

TRISH
CLARK
GALLERY



HEATHER STRAKA | Somebodies Eyes
1 April – 15 May 2015
Catalogue of works



Somebodies Eyes 1 2015
Oil on cotton on board
860 x 710mm framed



Somebodies Eyes 2 2015
Oil on cotton on board
860 x 710mm framed



Somebodies Eyes 3 2015
Oil on cotton on board
860 x 710mm framed



Somebodies Eyes 4 2015
Oil on cotton on board
860 x 710mm framed



Somebodies Eyes 5 2015
Oil on cotton on board
860 x 710mm framed



Somebodies Eyes 6 2015
Oil on cotton on board
860 x 710mm framed



Somebodies Eyes 7 2015
Oil on cotton on board
860 x 710mm framed



Somebodies Eyes 8 2015
Oil on cotton on board
860 x 710mm framed



Somebodies Eyes 9 2015
Oil on cotton on board
860 x 710mm framed



Somebodies Eyes 10 2015
Oil on cotton on board
860 x 710mm framed



Somebodies Eyes 11 2015
Oil on cotton on board
860 x 710mm framed



Somebodies Eyes 12 2015
Oil on cotton on board
860 x 710mm framed



Somebodies Eyes 13 2015
Oil on cotton on board
860 x 710mm framed



Somebodies Eyes 14 2015
Oil on cotton on board
860 x 710mm framed



Somebodies Eyes 15 2015
Oil on cotton on board
860 x 710mm framed



Somebodies Eyes 16 2015
Oil on cotton on board
860 x 710mm framed



Somebodies Eyes 17 2015
Oil on cotton on board
860 x 710mm framed



Somebodies Eyes 18 2015
Oil on cotton on board
860 x 710mm framed



Somebodies Eyes 19 2015
Oil on cotton on board
860 x 710mm framed



Somebodies Eyes 20 2015
Oil on cotton on board
860 x 710mm framed



Somebodies Eyes 21 2015
Oil on cotton on board
860 x 710mm framed



The Creator, 2015
Oil on cotton on board
990 x 790 mm framed



The Asian, 2009
Oil on canvas
Suite of 51 paintings + 1 poster



Chanel, 2010/2015
Oil on cotton on board
900 x 700 mm



Betty Txt, 2009/2015
C-type print
1060 x 780 mm framed
Edition 1 of 5



The Anatomy Lesson Txt, 2009/2015
C-type print
1320 x 1850 mm framed
Edition 1 of 5

TRISH CLARK GALLERY

"Tyrants conduct monologues above a million solitudes." - Albert Camus

"Those that I fight I do not hate,

Those that I guard I do not love..." - W. B. Yeats

If world events polarise us, the paranoia they unleash also tends to inspire the madness of crowds, particularly when atrocities, threats and fear result in the ethical paradox of swapping passivity towards events with passivity towards politicians. Paranoia forges mass consensus out of complacency with little place for individual dissent or reasoned debate; a situation that, not without coincidence, artists as a whole are intimately familiar with.

Heather Straka's 21 compelling new portraits in *Somebodies Eyes* suggest this dehumanising quality that seems as relevant to the clash of guttering empires during the First World War as it is to the binge and purge news cycle of Islamist terror threats and Middle East invasions we have been living with since Desert Storm in 1990-91. Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose. Straka packages her anonymous, yet still deeply individual, subjects as faceless and androgynous (typical of the gender play that permeates much of her work), bundled into the same ill-fitting military uniform hastily improvised to fit with bulldog clips and duct tape. With such a diversity of types, there is an intimation that we are all conscripted in one way or another, as participants, victims, collateral damage or news consumers of the action. At the same time she reminds us that those who do choose to don uniforms of whatever colour or stripe are no less human individuals than ourselves.

Given Straka's work has long been an intimate process of holding a subversive mirror up to accepted social consensus and various sacred cows, reflecting back prejudices and ignored otherness, it seems natural to read a kind of peripheral commentary in *Somebodies Eyes*. Not necessarily a political one or anti-war one, more a caution from the margins against assumptions and herd thinking. At the same time, we really have no idea which side of which conflict the subjects are on. The timelessness and universality of the impulse to war becomes generic when viewed through the lens of human history. If we flip things around we may find ourselves in the position of acknowledging the humanity of the person in the uniform – a bit like the creepily seductive "Tomorrow Belongs to Me" scene in *Cabaret*. If that's the case is anyone even a genuine enemy or just a straw man set up by the Powers That Be?

While history confers some objectivity to the judgement of evil applied to Nazism in World War II, Pol Pot's regime of the Khmer Rouge or Stalin's Gulags, it's not so straightforward to apply the same judgement to broader actions in, say, World War I or the Middle East today.

Straka's *Somebodies Eyes* is a variation on a theme already laid out in poetic form by W. B. Yeats in his 'The Irish Airman Foresees his Death.' The anonymous aviator, presumed to be Yeats' friend Major Robert Gregory, knows his next air battle will likely be his last and that he flies not out of a sense of duty or patriotism, but for the thrill of annihilation that gives his life meaning, "a lonely impulse of delight."

- Andrew Paul Wood

TRISH CLARK GALLERY

Heather Straka
b. 1972

Heather Straka's insightful explorations into perceptions of socio-political and cultural lives have created a significant body of compelling and controversial work. Straka demonstrates technical control of her medium and coupled with a finely modulated handling of her contentious subject matter, she deftly questions tradition, challenges the politically correct, and subverts expectations.

Her Maori Chiefs series of adjusted portraits by Victorian artists, adorned with religious, political and cross-cultural references, caused some outrage in New Zealand. Straka engages with such debate as a meaningful part of her practice. Her Asian Girl series slyly referenced western perceptions of art, authenticity and authorship as she commissioned 59 replicas of her own painting from Chinese artisans working in the Dafen Oil Painting Village in the Longgang District of Shenzhen, China. Straka's recent Burqa series again confounds stereotypical readings of particular cultural practices. Western notions of women oppressed by the material layering concealing their being are undone by the sexuality and freedom of the tattooed body below the direct and sensual gaze.

Studying sculpture at the University of Auckland's Elam School of Fine Arts in the early 90s, Straka honed an acute attention to detail that she later carried through to her painting practice, a shift made while working as Julia Morison's assistant in France. Scarcity of sculptural materials and proximity to the great paintings of Europe informed the refocus of her practice. Straka returned to New Zealand and exhibited her first painting show in 1998, later graduating with an MFA from Canterbury School of Fine Arts in 2000.

Since the turn of the century Straka has been awarded several scholarships and residencies. In 2002 she was presented the Pierce Low Award for Excellence in Painting from the Royal Overseas League, London. Straka was awarded New Zealand's esteemed Frances Hodgkins Fellowship in 2008, and the William Hodges Fellowship in 2011. Her prolific exhibition history spans two decades and her work is held in all of New Zealand's major public collections.

Straka lives and works in Auckland, New Zealand.