

Where I Belong

Episode 4: Michael and Phoebe Zavros

Podcast transcript

Michael Zavros:

When we head off to the beach that day, we were trying to get away and the light was fading, even in Brisbane. So, we were in such a hurry, but I really wanted to do it that day, and...

Wendy Love:

Not long ago, the artist Michael Zavros took his kids to the beach. But not for a swim – he brought them there to photograph them for an exhibition he was working on.

MZ:

And just trying to get everyone to get their gear and check in what everyone was going to wear and then we get down there...

WL:

He led his three kids out toward the ocean for the photoshoot.

MZ:

Of course, Phoebe is so self-conscious about this mannequin on the beach and just hated it so much that she was, just, so angry.

WL:

Yes, his daughter Phoebe was self-conscious about the *mannequin* – this mannequin they were dragging along to pose with them for Michael's camera. And if bringing a mannequin to the beach wasn't strange enough, this mannequin shares an uncanny resemblance with Michael. In fact, he sculpted the head of it himself – the whole thing was made to look like him – well, a smoother, slightly younger-looking version. Its face has this vacant expression on it.

Michael often wondered what it would be like to have another copy of himself, a better copy, so he decided to explore that by, yeah, making a model of himself and photographing him in different settings. Much to his daughter Phoebe's embarrassment.

Phoebe Zavros:

It was winter and we were wearing shorts and a knit on a beach, on a windy beach, and we were cold... and Dad was like “you got to stay in the game”. And Dad just doesn’t get it ‘cause it’s working for him, but everyone else is cold, and its windy and he’s like, “come on guys it’ll be over soon”. But there’s people walking past and there was a wedding right there and... I was on my wit’s end to say the least.

WL:

People starred as Michael told his son to face toward his plastic dad and instructed his daughter to place her hand on her fake father’s shoulder.

PZ:

We’re hiking up this sand dune and everyone’s yelling at each other. It was such a fun day.

MUSIC

WL:

So this is the Zavros family. There’s Michael, one of Australia’s leading artists known for his hyper-realist paintings that could easily be mistaken for photographs. His work has been exhibited all over the world, in Hong Kong, Los Angeles, Auckland and throughout Australia. There’s his wife, Alison Kubler, an art curator and writer, and the current editor of Vault Magazine. And together they have three kids. Phoebe’s the oldest, then Olympia, and Leo their son.

The kids are a good mix of their parents. Lighter hair from their mum and darker eyes from their dad, who’s own father is Greek Cypriot. With Michael and Alison heavily involved in the art realm, their family is a little different in some ways. They go to gallery openings and get photographed for magazines sometimes, and they do things like the mannequin shoot, for example. But they’re also just a family like any other, going through the same ups and downs that come with raising children and with all those family relationships to manage.

There’s one relationship though that, in addition to having the typical dynamic you’d expect, has this other unique layer to it. And that’s the father-daughter relationship between Michael and his oldest, Phoebe. Phoebe became the inspiration of many of her dad’s paintings, starting when she was five.

PZ:

I think doing what we used to do, that was one of our bonding things, that’s what we did to talk to each other.

WL:

This relationship between Phoebe and her dad is what we're going to explore for this episode. How Michael and Phoebe's relationship, as father and daughter, but also as creative partners, evolved as Phoebe grew.

INTRO

From Museum of Brisbane, you're listening to *Where I Belong*, a show that tells stories about fascinating and creative people whose lives have been shaped by Brisbane. I'm Wendy Love. On this week's show, Michael and Phoebe Zavros, the father-daughter duo on life behind the canvas.

MUSIC

WL:

I drove out to Chandler to meet Michael Zavros and his daughter Phoebe. Chandler's this semi-rural suburb, about 15 kilometres southeast of Brisbane's CBD. There are paddocks with gum trees and lots of horses. After going down the wrong driveway – some are quite long out here – I find the one that takes me past the Zavros family's low-set home and down to Michael's standalone art studio.

It's spacious inside: high ceilings, concrete floors. Gorgeous light comes in through two huge floor-to-ceiling windows. There is almost too much to look at, so many painted canvases, some on the walls, some leaning up against it. Stacks of books and magazines, that slightly creepy mannequin of Michael in the corner... and taxidermy, lots of taxidermy.

