

## Dunedin

Clive Humphreys  
Heather Straka  
Chris Gable

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The Animal Attic at the Otago Museum is a refreshingly honest and eclectic homage to the cabinet-of-curiosities style of museum display which is so often shied away from today as if it is somehow an embarrassing part of museology that the sector is working hard to phase out. Dunedin-based painter Clive Humphreys has chosen to immerse himself in this debate by choosing the Animal Attic as the site for his latest exhibition *Art in the Attic: Sheet Music (for Cheryl)*. As a student in London Humphreys spent significant time in the Natural History Museum, the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum in which he engaged with the notion of preservation and the interpretation of collective memories. Humphreys describes the Animal Attic as the 'museum's museum of itself' indicating that the ability to consider the history and impact of its own practices is as valuable as developing new and innovative positions in which to engage an audience.

Finding the Animal Attic within the Otago Museum is an adventure in itself. As I had not visited this space since I was a child, and not having a particularly good sense of direction I spent some time trying to navigate the various spaces through which one must access the attic, finally up a back staircase I discover the space which, in terms of the journey, is in keeping with the nature of the space and the show. The need to discover the space amongst a jumble of other exhibits is

part of the experience that one can be assured was taken into account by the artist when electing to create dialogue within this environment.

*Art in the Attic* represents a return to the Museum for Humphreys as he reflects on an exhibition held some 30 years ago (1978) in the Museum's foyer at the same time that Sonia (the escaped circus lioness) joined the Museum's collection. She now resides in the attic alongside Humphreys' literal and conceptual reflections on life, death and the museum. This returning to reflect on the past via objects, associations, and personal narratives is a significant part of museum practice. In collecting and interpreting fragments of history for preservation and display, those in the industry may become detached from the concept of life and death which is particularly prevalent in the attic. The 'objects' are effectively dead animals which is both fascinating and morbid. It comes across as a monument to a particular experience one will possibly never have outside of the confines of a museum.

Humphreys intercepts and invades the museum display case, creating dialogue between the animals, modes of display and his own practice. Reflection and contrast is evident in the artist's depiction of images painted in silhouette, of the cases themselves - installed within the cases. The viewer is asked to question their perception of subject and object as the artist moves between installations of objects painted black alongside museum objects and paintings presenting multiple images of the objects on display. Humphreys' reference to the 'museum's museum of itself' is, in this way, a statement about this mode of display, the work critiques and reflects

back on itself presenting a multi layered symphony of interactions with comic, rhythmic and mournful interludes. As the exhibition exists within the realm of the unexpected one is, as a viewer, often confused between the museum object and the artist's work, although it is obvious, when considered, that this may be due to the power of the museum display case and its perceived authority or authenticity more than any of the conventional synergies between objects that one would expect.

The exhibition's centrepiece presents two diptychs on opposing walls which enable the viewer to walk around it and take in the contrast between the two worlds depicted. One side is dominated by darkness and the other by light.

*Rehearsing Chaos* could be seen as an unrelated jumble of objects in shades of grey through to black floating on a stark white background. However, in the context of the attic one finds context and purpose to the carefully portrayed silhouettes. Animals, tools, books, chairs, beautiful women, Mickey Mouse—the objects of everyday life are brought together to form new relationships, much like a cabinet of curiosities can be seen as the bringing together of disparate objects which in themselves have their own stories, and then in juxtaposition are part of something new and fresh. Naturally when something new is created, inevitably something is lost; fading into the background like a memory one grasps for but can't quite reach—a ghost of its former self.

At the Hocken Library Heather Straka's *The Sleeping Room* draws together works completed during Straka's year (2008) as the University of Otago's Frances Hodgkins Fellow.

