



## HEATHER STRAKA

[b.1972 New Zealand]

### 'Repeat After Me...Amanda' No 4 2008

Oil on canvas on board  
800 x 600 mm (board size)

Prov: The artist; whence DPAG by gift through an anonymous donor, 2009.

In 2008 Heather Straka was the recipient of the University of Otago Frances Hodgkins Fellowship, which enabled her to work on a substantial body of paintings over a sustained and focused period, culminating in the University of Otago Hocken Library exhibition, *The Sleeping Room*. Provided with favourable circumstances to consider new ideas, and a unique opportunity to explore behind the scenes at the Otago Medical School, Straka produced a deeply evocative series of over 20 anatomical and portrait paintings that presented a stunningly Gothic examination of death, desire and sexuality.

The protagonist in this series is the androgynous female Amanda, whom Straka refers to as her 'live body donor'. She is painted in a range of formal and seductive poses that taunt and tease the viewer. In *'Repeat After Me... Amanda' No 4*, she appears in a profile pose, as Straka makes a knowing reference to the iconic double portrait *Head of Battista Sforza and Head of Federico da Montefeltro* (after 1475), by the legendary Italian 15th-century painter Piero della Francesca. When Straka showed this work in the Hocken Library exhibition at the end of her year in Dunedin, she referenced the face-off set-up of this famous double portrait, by positioning this painting with its companion piece, another portrait of Amanda.

Whereas Francesca's paintings are a celebration of the significant bond and status of this couple, Straka presents her sitter in a more fraught light – either narcissistically measuring herself up, or unable to recognise her split personality. This state of disquiet is reinforced by the model being cast alternatively against a dark and light backdrop; these are the two shades of Amanda, who come to embody the living dead, perpetually caught in a state of suspended animation. [APK]