

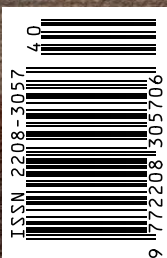
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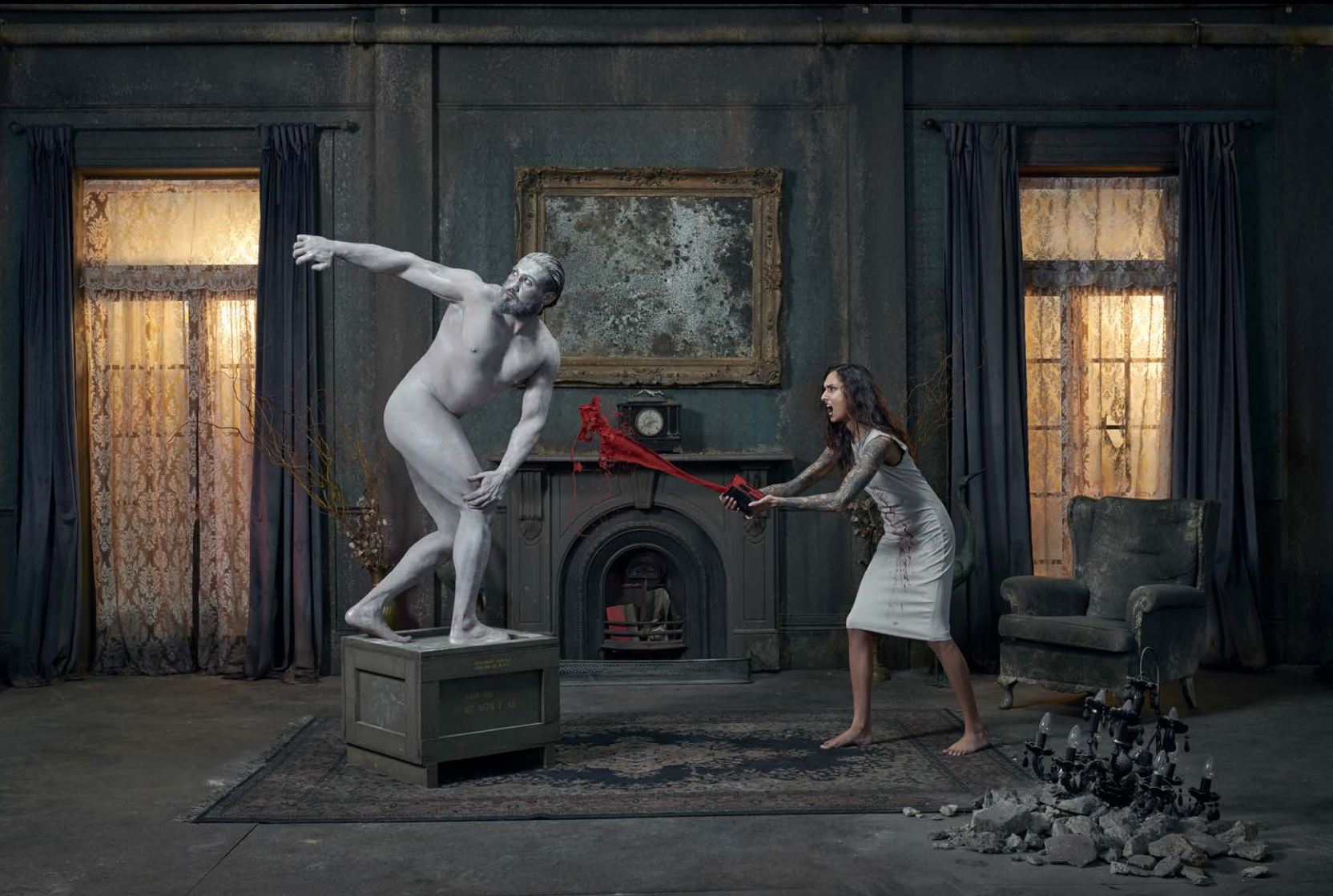




HEATHER STRAKA DREAMS, DECADENCE AND DISCOVERY

Edgy and seductive, enigmatic and theatrical, New Zealand artist Heather Straka's art stimulates both the eyes and the imagination. Andrew Wood looks back at a career exploring all manners of subversion and diversity, and forward to an extraordinary immersive artistic experience.

