



Altes Spital in Solothurn, Switzerland

In search of the 'hyper fake'

From the manicured beauty and highly organised society of Switzerland to the noisy chaos of a painting village in China, Heather Straka makes the leap.

Art residencies transplant you to places you never thought you'd go, let alone live in, and this is how I ended up in Solothurn, Switzerland – one hour's train ride from Zurich. As I write from a hotel in Shenzhen, China, on my way home to New Zealand, I reflect upon Switzerland as a place I came to fondly call home for a short time.

Solothurn is a small town of about 15,000, situated roughly in the middle of Switzerland, and it's a fantastic place to satellite off from. The transport system takes you to other big cities within an hour and to another country within two or three, so it's a perfect location. After travelling 28 hours to get to Europe, I thought Zurich, Berlin and London all seemed like neighbours in terms of their proximity and art scenes.

Having a public transport system at all, let alone one that works, is a novel concept for a New Zealander. Transiting between the numerous points of departure and destination has obviously been a carefully considered exercise in Switzerland. Initially I looked blankly at the travel schedule printout, distrusting the number of connections and the tight timetable. There's a cliché about Switzerland that the trains run on time and I must admit that the rare occasions when the train was late became occasions to celebrate.

In Solothurn I stayed at Altes Spital, a rather spectacular old hospital situated on the river Aare. Its comfortable, quiet, light-filled rooms meant for the first time in a long time I could truly relax. Historically the building served as a multifunctional hospital for the sick and the insane as well as a prison, and some of the rooms had thick, steel doors – to keep people in not out. I've also done time in a former plague hospital at Arbroath in Scotland and once again I was in a residency at an old hospital, wondering, "What is it about artists' residencies and art schools being in hospitals and asylums?"

How can I describe Switzerland? Well, the symmetry of the cross on the Swiss flag seems an apt metaphor because the urban environment is extremely tidy and the countryside is manicured and decorative – with trees, mountains and cows that make it look similar to the landscape at home.

You have the choice of riding your bike along a track next to the road, or taking a much more scenic route along well-maintained paths through carefully considered patches of forest. There are certainly no shortage of chocolate-box mountains, tranquil rivers and lakes and you almost expect Heidi the milkmaid to come bounding over the peaks, like some tacky vignette out of a Russ Meyers film.

My time at Solothurn was perfectly timed for me to visit the Venice Biennale during opening week and then the Basel Art Fair. The latter is one of those events where every artist's label is on display – so much so that by the end of a day you feel completely 'arted out' and want to empty out the visual gluttony and wipe your eyes clean. I also visited the Swiss capital Berne, a cute town built to accommodate siege mentality and surrounded by walls and a river. Among its spilling bars, cobbled streets and elaborate clocks, which look like the ones you see in tacky tourist blurbs, I found the best natural history museum I've ever encountered, but it made only very minor concessions to viewers who edge towards the interactive.

Some other non-tourist attractions I enjoyed were the university medical museums in Zurich, especially the wax museum of skin diseases, which delivers a truly overwhelming dose of beauty and horror. Apparently this method of casting and display (using wax) originates from Zurich, and later I found other similar examples in Berlin. Even if you're not medically inclined the museums are interesting; they help us appreciate the marvels of modern medicine and the horror of the body in revolt.

It's always good to arrive at a residency with a project in mind so you can work while you're absorbing your new environment. New ideas seem to leak into old ones in a process that's not always quick or obvious. For some time I've been working on a project for Dunedin Public Art Gallery (DPAG), titled *The Asian*, and I planned to do some painting as part of this project while I was in Switzerland. On my way home I'd planned a stopover in



Heather Straka at her exhibition in the Kunsthaus S11 project space, Solothurn

Shenzhen, China, where I would visit the Dafen painting village, which specialises in making painted copies of artworks. I'd sent digital images of one of my paintings to two companies in the village to establish relationships before I arrived.

The aim of the DPAG project, which opens in March 2010, is to create a series of what I call 'hyper fake paintings' that are painted copies of my work in an edition that mimics the variations found in the traditional print. I emailed instructions to the companies in the painting village asking them to do a painted copy, the same size as the original, and to send it to me in Switzerland. While in Switzerland I kept a detailed paper trail of all my correspondence in accordance with Swiss rules; it can be hard enough importing something into one's own country, let alone into a foreign one.



Parrot specimens and an inspired installation of a taxidermied rhino complete with scenic backdrop at the Natural History Museum in Berne



Dafen painting village in Shenzhen, China



A Mona Lisa 'copy' under wraps



From left: Sam (copy artist), Heather, Mayi Ying (copy artist) and Heather's translator



Medical cabinets in one of the university medical museums in Zurich

While in Solothurn I showed some of my work at the Kunsthaus S11, a project space run by a genuinely nice bunch of artists. The building has four floors and brings together a community of artists in what I would call a 'family' atmosphere. There were often Friday night dinners on the top floor, with an eclectic bunch of people catching up in a typically European manner over food and wine. I called my exhibition *Lost in Translation* to humour Manfred, the director of Altes Spital, who laughed as he tried to get his head around my accent. I was the first New Zealander to undertake the residency and so my accent was fresh to the Swiss ear.

Solothurn might be small but it has an absinthe bar that's well worth a visit and I was a convert the first time I went. The bar is cute and romantic with clichéd, old-fashioned green and red décor. Sitting inside its booths you can imagine the debauched exploits of the likes of Baudelaire, Rimbaud and Verlaine.

So from the order of manicured Switzerland and my supportive minders at Altes Spital, I made the leap to crossing chaotic roads and going solo in China. As the effects of absinthe faded into the sounds of Chinese traffic, so too did the memories of a time spent elsewhere. In the heat and turmoil of my current environment, I reflect upon what Manfred said to me one day when I arrived back from an excursion: "You are like a CD; you keep moving". I suppose he's right; maybe it's a New Zealand thing.