Is that a whole deer over there?

MZ:

Yes, I went through a real taxidermy stage. I was collecting it and using it in my work. Yeah, it's a whole deer (laughs).

WL:

There are heaps of places to sit in here: chairs, stools, couches, lots of comfy looking lounge furniture. Enough space to have some friends over. He'd actually hosted a long lunch here the day before, which explains the long collapsible trestle table and collection of empty champagne bottles on the ground next to the sofa.

Phoebe walks into the studio fresh-faced. Her long brown hair is pulled back into a ponytail.

Phoebe was two when she and her parents moved to this 8-acre block in Chandler. Michael grew up on a large property in the Gold Coast hinterland, with horses and chickens and lots of space. He wanted that life for his own family, so in 2007 they bought this place. He has his

horses and chickens again. He and his younger daughter Olympia, feed the horses and clean out the stables as part of their morning routine.

MZ:

I do love that we live on the outskirts of a capital city and everything that goes with that, like a major state gallery and the proximity to an airport. Those sorts of things are great for us and are a part of our life. And yet, we do feel like we are in the country, and I don't leave here very often. So it's quite remote, but we're still quite connected, I suppose, to a bustling big city.

WL:

Michael started painting when he was ten. His parents were schoolteachers and every Saturday they would take Michael to painting class. He went on to study printmaking at the Queensland College of Art. The discipline and precision he learned from that rigid process of printmaking shows up in his painting practice in the hyper-detailed, hyper-realistic paintings he's famous for.

MZ:

I work from photography and in lots of ways I mimic the look of a photograph, in terms of what I physically make. But it's a very traditional kind of painting. In lots of ways, at least technically, the way that I work hasn't changed for centuries. It's very like what artists have been doing for centuries and I quite like that. I like that connection to the past.

WL:

But what Michael paints is contemporary. His subjects are things that tend to scream high-status, wealth, privilege and conventional beauty. Things like luxury cars, high fashion, thoroughbred horses, the opulent interiors of palaces. Greek mythology and narcissism are big themes too: one of Michael's frequent subjects is himself, though the version he renders onto the canvas looks a bit more like an airbrushed photo of him – the kind you'd see in a glossy magazine. His work is often polarising.

As his family grew, Michael's personal life began to creep into his art practice.

MZ:

And then in a curious way, there was this performance I suppose between art and life and how they would feed each other, and I think that has become what's central to what I do.

WL:

Like all of us parents, Michael takes a lot of photos of his kids. I actually remember promising myself I wouldn't be that parent that snaps 20 photos of my kid trying avocado for the first time. Well, my oldest is 7 and my phone currently has 39,000 photos on it. So that's how that plan turned out...

Anyway, from the time Phoebe was only three years old she loved to turn it on for the camera: posing, dancing around. Michael the dad was happy he had all these photos of Phoebe, his very first child. Michael the artist, was in awe of how natural it was for her to strike a pose.

Olympia was born two years after Phoebe, and it wasn't long before Michael realised how different his girls were. Olympia at three was very different from Phoebe.

MZ:

So when Phoebe was about three, she was wanting to be very grown up and she would act like a little lady and she wear these little plastic heels that we got her from Crazy Clarks and she liked to put on makeup. She would regard herself in the mirror, or she would pose for you in front of the camera. And that's something her sister didn't do, so I was quite fascinated that these kids were so different. So it was quite an organic process to making art about this little performer, I suppose.

WL:

Michael made drawings of some of the photographs he took of Phoebe, to give as gifts to his wife Alison and just to keep for family records. Then, in 2010, Michael had an idea for a large painting with Phoebe at the very center of it. She was five.

At the time, Phoebe played dead a lot. That weird morbid thing kids love to do, like those dark fairytale stories. Snow White in the coffin, Sleeping Beauty under a spell.

MZ:

And at the same time too I'd become quite paranoid about, you know, we'd moved into this house and it's a really old house and certain doors didn't work, or didn't lock, or unlock... and just that strange irrationality that I think comes when you're not quite awake, and you're not quite asleep. I started to imagine horrific things happening to the kids and I guess just as a young parent – I don't do this anymore – but at the time, I couldn't stop doing it. And I did, in that way that I think artists often do, I wondered about making work about something in order to confront my fears.

