

**Asher Bilu – A Perfect Monster**



**Heavens 2006**

Flesh for Frankenstein, Young Frankenstein, The Bride of Frankenstein: I've always wanted to do a re-write too, so let's have a crack now.

I'll need a DeLorean with a Flux Capacitor to take me Back to the Future to collect ingredients for my soup. First on the hit list is Michelangelo: Anyone crazy enough to lie on his back for years to paint a ceiling of such scale has the mind and body-crippling dedication I need – I'll take the lot.

Next, Galileo the stargazing telescopic God-questioning universe inspector – no wonder those religious Inquisition freaks couldn't handle him – the brave big picture specialist. Into the mix you go.

Of course, I just can't go past my old one-eared friend Vincent van Gogh. Don't worry about the ear, off with his head and hands – plonk. A liberal sprinkling of manic drive and insanity is an essential seasoning to the brew.

No time, I'd better connect up the DeLorean to the electric wire above the clock tower: .The storm has arrived and that lightning bolt will get me back to 2007. Wow, what a rough, scary ride, I think I zoomed past Einstein chatting to Warhol: 'It may be fame, Andy, but 15 minutes is only relative.' Destination: Hollywood, to snare that elusive yet ubiquitous E.T. Spielberg. Snap, the trap shuts: You're in the blender too, mate.

Just a flick of the switch: Whiz, bang, swirl, bone-crack – I suppose I'd better add 'splutter' – the Cell and Chromosome Puree-Blender has done the trick in seconds and the human, better than gold, but somewhat red fatty liquid, oozes slowly into the Full Body Vortex Regenerator. Instantly the head splitting, there's about to be a nuclear explosion red light flashing siren belts out. (You know the one, where James Bond has 30 seconds to get out of Goldfinger's cataclysmically doomed, world-dominating nuclear reactor).

Suddenly it's over. A green and white glow humming in rhythm to a low murmuring heartbeat builds through the cloudy dry ice vapour as a translucent, three metre high, veiny egg rises from the floor. Crack, out steps my perfect monster, the man of all ideas, the man of all courage, the man of big pictures, Mr Universe – ASHER BILU.

I kneel before him.

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On my right, Marcel Marceau asks me for the crushed pepper: What a shock, not that he uses crushed pepper on his snails, but that he talks. To my left, Asher Bilu breaks off leaves of an artichoke, dipping them into melted butter and scraping the fleshy ends into his mouth with his front teeth – 'What are these weirdos doing?' I thought. It was the end of 1968 and I was dining at Tolarno in Fitzroy Street, St Kilda with Georges and Mirka Mora, Charles and Barbara Blackman, Asher Bilu, Marcel Marceau and a then young Allan Wynn of Wynn Wines. We were celebrating Asher's winning of the Blake Prize.

To say I was unsophisticated is a gross understatement. Sausages, mashed potatoes, and peas with tomato sauce were my usual fare. I had, however, once enjoyed a prawn cocktail with Thousand Island dressing at a wedding. I'd never seen, let alone tasted an artichoke, as for snails – gimme a break. So I thought it was better to abstain from the entrees and wait for the mains, where at least I recognised the word 'steak' on the menu. I opted for the pepper one. Asher went for steak tartare.

Man, I nearly threw up when I realised what this hippie was eating. It arrived on a clean white plate, a lump of raw mince with a raw egg nesting in the top. He then folded in the egg, capers and black pepper. Maybe they're going to bring out the frypan and cook it at the table; it's a fancy, do-it-yourself hamburger with the lot – but no, he ate it raw. I was in shock.

I took Marcel and Asher home in my 1937 straight-8 black Buick, dropping off Marcel at the Southern Cross Hotel (that's where the Beatles stayed, you know). Asher then directed me through a maze of tight tiny streets – at least one hundred and fifty corners – to his small cottage in Nottingham Street, Prahran – the longest shortcut in the world. Through the front door, straight down the central corridor to the backyard, there they were: 200 acres of four metre high sunflowers, and in the middle a tall battered plastic-fronted tin shed – 'That's my studio.'

'I've just got to finish something.' He started up a noisy old PMG compressor – this was already about one in the morning – whacked on his World War One mask, then started spraying acetate onto a huge layered jigsaw construction lying on the floor of his studio. 'Better get out,' he directed. And just in time: As he applied the blowtorch to blister his surfaces, the whole thing burst into flames and nearly burnt the shed down. After a couple of minutes of vigorous hosing, Asher whipped off his mask, looked up and smiled: 'I love the smell of burnt art in the morning. That looks pretty good to me, what do you reckon?' I was a little dumfounded but nodded pleasingly.

'Like some salad with your coffee? Well, here's a red wine.' I'd never had red wine before, but took to it that night. To me, a salad consisted of a couple of lettuce leaves, three slices of tomato and a generous piece of tinned beetroot. Unless of course it was Hawaiian, with a ring of tinned pineapple added. Well, Asher started building: Spring onion, radish, parsley, finely chopped black-coloured lettuce, apple, oranges for God's sake, weird green avocado pear, some white stuff he called cottage cheese, a mixture of garlic, rock salt, black peppercorns and cumin seed that he crushed, juice of a couple of lemons and almost a bucket of olive oil. By this stage the salad was taller than his studio and I wondered who else was coming to the party. Nobody else: That's just the way Asher goes about life. Bits of everything, millions of little bits but always ending up bigger than Ben-Hur. I went home with an excitedly blown mind and a heart full of joy.

