

masters and Slaves

de Medici is an artist with many guises, she has worked with a variety of media including sound, performance, installation, photocopy, photography, drawing and painting. In 1989, de Medici apprenticed to tattooist Kari Barber in Los Angeles before returning home to become an icon for the tattooed queer communities of Canberra, Sydney and Melbourne.ⁱ

Before tattooing, de Medici's art was produced with 'speed, ease and an anti-skill attitude' whereas since then, her work has been distinguished for 'fastidious detail and a 'new obsessively slow process'.ⁱⁱ While de Medici does not consider her tattoos as works of art her two practices are inextricably bound and feed off each other. Tattooing appears as a subject of her art and the experience of tattooing has contributed to her reputation as 'masterful' drawing.ⁱⁱⁱ

de Medici's has consistently demonstrated two major themes: a motivation to make art that stems from a respect for the fragility and brevity of life and a critical impulse to investigate the signs underlying relationships of power and control.^{iv}

In seeking to induce audiences to engage with this thorny debate de Medici has fully propelled her art towards more traditional approaches such as naturalistic representation and intricately worked detail.

The red and blue series began in 1996 with a pair of pencil drawings, *Spectre #1 (Swastika)* and *Spectre #2 (Triskele)*, each over two-metres long. de Medici. Respectively, they refer to adaptations of the ancient swastika: the Nazi insignia and the triskelion of South Africa's Broederbond, both of which are, in the artist's own words, 'beautiful signs for ugly people'.^v These works were not intended as a mark of the artist's own fascism but rather as a warning of sinister currents adrift within culture, red for old and blue for new. The emblematic design suggests a connection to tattooing^{vi} as does the intended 'muscularity'^{vii} produced by the artist's intense rendering on the paper, seemingly, into the surface of the thick paper.

Blue (Bower/Bauer) 1998-2000 and *Red (Colony)* 1999-2000 are two colossal watercolour paintings with which de Medici positions herself within the ongoing debate about the place of skill in art^{viii}; as a technique of

making and of communication. Completed over three years, the paintings and numerous related studies reflect de Medici's resolve to find a means of expression that was instantly recognisable and accessible. Her conclusion was to produce work that was 'clunkily representational, reactionary, deliberately conservative and skilful'.^{ix} Both works are the result of de Medici's hybridisation^x of the methodical brushwork of natural history illustration^{xi} with the loaded symbolism of *vanitas* still life painting.^{xii}

In bringing two pictorial conventions into play, de Medici's two watercolour paintings exploit the cultural nuances of each approach – the development of natural history classification and drawing as an agent of colonisation and empire^{xiii} and the association of still life with the vain acquisition of material goods. Both of de Medici's watercolours are constructed as representative of the *memento-mori*, a set of visual codes within the *vanitas* tradition,^x intended to remind of one's own mortality and the futility of worldly pursuits. The disorder and excess of decoration in de Medici's large compositions recalls the way 16th century Dutch still lifes often acted as sign of 'the peril of a household losing its moral grip'.^{xv}

The title of *Blue (Bower/Bauer)* refers to Ferdinand Bauer, the official natural history artist on Matthew Flinders' exploration of the Australian coastline during 1801-03, and the Australian bowerbird, which indiscriminately adorns its nest with anything blue. An exhibition of Bauer's exquisite taxonomic drawings, which toured to Canberra in 1998, stirred de Medici to action and provided her with the 'language in which to couch' the debate.^{xvi} Interwoven throughout *Blue (Bower/Bauer)* are numerous references to the experience of colonial rule on Norfolk Island – such as shackles, skulls and smashed blue and white china^{xvii} – a place which Bauer, de Medici and her convict ancestors all have in common.

The ambitious scale on which de Medici worked compelled her to produce a study for every object shown in the final paintings. Beyond the evident appreciation of the individual studies, these 'rehearsals' provide clues to structure and content of the final, large watercolours. Placed within the larger composition, individual elements are carefully positioned and distorted by multiple perspectives, suggesting that behind the chaos there are more carefully encoded levels of meaning.

e artist's interest in recording natural phenomena began with the simple desire to record the remains of a dead butterfly, plucked from the grille of a car by a friend.^{xviii} This poignant episode provided the impetus for de Medici's interest in natural history illustration and watercolour as a medium, which was a precursor to another project, *sp.* 2001, a series of 54 watercolour studies of tiny unclassified moths that the artist produced during a residency at the CSIRO Entomology Division's Australian National Insect Collection.^{xix} This endeavour complemented her work on the group portrait of the rock band Midnight Oil, undertaken in the same year, in which de Medici transferred patterns from the moth's wings onto each member's necks as a symbol of their roles as spokespersons for the environment.^{xx} In the following year, de Medici produced a group of sumptuous watercolours painted on calfskin. These 'Gunskins', as the artist called them, each depict a large, solitary gun covered with the complex pattern of a tiny moth's wings; a powerful metaphor of strength and fragility. Guns have featured prominently in de Medici's art, since the 1980s, as a prominent sign with multiple readings such as death, power, authority and feminine guile. In 2003, de Medici's photographs of 'gals' posing flirtatiously with firearms were the focus of *Soft Steel*, a solo exhibition at Melbourne's Heide Museum of Modern Art.^{xxi}