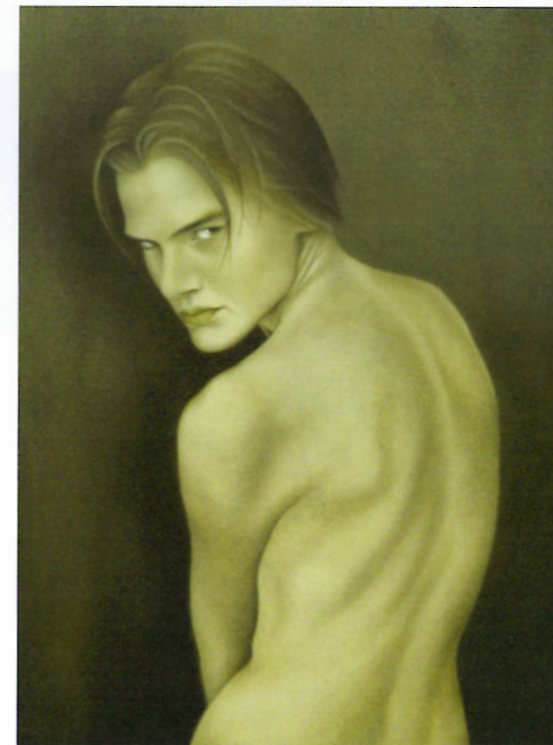
Again one is aware of a reference to the museum as Straka's access to the Otago Medical School's Dissecting Room has facilitated the presentation of a collection of small detailed paintings of human tissue. This collection of human body parts is, however, handled with less cool objectivity than a museum would lend to its display methodologies.

There is a complex relationship within the space between small, delicate and dark works which demonstrate the artist's intimate and sensitive relationship with her subject matter—a rose, human tissue, a chicken wing portrayed with evident respect and care opposed to the cold, removed, calculating and voyeuristic gaze depicted in portraits of Amanda who is described in the exhibition didactic as a 'live body donor'.

This is particularly evident in works hung side by side—*Life Still No. 10* and *Life Still No. 11*, a small subtle, and beautifully rendered chicken wing alongside a larger portrait of Amanda who appears naked, her body twisted to confront the viewer with a piercing gaze, angry and defiant in her vulnerability. The handling of the paint palette is similar, depicting the living body in the same deathly hues as the dissected human flesh. This relationship is unnerving and at its worst extremely disturbing.

One is acutely aware of one's own gaze at the artist's 'live body donor' who is, in all representations, a sexualised object of desire, positioned with the intention of meeting the viewer's gaze with contempt. These poster pin-up girls are of a different variety—brazen, angry but passive bodies posed seductively stripped of their clothes and positioned in dark spaces, some in front of dirty white tiles evocative of a public toilet. In *Life Still No. 9*, two severed fingers lie crossed in an expression perhaps of deception or broken promises. In the artist's game of life, sex and death, all bets are off. She holds the cards and calls the shots.

The gaze is once again referenced in Chris Gable's social documentary project *Shop keeping* at the Otago Settlers Museum. Gable spent two years photographing and interviewing small Dunedin retailers, and, of the 70 images, 42 were selected for exhibition. The artist references his past experience living above a retailer in a London apartment—one often passes through retail establishments exchanging niceties or over time building more long-term relationships. Gable describes Dunedin's small



(opposite)  
CLIVE HUMPHREYS  
*Rehearsing Chaos* (Diptych)  
2007-8  
Acrylic on canvas  
3200mm. x 1600 mm.

(left)  
HEATHER STRAKA  
*Life Still No. 11* 2008  
Oil on cotton on board  
590 mm. x 990 mm.

(below) HEATHER STRAKA  
*Life Still No. 9* 2008  
Oil on cotton on board  
590 mm. x 440 mm.

retailers as the 'mortar that holds the community together' and laments the gradual disappearance of the small independent retailers as cheap imported goods stock the new mega-stores.

Gable's photographs are honest and undirected in the sense that the retailers chose their own position in which to be photographed. Interestingly most chose to be presented inside their shop amongst their merchandise. Overall small retailers, it seems, are passionate about their business whether it be '50s style clothing, jewellery or pornography. Some find themselves stepping into their parents' shoes; others hold serendipity accountable for their current vocation.

The Settlers Museum is an especially appealing and fitting venue for *Shop keeping*. Perhaps this is due to the consistent feel of the show and the space. The presentation of the exhibition was a little sloppy which seemed oddly fitting, and the sickly glow of neon signs from Fresh Freddy's Fish Shop and Burton's Butchery lent the space a quirky unease reminiscent of finding oneself inside a David Lynch film. One certainly walked away from *Shop keeping* with regret, which is to the credit of the artist and the curator—regret that an interesting, unique, sometimes quirky and eccentric part of Dunedin's past is slowly dying, part of the city that talks about identity, history, people and the stories of their lives.