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Hop in the back of the DeLorean, I'll take you for a lightning fast time travel. The Flux Capacitor's working, on with the key, full throttle. Flash, blink, blur, smudge of colour, this must be hyper-drive. There's Asher chatting with Mark Knopfler – 'More salad Mark?' – 'Asher, I'm thinking of killing a cow and putting it outside the National Gallery.' – 'If you think it's art, don't tell me about it, just do it. Piss or get off the pot.' There's Realities Gallery. Spillout: Another Bilu spectacular. Look at that ten metre long universe jigsaw puzzle spilling down the wall like some Garden of



**Spill Out 1979**

Eden on acid, draining into the middle of the room. 'Lets eat Greek, smash some plates.' – 'Have another red.' – 'Hi Asher.' – 'Hi Brett, hi Wendy.' This has got to be the biggest party in the world – even Hollywood movie stars. Isn't there anyone who doesn't love this bloke?

Screech, here we are, 1982, the old Tolarno building, now the home of United Artists Gallery. It's an artist's co-op, you know, originally founded by Asher and myself. Everyone shows there now. Let's go inside.

'You laughing at me mate?'

'No, you laughing at me?'

Everyone's laughing. Look at their faces, kids running in and out, heaps of people streaming up and down the corridor, in and out of the gallery, eyes wide open, grinning from ear to ear: Bilu's done it again. I knew he was working on a big piece for United Artists but this goes for miles. Bigger than his sunflower plantation, a 46 metre long and three metre high curtain of paint suspended from the ceiling, winding in and out, up and down, across and around, then back on itself. It's *Amaze*: It never ends – a salad of paint, a collection of everything he's seen, and everything he knows. I don't think I'll ever see a greater work.

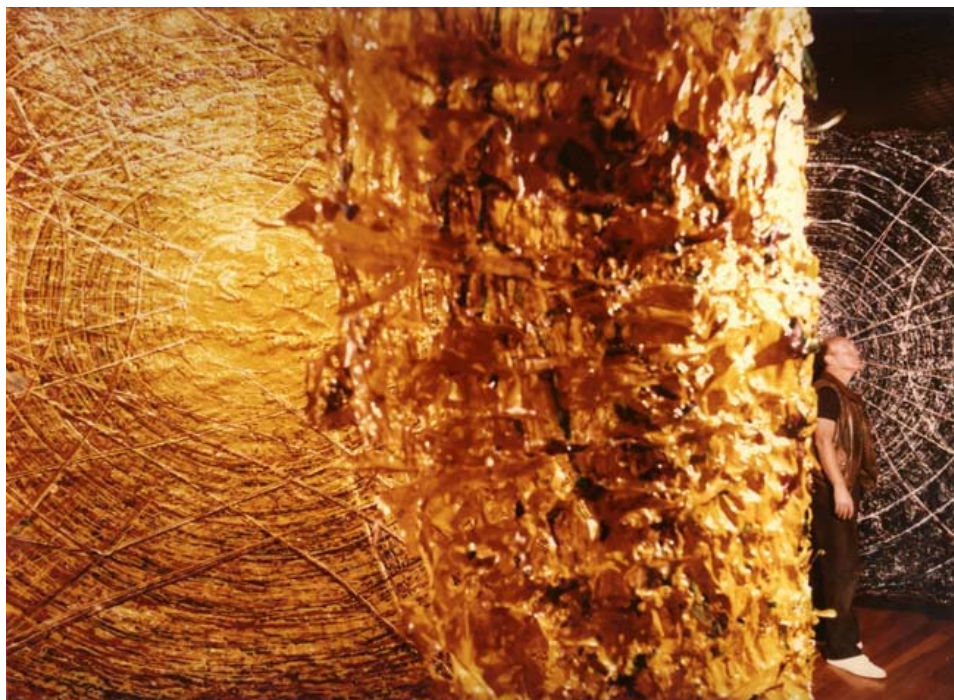
Back in the DeLorean: We're off to Benalla, Victoria, August 2007. Just when I thought it

was safe to go back in the water, when I'd seen all that could be seen. *Amaze* was 46 metres long and I call that a big painting. As Crocodile Dundee would put it: 'You call that a big painting? Now that's a big painting', as he points to Asher's 168 metre long, three-and-a-half metre high installation in the Benalla Art Gallery.

It's the eighth wonder of the world, or maybe the first wonder of the universe. As I travel through, along and around this galaxy of ice, light, stars, Einstein timelines, amoebas, chromosomes and anything else I could ever see or dream of, I suddenly realise I'm no longer walking. Bilu's spirit has taken me. I'm gliding; I'm floating. Maybe I flew in from the Milky

Way. A dictionary of words, an encyclopaedia of description will never come near the emotion of seeing this masterpiece first-hand. So whatever you do, if it's the last thing you do, if it's the last drop of petrol you have in your car, gather up all your friends, come and see *Heavens* by Asher Bilu.

And I kneel before him.



**Amaze 1982**



**Heavens 2006**

