



CAROLINE ZILINSKY
Exquisite Cadaver



Caroline Zilinsky and I meet at 6am. We are both wide awake.

She's been up since 4am. A creature of habit who adheres to routines, she starts work in the quiet hum of pre-dawn. "I live in the inner-city of Sydney," she explains. "The before times have always been my favourite." Her snug home studio is brimming with brushes, paints, pencils, easels, canvases, half-finished cups of tea and coffee. The bed, where she sleeps is hard to spot. It takes her a month to finish a single painting – way too long, she's been told – by some of her male peers. But these, the fruits of her labour are born of meticulous care and exertion. Her day starts at 4am and often ends at 6pm at night. The work, she explains, is everything to her.

"It's a type of physical – and hopefully – enduring documentation. An attempt to capture some of the powerful images we witness in this fast-moving, disposable, meme-based world of ours." We discuss this at length. Wide-eyed. Her ideas are fresh and pristine and complex. Everything with Caroline has layers.

"The visual is everywhere right now," she pauses to light a cigarette. "We're part of a culture that consumes images constantly. But then, regardless of how profound they are, how much these images might say, their lifespan is extremely brief."

Caroline dutifully rescues these fleeting remnants from the hollow gaze of social media. Once safely preserved in the raft, she looks at them again and again. Finding greater context and meaning with each study.

The painting *Somewhere Over The Rainbow* is a great example of this. It features the illusive North Korean Supreme Leader, Kim Jong Un, sharing a tender moment with his daughter. They're deep in conversation and holding hands as they walk away from a long-range missile test. The imposing explosives and all the uniformed missile minders, remain in their wake. It's a painting that's as much a study of chilling and odd juxtaposition as it is about politics. In the background, looming over the horizon, is a giant dog – the internet famous Shiba Inu – Kabosu. Known as "Doge", and incidentally the first ever meme to become a cryptocurrency, Doge sheds a tear as he takes in the solemn scene. Above the canine, floating in the sky like pastel balloons at an Easter fair, are two reaction symbols regularly found on Instagram stories: a rainbow anchored on each side by smiling clouds; and a genderless pink bean – from the series, Ketnipz. Bean, an internet symbol promoting positivity, is waving goodbye through the prism of a love-heart.



“Life is strange enough just in observation. And it’s from this position that you have the space to formulate your own ideas”

“Most people start their day with social media,” Caroline says in earnest. “You’ll be flicking through images or stories on Instagram and see horrific footage of lifeless children in Gaza followed by a meme of a dancing cat. How does the brain process that?” She adds somewhat incredulously, “This is the norm now.”

This idea of melding the very sober real with the utterly surreal is a recurring theme in Zilinsky’s work as is her keen eye for symbolism. She describes her painting depicting Mark Zuckerberg’s 2018 trial. The Facebook CEO is standing outside the Hart Senate Office Building, surrounded by press ahead of his testimony before congress.

“In that moment, just in that single image, we see the absolute changing of the guard: the old rules-based order of the court system versus the new world order of Zuckerberg’s Meta empire – which is so powerful and wields so much influence – it’s almost above and beyond the law,” says Caroline excited. “And in the image, there’s a photographer with a camera on a very long stick. It’s almost like the images found in historical paintings of the planting of the staff.” she adds.

Her creative process starts with a notebook. Lists of images she's seen on Instagram, on mastheads, through shop windows. She'll then add the occasional doodle or description to catalogue related symbols or themes, colours, or shapes. She shows me an example.

It's a set of boxes, in a row. Each one sporting full facial features. Faces in a box? I notice the luscious – almost too large – lips, the crazy lashes, and tiny noses.

"Plastic faces to go! Buy your own face!" she giggles. Beneath it she has a sentence describing the colours she will use.

In preparing to meet Caroline, I stared for days at her paintings. Each time, I found myself catching another detail, or something else of note resting in plain sight on the periphery. This is deliberate.

"There's an inherent thirst residing in people for information. In the absence of our institutions providing useful knowledge and education, I feel like social media is filling those gaps."

Caroline explains, "There's so much information being disseminated from all sides of the globe. If you study your sources, you can form new narratives and start joining dots together. I expect it will be censored soon."

We talk about politics. It's multifaceted and longstanding relationship to art. And while she acknowledges that those dimensions to her work exist, for Caroline it's just an inherent part of documentation. Zilinsky is far more interested in laying out the facts than drawing a conclusion. She moves closer and says, "I really want people who look at my paintings to make up their own minds about what it is they're seeing." Adding, "Life is strange enough just in observation. And it's from this position that you have the space to formulate your own ideas."

Her life, however, has always been political. Caroline is the daughter of a refugee father who, after enduring years in a labour camp during the Second World War, arrived in Australia to Hunter Valley's Greta settlement. From an early age, she was told to always scrutinise the supposed truth.

"I knew that fact-based history was never taught at school. That the axis of the world could shift in an instant. That the powerful should never be trusted and that angels and villains are relative." She also tells me that her childhood home had a picture of Stalin on the fridge. But even now, Caroline's not entirely sure why.

It was as a teen that the painter found her style. Caroline remembers that even at 16 years of age, her work had the same heavy line to them, and this has just become more articulated over the years.

"There's something very definite about a line. An honesty to the initial sketch – it's the immediate interpretation and I try to keep true to that."

Exquisite Cadaver is the title given to her latest show. Named after the surrealist multiplayer game, *Exquisite Corpse* where each participant takes turns writing or drawing on a sheet of paper, folding it to conceal their contribution, before passing it on to the next player. The exhibition is a coming together of thirty of her paintings, the first time she's had all her work in the one place.

"The most precious thing we have in our lives is time and our ability to think. For me these paintings mark a passing of time. A commitment I've made to documentation. So seeing them together, all in the same space, will be quite emotional for me."

- Daz Chandler 2024

Equisite Cadaver is on at University Gallery 28 February - 20 April, 2024

IMAGE FRONT COVER: Caroline Zilinsky, **For Whom The Bell Tolls** 2023. Oil on linen, 138 x 138 cm.

IMAGE RHS FOLD: Caroline Zilinsky, **Somewhere Over The Rainbow** 2023. Oil on linen, 122 x 112 cm.

IMAGE LHS INTERNAL: Caroline Zilinsky, **Heiress to the Pied Piper** 2020. Oil on linen, 97 x 97 cm.

IMAGE RHS INTERNAL: Caroline Zilinsky, **Faceless** 2020. Oil on linen, 122 x 122 cm.

Images courtesy of the artist and Nanda\Hobbs Gallery



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