

## MAGNUS BELLUM

Andro Semeiko

November 2009 – January 2010

Solo exhibition of paintings by London based Georgian artist, Andro Semeiko on the subject of the power-plays in commissioned portraits and the creation of iconic symbols.

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How do paintings act as a device to glorify human beings and human accomplishments? How are influential symbols created? How do images of people endure as icons of power? Andro Semeiko unpicks these questions in a body of work from 2005-2009 with wit and satire. The exhibition's title, *MAGNUS BELLUM* translated from Latin is BIG WAR, hints at the grand enduring themes around the depiction of power and influence.

Semeiko's training as a painter began at an early age owing to his father being a successful contemporary painter in Georgia. Semeiko attended top institutions in Georgia, the Netherlands as well as London's Goldsmiths College and the Royal Academy.

In reading contemporary philosopher Baudrillard and Foucault's critical investigations on how humans assign meanings to objects and the resultant potent symbols of power, Semeiko began a body of work of hyper-realistically painted single objects on large canvases. Semeiko purposefully employed devices he observed in the compositions of highly charged symbols, such as the USSR hammer and sickle he was regularly exposed to growing up in Georgia. These devices included the complete isolation of a floating object, the stripping away of any context, and an illusion of rays of light from behind objects. For instance, *Very Big Chocolate Cake*, 2006 a large (meter and a half square) oil and acrylic painting of a slice of chocolate cheesecake on a flat black background. Painted many times larger than life and in striking colour, the cake takes on an unlikely strong assertive presence.

Semeiko painted similar images of floating helmets from suits of armour which are based on actual helmets fabricated for a planned Crusade around the 16th century which in fact never took place. The single objects successfully transcend themselves and appear as believable mini-icons. The result is a satire on the absurdity of a pervasive multi-layered assigned meaning to a symbolic object... from hammers and sickles, to apples, a star of David, or a Nike swoosh.

The exhibition includes several large paintings based on classical portraits. These "portraits" are not of anyone recognisable, but rather self-contained suits of armour placed into classical poses and compositions which have historically been chosen to communicate a person's wealth and dominance – a public relations exercise essentially. By using suits of armour with the helmet closed, the figures reveal no flesh and although they are human forms, they are difficult to relate to. All of this posturing and presentation of self-assuredness seems to collapse on itself leaving only artifice and a parody of oneself. It is not unlike our current experience of celebrity culture or even politicians...impossibly groomed and airbrushed actors or a politician wearing an Etonian armour rendering them difficult to relate to...

Semeiko's work are consciously aware of being a staged exercise. In recreating portraits with borrowed compositions and poses from wealthy and powerful personas of bygone eras, Semeiko cannily exposes that closely managing and controlling one's image through aesthetics is a human pursuit with a long, long history.

This timely exhibition comes when we are faced with great uncertainty seemingly caused by a cast of ubiquitous characters who would easily fall into the wealthy and powerful, groomed and armoured category. We rightly hold suspicions of self-consciously crafted images. Semeiko shows us how it is all too easy to project power. He is not a political artist, just a keen observer of human nature and the aesthetics of a power play.

- Meredith Gunderson, 2009