FEATURE by ANDREW WOOD



Hotels have always been strange, liminal places where odd characters, often trying to pass themselves off as something other than they are, collide together. It's a curious atmosphere, and one which New Zealand artist Heather Straka exploits in a theatrical new immersive art experience – *Age of Discovery*.

Straka attended the Elam School of Fine Arts in Auckland, graduating in 1994 with a degree in sculpture before moving to France where she started to paint, following a visit to see a major René Magritte exhibition in Belgium. The historical masterpieces of

Europe were formative on Straka's sense of the grand and the dramatic. Upon her return to New Zealand in 1998 she had her first painting show, completing an MFA in film at the University of Canterbury School of Fine Arts two years later.

Straka has always pushed the limits of the envelope of the outré, unafraid to explore the edges of approval. In 2005 her *Paradise Lost* paintings reworked the colonial portraits of Māori by colonial Bohemian-New Zealand painter Gottfried Lindauer (1839–1926). This was in reference to Straka's adoptive father's lineage, traced to the Bohemian

HEATHER STRAKA
Semisi Bro, 2021
HEATHER STRAKA
The Scream II, 2021
archival pigment
prints on Photorag
Ultrasmooth paper
Courtesy the artist
and SCAPE Public
Art, Christchurch



HEATHER STRAKA
Honeytrap, 2015
oil on cotton on board
68 x 56 cm
Courtesy the artist
and SCAPE Public Art,
Christchurch

settlement of Puhoi near Auckland. Straka's rendering of aristocratic Māori as religious figures seemed to intuitively tap into Lindauer's academic training by former members of the German Nazarene school. They also attracted controversy. Says Straka:

"*Paradise Lost* was inspired by historian Anne Salmond's book *The Trial of the Cannibal Dog: Captain Cook in the South Seas*, new at the time, about Cook's interactions with Pacific peoples. What I took from it was what gets lost in translation between two cultures. Every year there is hope that we can understand a little more."

There was also a personal connection for the artist:

"I was quite new and we weren't as sensitive to those issues back then. I don't regret those works though, they were of their time and reflected the Western cultural perspective that we were brought up with. The question was who owned the works, the artist or the sitter. They also looked at my upbringing to try to find my culture, which was Czech like Lindauer's."

The theoretics around who owns the image – Walter Benjamin's *Art, Aura and Authenticity* and René Magritte's subjective treachery – are perennial themes in Straka's art. For her 2010 project *The Asian*, Straka commissioned 50 reproduction artists from the painting village Dafen in Guangdong Province, China to make copies of her painting *The Asian* (2009), a portrait of a young woman of Chinese descent based on Chinese commercial advertisement posters for the Western market in the 1920s and '30s.

The resulting works, exhibited alongside Straka's original at Dunedin Public Art Gallery, New Zealand, explored Western orientalist and highly sexualised impressions of the East. They playfully interrogated Western art's notions of originality, individuality and the artist as uniquely inspired source of authenticity.

It is impossible to challenge a depiction without depicting it in a challenging way. Some interpreted this a little too literally, as with Straka's *Burqa* series of paintings (2012–14), which depicted female sitters, arms and torsos bared and tattooed but faces concealed by burqas. These works were created to counterpoint Western projections about the lives of women in the Middle East by alluding to the lives the garments conceal.

Gender stereotypes, the objectifying gaze and sexuality are perennial themes for Straka, known for her vintage men's suits and retinue of Italian greyhounds. The series *Honeytrap* (2015) comprises oval portraits of predominantly young women viewed from behind in a soft, romantic-yet-solemn, 19th century style. Their jarringly modern bra straps provide the punctum for the images.

The roots of Straka's new work, *Age of Discovery*, can be found in *Isolation Hotel*, a series of large photographic works created by the artist in 2021. These works were a theatrical encapsulation of the social and political upheaval of the early 2020s – from the Covid-19 pandemic to the war in Ukraine – and the overly literal and ontological interpretations some insist on reading into her work.

