

PREMIUM

Artist eX de Medici paints brutal violence in a gentle medium



eX de Medici with her artwork, *I Killed Her With My Club* (2017). ST PHOTO: SYAMIL SAPARI

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Artist eX de Medici started using watercolours to protest against a conservative government and grew to love the medium

[Akshita Nanda](#) | Arts Correspondent

Australian artist eX de Medici paints violence and surveillance in watercolours.

Her solo show at Sullivan + Strumpf gallery at Gillman Barracks, which runs till June 24, includes a 6.2m-long painting done in 2016, *Spies Like Us*, in which tiny birds fly around giant, grey surveillance cameras.

In another work, *Family Portrait (Birnam Wood)*, done this year, flowers explode like fireworks from the mouth of a gun.

The paintings, which are priced from \$35,000, are disturbingly beautiful.

"It's brutal work, but it's a brutal world," says the 59-year-old artist, visiting from Canberra. "I've been looking at the way power is enforced on us."

Watercolour is a medium with a long history and associated with Victorian notions of female gentility. De Medici uses the medium to challenge stereotypes and conservative notions.

BOOK IT / EX DE MEDICI: SMITHEREENS

WHERE: Sullivan + Strumpf, 5 Lock Road, 01-06

WHEN: Till June 24, Tuesdays to Saturdays, 11am to 7pm; Sundays, 11am to 6pm, or by appointment

ADMISSION: Free

INFO: sullivanstrumpf.com

Her 2013 work *That's A Good Dog* featured a beribboned rifle and was nominated for the 2014 Signature Art Prize, organised every three years by the Singapore Art Museum and supported by the Asia Pacific Breweries Foundation. (Singaporean artist Ho Tzu Nyen won that year.)

She is known in Australia for being edgy and also elusive. She lives alone and has no social media presence or personal website.

For 28 years, she refused to be photographed, insisting that her work speaks for itself.

Then a portrait of her by photographer Gary Grealy was shortlisted this March for Australia's National Photographic Portrait Prize - chosen from over 3,200 entries.

De Medici only agreed to the shoot because she was positive it would go unnoticed. "Nearly 30 years of keeping my face out of things and it's everywhere now," she laments before agreeing to be photographed for this article.

The name she is known by in the arts world began as "a punk joke" with a legitimate start. One of five children, she went without a name for almost a year as the family tried to decide what to call her. Growing up, she was sometimes called by her sister's name, Catherine. Her brothers still call her "Baby". Her confirmation name Xavier is the only one she owns and it led to the capital X in her pseudonym.

Born in 1959 in the Riverina district of New South Wales, she trained at Claremont School of Art in Perth and also as a tattooist in Los

Angeles. Tattooing provided income and was also incorporated in her work - sometimes as blood-stained rags.

In 1996, the conservative Liberal Party came into power in Australia and sparked a change in de Medici's practice. She decided to use watercolours, "the most conservative medium I could think of", in order to speak to those in power.

Paintings are also considered more accessible than performance art, which was important to an artist making a statement to a wide audience.

"A very important aspect of my work is you can't get an eye and the brain behind an eye if you assault it," she says. "Watercolour is a device. I openly explored it and exploited it to my ends, but I wanted to make beautiful things as well."

Death-dealing weapons surrounded by intricate flowers; the free flight of birds restricted by surveillance machinery - these are stories obvious to anyone who looks upon her paintings.

Beneath each work is a sequence of tally marks, every black stroke indicating a 16-to 18-hour day spent on its creation.

In the beginning, de Medici kept this count like a prisoner might. "When I started, it was a torture to me. Then I grew to love it."

She laughs. "I've got Stockholm Syndrome with my own work."

A version of this article appeared in the print edition of The Straits Times on May 29, 2018, with the headline 'Painting brutal violence in a gentle medium'. [Print Edition](#) | [Subscribe](#)