WL:

So he asked Phoebe if he could photograph her and his little performer happily obliged. He took heaps of photos and video and then got to work on the painting. The result is a work called

Phoebe is Dead. A life-sized portrait of Phoebe lying down against a white backdrop, as if dead, though she looks alive. Her cheeks are rosy, her lips pink and her body is covered by a black Alexander McQueen scarf, with skulls on it. McQueen had taken his own life earlier that year.

The painting won Michael the prestigious Doug Moran National Portrait Prize, worth \$150,000.

Of course, the subject matter is every parent's greatest fear: the death of their child. So, it's no surprise that there were a lot of mixed responses to the work. Michael scrolled the comments of online articles about the painting – there were 100s – some people were truly outraged. Others loved it.

MZ:

People were very confronted that I would paint my daughter as if she was dead. I think that was very confronting, but it was confronting for me. It's understandably confronting, and I didn't see that as a criticism at all – of course it's confronting (laughs). But some people thought that was very good, that was very interesting that this work was provocative or teasing out these things. Others felt it was inappropriate. So it's that spectrum, from the same response, I guess, is interesting.

WL:

Phoebe doesn't remember much about the photoshoot – just little bits like what she laid down on for the photo, on a glass table, and it was always just fun. What she does remember is her dad winning the Doug Moran prize. She was there with Michael when he accepted it.

PZ:

I remember I had a fringe, and I wore this long black dress and I had tights on. And I remember Mum said, because I was very nervous. Not really nervous, but lots of emotions. I think I couldn't really figure out what was going on, lots of people trying to talk to me, lots of photos being taken. I think it was quite a lot for my little brain to handle. But Mum was like, you know, "if you get up there and Dad's gonna hold you, you'll get your chocolate afterwards". And I was like "okay I'll do that" (giggle) that was fine, and I did it. There were so many photos of me like, not in the photo, but in Dad's neck, it was really funny.

WL:

It was fun, but she also remembers crying at times, just so overwhelmed by it all, like a kid who bursts into tears at their own birthday party due to all the attention. Phoebe was in prep at the time.

MUSIC

WL:

More photoshoots and paintings of Phoebe followed. She quickly became Michael's little creative partner. Soon their "Phoebe Paintings" became a body of work within his practice.

MZ:

It became this thing that we were committed to in lots of ways. So we would do a shoot... and I would have an idea for something, so we would do a shoot and then you'd just end up with these hundreds and hundreds of images and sometimes they would make their way into the studio and I'd paint them or do something else – we've done any number of things.

WL:

As Phoebe grew from five, to six, to seven years old, she, like most kids, became more aware of the world outside of herself, outside her family. In grade three, kids at her school started using the computers in the computer lab to Google their own names, and the names of their friends.

PZ:

Because that was super cool. Like, the Kardashian you search the Kardashians, they're going to come up – or whoever it is that you're interested in the time. I don't know who we were interested in at the time, probably Justin Bieber (laughing), One Direction. So we'd search that and they'd come up, so you know we'd start searching our own names. And of course when you search up my name it would come up, you'd find images of me. I think lots of them... I think it was exciting, lots of people would like to tell you about it. I think that was definitely a thing, like if you searched up my name, if it comes up with stuff, you know, you're famous (laughing). Not actually though.

WL:

The more Phoebe grew, the more agency she began to hold when she collaborated with her dad for his portraits. She had more of a say in the creative process.

MZ:

And with each shoot as Phoebe was getting older, the nature of them would change. The way she behaved would change. Her input changed, she started to collaborate more, or say what she did want to do, or didn't want to do.

WL:

Then, when Phoebe was eight years old, Michael snapped photos of her and her younger sister Olympia in the family pool. They were pretending to be mermaids, so they weren't wearing swim tops. She says she didn't mind that her dad was taking photographs.

But, later on, when Michael asked if he could use them for a portrait, Phoebe told him no. She says she knew it wasn't appropriate for girls to be seen without tops at pools, even though it was okay for boys the same age.

PZ:

I knew that at some point that was wrong. Like I knew, even though, you know – it isn't. I knew that someone out there, lots of people out there view that as wrong.

