



THE SLEEPING ROOM

*Heather Straka*



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HOCKEN GALLERY, HOCKEN COLLECTIONS

WITH GRATITUDE TO THE SILENT DONORS

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## **Hocken Collections**

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## LOOKING DEATH IN THE EYE

*Nothing about her death could be measured by a common standard, and the contradictory impulses overtaking us in this circumstance neutralised one another, leaving us blind and, as it were, very remote from anything we touched, in a world where gestures have no carrying power, like voices in a space that is absolutely soundless.'*

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LOOKING DEATH IN THE EYE

An

autopsy is a medical procedure for establishing the cause and manner of death. It is also a particular way of seeing, a searching and inquiring gaze. The word ‘autopsy’, derived from the Greek words ‘auto’ and ‘opsis’, translates as *to see with ones own eyes* and points to the privileging of vision over other senses in western society. Even if seeing is everything there are things we do not always wish to see, including the corpse. Heather Straka’s macabre still life paintings of cadaveric material are confronting because they speak directly of our own mortality and remind us of the transience of life.

The

attractive glossy surfaces and underlying associations of these still life paintings give death a palatable veneer and are meant to engage, rather than repulse, the viewer. Straka’s highly finished technique and her near monochromatic rendering smothers the repulsion associated with the idea of looking at a corpse. The cadaveric material that her work depicts is mediated by the ideas and verisimilitude of the *vanitas*, a genre of early seventeenth century Dutch still life painting. The Dutch paintings commonly featured skulls, snuffed candles and decaying flowers to symbolise the certainty and suddenness of death, ageing and the futility of pleasure.

Looking

at images of the body-interior encourages self-reflexivity in the same way that *vanitas* provoke us to consider our own mortality. Like the Dutch still life paintings, Straka’s images of human tissue remind us of the transience of life and the certainty of death. However rather than illustrating the futility of pleasure, these works glow with human sensuality and emotion. In contrast with impartial medical texts and anatomical illustrations, Straka’s images suggest a heightened emotion that circumvents the feelings of detachment commonly associated with the experience of viewing a corpse.

The

pink latticework of the latex-injected veins in *Life Still No.3* and *Life Still No.4* recalls the ties of a bustier like the one Straka painted in *Persuasion* (2002, oil on board) from her *Roxburgh Classic* series.<sup>3</sup> Three of Straka’s still life paintings depict flowers – single wilted orchids and a prone rose slumped in post-coital relaxation – and reference sexuality through their playful association with Robert Mapplethorpe’s *Flower* photographs of the late 1980s. The photographer’s homoerotic images included depictions of calla lilies with erect, protruding stamens.

Humour

and visual puns, present in several of Straka's still life paintings of human tissue, are other strategies that she employs to alleviate the melancholic tone of her morbid subject matter. This is evident in her image of two severed fingers sitting crossed in hope and in a second painting that shows a lone finger tied with a piece of string in a 'to-remember' gesture.

The

paintings in 'The Sleeping Room' were created during Straka's tenure as the University of Otago's Frances Hodgkins Fellow in 2008. While in Dunedin she gained privileged access to the Dunedin Medical School's Dissecting Room, a facility that normally restricts entry to 'authorised personnel'. At the school she observed the cadavers and examples of human tissue that are employed as teaching aids by the staff of the Anatomy and Structural Biology Department.

The

genealogy of modern dissection dates to the early Renaissance<sup>3</sup> and since that time the corpse has provided the pedagogy for artists as well as physicians. As a regime of learning, the human dissection was introduced to medical students at Oxford University in 1549.<sup>4</sup> The practice is often viewed by first year students of medicine, as a 'rite of passage' from which, by the end of their studies, they will emerge as a qualified medical physician or anatomist, a respected

authority on the human body. Throughout history many artists have worked with cadavers and been fascinated by anatomy. Anatomical notes began to appear in Leonardo da Vinci's art of the late 1480s, including on the studies he did for *The Last Supper*.<sup>5</sup> Da Vinci also dissected dozens of cadavers in order to create anatomical illustrations.<sup>6</sup>

Straka's

interest in human dissection and historical anatomy texts was first seen in *Eden Before the Fall* (2007, The Odyssey Group, Auckland) that is based on an engraving of three skeletons that was the frontispiece of an anatomy text by Bernardino Genga dating to 1691.<sup>7</sup> The role of the skeleton as a symbol of death in Medieval and early Renaissance art reappears in the Gothic revival of eighteenth century Romanticism.<sup>8</sup>



EDEN BEFORE THE FALL, 2007, oil on cotton on board,  
1200 x 920 mm, The Odyssey Group, Auckland.

