

# TURPS

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**Featuring**  
Mathew Weir on Dawn Mellor

# PATNT -

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**Issue 4**

# ING

# MAGA -

# ZINE

# DAWN MELLOR: THE FLOWERS OF EVIL BY MATHEW WEIR



Janet Leigh  
2007  
Oil on canvas  
(60 x 60 cm)

*Courtesy of the artist*

‘Who has not, a hundred times, found himself committing a vile or stupid action, for no other reason than because he knows he should not? Have we not a perpetual inclination, in the teeth of our best judgment, to violate that which is law, merely because we understand it to be such?’

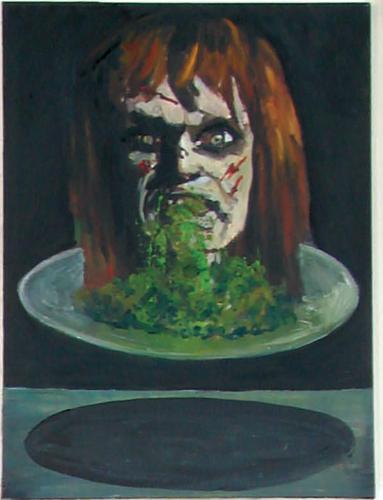
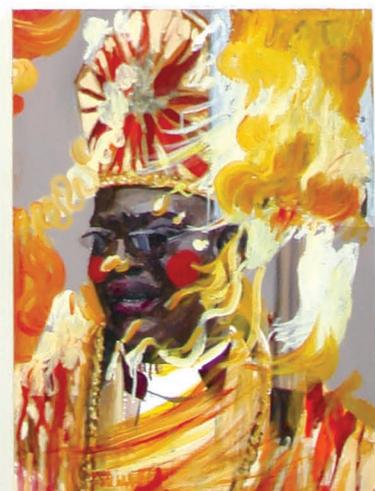
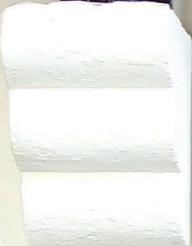
*Edgar Allan Poe*

‘Crime in itself has such an attraction that, independently of lust, it alone can inflame the passions’

*Marquis de Sade*

‘If rape or arson, poison or the knife, has wove no pleasing patterns in the stuff of this drab canvas we accept as life – it is because we are not bold enough’

*Charles Baudelaire*



Previous Page: **Installation shot**  
2007

*Courtesy of the artist and Studio Voltaire*

One of the most recognised and written about elements of Dawn Mellor's paintings are her depictions of celebrities. This is of no surprise, as they are at the core of her practice. Celebrities are a prominent part of popular and visual culture, where recognition is desirable and opportunities for self-promotion are sought. Representations of people such as Madonna, Britney Spears and Michael Jackson are immediately recognisable in Mellor's work and, as such, encourage the viewer's engagement through their familiarity. The less accessible or understood part of Mellor's practice is the violence she inflicts on her painted images of celebrities. Her works are not just a comment on a celebrity phenomenon but a conduit for violent urges.

When describing Mellor's paintings I will often say that she paints celebrities and does horrible things to them. Although this statement quickly describes the paintings, I realise that to expand on this one has to engage with a discourse that can be uncomfortable – the painting of Cherie Blair (2007) depicts her sitting in a huge black dildo, skulls on each side, her left hand poking fingers through the eye sockets; Amanda Lepore (2007) has her breasts resting on a table, cuts cover the whole of her body, and some have been stitched-up in a bizarre act of reparation.

Are the images Mellor creates attacked? Or are they representations of an attacked image? The latter concept suggests a form of detachment, the mere reinterpretation of an image depicting a violent act. The former implies that violence is at the heart of the process. Through her handling of paint – the frenzied sweeps and stabs of the brush – the violence is very much present, real not represented. Energy has gone into the paint application, brought on by an aggressive mental state. In Mellor's painting of Julie Andrews (2007), red paint drips from an inscription on her face, falling indiscriminately down the canvas. Similarly paintings of Hitchcock

(2007) and Madonna (2007) have thick red paint dotted and jabbed across the surface, appearing random, automatic and unconstrained. Violence is represented by colour. Red paint becomes blood, brown paint, excrement, and so on. The use of paint to represent bodily fluids finds comparison with an aspect of Freud's theory concerning the anal phase in children, where the child, seeing faeces as a gift, will play with it. To discourage such play the child may be given a replacement substance, such as mud, clay or paint. In Mellor's work, paint represents faeces; the substance for which it is suggested paint can be a substitute. It is worth noting here that Mellor has referred to her paintings as childish acts.

