

SNAPSHOT OF A FELLOW

by Anna Chinn

"You'll have to hunt for the detail," Heather Straka says at one point during our interview in her studio, reserved by the university for the Frances Hodgkins Fellow. She is talking about a series of medical-themed paintings she is preparing for an exhibition in Christchurch. "They'll kind of look quite straight on the surface, and then there will be a little quirk. See that [figure] is getting an ear tag, and it will have a bit of text on it. The tag is like refreshing the prototype, just a change from an earring ... And this one here's going to have little heckles - you know how dogs put their heckles up when they're threatened - so just a very faint little tuft down there."

You'll have to hunt for the detail. Straka could also be talking about herself. Her responses to questions are frequently based on, or return to, what work is happening in the studio at this moment and, when asked for her background, she discusses her practice, not personal influences such as upbringing, politics, outlook. In a mere half-hour, I failed to ask the right questions to extract that information - so, a search for detail.

Another comment about Straka's art, but potentially about the artist, from T.J. McNamara of *The New Zealand Herald*: "She can capture an exact likeness but also has a passion for combining baroque effects with romanticism and oddity."

Baroque. Dressed head-to-toe in black, Straka herself does not read as baroque, nor as romantic, but constantly dancing within her orbit are two Italian greyhounds. "They are the dogs of the Renaissance," she says. The Renaissance engine pulls carriages marked Baroque, Dutch Golden Age, Romanticism. The ever-present dogs, as if they have leapt from that train when it called at Straka Station, provide it all.

Oddity. From the interview tape, some unexpected facts emerge. Straka frequents Les Mills. "It's a good gym, if you're into that sort of thing. I quite like to go and get some exercise in the middle of the day." Straka will model menswear for a magazine tomorrow. "It's kind of the clothing that I usually buy anyway, so it's not a biggie." These somehow seem to sit like ear tags in an otherwise straightforward portrait. They are hunted-for details, found.

A more obvious finding is that she is neither pretentious nor superstitious about her work, happy to be photographed with paintings still in progress and readily discussing art she might make in the course of her Dunedin residency. Medical science interests her at the moment and she has been spending time in the warren of the Otago Medical School. "It's interesting - health science and art are related as you need genetic difference to continue to breed, whereas artists need mutations."

The series she is working on has cloning and donor themes, although she says a mutation towards the theme of dissection is taking place in her head. "What I found really fascinating is, we went into a room [in the med school] and they had all these Tupperware containers which actually were used for storing bits and pieces in." Here I seek clarification - bits and pieces of bodies? "Yeah, well, it is the medical school. And I kind of liked the everyday in that - you know, you've got Tupperware that stores biscuits and things, and then these bits and pieces."

This Tupperware may be the inspiration for a series of still lifes.

"So that's sort of what I'm working on in the back of my mind while I'm doing this. There's always something else that I'm busy thinking about."



Heather Straka