The 'Romantic' in the sense of anything extreme, strange, or unnatural that provokes heightened sensations such as horror and awe, continued to influence Straka's approach during her Fellowship year.

**I**<sub>n</sub>

the early seventeenth century the cadaver became a source of widespread interest and the human dissection was extended into the public realm as the subject of entertainment and spectacle. Public anatomy theatres such as the one at the University of Leiden were very popular and theatres in the Italian cities of Bologna and Padua rivalled the classical antiquities in their attraction to foreigners.<sup>9</sup> Art galleries and museums have become places of education and entertainment. Within the exhibition context her depictions of human body parts are intended to arouse interest and collectively they evoke the spectacle of Renaissance anatomy theatres such as Leiden's amphitheatre which was part operating room, lecture hall, museum and theatre.<sup>10</sup>

**A**<sub>rtistic</sub>

depictions of the cadaver differ from the searching and inquiring gaze of the autopsy and the objectivity of contemporary anatomical imaging because we are not seeing the dead body with our own eyes. The experience of looking at Straka's paintings differs from seeing a real cadaver because our vision is mediated through her ideas, the mannerisms of her style and through widely accepted pictorial conventions.

**W**<sub>hile</sub>

referencing the vantage-points used in historical anatomical texts Straka's paintings of different brain sections, a brain-stem and an eyeball give us a 'glance' of the dead body. Her images enable the living to look at the dead without seeing the cadaver because they are lost in thoughts of their own mortality. When the viewer sees an image of a corpse, they also see themselves. This 'glance' contrasts markedly with the experience of the anatomist who in the course of their work focuses intensely on the body-interior, temporarily suspending the individual life that it represents.

**F**<sub>or</sub>

Straka the human dissection is a nexus where the disparate territories of art and medicine overlap. As well as enabling her to depict cadaveric material, Straka employs the human dissection as a means to highlight affinities between the roles of the artist and the anatomist. Both professions are bestowed with privileges of power because they work with passive subjects and are considered 'authorities' in their respective fields. There are also similarities in their working processes that are governed by established historical texts or codes.

**A**<sub>s</sub>

with the anatomist, the artist 'cuts up' the human body and arranges its parts by following established methods. The artist arranges 'parts' of the composition and the body's proportions within the picture frame to create a finished pictorial

representation. Like the anatomist's dissection that follows acknowledged medical texts, Straka's compositional arrangement is determined by existing codes of representation such as the Classical ideal and other art-making conventions. *Life Still No.13*, that shows a model swathed and armless, can be seen as a metaphor for how depictions of the female body are bound by historical codes of representation.

I<sub>n</sub>

*Repeat After Me ... Amanda* series of 2008 and her large *Life Still* works including *Life Still No.11*, *Life Still No.13*, *Life Still No.15* and *Human Tissue Manager*, completed later that year, Straka depicts a female model named Amanda that she refers to as her 'live body donor'. The self-conscious, overwrought and unnatural poses of Amanda in all of these figurative paintings demonstrate the artist's manipulation of the model and her control over the model's portrayal. In these works, as with her *Life Still* works of cadaveric material that reduce the human frame into unidentifiable dissected portions, Straka seeks novel ways to depict the human form.

T<sub>he</sub>

notion of individuality that emerged during the Renaissance, simultaneously with the increased practice of dissection, is laid to rest in Straka's pictorial 'cloning' of Amanda in the *Repeat After Me...Amanda* series. Amanda's zombie-like expression, lifeless skin-tone and the repeated single utterance of her name, as suggested by the series' title, sug-

gests the artist's methods are akin to that of Mary Shelley's Frankenstein character, a scientist who creates a man with superhuman powers after examining the body parts. This association bestows Amanda with extraordinary powers, challenging the notion of the passive artist's model and giving Straka's subject agency. Just as the Gothic-inspired *Frankenstein* novel of 1818 warns against the 'over-reaching' of modern man, Straka's depictions of artfully arranged human flesh bleached from the preservative formalin, double as metaphors for modern medicine's desire to prolong life. The practice of human tissue transplantations is no longer fiction.

