

The Good Son

MICHAEL ZAVROS
works on paper



GOLD COAST CITY ART GALLERY
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The Good Son—Michael Zavros: works on paper

The absolute fluidity that exists between popular culture and high art, where layers of connection and association collapse continually into one another, as characterized by the work of Michael Zavros, may be the legacy of growing up Gold Coast style. Current international arbiter of all things cool—rapper Kanye West—has recently absorbed Zavros into his monthly must read blog of ‘it’ and ‘now’. In so doing, West throws out the challenge both to the artist and to us as viewers of how to respond and relate to Zavros’ work.

Michael Zavros was born in Brisbane in 1974 and grew up on the Gold Coast. This survey exhibition of a returning Good Son allows us the luxury of looking back and letting the threads that connect a group



Plot, 2002
charcoal on paper, 109 × 157.5 cm
Courtesy Grafton Regional Gallery Collection
Winner of the 2002 Jacaranda Acquisitive
Drawing Award

of works be brought together. While a number of apparently distinct subject groups or themes emerge in this body of work from the past decade, what is revealing about bringing them all together, is seeing the manner in which the inherent ideas, techniques and Zavros’ own research intersect.

Works on paper have never been a sideline for Zavros: rather they occupy a

central place within his practice and at several junctures have offered greater opportunity for innovation and experimentation.

Critical attention to drawing has been building steadily since the 1980s with the acclaim accorded artists such as William Kentridge for example, and has moved beyond an interest in the immediacy of the technique and the view that it is an almost primal manifestation of artistic intention.

For Zavros, the childhood legacy of the enjoyment of putting pencil to paper may have been one of the spurs that encouraged him to pursue a pathway in the visual arts. His technical armory of a multitude of differently tipped lead and charcoal pencils and brushes is now augmented by the equally essential tools of a digital camera and Mac computer that help to select and frame, edit and strip away what he then wishes to commit by hand onto paper.

The large size of many of the drawings defies the conventional small scale usually expected of the medium. Scale, which the artist enjoys manipulating, demands different responses from a viewer: the giant *Debaser* series of beautiful but disengaged men confronts with their overwhelming presence, the falling and flailing horses might illicit a momentary flicker of panic as we imagine these magnificent creatures crushing towards us, while the architectural grandeur of the palace of Versailles, built to humble the sun kings’ subjects, is rendered in vast panoramic homage in *I ♥ Versailles*.



An Elk, 2008
charcoal on paper, 37 × 51 cm
Courtesy Collection of Samuel Holdings

Zavros also carefully considers the impact of the intimate works. The small suite of trophy heads are delicate miniature renderings of the hulking spoils of the hunt. Zavros emasculates them, rendering them as curiosities stripped of their monumental power leaving a tragic presence hanging on the wall. Here the lonely *Elk* still bugles in frozen anguish at his fate, while the king of the jungle lies flattened, mouth open in a silent roar.

Drawing allows artists to disengage with the weight of expectations carried by the genre of painting, and as an artist working within the photorealist tradition, Zavros is acutely aware of the potential for the easy seduction of the super real. Some of the drawings selected here make reference to their original photographic source and the hallmarks of photography, such as the blur that articulates the falling speed of the horse in *Till the Heart Caves In*. This survey of some ten-year’s work reveals an increasing confidence in manipulating and owning the medium. This is evident most dramatically in the recent *Debaser* series where the blank and characterless expressions carefully crafted by the stylists of high fashion appear aggressively ‘ruined’ by crude erasure. Here, the artist is both creator and debaser, manipulating the fragile nature of the medium to create a metaphor for the inevitable passing of beauty itself.

The construction of beauty, its allure, frailty and transience, has been a theme that Zavros returns to. Desire compels possession and few can be genuinely immune to the seduction of this roll call of men’s high fashion: Gucci, Jean Paul Gaultier, YSL *et al*. All but one of the *Debaser* subjects was drawn from images found in glossy magazines, a practice that Zavros began in 1999 with his series of powerfully suited businessmen striding through the corporate jungle, their individual identities also obscured, but by more conventionally formal means of compositional cropping. With *Debaser/Dior* 2009 however, Zavros had grown frustrated with the limitations of perfection. In this instance he chose the model, styled the fashion (the artist’s own Dior butterfly bow tie) and photographed the subject himself.

