

A body of work

Dunedin artist Heather Straka likes stirring up controversy. Ahead of new Wellington exhibitions, she talks to **Tom Fitzsimons** about witnessing an autopsy, faking her own work and portraying Asian people in service roles.



Star Straka: Heather Straka works on the exhibitions in her studio.

WHAT better place for a painter to learn her craft than a morgue? For Dunedin artist Heather Straka, the experience was certainly worth it. Her relationship with Otago University's anatomy department goes back a while, she says, but when they gave her the chance to witness an autopsy, that was something completely new. "You feel it's kind of sacred," she says. "Even if you could have snuck in and taken a photo, you could never recreate that feeling. I felt quite honoured to witness that, as a living human."

But where many artists might have simply used the insight to help them perfect the human form, Straka had another idea. As well as painting studies of various parts of the body, she took the morgue setting and used it in her latest exhibition.

Thus the photograph *The Anatomy Lesson*, which appears as part of her new exhibitions at Wellington's Page Blackie Gallery, features a half-naked cadaver on a sort of makeshift trolley.

In a nod to tradition, the scene recreates that of Rembrandt's famous 1632 work, *Doctor Nicolaes Tulp's Demonstration of the Anatomy of the Arm*.

But then again, it also includes a bevy of young, uniformed Asian women looking half-interested and dragging on cigarettes.

It's those women and subjects like them who are a constant theme of her exhibitions of photography (*Do Not Resuscitate*) and paintings (*The Attendants*).

She seized upon portrayals of Asian women after spending time in China, as well as Japan – where service is paramount.

Despite coming to painting relatively late, Straka has already made waves in the art world, winning residencies to places such as Switzerland and exhibiting internationally.

With the latest pieces, she deliberately wanted to portray people who were "a little bit typecast", she says.

"I wanted them quite robotic, a little



bit fake, so they're almost stilted. And I've always been kind of interested in the relationship between the viewer and the figure... as a model, they kind of donate their body to the artist to do what they want with it.

"I suppose in some ways, [I was] stripping them of a personality. It's a figure rather than a portrait."

So it seems there is a political side to the works, even if it's not easy to pin down.

"In some ways, I was kind of being a little provocative. It used to be, especially in [Manet's] *Olympia* and paintings like that, it was a black maid doing all the service stuff," she says. "And I was sort of playing on the yum-char outfits and the service industry of the Asian models."

In the paintings, such as *Betty*, she focuses on one person, mixing the

Service ethic: Heather Straka was inspired by the service culture in Japan with paintings such as *Betty* (2010, oil on canvasboard).



Team work: *The Anatomy Lesson* (2009 C-type photograph), by Heather Straka with the assistance of Karren Inderbitzen, Delphine Avril Plaqueel and Margo Regan.

THE DETAILS
Heather Straka's *The Attendants* and *Do Not Resuscitate* will be at Page Blackie Gallery in Wellington from Tuesday until April 24.

service role with the uniform and haircut of another era.

The exhibitions are not the first time Straka has pushed out into new cultural territory. In 2005, she caused controversy when she riffed on renowned 19th century painter Gottfried Lindauer's images of prominent Maori – inserting religious iconography into portraits.

Does it ever lead to criticism? "Oh yeah, but you've got to expect that," she says. "I always look at other cultures. I'm adopted, so I'm trying to find my own place within everything."

Using different media was easy, she says, because she has worked in sculpture and film before. "I spent a few years making sets and doing that sort of thing, so I always had an interest in filmic concerns and sets." But she wanted the photographs to have a life of

their own, so she hired an Auckland warehouse, came up with a vision and enlisted a team of three others.

"I sort of set it up, but I don't take my own photos any more. I'm just not good. "When you don't work with models all the time it's just an awkward relationship. But when someone else does and it's their job, it's great."

The process is also in keeping with what she calls "undermining my own hand" – postmodern playing around with authorship. In the same vein, she has previously sent some of her paintings to China to be meticulously copied.

Throughout her work, she says, she tries to keep an element of humour – even when the subject matter's as grim as a morgue.

"This is adding a little bit of cheek – not too morbid, a little bit poppy."