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Beautiful, Beautiful Violence: It's a fine line between pleasure and pain...

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The history of art is littered with the triumph of virtue in its depiction of violence as allegory – where history and myth become symbols of modern, moral atonement. And now contemporary violence is shown more graphically and literally than ever – often to shock but, paradoxically, it serves as a reminder that things seldom change. Art's humanism and contempt for authoritarianism are generally pushed aside as human conflict pursues its predestined course.

Images of good over evil – the Northern Renaissance and Bosch – the gruesome depiction of flawed moral choices warns us of their mortal consequences. Or Goya's *Saturn Devouring His Son* – at first a private work, but now in the Museo del Prado. Perhaps the work of an old man aware of his own mortality and profoundly disillusioned with a life observing civil butchery. It's the kind of extreme depiction that eX de Medici finds more disturbing than a graphic cut from Hammer or Sam Raimi splatter movies. The fictional representation of gratuitous bloodletting is easy to take – it ends our complicity as no known subjects involve us. But the stand-in – allegory – is another matter entirely.

We admire the tools of conflict and death – even to the extent of seeing them in isolation from the actuality of what they do. The aesthetics of swords, nunchukas, guns – they're all museum material. It's impossible not to admire them. In most cultures they are not objects of gratuitous bloodshed, but the particular representation of culture where all sorts of behaviour – like violence – never sits in isolation from other conduct. Where sanctioned brutality and the systems that enable it to flourish is simply what happens – where moral judgment is superfluous. Beautiful objects of warfare hold their own intrinsic significance and are respected for their artistry. Why we value them remains equally diverse. In Japan *seppuku* is a perfectly enacted sequence of dying violently with honour and dignity; in the United States the right to bear arms is about the enduring rightness of a late eighteenth century constitutional idea of liberty, coupled with a heightened sense of never-ending and omnipresent paranoia. A twenty-one gun salute marks respect, friendship – peace between friends. Weapons of war and conflict assume specific characteristics according to the cultures in which they are used – and this is an area in which eX de

Medici's imagination and expression abound. Is it less reasonable to begin to understand a culture through its application of violence than it is through its cuisine or the clichés of supposed national dress, or self-interested political double-speak?

We have come to accept that guns represent aggression and retribution. The art of eX de Medici presents them in ways which are culturally diverse yet universally relevant. They are modern allegories – but they do not represent a piece by piece symbolism in which certain and inevitable meaning or judgment is secured. And there's no easily read didactic as modern parable. Among beauty we find unsettling contradictions – is the skeletal material a grand tribute to *memento mori* – or perhaps Holbein's *Danse Macabre*? Or is it simply the legacy, the human debris of atrocities – vignettes of genocide? In *Tooth and Claw*, playful Lei-like swirls of flowers and tattooist birds flutter in carefree celebration around an AK 47 and a Blackwater Carbine. Weapons filched from General Mikhail Kalashnikov's idea of cheap, affordable killing. A modern colonialist's weapon which has crossed borders – crossed cultures – and become the transnational symbolic paragon of aggression.

Real violence and its consequences are serious. Its depictions can be consumed in instructive condemnation – but also grieving – while holding true to noble causes. Take for example the Australian War Memorial. But they can also be playful, funny and entertaining – there's *Kill Bill* with its suave, brilliant nihilism as commercial spectacle.

The depiction of everyday killing is invariably 6:00pm reportage. Later programming is fictionalised or gratuitous – often both. Quentin Tarantino's movies are brilliantly and self-consciously gratuitous – entertaining and absurd. It's as though he has come to accept the unstoppable pointlessness of killing. And we easily yield to and enjoy fictions and adaptations untroubled by the absence of much beyond retribution. Tarantino's violence is inventive – grungy, sometimes elegant and stylish. It is at once satirical, alarming and ridiculous. Any unease we might feel as we watch is that he has rejected all conciliatory hope.

eX de Medici's work brings an equally ironic but different twist. She is politically astute, morally attuned and loathes cant and hypocrisy and approaches us with a masterly and beguiling technique where possible meanings stalk us – perhaps they ensnare us – en route to understanding. Her art reminds me of the story of the Shogun

who bragged to his prisoner that his sword was so sharp that he would not feel the pain of execution. The executioner raised his sword and swept it down, His sufferer said, "What are you waiting for?" The Shogun nonchalantly replied, "Nod."

In *Send More Meat* Imperial dragons frolic in a stylised sea where a rifle is the central motif: a rich allegory of feudal and modern China. *Political Power grows out of the barrel of a gun*, Mao said. China's five pointed stars flit in and out of an angry ocean – a reminder of tradition, the continuity of a grand history of brutality in Asia. Everything is intertwined – where the objects of conflict have a deep historical wellspring. But now the waiting dragon ushers in the one who waits – and wins: China's economic wonderland.

It's been frustrating for eX de Medici – the artist as tattooist, and vice versa. But she has eventually and inevitably shaken off typecasting. She knows the corporeal realities of pain and blood as she executes the reflections and expressions of identity that come from it. Cultish identity – self-made, personal identity – military tattoos: essential identity – like Pacific tattooing as a marker of who you are. Blood has always held redemptive power and the emblems she has invented, adapted and collaborated

on have often turned uncertain ideas into real images and she has memorialised them. And redemption is not just a godly thing – it's personal and cultural. And so is its broader political reach – like America that seeks to save us from ourselves through gestures of violent incursion.

eX de Medici makes this fascinating – exhilarating – and when we understand, frightening.

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