative language in her art, and she selected the most conservative visual language that she could imagine, that of exacting watercolour illustration that was most widely associated with natural science illustrators of the colonial period, including the wonderful Ferdinand Bauer. Ostensibly, she argued that it was a visual language that even the least enlightened in the new ruling classes could understand, and yet within this language she could conceal an ideology that could shine a light on the evils that were being perpetrated in the world.

Over the subsequent 25 years, she has perfected her meticulous technique and expanded the web of subjects to include the interrogation of American foreign policy in places like Iraq through to domestic violence and environmental devastation.



eX de Medici, Blue (Bower/Bauer) 1998-2000

In the first mature piece in this visual language, the mesmerising "Blue (Bower/Bauer) 1998-2000", the title plays on the names of the Bower bird that collects blue objects and the Austrian botanist Bauer. When examined carefully, emblems of empire from the Union Jack to leg irons are built on a background of skulls.

In the companion piece, "Red (Colony), 1999-2000", a careful investigation will reveal a transition from colony to corporation as Monsanto's weedkiller Roundup and genetically modified crops threaten the environment and, indirectly, human survival. It is a feature of de Medici's art that we are seduced by the beauty of the surface; only on close investigation does the full horror described in the painting reveal itself.



eX de Medici, Red (Colony), 1999-2000

Over the years, two recurring motifs have emerged in her art - that of the moth, usually multiplied to something like a hundred times life size, and guns, particularly the AK-47, frequently entwined in flowers or luxuriant jungle growth. The two may be viewed as a polarity between nature and its will to evolve and survive, and weapons invented by humans with the sole purpose of destroying life.

I suspect that this historic watershed exhibition may mark a close to this phase of the artist's work and a new and very different direction will emerge in her art. It seems a pity that Canberra audiences will have to travel to Brisbane to see a major exhibition of the work of this wonderful Canberra artist.