

# DOROTHY'S DARK SIDE

Painter **Dawn Mellor** has made a career of subverting celebrity culture with her ghoulish portraits. **Ana Finel Honigman** discovers why she's now decided to desecrate the heroine of *The Wizard of Oz*

Photography **Atlanta Rascher**



For a little girl with such an unwavering sense of herself that wondrous distractions, horrifying diversions and even a field full of poppies could not stop her from staying her course, *The Wizard of Oz*'s Dorothy Gale is held dear in the hearts of many different people. Emulated over the years but still remaining a quintessential American icon, Gale is subject to a ghoulish and surreal makeover by Manchester-born and London-based painter Dawn Mellor in her her third solo show, *A Curse on Your Walls*, at New York's Team gallery.

In six large-scale paintings (some of which measure 12 x 10ft), Mellor riffs on the notion that Salman Rushdie presents in his challenging essay, "The Wizard of Oz", where he argues that Dorothy might well exemplify Americana through her yearning to return to small-town Kansas, but that she is also the ultimate "symbolic refugee", desperately struggling to find her way home. In Mellor's paintings, Dorothy's home and identity remain undefined but she is clearly, as Mellor describes, "a nasty piece of work".

"She looks American from the Gingham dress she is wearing, but it's not clear whether she's adopted that outfit so as to assimilate, or whether it is actually reflective of her identity," explains Mellor. In *A Curse on Your Walls*, Mellor offers a range of alternative and highly oppositional identities for Dorothy – in some of the paintings, Dorothy seems to be wandering through a war-ravaged stretch of Iraq. In one, she lies stiff in a bombed-out building copied from a newspaper report on the destruction of an Iraqi home. In another, Dorothy is back in the land of Oz. Accompanying these is a separate set of historical and political references in a painting in which she casts multiple Dorothys as British women moving bricks, copied from a vintage photograph. However, Dorothy's bricks are made of gold and the skin on her face is melting, suggesting that Dorothy is a Jewish slave girl in a work camp during WWII. Other images leave open the possibility, through their appropriation of news reportage, that Dorothy might be Palestinian. "Is she a terrorist?" Mellor asks rhetorically about the implications of her images. "Is she a victim of war? A fascist? Is she American? Is she just an American working-class girl with extreme view? Because she is a child, you want to see her as a hero and you want to empathise with her," explains Mellor. But who is she and does she deserve our sympathy? It is important to have ambiguity – I had massive empathy and then I tried to imagine the rage I would feel if I were a Palestinian child or a child from the Holocaust. I portray her in many of the paintings as an extremist, and I want there to be the question of whether she is a child who was so oppressed that she developed extreme views as a result of that oppression."

In one of the most compelling storylines, the character of Dorothy becomes deeply intertwined with the cult status of Judy Garland, the tormented and immensely talented actress who played her when she was 17. Threaded through several of the canvases on view is a narrative of Dorothy as a "gay fundamentalist, 'kill breeders' extremist". Though Dorothy – and Judy Garland – have had such a powerful status in the gay community that FOD or "Friend of Dorothy" has been code for being gay since the movie was released during WWII, Mellor says that she was not aware of the gay cult status of *The Wizard of Oz* when she started obsessively painting images of the icon during her MA at the Royal Academy.

"I knew I was gay then," she recounts. "But my whole relationship with the gay scene was through techno and clubbing. I saw Judy Garland at Carnegie Hall during her last summer performing, and I just became obsessed with her, without realising what she signified within gay culture."

The awkward, honest and loving portraits Mellor drew of *Thriller*-era Michael Jackson when she was a teen, were on view at White Columns gallery after Mellor had become an artist known for dark, disarming portraits of subjects ranging from French feminist H el ene Cixous and French post-structuralist Gilles Deleuze, to French



# “IT’S A SATIRE ON FUNDAMENTALISM, I AM MOCKING IT ALL” – DAWN MELLOR



manicure lover Britney Spears. Highly charged, allegorised political observations are often interspersed with the gory and gothic images Mellor paints. Her work has a striking David Lynch quality, and she herself bears a distinct and almost disquieting resemblance to the actress Sherilyn Fenn, Lynch’s muse.

“I could just collect a lot of rubbish and debris and shove it in the gallery, to make an orgiastic critique of consumerism or something,” she says. “But I find the way that celebrities are a distraction more interesting. I generally feel traumatised by what I read in the press. The people who are really on the ball, but are also just really honest, will admit that they are tired of reading about the recession and the war in Iraq. They just want to know about Britney.”

When asked about why she decided to make Judy Garland the subject of this series – instead of painting Britney, whose childhood stardom, iconic American status, raging insecurity and descent into booze, pills and madness could be seen as a hyped-up, accelerated re-run of Garland’s sad story – Mellor offers a personal explanation. She explains that she just loves Judy Garland. Her attachment to Garland was one of only two instances where she sees herself as feeling like a real fan, the other was Michael Jackson. Her choice of these celebrity crushes is not as odd as the fact that there were only two, given that Mellor has devoted her artistic career to creating gripping portraits of our culture’s dysfunctional relationship with celebrity.

Tabloids might undermine the mythic status of celebrities with close-ups of cellulite and exposés of their every bad day, but Mellor goes far deeper in mocking our desire to make super-human stars out of the people we elect to govern, teach and entertain us, by combining them with horrific, violent and surreal iconography. In her thickly painted canvases, Mellor has depicted Tony Blair as a grotesque blissed-out raver, Audrey Hepburn as a zombie with her lips chewed-off, Karl Lagerfeld covered in silvery cockroaches, and Linda Blair as Regan from *The Exorcist*.

Last October, Mellor exhibited *Vile Affections*, which had been hung salon-style in the backroom of Team gallery, with Studio Voltaire, south-west London’s intimate, friendly artist-led gallery housed in a former church. The church setting would have made an appropriate backdrop for many of Mellor’s Dorothy paintings, which confront and taunt fundamentalist Christianity’s fire and brimstone views about homosexuality. In the most well-defined of Mellor’s versions of the *Wizard of Oz* story, Dorothy is shown dating Regan, the possessed girl from the classic 70s horror movie *The Exorcist* (a recurring figure in many of Mellor’s paintings). “Regan is the perfect partner for Dorothy. She is the embodiment of Christianity’s idea that the devil is within, not outside, of us. This fits with fundamentalist Christianity’s image of homosexuality. And while Regan might be a fundamentalist’s idea of a gay person, in my paintings Dorothy is corrupting and exploiting her.”

Though Mellor came to appreciate Dorothy’s impact on the gay community, her decision to cast Dorothy in many of her paintings as a militant lesbian had little to do with her cult status with gay men. “Dorothy is paranoid,” Mellor explains. “It’s all a satire on any kind of fundamentalism. I am mocking it all. But by making her a gay fundamentalist, I allow myself more room for camp.” Thus one image shows Dorothy belting out a song surrounded by a chorus line of zombies with the bodies of the girl in *Goldfinger* and skulls affixed with blue bows. “She is fucked up,” concludes Mellor. “It’s all really fucked up.”

*A Curse on Your Walls* exhibits at Team Gallery, NY from June 19 – August 8, 2008  
www.teamgal.com

Previous page: (clockwise from top left) *Not Yet Titled*, 2007; *Tony Blair*, 2007; the artist at work. This page: (clockwise from far left) *Judy Garland*, 2007; artist in studio; *Not Yet Titled*, 2007. All images of paintings courtesy Team Gallery, New York