I<sub>n</sub>

*Life Still No.15* she challenges artistic conventions of composition by abruptly cropping half of the model's figure behind a black door. The model's body is cut in half, metaphorically dissected by this door, guarding the entry to the Dissecting Room. In *Human Tissue Manager* the model is given the anatomist's mantle of authority by posing in the role of the person who manages the Dissecting Room's cadavers. Amanda's androgynous appearance, the black cape she is wearing and her determined, fixed stare gives her a resemblance to Dracula, an association that Straka employs to Gothic and humorous effect.

S<sub>traka's</sub>

conceptual approach shows a debt to Surrealism, which aimed at breaching the dominance of reason and conscious



control by methods designed to release primitive urges and imagery. Her still life images of human tissue in a very realistic manner provoke the viewer's instinctive fear of death. The cadaver has an inherent shock value described by Julie Kristeva's term 'the power of horror'.

**S**traka's

juxtaposition of bizarre and unlikely objects is visible in her pairing of the emaciated, contorted body of the model in *Life Still No.11* and the painting *Life Still No.10* that depicts an uncooked chicken wing. This surprising juxtaposition promotes the Surrealist idea of the disinterested play of objects suggested by André Breton's phrase 'as beautiful as the chance encounter between a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table'.<sup>11</sup> Having Straka's exhibition occasionally ruptured by chance moments of wonder alleviates its melancholic tone.

**L**ike

Straka's work, Marcel Duchamp's *Etant Donnes* (1968), is an exploration of the troubled confluence of vision and desire. To view the work, first shown a year after Duchamp's death, visitors had to enter a small dark room and look through two eyeholes drilled in a door. Through these holes they viewed a naked girl stretched out on a bed of branches with her legs open.<sup>12</sup> Straka's excessive realism and shocking subject matter similarly mock the spectator's urge to look.

**T**he

'Sleeping Room' is a staged spectacle where the body-interior is blatantly opened to the viewer's gaze and where we are made conscious of the act of looking. Her paintings allow us to 'glance' at the cadaver's interior without employing the objectifying inquiring gaze of the human dissection and without the detachment or unease associated with looking at a cadaver.

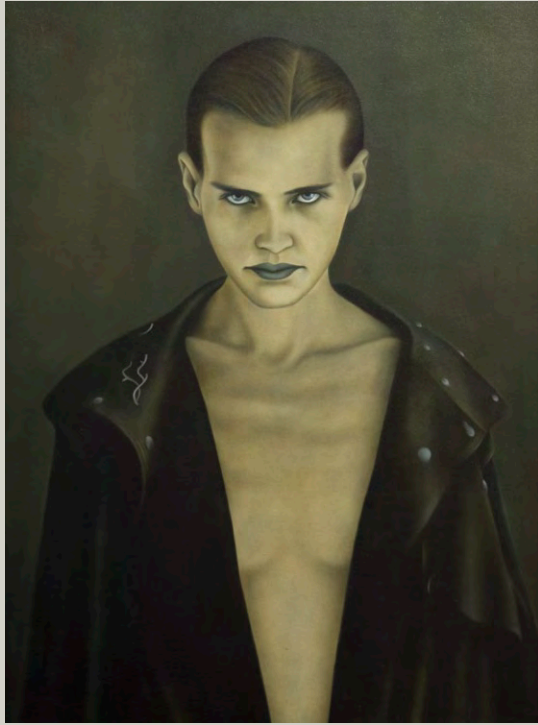
**D**uchamp's

installation subverted the traditional identification of subjectivity, as viewers who queued for the peep show were themselves the objects of a voyeuristic gaze, viewed by those who stood behind them. In the same way Straka's still life paintings of cadaveric material result in the conflating of the 'eye' that really sees with the 'I' of the self at a moment of reflection. The viewer becomes the object of their own self-reflexive moment as they contemplate the universal phenomena of death and see themselves in finality.

