

Picture this: Icing Sugar by Ralf Ziervogel

"I wanted to get beyond a preoccupation with graphic depictions of the figure," says the artist Ralf Ziervogel of the 6x2-metre cloud formation, crawling with matchbox depictions of flies, that forms Icing Sugar, the *pièce de résistance* in his first show in the region, In Decay, at Carbon 12 in Dubai.

"I wanted to concentrate and reduce some of the basic human compulsions, and I hit on the image of the insect with a sting in its tail." Ziervogel is a former professional swimmer who found himself drawn into Berlin's avant-garde scene, and athletes and sportsmen crop up all over the place in his latest work, though here they are blown out of the water and out of the arena by a scattergun explosion of spray cans.

There's a kind of grotesque smut in his comic book depictions, unhinged and disturbed as they are by their wild, explicit content and gruesome depictions of killings. Horror-flick icons and Marvel-style superheroes are recast with sinister, deranged overtures. Their costumes - aerodynamic swimwear and skin-tight sports kits - are lovingly stencilled, with details of designer labels, and sports brands such as Fila, much in the style of a Brett Easton-Ellis killer. And, like Ellis's American Psycho, these anti-heroes come to a sticky end, spontaneously combusted or stabbed in the back by a lover.

Ziervogel takes a lewd snigger at some of the more risqué and extreme aspects of human relationships. His outlandish images can often seem subversive, deranged even, but are shot through with a kind of esoteric humour which the artist admits, you may or may not get. Elsewhere, war and genocide is uneasily lampooned. The spectre of Adolf Hitler's visage is eerily sent up with the cartoon minimalism of a pop-art poster.

"I wanted to play on clichés in art, and I ended up reimagining the insects through the conceptual spirit of the American art of the 1950s," he says of Icing Sugar. Elsewhere in the exhibition, figures straight out of Roy Lichtenstein's famous cartoon depiction Kapow!, say, find themselves reincarnated in scenes of gratuitous compromise. There's something of the spirit of Jake and Dinos Chapman in the minute way he details these action heroes, reimagined by a mind fixated with the perverse.

Ziervogel is an adept draftsman, and the series of graphic pen-and-ink miniatures are drawn with beautiful skill. His playful experiments in conceptual and figurative drawing have been shown at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, as well as at

galleries in Berlin and Vienna, but at Carbon 12, the more extreme content is shielded from the squeamish behind a screen. But in the main exhibit, *Icing Sugar*, Ziervogel leaves most to the imagination. And in its 15 glass-framed panels, he is attempting something new, he says, crystallising some of his more bizarre pécadilloes in a kind of abstraction that nevertheless does not leave the figure behind entirely.

Studies from the 1950s in crowd psychology are reinterpreted though the insect world, with swarms or hives crawling in the febrile mass of pupating larvae that forms the detail of the work. It is a skyscape, but one that depicts a post-industrial world, he says. "I wanted to create a window on to a certain kind of sky, so that the insects are caught in a kind of gravitation, and emerge crawling from the soot of the clouds."

Icing Sugar's impact derives more from suggestion, says Ziervogel, citing the shower scene in Hitchcock's *Psycho*, which left audiences at the time throwing up in the aisles, but did not actually contain any penetrative violence. The stark, shocking brutality was all effected through the intensive cutting and splicing of the final edit, as he points out. Cinema figures heavily in the work, informed as it is by all manner of pop culture. Ziervogel cites the Russian filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein as one inspiration, and he combines humour and horror much in the way of the famous scene in Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*, with the pram careering down the Odessa steps.

Star Wars was a formative influence, he says, while more recently, films like *Pulp Fiction* and *Fight Club* also made an impression. Other predilections include sci-fi and rave culture. But amid the jarring sense of disturbance, he is careful not to lose a sense of humour. In a witty touch, the surface spray paint at times even bears the imprint of his foot. "I wanted to simplify representation but not lose the figure entirely," he says. "Cartoon depictions were a way of doing that, and in the same way, stick drawings of insects. Hitting on insects was a breakthrough for me."