

# VOGUE

AUSTRALIA

**HOW GREEN IS YOUR LIPSTICK?**

**RUNWAY REPORT**  
VIVID COLOUR  
SHARP LINES  
LUXE DETAILS

**MUM'S THE WORD**  
Saying no to parenthood

**Back in black**  
Return to the dark side

**THE IT PARADE**  
**30**  
things we love right now

\$7.95 AUG '08 NZ \$9.90



9 312966 801005

08

ARTS FOCUS

# talks

Editor: Clare Press

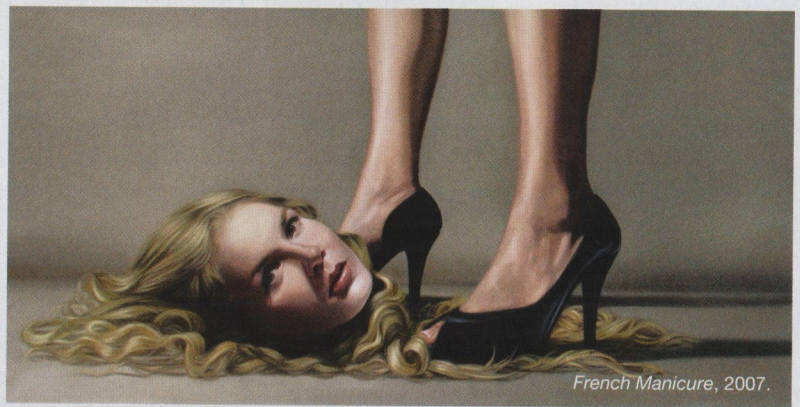
## FIGURATIVELY SPEAKING

Decapitated ladies in the latest looks from Paris, sensational stilettos dripping with blood, the marvellous mixed with the macabre – it's all in a day's work for expatriate Australian artist VR Morrison. ▶

Words: Prue Gibson



A photographic self-portrait, 2008.



French Manicure, 2007.



My Red Soul Richelieu, 2008.



L'Ombre Rouge, 2008.

Sofia Coppola's film *Marie Antoinette* inspired scores of fashion moments, thanks to those powdered wigs, the intricate brocades and the hundreds of shoes especially designed by Manolo Blahnik. Like Coppola, Australian artist VR Morrison draws upon the extravagances of 17th- and 18th-century French fashion for inspiration as she paints epic dramas of grand beauty. "I feel more like a stylist than an artist sometimes," she says. "Shoes, handbags, colours – I use these items to illustrate the historical tableaux I am interested in."

Morrison (the VR stands for Virginia Rose) is well placed to access the abundant imagery and histories that end up in her art. She lives in Montpellier, in southern France, with both the worlds of baroque glamour and 21st-century fashion at her fingertips. The Palace of Versailles and Paris – the Louvre, the Musée de la Mode et du Textile and the flagship stores of her favourite labels Christian Dior and Christian Louboutin – are only hours away.

In 2005 Morrison and her husband moved to southern France, a few hours' drive from Spain and Italy. "I love the fact that there's never anything in my fridge. I walk to the local markets and buy fresh ingredients. It's lavish but liberating," she says. Morrison makes regular trips to Paris – with her constant companion, a white toy poodle named Ripley – and can spend all day on Avenue Montaigne, shopping for inspiration at Chanel, Christian Dior and Louis Vuitton.

Fashion may inspire her, but in her painting practice Morrison behaves like a one-woman movie-making machine. She

sources props – fabrics and accessories – and uses them to illustrate her tableau scenes. Many of these garments and shoes are customised: she's a whiz with a sewing machine. She then ropes in models (often her gorgeous friends) and builds elaborate sets, paying special attention to the hair and make-up looks and the lighting for the scenes, drawing on her expertise in prop-making and animatronics and her experiences as a make-up artist and fashion designer (her first job after college was with the design team at Trent Nathan).

Once the scene is set, she photographs it and then painstakingly paints the final oil works from the prints. Sometimes she depicts women beheaded (*Marie-Antoinette* again) or, in turn, women scandalously beheading men (referencing baroque artist Artemesia Gentileschi's work). Other times she paints still-life scenes featuring stilettos and collectable handbags, perhaps bound with ropes or served up sinisterly on a communion platter. She says she wants the viewer to feel the same way looking at her paintings as she does turning the pages of fashion magazines

and lusting over the beautiful images. "It's all about luring and seducing the viewer."

Despite the charm of her paintings of sky-high heels in French-revolution colours, her feathered purses and polished candelabra, Morrison's works are profoundly disconcerting. There is passion and sensual decadence in her potent objects and beautiful portraits, but there are also symbolic

references to death. She says she finds the idea of impending doom both romantic and alluring. There is also implied violence, especially towards women. She interprets historical stories and understands that "what has happened to women in history shapes how we as women act and react today. I suppose I am trying to make relevant, and celebrate, heroines of the past."

There are art critics who snub their noses at overtly beautiful paintings, with an implicit criticism that the artist who is too consumed with surface beauty reduces the seriousness of his or her work. What does Morrison have to say to that? "Beauty is paramount. A world without beauty is a sad world. That's why I love the French. I do find it sad that people are afraid of seeking beauty, feeling inferior to it, apprehensive or ashamed of attaining it. I don't believe it is superficial or vain. Appreciating beauty is a lifelong journey for me."

Morrison plunders the rich history of French art and contemporary fashion to articulate a singular voice in the wilderness of the art world. Her vision of life encompasses epic proportions of outrageous decadence on the one hand, but on the other she is a master of the darker influences on human nature, such as the urge of women to seek revenge or even to murder after having been raped. And then there is also that other dangerous and forbidding influence, the urge to shop. As Morrison explains: "I see myself as a feminist artist, but rather than burning my bra I'm burning a huge hole in my wallet on my impractical and expensive fashion fetish."

VR Morrison's work will be shown at the Melbourne Art Fair 2008, Royal Exhibition Building, Melbourne, from July 30 to August 3.