This idea is most evident in Mellor's painting of Janet Leigh (2007). Using the famous film still of Leigh's screaming face, from the shower murder scene in Hitchcock's *Psycho*, Mellor subjects the image to a 'shower' of (represented) shit and blood, which is sprayed across Leigh's face/the canvas. This 'shower' is projected from a spread arse, with a wide, gaping arse-hole. Finger marks of brown paint are smeared over the arse, revealing Mellor's use of her hands to play with paint, in an apparently archaic childlike frenzy; real finger marks, pretend shit. An apple floats on each side of the disembodied head, creating a Magritte-like tableau. There is a relationship between Leigh's open, screaming, mouth and the apples which suggests taste and temptation. Mellor's reworking of this iconic film-still may comment on the apparent misogyny of Hitchcock. It also challenges the viewer to reconsider a known and understood filmic representation of horror by presenting a new version to which horror has been added. Mellor's work combines both actual and represented violence – a knife represented in paint, yet it may also be painted using violent stabs. In relation to the painting of Janet Leigh, more violence is added to an image of enacted or pretend violence.



**Morrissey**  
2007  
Oil on canvas  
(60 x 76 cm)

The slashing of Velázquez's *Rokeby Venus* (1647-51) by the suffragette Mary Richardson in 1914 could be compared to the iconoclastic acts in which Mellor engages. Richardson, also known as 'Slasher Mary', gained notoriety for cutting the painting seven times with a meat cleaver. In 1952 Richardson explained that "The most beautiful woman on canvas was

as nothing compared to the death of one woman in prison'. Richardson describes her actions as a symbolic act - minor in comparison to violence directed towards an actual person. Yet, the incident is an act of true violence. As with Mellor's work, the image becomes a sacrificial object, on which violence is enacted.

A significant difference between



Jackie O  
2007  
Oil on canvas  
(56 x 71 cm)

Mellor's work and Richardson's slashing of the Rokeby Venus is that Mellor's practice involves both the creation and destruction of an image. Mellor starts by concentrating on the technical aspects of rendering a portrait in paint; achieving an accurate likeness, attaining appropriate colours, tones, shapes and so on. Then on any given day the painting will have the cruellest

violent acts put upon it; a Jekyll And Hyde syndrome of calm and madness.

This form of iconoclasm suggests a state of flux, moving between creation and destruction. Mellor creates a painting and then, through violence, the image is altered and possibly 'destroyed' - the result is an alternative creation. 'Destruction is creation', as stated by anarchist Mikhail

Bakunin . This is possibly a cathartic process for Mellor, of birth, death, re-birth - all within the production of one painting.

The philosopher, historian and critic Rene Girard writes that ‘Violence is not to be denied, but it can be diverted to another object, something it can sink its teeth into’ . To illustrate this idea he describes the biblical story of Cain and Abel, from Genesis. Cain and Abel were the first and second sons of Adam and Eve. Cain murders his brother Abel. Gerard states ‘Cain is a tiller of the soil who gives the fruits of his labour to God, whereas Abel is a shepherd who regularly sacrifices the first-born of his herds. One of the brothers kills the other, and the murderer is the one who does not have the violence-outlet of the animal sacrifice at his disposal’ . Gerard suggests that the sacrificial killings of Abel provide an outlet for his violent needs, whereas Cain’s lack of an outlet results in escalating frustration and jealousy, which leads to murder. It can be argued that Mellor’s sacrifice or acts of violence towards celebrity images may exhume similar violent/murderous tendencies. Mellor states that the more violent her paintings become, the calmer she becomes, exemplifying Girard’s theory of diverted violence. For Mellor, to repress this violent outlet may prove dangerous.

It is interesting that Mellor should choose to use painting as an outlet for her violence. What is the relationship between painting and violence? Violence has always been prevalent in art history, from images of the crucifixion to Goya’s *Disasters Of War* (1810-1820) and on to the sexually violent images of Picasso. Otto Dix also produced a number of paintings depicting serial murder. One painting, *Sexual Murder: Self-Portrait* (1920) is signed with a red handprint as if to confess to the act of murder itself. There is something inherent to the nature of painting, the physical and psychological act of mark-making, which enables it to become an important substitute for violence.

A number of serial killers, once

imprisoned, have started to produce paintings. The act of painting can be recognised as an alternative violent outlet; to use Gerard’s theory, violence is ‘diverted on to another object’ . The production of paintings by serial killers may be as part of an art therapy class, which suggests a clinical recognition of painting’s use as a means of personal expression.