WL:

She's not sure how she came to understand that it was wrong, but it's an understanding we all come to eventually. Sometime between five and eight, we're socialised to believe that it's not okay for girls to swim bare-chested anymore. And girls start to become more self-conscious around this age, and more aware of what other people think.

Anyway, Michael had always said he wouldn't paint her without her permission, so when Phoebe said no, that was that.

MZ:

We worked together quite a lot then, but we would always talk about what I was going to do and then, looking at the photographs, and looking at the shoot, and edit out what we liked and what we didn't like. So, because she was very much a part of the process, it was important for me that she liked it.

WL:

So, they worked on other ideas. Ideas Phoebe was happy for Michael to turn into paintings, like the one of eight year-old Phoebe, posing with her hand on her hip, wearing a one-piece swimsuit and Tom Ford sunglasses.

MUSIC

WL:

Then, one day in 2015, Michael was scrolling back through his collection of photos, something he does a lot and he came across the ones of Phoebe pretending to be a mermaid in the pool. He was working on a series of paintings with a water theme at the time and he thought making

one from that mermaid shoot would go well with the series, so he decides to ask her again if he could use them to paint her. Phoebe is ten, nearly 11 now, and says yes right away.

PZ:

I think it was just out of my mind at that point. I was like whatever (laughing) that's eight-year-old Phoebe, I don't really care.

WL:

So, Michael got to work painting a small portrait called *The Mermaid*. It's a closeup of Phoebe, floating on her back, facing up, looking directly at the viewer. Her head's just above the surface of the blue water. Her shoulders and chest are partially submerged; the portrait ends just above her belly button. The colours are vivid. It looks so real.

MZ:

Around that time, I started to change the way that I was painting, because the paintings had looked a little bit anemic. I was looking at old master paintings and thinking how did they get that light, things seemed to glow. I started painting with layers and it just allows you to use much brighter colours, and it allows you to introduce more light into the work.

WL:

Now, the level of skill that went into painting *The Mermaid* is undeniable. The light, the detail, is extraordinary. Still, the subject of the painting was controversial for some, for reasons many of us can probably understand. But it was an exceptionally sensitive issue around this time because people were still reeling from a controversy that surrounded another famous Australian artist, the photographer Bill Henson. His photographs of nude teenagers sparked a national debate about how young people should be depicted in art. He became a lightning rod for some in the media, even the Prime Minister at the time, Kevin Rudd, weighed in, calling the pictures "absolutely revolting".

Michael is an admirer of Bill's work, but doesn't see his portrait of Phoebe as being anything like Bill's photographs.

Like his *Phoebe is Dead* portrait, reactions were mixed which, for the most part, Michael was happy with. He likes when his work is polarising. He likes the dialogue it creates; the questions it raises, the introspection it can spark.

MUSIC

WL:

Meanwhile, Phoebe had her own stuff to deal when *The Mermaid* portrait started getting attention. She didn't see any issue with the painting. For her it was just art, not all that different from artworks she'd grown up seeing on the walls of galleries she'd visit with her parents. But most kids her age aren't used to art like that and don't have artists for parents. So, when kids at

school started using images of *The Mermaid* for their screensavers, including some of her friends, Phoebe got uncomfortable.

PZ:

People did like to go, “that’s strange, you should be wearing a bathing suit”. It more was upsetting for me because I didn’t see an issue with it.

WL:

This hurt her feelings, but she didn’t want to make a big deal, so she left it for a while. After a few weeks, she kindly asked them to stop using the picture. She thinks everyone was just confused and didn’t know what to make of it.

PZ:

But that has a lot more to do with, you know, the way society has made us think about everything.

WL:

Phoebe’s reflected on this a lot since then. Why a painting like *The Mermaid* is provocative to some people and she thinks a lot of it has to do with the way we treat boys and girls of the same age. She often compares herself to her younger brother Leo, who is nine now. She says they’re a lot alike.