The photographs are set in a dimly lit 1930s-style European hotel that has clearly seen better days. "The theme is the way artifice intensifies drama. The hotel could almost be anywhere or any when," explains Straka. Strange, diverse characters in flamboyant costumes arrive with their luggage and interact in over-the-top ways. Who are they? Are they really who they appear to be? Do they know each other? What are they apparently fleeing from?

"I've always been drawn to those encounters one has in the communal areas of a hotel, between departure and destination," says Straka. "As an artist, these are the inspiration for much of my



Top to bottom
HEATHER STRAKA
Mambokadzi
Tsvarakadenga Queen
The Beautiful One, 2021

HEATHER STRAKA
Double Brown, 2022
Opposite
HEATHER STRAKA
Boy in trouble, 2021

HEATHER STRAKA
Shakti Raksha feminine
energy protection, 2021
archival pigment prints on
Pictorag Ultrasmooth paper

Courtesy the artist
and SCAPE Public Art,
Christchurch

work, these transient spaces where we are brought together and where we cohabit, if only for a fleeting moment. A hotel is a place of endless stories: the corridors and the rooms they connect to, all with their own intimate histories.”

Isolation Hotel was first exhibited in November 2021 in a hotel lobby stage-set mocked up by the artist inside Canterbury Museum in Christchurch, New Zealand.

The aesthetic is cinematic, intended to give the impression of film stills: a little Wes Anderson’s

The Grand Budapest Hotel,

a dash of the *Overlook*

Hotel from *The Shining*

and some Agatha

Christie. Are they

decadently partying

away some disaster

à la *The Masque of*

the Red Death or

the *Decameron*? Are

they trapped there

like Luis Buñuel’s *El*

ángel exterminador?

Is it some kind of

Sartrean purgatory –

l'enfer c'est les autres?

The uncanny

strangeness, the interiority

and the mystery showcase an

alternative kind of inclusiveness in

critique of newer, slightly prudish and

moralistic conformities and orthodoxies.

The models are diverse in ethnicity, gender,

sexuality and personality. The artist pokes

fun at herself. In some images, Straka even

staged her own funeral!

For *Age of Discovery* – a collaboration

between Straka, SCAPE Public Art,

NFT studio Glorious Digital and the new

Sudima Auckland City hotel – the visual

vocabulary of *Isolation Hotel* has been

repurposed. At the heart of the project

are Straka’s large, baroque photographic

tableaux of a motley cast of mysterious,

flamboyant and often glamorous characters engaged in strange and enigmatic behaviours, charged with tension and eroticism. These scenes are driven by a collaboration with the models, inspired by their suggestions and teasing out biographical details.

In November of 2022, Straka’s *Age of Discovery* takes over the new four-and-a-half-star Sudima Auckland City in Auckland’s CBD on the corner of Nelson and Wellesley Streets, combining the theatrically decadent flair of Straka’s photographs with the sumptuous luxe of an unforgettable hotel getaway. This is a must for Auckland visitors and residents in spring – whether you are a guest, just passing through or looking to satisfy that voyeuristic impulse, this intoxicating environment of glamour and intrigue is not your typical art experience.

“I really like the idea of these random people being thrown together,” notes Straka. “I guess the *Age of Discovery* is what happens next. Partly its creation is from my direction – my intuition and aesthetic, staging and art directing the scene for maximum drama and visual impact. But it also incorporates little narrative threads, the stories inspired by the models talking about their lives and experiences. It goes both ways. Everything goes into the mix.”

Like the *Hotel California*, you can check out any time you like but you may never completely leave. **V**

Heather Straka’s *Age of Discovery*, produced by SCAPE Public Art at Sudima Auckland City Hotel, shows from November 15 to 20, 2022.

Heather Straka is represented by Page Galleries, Wellington; Jonathan Smart Gallery, Christchurch; Trish Clark Gallery, Auckland; and Glorious Digital.

pagegalleries.co.nz

jonathansmartgallery.com

trishclark.co.nz

glorious.digital



HEATHER STRAKA
Honeytrap Returns, 2016
oil on cotton on board
68 x 56 cm

Courtesy the artist
and SCAPE Public Art,
Christchurch