



Repeat after me
... Amanda #3

▶ Heather Straka, "The Sleeping Room", Hocken Gallery

HEATHER STRAKA is a painter of rare finesse. Her fusion of traditional techniques with challenging subjects makes for compelling viewing.

The show includes two works from 2007, which help to contextualise these paintings, produced while she was Frances Hodgkins Fellow last year, within her wider oeuvre. The exhibition explores notions of identity and ownership, both of which have long been central to Straka's practice. She repeatedly highlights the lack of control inherent in any representation of the self. By implication the same can be said of the eventual critical interpretation of the work, which may likewise bear no resemblance to the intention of the artist.

The idea of the subject as donor explored in earlier works reaches new levels in this series. Straka gained access to the medical school's dissecting room, reconnecting art to its Renaissance roots in anatomical study. The resulting small paintings of fragments of the dissected body, alone, or paired with the portraits, are confronting. There is a clear reference to memento mori or vanitas works historically used to highlight the transience of earthly pleasure and the inescapable reality of death.

In this series of paintings she questions ideas of originality and the role of the copy in the series *Repeat after me Amanda*, in which she reproduces and alters her own works. Straka has delivered a powerful and thought-provoking exhibition.

▶ Di ffrench, "Activating Ideas", Duredin Public Art Gallery

"ACTIVATING IDEAS" celebrates the work of local artist Di ffrench (1946-99) whose politically motivated performances and innovative modes of working deserve greater recognition. The exhibition chronicles her performance works of the '70s and '80s as well as her later cibachromes. Rather than being a departure from her previous work, the photographs were a product of her ongoing cross-media practice.

Her work was informed by a commitment to feminism. The later cibachromes explore the nature of the gaze, attempting to challenge and dislocate the tradition of the active male viewer, or artist, and the passive female subject. The body, male and female, is the focus of most of the photographic works. In *The Useful Idiot and Arnolfini's Hat*, ffrench refers to the famous and much-interpreted painting known as *The Arnolfini Portrait* (1434) by Jan van Eyck. In taking the name of the male subject of the original and his hat, a symbol of his business and attendant wealth, for her own self-portrait, ffrench makes a powerful statement and refocuses the power of the gaze. Eyes appear repeatedly in the background, reinforcing her message.

The only flaw with this excellent exhibition is that the accompanying film about the artist is being screened in the noisy stairwell space, making it difficult, if not impossible, to hear.



The Useful Idiot and Arnolfini's Hat



Night
Watch

▶ Michael Harrison, "Shapes of Thoughts", Brett McDowell Gallery

MICHAEL HARRISON has long been celebrated for his delicately layered paintings. The works are small in scale and the majority of them take years to come to fruition. Harrison inscribes dates on the back of the works, indicating the days spent working on each piece. One work in the show was started in 1987 and only completed this year.

Animals often take centre stage in Harrison's work, though in their emotional intensity his creatures seem to echo human desires and experiences. *Moon Dogs* is a good example of Harrison's interest in visual harmony and symmetry. The central figures, two dogs, mirror one another, as do the clouds above. Yet perfect symmetry is purposefully avoided by the profile image of a woman's face within the moon and the irregularity of the landform below.

McCahon's influence can be felt in the textual work *She's The One*, in which bold block capitals contrast with the rolling cursive one in the centre of the composition.

The highlight of the show for me is *Night Watch*, with its richly layered black background pierced by blue and orange geometric forms leading the viewer to the truncated yet luminous stag at the bottom of the work.