PZ:

I like to look at the same patterns, ‘cause it’s interesting to see yourself in someone. But he is a nine year-old and if you looked at me when I was a nine, eight year-old girl, we both have completely flat chests and we both have nipples because that’s how that works. It’s very interesting that we get upset about that, I think... you know...it is very strange, we’re both very underdeveloped humans, little humans, so really what’s so upsetting and scary about that? Like there’s nothing provocative there, and I don’t know what really, you know, being developed... there is nothing provocative about that either, like what’s so scary about that? But, apparently, at some point in society it was decided that that little girl having nipples is very wrong and she’s not allowed to do that. Even though that’s not her fault.

WL:

Despite some criticism, *The Mermaid* was well-received at a contemporary art fair in Los Angeles and is now part of the Newcastle Art Gallery’s collection.

MUSIC

WL:

Coming up after the break, Michael and Phoebe hit the pause button on their work together.

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MUSIC

WL:

When Michael was an emerging artist, he travelled to Sydney a lot to show his work, and to network with the strong art community there.

MZ:

I liked being involved with that to a point, but I also felt that it was quite stifling to a lot of those artists to be so embedded in something... and part of quite a competitive art scene. And I think that it can be a bit stifling to be constantly looking at each other and addressing each other's work all the time. I think that artists need to be in a vacuum to find some sort of authentic voice. And that's been really true for me. I've needed to really get away from any noise, from even fellow artists, to be the kind of artist that I wanted to be.

WL:

He says he's fortunate to be able to live a bit tucked away in the outer suburbs of Brisbane, where he can enjoy the space and quiet he so craves.

MUSIC

WL:

Over the next couple of years, Michael painted more portraits of Phoebe. One of them, called *Flora*, won the Mossman Art Prize in 2016. It's of Phoebe at 11 years old, she's got her arms folded across her chest, and a Gucci scarf with colourful flowers is wrapped around her face. The spring theme is a metaphor for her journey into puberty.

But as she got deeper into that journey, Phoebe and her dad found they just weren't syncing. They tried out a few more ideas, did a few more photoshoots, but nothing worked. It wasn't fun anymore, so they decided to call it quits.

PZ:

I think everyone gets to a point in their childhood where there's a lot going on and emotions are big and hard to deal with. I think I just needed a break, you know? Big minds in small bodies (laughs) – there's a lot going on.

WL:

This is normal of course. The relationship between girls and their parents usually change when they hit puberty. And in the case of Michael and Phoebe, a father and daughter, but also an artist and creative partner... well, the latter had to go. She was experiencing so many changes mentally, socially, physically.

PZ:

And you get like, pimples and stuff, you don't really want to be photographed.

MZ:

I think puberty had a lot of to do with us not working together. Phoebe wasn't comfortable, she didn't think she looked very good, she didn't like any of the photographs. And she didn't look like a little girl playing dress up anymore and she didn't really look like a grown up. I wasn't able to make work about that for some reason. We were missing some crucial element. And neither of liked it, so we just stopped doing it.

WL:

So, for nearly two years... nothing. Michael worked on his art practice, while Phoebe worked on herself, finding out who she was. Social media was a big part of that: YouTube videos, Instagram... watching other people helped inform her own understanding of what was considered feminine. What was cool, what was pretty.

PZ:

I think femininity and growing up in girls is very different from boys, as much as people would like to admit it's not, I think it is. I think from a very young age you know what the male gaze is to say the least... and I think I knew that wearing makeup would make me prettier, as a 13-year-old, and I also liked putting it on, it was fun. I liked all that stuff. I liked being older than I was.

WL:

Around 13, Phoebe started to feel more confident about herself. She'd watch makeup tutorials on YouTube and then practice on herself. She still had this young face, not a child's face or a grown up's, but somewhere in between. And she was getting quite good at dressing it up with makeup in this spectacular fashion.

Michael was intrigued by this hobby of hers and thought it could be an interesting theme to play around with. So, one day he asks if she wants to put on some makeup and do a shoot. She loves the idea. The shoot turned into a portrait Michael painted called *Amour* – it was shown at the Sydney Contemporary in 2018 and...

MZ:

It's probably the closest to the *Phoebe is Dead* painting in the way that it really upset people. And I thought it would be a little bit provocative, but I didn't expect people to just... didn't know what do with this.

WL:

This reaction surprised me. The portrait depicts a woman who looks like Phoebe, but not. She's wearing a red-and-white-striped shirt. her hair is big and wavy, gold hoops dangle from her ears, and she's got bright red lipstick on.