Possibly the most renowned killer/artist is the Chicago serial killer, John Wayne Gacy. In 1980 Gacy was convicted of torturing and killing thirty-three young men . A carpenter and children’s entertainer by trade, it was in prison that Gacy started to paint. His paintings consist of mundane and naïve portraits of himself, dressed as his children’s entertainer alter-ego Pogo The Clown, as well as images of characters from the Disney film *Snow White*. Gacy gained recognition for both his crimes and his paintings. Unable to kill, it can be suggested that painting provided a substitute for his desires. Former FBI profiler John Douglas has claimed ‘Manipulation. Domination. Control [are] ... the three watchwords of violent serial offenders’ . Painting can offer all of these things.

Mellor’s has established her practice to satisfy her own needs. She is able to select any image she desires and has the power to recreate it. Celebrity images are at the mercy of her violent hand and brush actions. There are some serial killers who leave a tableau for the police to discover - an image of violence created and presented to the world. The serial killer and artist are also drawn together by the serial nature of their actions the desire to kill or make a painting again and again.

Possibly aware of a relationship between the killer and the artist, Mellor has painted a martyred - looking image of Morissey (2007), in which paint brushes enter the face, neck and body, as in a painting of St Sebastian. Blood spurts from the incisions, making the paint brushes weapons. This painting emphasises Mellor’s choice of paint and brushes as

a means of enacting and representing violence. I am not suggesting that if Mellor did not paint she would be a serial killer but, through painting, certain violent tendencies are controlled and channelled. Similarly killers may turn to paint, when unable to kill.

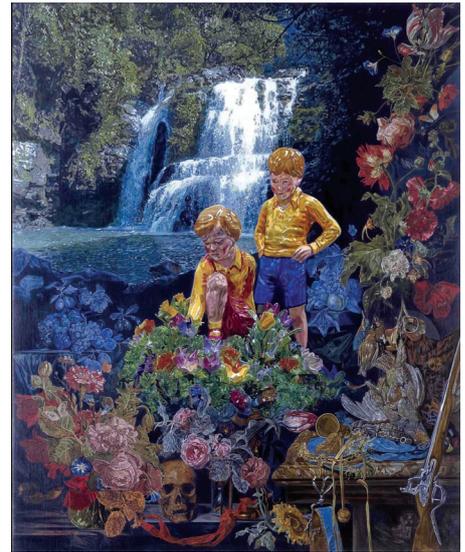
It may be that if painting was removed from the equation, the violent acts that Mellor inflicts on her work could be directed towards herself in the form of self-harm. Mellor has suggested that, at times, the violence she inflicts on to celebrity images helps her feel closer to them and makes them seem more real. This is a feeling that is often expressed by self-harmers; one reason for a person inflicting cuts, burns or bruising to their body is 'to feel real, if they are feeling numb or remote from the world around them'. Does Mellor displace similar feelings onto a surrogate object in order to divert them from herself? Mellor may transfer her own feelings of numbness to an image she sees as being devoid of life. Celebrities mainly exist through the printed page and film; they are distant and become mere images to most people.

The psychoanalyst and writer Darian Leader states that 'Something can be fixed or arrested by making a mark, as we see, for example, in the feeling of relief sometimes experienced by self-harmers after they have made a cut in their body surface. And it is a positive step in such cases if, perhaps due to a therapy, it becomes possible to make marks on paper or canvas rather than on the flesh itself'. Leader suggests that canvas and paint can divert a desire for self-harm and an act of violence. Do Mellor's paintings satisfy the urge to make marks independent of her own or others bodies?

There are many contradictions in Mellor's paintings. The extreme violence inflicted on the celebrities does not seem to affect them. They have not been killed - appearing defiant and invigorated through the dramatic spectacle imposed on them. Mellor claims to admire many of the people

she paints, which suggests why she would want them to be more real or to feel closer to them but not why she would wish to hurt them. There is a democracy to the violence inflicted; from the apparent hated figures of Tony Blair to the loved Judy Garland, it is dealt in more or less equal measure, making the artist's stance unidentifiable and universal. Mellor's paintings combine awkwardness and comfort, violence and calm, strength and vulnerability, control and automatism. It is these contrasting elements that produce the power and intrigue in her paintings. The title of Mellor's most recent show *Vile Affections* at Studio Voltaire, London, further emphasises this love/hate relationship.

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**The Spectre Of Sex Appeal – Mathew Weir**  
2007  
Oil on canvas  
(44 x 54.5 cm)

*Courtesy of the artist and Alison Jacques Gallery, London*