In some of the most recent works completed over the past six months, Zavros has introduced commercial spray paint colour—straight from the can—first carefully masking the velvet tones of the charcoal drawing that are already laid down. A pair of Prada shoes is elevated to saintliness with a golden halo. One might imagine the double effect of the glory of ownership for the wearer as they look down and gaze upon their reflection in the shiny polished surface of the leather. This viewer might well be cautioned by the second commandment ‘Thou shalt not worship false idols’.

The incongruous titles of *Lime Spider* named after the sickly sweet, luridly colored milkshake soda concoction and *Fanta*, the orange drink of a 1970s childhood, are a way in which the artist personally colonizes the perfection of Versailles—a giant of world architectural history. The fluorescent spray paint is a punk slap that makes a stark



Patent with Gold, 2009
charcoal on paper, 102 × 73.5 cm
Courtesy the artist

contrast with the polite formalism of the landscape and the drawing itself. But here this vandal's gesture sits more as a carefully styled contrivance and a nod to the legacy of Stephen Sprouse's collaboration with Louis Vuitton. Zavros has joined the throngs and visited Versailles a number of times, but like many Australians he received initial and continuing connection to Grand European Traditions through photographs in books.

The French Pavilion which was featured in *Lime Spider* was designed in 1749 and is situated in the grounds of the larger Petit Trianon, the small palace commissioned originally by Louis XV for his mistress the Madame de Pompadour but not completed before her death. It was remodeled by the new teenage Queen of Louis XVI, the Austrian princess Marie Antoinette from 1774.

The casting of Marie Antoinette as the haughty and naïve Queen epitomizing all that was wrong with the excesses of the ancient regime, has undergone some revision in recent years with a reconsideration of the independent development of her character expressed through her firm notions of style and design as played out in her private domain of the buildings and gardens of the Petit Trianon.

Of course the choice of this garden and pavilion is particularly resonant for Zavros. The parties and gaiety of dressing as an innocent shepherdess in the distinctly 'un-royal' simple chemise, playing charades and wandering through lush gardens carefully designed and tendered to appear as 'naturalistic' as possible, came to an end with the swift fall of the guillotine. The deep charcoal blacks of the languid pool might be the forecast of these events and the collapse of the regime. Zavros describes these works as double follies.

For an exhibition that returns this son to his hometown, it is important to ask what we might find in this work that connects back to experiences shaped by growing up on the Gold Coast. The hinterland fringe of the city supports an active equestrian culture, which enabled Zavros to learn and then compete at dressage and show jumping, the ultimate sports that connects human and animal. He worked as Clerk of the Course at the Gold Coast Turf club, a role that is ceremonial—the rider dressed in a smart red jacket leading the field from stable to marshalling yard to track and back—but also requires horse and rider to work in tandem to calm skittish thoroughbreds and act quickly in emergencies. *Energie T/ Chestnut* is a work that connects back to these experiences and is borne out of a very visceral understanding of

being at one with the animal—but now layered with other references to the centaur of classical Greek mythology and the sheer impossible beauty and folly of this combination. Working with thoroughbreds also gave Zavros insights into the incredible physical demands of

racing and the intense culture and science of breeding to achieve particular qualities of speed and staying.

This reflection on the manipulation of genetics appears much later in works that feature, for example the naked Lipizzaner horses, but most powerfully in a work such as *White onagadori*, which depicts the extraordinary bird bred from mutations of long tail Japanese breeds for the sole purpose of achieving a beautiful but hopelessly impractical long train of tail feathers. Technique and subject mirror each other as Zavros' drawing strips away contextual detail, for that is not what lovers of this ornamental bird wish to see, and plays instead with the positive and negative decorative qualities of white on black, the languidly curling lines reminiscent of the decadent Art Nouveau style. Led out only for display, the onagadori exists to give tangible worldly form to the Phoenix, that mythical creature of the imagination. In reality this flightless bird must be confined permanently in a cage to protect the trailing feathers, its chain and its glory.