Ger Leong, 2004. Curator, International Fashion and Textiles, National Gallery of Victoria

Excerpt from eX de Medici @ MPRG Curator's Essay, for the full text go to <http://mprg.mornpen.vic.gov.au/exdemedici>. Kindly reproduced courtesy of eX de Medici @ Author and Mornington Peninsula Regional Gallery, Victoria.

ⁱ Gott, 'eX de Medici: An Epic Journey on a Lilliputian Scale', *Art and Australia*, vol. 40, no. 1, Spring 2002, p. 104; see also Feona Stoddart, 'X marks the spot', *Outrage*, no.166, March 1997, pp.48-52. For accounts of eX de Medici's beginnings in tattooing see Michael Desmond, 'eX de Medici: The Illustrated Woman', *World Art*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 72-75; Kimberly O'Sullivan, 'eX de Medici: the interview', *Wicked Women*, no. 24, 1995, pp. 34-6. Gordon Bull, 'The scandal of eX de Medici', *Photofile*, no. 56, May 1999, pp. 12 & 14. Gordon Bull, *Art and Australia*, p. 104; see also Bull, *Photofile*, p. 14. For extended discussions of de Medici's practice see Bull, *Photofile*, pp. 12-19; Kelly Gellatly, *Soft Steel: eX de Medici - recent work*, Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne, 2003, exhibition catalogue; and Gott, *Art and Australia*, pp. 102-109. eX de Medici interviewed by Ted Gott, Canberra, 30 November 1996 in Ted Gott and Jim Logan, *Indelible: eX de Medici and Kelly Leonard*, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, 24 January- 2 March 1997, exhibition catalogue, p. 3.

^{vi} Gellatly, *Soft Steel*, p. 6.

^{vii} Telephone conversation between eX de Medici and the author, 15 February 2004.

^{viii} Gott, *Art and Australia*, p. 105.

^{ix} eX de Medici, Artist's statement in <http://mprg.mornpen.vic.gov.au/exdemedici>, designed by eX de Medici and Amanda King for eX de Medici @ MPRG, Mornington Peninsula Regional Gallery, 10 April - 23 May 2004.

^x Telephone conversation between eX de Medici and the author, 15 February 2004.

^{xi} Natural history illustration is a branch of scientific illustration which depicts natural history subjects in botanical, biological and geological subjects. Watercolour is the medium most commonly used for this purpose.
^{xii} The *vanitas* theme in art is represented by objects which symbolize the vanity of worldly things and the transience of life. See Norbert Schneider, *The art of still life: still life painting in the early modern period*, Köln Ben Taschen, 1990.

^{xiii} David Mackay, 'Agents of Empire: the Banksian collectors and evaluation of new lands' in David Philip and Peter Hanns Reill, *Visions of Empire: voyages, botany, and representations of nature*, Cambridge University Press, New York & Melbourne, 1996, pp. 38-57.

^{xiv} eX de Medici - ANIC artist-in-residence', *ANIC News*, no. 17, June 2002, p. 15.

^{xv} Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: four essays on still life*, Reaktion Books, London, 1990, p. 10. *Vanitas* pictures were popular in the Dutch Republic during the 16th and 17th centuries, a time of unbridled wealth. See Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches: an interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age*, Fontana Press, 1988.

^{xvi} Interview between eX de Medici and the author, Canberra, 8 September 2003.

^{xvii} Christine James, 'Vainglorious', *Art Monthly on-line*, 26 November 2000.

^{xviii} Interview between eX de Medici and the author, Canberra, 8 September 2003.

^{xix} For a discussion of the *sp.* 2001 project see Gellatly, *Soft Steel*, pp. 9-15.

^{xx} In 2001, the National Portrait Gallery, Canberra commissioned eX de Medici to create the group portrait *Midnight Oil: Nothing's as precious as a hole in the ground*. For a discussion of the commission see eX de Medici, 'Nothing's as Precious as a Hole in the Ground' in Magda Keaney, *So You Wanna Be a Rock Star*, National Portrait Gallery, Canberra, exhibition catalogue, pp. 46-53; and Magda Keaney, 'Seduce and Destroy', *Portrait*, Summer 2001, pp.10-14.

^{xxi} *Soft Steel: eX de Medici - recent work*, Heide Museum of Modern Art, Bulleen, 1 March-11 May 2003, exhibition catalogue, by Kelly Gellatly.