*Natalie Poland*  
*Curator of Pictorial Collections*  
*Hocken Collections*

- 1 Georges Bataille, *Story of the Eye*, p.24. [http://supervert.com/elibrary/georges\\_bataille](http://supervert.com/elibrary/georges_bataille) First published in 1926.
- 2 Straka's *Roxburgh Classic* series was a group of paintings painted to look like covers for reprints of well-known titles such as Jane Austen's *Persuasion*. The series' name was taken from the well-known Penguin Classics range.
- 3 Its practice goes back to ancient Egypt when it was used to prepare bodies for burial.
- 4 Jonathan Sawday, *The Body Emblazoned: Dissection and the Human Body in Renaissance Culture*, Routledge, London, 1996, p.56.
- 5 Benjamin Rifkin, Michael Ackerman and Judith Folkenberg, *Human Anatomy: Depicting the Body from the Renaissance to Today*, Thames & Hudson Ltd, London, 2006, p.8.
- 6 He completed a collection of meticulous anatomical drawings around 1510 with the intention of compiling a medical textbook, but it never eventuated.
- 7 Genga's text was *Anatomia per uso et intelligenza del disegno ricercata non solo su gl'ossi, e muscoli del corpo humano*. For an illustration of the frontispiece see B. Rifkin, M. Ackerman and J. Folkenberg, *Human Anatomy: Depicting the Body from the Renaissance to Today*, p.38.
- 8 B. Rifkin, M. Ackerman and J. Folkenberg, 2006, p.39
- 9 *Ibid.*, p.42.
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 This phrase's original source was a nineteenth century Symbolist poem, *Les Chants de Maldoror* by Isadore Ducasse.
- 12 Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*, University of California Press, Los Angeles, 1994, p.169.

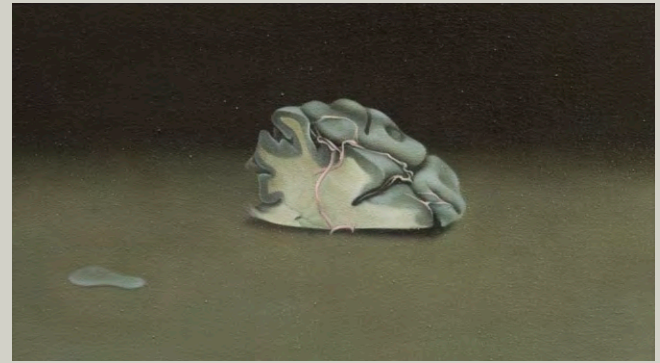




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HUMAN TISSUE MANAGER

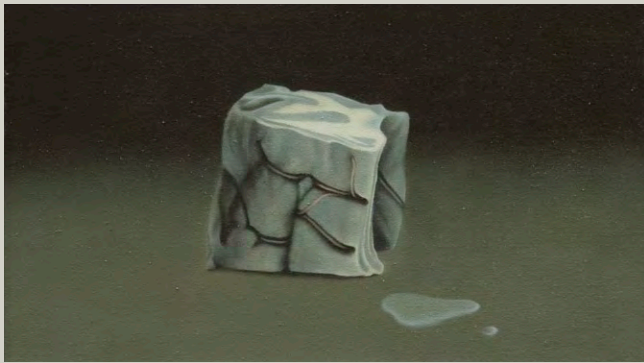
2008, 990 x 800 mm, oil on cotton on board,  
*Collection of the Artist, Dunedin.*



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LIFE STILL NO. 2

2008, 340 x 465mm, oil on cotton on board,  
*Collection of the Artist, Dunedin.*



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LIFE STILL NO.3  
2008, 340 x 465mm, oil on cotton on board,  
*Collection of the Artist, Dunedin.*



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LIFE STILL NO.4  
2008, 340 x 465mm, oil on cotton on board,  
*Collection of the Artist, Dunedin.*



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LIFE STILL NO.12

2008, 395 x 545mm, oil on cotton on board,  
*Collection of the Artist, Dunedin.*



