

24HRArt

Northern Territory
Centre for Contemporary Art

Michael Zavros
This Charming Man

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As you set out for Ithaka
hope your road is a long one,
full of adventure, full of discovery. ...
... may you stop at Phoenician trading stations
to buy fine things,
mother of pearl and coral, amber and ebony,
sensual perfume of every kind

“Ithaka”, C.P. Cavafy

Homecoming King

Picture yourself the hero of your own John Hughes movie. You're Molly Ringwald pretty in pink on the wrong side of the tracks. Or Ferris Bueller skiving from school to go hang out in the Art Institute of Chicago with your new girlfriend. You're not the most popular at school but you've got style, you've got flair, and an intense passion for living your life. Fast forward 15 years and you return to school for Homecoming (stay with me on the American cultural references here; not our own lived experience perhaps, but oh so familiar from the daily bombardment of Yankee pop culture). The teens are playing out the same rituals of mateship and courtship but the tropes are unfamiliar. You look at your former classmates, the ones with whom you once had a fervent connection, with an unsettling admixture of disinterest, dislike and alienation. You're questioning the wisdom of ever going back when into this throng struts the peacock, the golden boy on whom the years barely land and whose every movement shouts *Love Me*. And that's all it takes to whisk you back to those years of unrequited love, yearning for experience of the world, and the wondrous possibility of self-invention.

This journeying back, mining the precious *objets* of our cultural past and present, is the hallmark of Michael Zavros's work. We proceed accompanied by a sly humour, an ironic invitation to consider not the importance of reaching our destination, but rather that it is the destination which both inspires you and nourishes the journey. Like *This Charming Man* of the song by The Smiths “I would go out tonight but I haven't got a stitch to wear ... this man said it's gruesome that someone so handsome should care.”

As in Cavafy's poem, *Ithaka*, Zavros's journey is marked by beauty and precious things. His Ithaka is his Greek heritage and yet it is also defined by his youth and classically inspired modernity. The mythologies unsettle rather than soothe or comfort by their familiarity, because the myth collides with this modernity. So a centaur wears a Chanel cardigan, a clothed male model struts before what could be an ancient sculpted head, endlessly looping behind him, a famous actor is a naked Greek god, the eye feathers of a peacock spell out the centuries-old message of Narcissus, an improbable rooster becomes a symbol of eternal life, a white horse transmutes in a flash of light into a unicorn on an endless Delphic plain, the hurrying feet of capitalism recall the dislocated and disembodied limbs of ancient Attic statuary.

We are seduced by the paintings' own aesthetic preciousness, their tiny jewel-like detail and celebration of fashionable glamour and the masculine ideal; once drawn in to that place of easy recognition, however, we are struck by the instability of memory through a series of unanswerable dichotomies. The onagadori in *Forever* suggests the possibility that beauty might rise again like the phoenix but, as we're reminded in *Dior Breton/Bay*, it is only the key notes of fashion that are reincarnated. The exactitude of *Milano interior*, pristine and perfect yet void of any humanity, invites us, in an active viewing that actually draws us closer, to treasure the tiniest point of the brush. We move on and must rear back to encompass the menacingly seductive glamour of the two *Secret Men's Business* canvases. Scale becomes an unfixable point on our readings of the paintings, just as the painterly mark, at once so tight and so loose in the video/photo overlapping of *Double Versace*, becomes simply a marker on our journey to memory. Zavros's paintings, mediated and manipulated through the photographic medium, carry us with a humorous knowingness to that place where memory and mythology intersect.

How soon after finishing school, after leaving home, do we start writing our own myths about our youthful past? Are we creating them even as we live them so that our interests become obsessions, our indignities triumphs of ironic distance over self-conscious awkwardness? Our personal mythologies navigate our journey homewards to our roots, and simplify the complexities of the journey by creating a bridge between that sense of dislocation we have when we return home and the all-enveloping comfort of memory's familiarity. Whether played out in films, songs, poems, paintings or daily discourse, our mythologies have the power to both confront and comfort; *This Charming Man* unsettles us with familiarity, and a sense of ancient awareness, of the journey in progress on which the follies of fashion and machismo celebrate but do not dictate the direction.

Meredith Garlick 2006

www.michaelzavros.com

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