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HEATHER STRAKA | The Strangers' Room

2 May – 3 June, 2017

Press Release

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Trish Clark Gallery is pleased to present Heather Straka's second solo exhibition at the gallery, *The Strangers' Room*. Conceived as a rich coda to her earlier Maori Chiefs series of adjusted portraits by Victorian artists, adorned with religious, political and cross-cultural references, and mindful of the identity politics and historic idealism inherent in current global 'immigration crises', Straka now delivers us a moody exploration of gender-separated 'otherness'.

Beyond Straka's long-time investigation of identity/cultural politics, this exhibition enlarges that arena of cultural and gender separation into the yet more esoteric area of 'the other'. Sara Ahmed's *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* was one of the prompts for Straka's consideration of the notion of 'the stranger' – ineluctably referenced back to her own origins and those of the colonial culture she matured in. Experiencing the 'Strangers' Room' - a separate room allocated for women with a slot in a door for communication purposes – in The Invercargill Club (a gentlemen's Club in the far south of New Zealand) galvanized Straka's thinking.

For this exhibition Straka scoured New Zealand hunting down historic frames in Masonic Lodges, re-considered the Waikato Wars and her series Blood Lust, and the impact of Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki's recent Lindauer exhibition with its earlier foreign exposure, together with the shame of each post-colonial country's collision of cultures with indigenous peoples, amidst butchered landscapes. The viewer's gaze inside (insight) is denied in all these portraits; they truly are depictions of 'the other' – each resists further identification: of race, beliefs, motivations.

Her broad and insightful explorations over many years into perceptions of socio-political and cultural lives have created a significant body of compelling and controversial work. Everything is grist to Straka's mill, with no apologia. Unafraid to confront racist and sexist stereotypes, Straka engages with such debate as a meaningful part of her practice. All is rendered via a finely modulated painting approach, making objects of beauty from her contentious subject matter, her caustic gaze deftly questioning tradition, challenging the politically correct, and subverting expectations.

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.

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Straka returned to New Zealand and exhibited her first painting show in 1998, later graduating with an MFA in Painting 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 work is held in all of New Zealand's major public collections.

Straka lives and works in Auckland, New Zealand.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION AND IMAGES

PLEASE CONTACT THE GALLERY

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