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LIFE STILL NO.13

2008, 990 x 800mm, oil on cotton on board,  
*Collection of the Artist, Dunedin.*



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LIFE STILL NO.5  
2008, 440 x 585mm, oil on cotton on board,  
*Collection of the Artist, Dunedin.*



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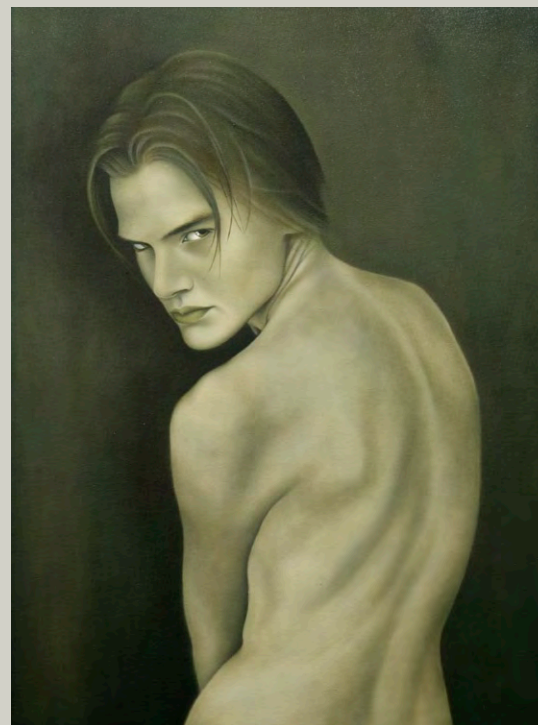
LIFE STILL NO.8  
2008, 430 x 585mm, oil on cotton on board,  
*Collection of the Artist, Dunedin.*



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LIFE STILL NO.10

2008, 440 x 590mm, oil on cotton on board,  
*Collection of the Artist, Dunedin.*

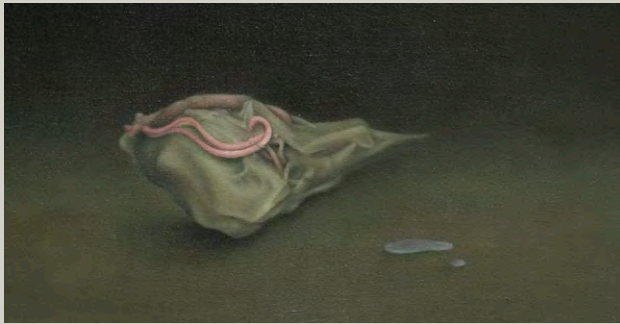


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LIFE STILL NO.11

2008, 990 x 590mm, oil on cotton on board,  
*Collection of the Artist, Dunedin.*





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LIFE STILL NO.6

2008, 375 x 540mm, oil on cotton on board,  
*Collection of the Artist, Dunedin.*



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LIFE STILL NO.15

2008, 850 x 850mm, oil on cotton on board,  
*Collection of the Artist, Dunedin.*



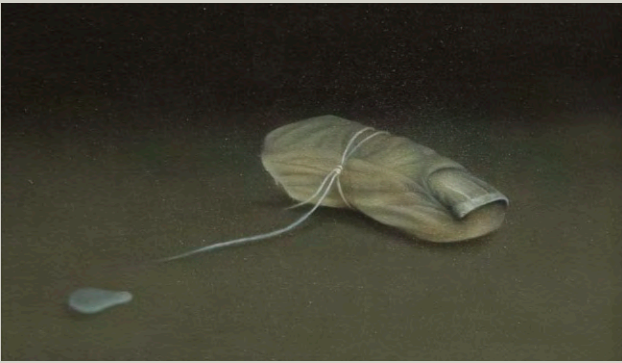
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LIFE STILL NO.7  
2008, 465 x 635mm, oil on cotton on board,  
*Collection of the Artist, Dunedin.*



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LIFE STILL NO.9  
2008, 345 x 420mm, oil on cotton on board,  
*Collection of the Artist, Dunedin.*



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LIFE STILL NO. I

2008, 340 x 440mm, oil on cotton on board,  
*Collection of the Artist, Dunedin.*