



Challenge: Heather Straka's new exhibition *The Asian* presents an interesting challenge to viewers.

Challenging perceptions

By JOHN HOBBS

It is hard enough trying to find one person in a crowd of 51. But try finding that one person when all 51 look the same.

That is one of the challenges Heather Straka's new exhibition, *The Asian*, puts to those viewing it.

Several years ago, Ms Straka painted the original Shanghai girl wearing a tiki, and while travelling overseas the idea for the exhibition was formulated.

A digital print of the painting was made and sent to Dafen, China, a painting village where the artists produce replica versions onto canvas.

Each painting has the artist's signature on it, even Ms Straka's. However, each signature is in Chinese characters, making it even harder to determine which portrait is the original.

She said the crux of the exhibition was that in Western civilisation, many people do not differentiate the cultures of the Asian community. Instead of identifying people as, for example, Chinese or Korean, they are simply grouped under the umbrella of the word, Asian.

Many people also identify the tiki with New Zealand and it was not uncommon, Ms Straka said, to find tiki in souvenir

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Heather Straka

shops that had been made in China, essentially selling New Zealand culture.

By painting a tiki on the Shanghai girl, she said it turned around that idea and in a way sold the culture back.

“We are getting used to being a multi-cultural society. It forces [the audience] to look on a different level and work out what is the original.

“If you had two things side by side you would think one is the original and one is the copy, but this causes a visual overload. It gets really difficult when you start comparing – like walking into a shop and seeing too many things, you might walk out with nothing. It's a play on the trick of the eye.”

Because the 51 paintings were done by different artists, each one had subtle differences such as shading, which highlighted the unique style.

So far the exhibition has been shown in



Which one: Out of 51 paintings of the same girl, only one is the original.

Dunedin, Rotorua and Tauranga. Ms Straka said so far the reception had been impressive and attracted a broad audience.

The *Asian* is now open at the Ashburton Art Gallery.