

ORDINANCE

presents

Broligarchy
Lillian Morrissey



Room 20, Level 6
37 Swanston St,
Narm/Melbourne VIC 3000
info@ordinancegallery.com

IN STITCHES

(The Hero's Body, Revisited)

Tara Heffernan

“Anyone who speaks of heroes and the heroic”, Boris Groys explains, “can hardly help but think of Fascism”.¹ For Groys, twentieth century image culture fostered a new age of hero-worship. In this age, the hero's body became a commodity: a readily recognised (and idealised) sign. Though there existed artistic renderings of heroic bodies from antiquity onward, the particular theatricality of the everyday and the omnipresence of screens has renewed and reshaped the public's hunger for heroes and “heroic” acts, turning the body into a medium with heightened aesthetic expectations.² Adolf Hitler himself was invested in classicism. Fascist figures throughout the twentieth century idealised robust male youths, athletes, soldiers and fighters. The online masc coded obsession with bodybuilding, the Roman Empire, and the veneration of perverse dandies like Patrick Bateman, exemplify the continuation of this tendency.

Lillian Morrissey's *Heroes* (2022-2024) feature a series of embroidered tapesries confronting this macho-cultural mire. The scenes depicted riff on historical and culturally codified archetypes of male heroism: military, imperial, mythic or otherwise. Cowboys, knights, warriors, kings, and terminator-like figures co-exist in playful and parodic patterns. Era-specificity is muted, while tales of heroism are jumbled on pleasingly flattened—though gently textured—planes.

There is obvious joviality in the blocky, comical figures populating *Heroes*. In part, they resemble nostalgic children's cartoons of the 90s and early 2000s.³ These styles developed in tandem with modern art; just think of the reduced anatomy of humanoid beings populating avant-garde canvases. Both were exercises in testing the austere limits of visual economy. Morrissey plays upon this tension, too.

Recently, there has been a renewed artworld condemnation of craft. The most well-known was levelled by the plum mouthed, aging trend vampire Dean Kissick.⁴ His criticism, targeting the over-institutionalisation of “feminine” or “outsider art” clichés, ignores the reality that no medium is inherently bad, *just as no medium is inherently good*.⁵ Betraying a faith in the significance of image-making beyond medium-based hierarchies, Morrissey's visual vocabulary is informed by a range of reference points including history painting, war tapestry and popular culture. Crucially, however, Morrissey's work responds directly to the ways in which these archetypes and aesthetics have filtered through meme and gaming

culture in the murkier depths of the internet.⁶ *Heroes* weds knowledge of these highly ideological spaces (and their particularised macho iconographies) with skill in, and reverence for, a traditional form of expression often denigrated as “feminine” or unserious.

Decapitation is a recurrent theme in *Heroes*. It features in *Rambo Caesar* (2022) and *Daddy (King Edward VI)* (2023) among others. Though this visceral spectacle is the subject of many moving baroque paintings, it seems reprobate and adolescent in Morrissey's renderings. It's crucial to note that beheading has a symbolic association with masculine anxiety. The cartoon-like characters of *Heroes* seem to

caricature the juvenility of the pleasures offered by these grotesque scenes, which play out indefinitely in the unreality of role-player gaming, action films and fantasy genres: vicarious conquests that assuage underlying fears of sexual impotence and castration.

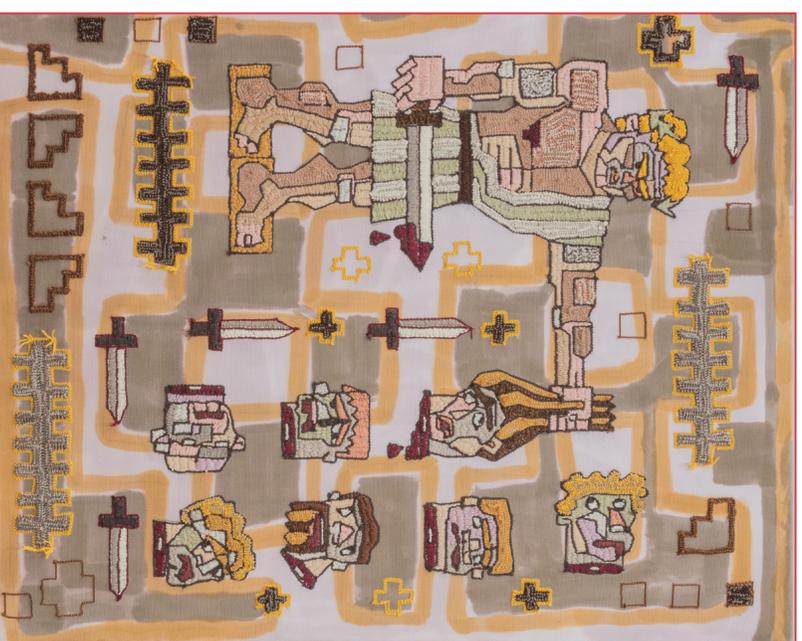
In *Sulla (with the severed heads of his critics)* (2022), Morrissey depicts the Roman General and Statesman, Lucius Cornelius Sulla Felix, clutching the head of a foe in one hand while brandishing a blood-tipped sword in the other. It is a comical portrait lampooning the macho pride in “the simple physical potency of subjugating others.”⁷ But there's more going on here. It's worth briefly considering one chapter in Sulla's sordid history. Following his victory at the Battle of Colline Gate, he published two lists of “enemies” (amounting to over 500 individuals) and generously rewarded followers who assassinated or tortured those named. Morrissey's tapestry seems to note the methodological quality of such tyranny. To Sulla's left, several decapitated heads settle into a grid bordered by cartoonish swords (obvious phallic symbols). The geometric non-space they float upon might resemble panelled headshots on dating apps or professional networking platforms, or the character selection menu in a video game. Their subordination to Sulla reflects a ruthless triumph of one over all others, a desire that resounds in mansplore rhetoric (consider the obsession with denigrating rivals as NPCs, betas, cucks or simps).