The image of the Gold Coast that many people have is of an outward glamour concerned with show and display. It is a landscape in which grand architectural styles have been plucked from the lexicon of world culture to create buildings that unashamedly seek to be associated with the wealth and confidence of past civilizations. This milieu is referenced in *Et in Arcadia Ego* (Even in paradise there is mortality) where anonymous men confer over a set of plans, blank apart from a simple ellipse: the symbol of infinite perfection. The work is based on a painting held in the Louvre by 17th century artist Nicholas Poussin and Gold Coast City Art Gallery holds the large oil of this work in its collection, the drawing of which is featured here.

Perhaps growing up in the normality of this setting has allowed Zavros the confidence to make his own personal connections to icons of world culture: Viennese horses, French palaces and paintings, couture fashion, and Greek mythology, and to use these to make a searching examination of their enduring allure, their aching melancholy and the artist's own fascination with, and questioning of, the power of their beauty.

VIRGINIA RIGNEY

Curator Public Programs, Gold Coast City Art Gallery

A graduate of Queensland College of Art, Michael Zavros has exhibited widely nationally and internationally. Best known for his painting, Zavros has also won three significant Australian prizes for drawing including the 2002 Jacaranda Acquisitive Drawing Award, The 2005 Robert Jacks Drawing Prize and 2007 Kedumba Drawing Prize. He has been the recipient of the Australia Council Visual Arts/Craft Fund, Milan Residency and Barcelona Residency and was awarded a Cite International des Arts Residency in Paris through the Power Institute, University of Sydney. Zavros' work is held in numerous private and public collections. He is represented by Philip Bacon Galleries, Brisbane, Sophie Gannon Gallery, Melbourne and GRANTPIRRIE, Sydney.



White Onagadori (detail), 2007
charcoal on paper, 82 × 88cm
Collection of Clinton Ng



An important lady, 2008
charcoal on paper, 34 × 28.5 cm
Courtesy the artist



Lycra hood/Dress you up in my love, 2004
charcoal on paper, 58 × 77 cm
Courtesy the artist



Video Portrait—The Good Son: Michael Zavros

To accompany this exhibition Gold Coast City Gallery has commissioned a video portrait of Michael Zavros to be made by fellow artist and filmmaker Alex Chomicz. Chomicz shares the same generation and background as Zavros, having grown up on the Gold Coast in the 70s and 80s then left the city to study and work. The video portrait follows the making of one of the major new works featured in the exhibition—*Debaser/Dior*—and takes the viewer up close in the studio to hear the scratch of pencil on paper and the click of the camera. Interspersed with footage from local locations including the Gold Coast Turf Club, Palazzo Versace and nighttime in Surfers—the portrait aims to give visitors to the exhibition an insight into the artist's practice and background.

Leaving the hands of the maker, the video footage is destined to move seamlessly from YouTube to shuffle to iPhone, virally making its way through the myriad of blogs that operate as gatekeepers of style and the carrier pigeons of contemporary culture.

The son of a builder who grew up following in his father's footsteps on the Gold Coast, Alex Chomicz made a sudden u-turn through his experimental films, which led to film school, and to an array of award winning short drama projects which have screened at International Film Festivals as well as SBS & ABC. His short film *Seize the Day* won the inaugural \$5000 Queensland Short Film Prize in 2008. He is currently pursuing an art practice exhibiting several photographic series, while also developing a feature film about the ghosts of the seldom discussed slave trade in Queensland.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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The Gallery gratefully thanks the exhibition sponsors Bond University and Philip Bacon Galleries Brisbane and the artist for his commitment to the project.

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Alex Chomicz, stills from *Video Portrait—The Good Son: Michael Zavros*, 2009

FRONT COVER: *Lime Spider* (detail), 2009 charcoal and fluorescent spray paint on paper, 85 × 103 cm
Courtesy the artist

BACK COVER: *Debaser/Dior*, 2009 charcoal on paper, 120 × 80 cm
Courtesy the artist

POSTER: *Fanta*, 2009 charcoal and fluorescent spray paint on paper, 112 × 86 cm
Courtesy the artist

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GOLD COAST CITY ART GALLERY

Gold Coast Arts Centre
135 Bundall Road
Surfers Paradise, Queensland
07 5581 6567
gallery@gcac.com.au
www.gcac.com.au