MZ:

And what I love about it is there's no nudity, there's nothing that... 'cause straight away when we encounter something, I think people now are conditioned to check it. Especially if there's a child involved – we immediately are looking very quickly, is everything ok here? And with this work, no one could quite explain to you why they felt so uncomfortable, but friends of ours, so many fellow artists were like, "I can't stop looking at it, but I find this really, really hard, really difficult to deal with." I think it's really interesting because I think I'm exposing something in all of us, not exposing any of our vulnerabilities. I think I'm holding a mirror up to my audience. I always say that, and I like watching that play out.

WL:

What people often don't realise about all of Michael's paintings is that they are paintings, not photographs of things exactly how they are. He works from composite images, so his paintings are never of one specific photo, and he adds things into them that were never even there to begin with. The big wavy hair he painted, for example, was based on a photo of another person, not Phoebe.

MZ:

They're not exactly portraits of Phoebe, of my daughter. They're actually these kind of fictions that we both are involved with – they're somewhere between a portrait and like figure painting. She's model for an idea of something that is also based on who she is but it's not really a portrait. They're tricky to... they're functioning in that quasi portrait way, I think.

MUSIC

WL:

Last year, when Phoebe was rummaging through her mum's clothes looking for a corset to borrow – yes, apparently corsets are in again – she came across her mother's wedding dress.

PZ:

I remember I wanted to wear a corset for my birthday dinner. We had just come out of quarantine, so we were going to do a nice dinner. Anyway, I tried that on and then I tried the wedding dress on, and it was so pretty. I think I tried it on because one of my other good friends had also just tried on her mum's wedding dress, so I was like I may as well, and it fit pretty good (laughing) and...

WL:

She walked out in the long, strapless, satin gown, and called out to her dad to come see.

MZ:

It was one of those amazing, confronting things where you don't want your daughter to grow up, but then oh my god – she looks amazing (laughing). So it's that absolute razor's edge, and of course she's wearing my wife's wedding dress, so it's very incredibly loaded. It's really weird, but it's incredibly innocuous at the same time and that's what I really love about it.

WL:

The father in him was struck by how much his oldest child had grown; by how beautiful she looked in her mother's dress. The artist in him saw his next painting. With Phoebe's approval he photographed her over three days.

MZ:

It's always over there that we shoot, we tend to use that natural light over there and we just have to always hit our moment.

WL:

He finished the painting at the start of this year. It's big, about two metres. It shows Phoebe, who's 15 – nearly 16 now – sitting in the middle of a black leather couch, wearing the long satin wedding dress. She's barefoot.

MZ:

It almost looked like the wind was just sort of catching her hair and it just looked a bit sort of fairytale, like a Sleeping Beauty kind of a thing.

WL:

Her eyes are fixed, like she's staring me down. She looks strong, empowered. Phoebe's not so sure, she thinks her expression is an angry one. But I don't see that. I see a composed, yet fierce teenage girl.

MUSIC

WL:

It's hard for Michael to book in her in now for photo shoots. With school, friends and a job at a cafe, she's got a pretty full diary.

He's got Leo too, though, his youngest, who's lot like Phoebe – good in front of the camera. He's been the subject of some of Michael's recent works, including one that's now in the collection of the brand-new Home of the Arts Gallery (HOTA) on the Gold Coast, which is now the largest regional art gallery in Australia.

As for Phoebe, she's definitely a Zavros. She plans to pursue a career in the arts.

PZ:

I think I'm interested in studying art history, the same as Mum. I can't do art, I'm really bad at it actually. I'm really interested in films. I don't know, a bit of everything. I haven't really figured out what I'm super into yet.

WL:

Thanks to Michael, Phoebe and Alison for welcoming me into their studio space.

And definitely scroll through Michael's Instagram. There's heaps of posts showing Michael working on his portraits, and of course the portraits for you to look at themselves.

END

Where I Belong is written and produced by me, Wendy Low, on Turrbal and Yuggera land. Museum of Brisbane acknowledges the Traditional Owners of this land and pays its respect to Elders past, present and emerging.

Dylan Ransom-Hughes mastered this episode.

A very special thanks to Louise Martin-Chew.

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