Mirroring the kidult antics of the memosphere, or the homoerotic theatricality of figures like Andrew Tate, Morrissey's gamified heroes emphasise the carnivalesque nature of the hero in the neoliberal hellscape of the present. Their IRL spiritual impotence is palpable. Men will not be saved by the mansplore, and many of their “heroes” are aestheticised symptoms of the same atomised neoliberal culture they claim to reject.

Brolisarchy, an exhibition of works by Lillian Morrissey (Berlin/Sydney) runs from 7 February to 1 March, at Ordinance.

Cover Image

Official Trump NFT Trading Card.



Sulla (with the severed heads of his critics), 2022
cotton, yarn, mixed media on panama cotton
120 x 145 cm
\$3300

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³ Like those of Dick Bruna, Martin Brown or the studio Astley Baker Davies.

⁴ To be fair, this backlash was inspired by weak curation of showy and uncomplicated artwork. However, the critical lens does not dig deep enough into the causes and structural motivations behind such exhibitions. Rather, it instead rests on venerating the earlier iteration of the same kind of work with zero reflection on the author's own participation in gimmicky, identity-based art-making (in the author's case, via empty and opportunistic focus on personal anecdotes). Dean Kissick, “The Painted Protest: How politics destroyed contemporary art”, *Harper's Magazine*, December 2024, <https://harpers.org/archive/2024/12/the-painted-protest-dean-kissick-contemporary-art/>.

⁵ Nor is any artform or medium inherently political by virtue of its history or the identity of its maker. We see a similar tendency in the condemnation of auto-fiction in the past five years (often by writers who have indulged in auto-fictional prose themselves). Again, however, the reality is that auto-fiction itself is *not inherently bad* but has been superficially poisoned by masses of trend-following, disingenuous writers producing formulaic, trite work under its name. But, for the likes of writers like Kissick, it's easier to dismiss a “painted” category based on changing fashions than have the confidence in one's own instincts and sensibilities to discern quality regardless of the fickle hides of middle-brow taste. Perhaps ironically, the innovative nature of craft was acknowledged by one of the great conservative critics, Hilton Kramer, in the early stages of its institutional acceptance. “[I]t is the kind of exhibition” he wrote on a Whitney Museum exhibition of quilts, “that prompts us to rethink the relation of high art to what are customarily regarded as the lesser forms of visual expression”.

⁶ Regarding high art, he wondered “the question remains whether or not the native genius for visual expression found its most powerful expression in such forms.” Hilton Kramer, “Art: Quilts Find a Place at the Whitney”, *The New York Times*, 3 July 1971, <https://www.nytimes.com/1971/07/03/archives/art-quilts-find-a-place-at-the-whitney.html>.

⁷ Indeed, the internet has been a generative place for cultural innovation. Many commentators love to tout the well-worn factoid that “language has been innovated by teenage girls!” However, many of the latest cultural changes in language have been innovated by achan adjacent, terminally online masc types. This isn't to say that the teen-girl-as-language-innovator line is irrelevant or unworthy of consideration, but that the widespread acceptance of this story corresponds with a yet-to-be grasped shift in cultural creation. The story is presently sanitised to align with the contemporary faux-celebration of youth and adolescent creativity, rather than acknowledging the nastier undercurrents of culture, and the reality that its innovators aren't always ideologically pure, sweet souls.

⁸ Shaun Tougher, “Holy Eunuch! Masculinity and Eunuch Saints in Byzantium”, in *Holiness and Masculinity in the Middle-Ages*, edited by Katherine J. Lewis, Patricia Cullum (University of Toronto Press, 2005), 154.

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