

## 23

### Heather Straka (b 1972)

*The Gatekeeper*

oil on board

signed, inscribed with title and dated 2005

to reverse

79 x 52cm

\$35,000 - \$50,000

#### PROVENANCE

commissioned by the vendor directly from the artist after viewing *'Paradise Lost'* at Jonathan Smart Gallery, Christchurch, 2005  
Private collection, Christchurch

Heather Straka is one of New Zealand's most conceptually minded mid-career painters. Her work is in major public and private collections and she was the 2008 Frances Hodgkins Fellow and the 2011 William Hodges Fellow. Straka began taking art night classes while still in high school with her sights set on Elam to which she went to study sculpture. Her tutors there included Christine Hellyar and Greer Twiss. After graduating in 1994 she spent five years in France working as an artist assistant for Julia Morison before returning to New Zealand where she graduated from Ilam in 2000 with a Masters of Fine Art. It was during her time in France that, thanks to a paucity of sculptural materials and live exposure to René Magritte's oeuvre, Straka was moved to paint. Her work since has functioned in a thoroughly surrealist logic, relishing the juxtaposition of unlikely subjects that create a culture clash and confuse our societal codes. Her work strives to unsettle the viewer. However unnerving her paintings can be and despite their initial shock they ring with a deep resonance that is more true to life than immediately recognisable.

*Burqababes* (2014) is a series of women in burqas that mostly cover their faces and torsos but reveal heavily tattooed bare skin. It explores the complex and secret relationships we have with what we hide that underpins our interactions and connections. *The Asian* (2010) looks at the predicament of a cloning culture with, among other things, a

recurring tiki brooch foreignised by its placement on the cheongsam of a 1940s Shanghai girl. In an interview with the *Canterbury Herald* 1. Straka says that it has been common in the past to find plastic tiki made in China for sale in New Zealand. These obvious comparisons of 'real' and 'fake' are blurred and impossible to distinguish when it comes to people face to face.

Straka's groundbreaking exhibition *Paradise Lost* (2005) copied portraits by Lindauer and Goldie. Using her own highly finished trademark style of serene tonal control and adding elements such as horns, red tinged skin, tattoos, and halos, Straka appropriates specific cultural imagery. *Paradise Lost* deliberately comments on contemporary New Zealand society by way of acknowledging the different layers and lenses of our shared colonial past. Without asking for permission to ask, her works by their very existence demand an answer from us; who has the right to the imagery used in these paintings? Straka, Lindauer, or indeed in this very instance the subject of the painting, Tukukino Te Ahiātaewa?

Tukukino Te Ahiātaewa was a rangatira and land activist of Ngāti Tamaterā living in the 19C. He holds a tewhatewha with huia feathers, a weapon for a chief. His portrait was first done by Gottfried Lindauer in 1878. It was common at that time for Māori subjects of a high rank to commission Lindauer for a portrait. Yet Lindauer's works

were exhibited in the Colonial and Indian Exhibition of 1886. Acknowledging the then popular ideals of social Darwinism this gives his paintings an anthropological approach more akin at that time to taxidermy than art. It is this cultural tension, between genuine admiration and debasing exoticism, that Straka's paintings find their roots in.

A part of arguably the most compelling series of her career *The Gatekeeper* was a private commission made after the vendor saw *Paradise Lost*. The halo signifying sainthood and the heart the divine light of love, Straka modernises Te Ahiātaewa's presence while also deepening our ability to connect with him. *The Gatekeeper* revolutionises Lindauer's narrative, elevating it from unsettling representations of a supposed dying race to a potential acknowledgment of a powerful, full hearted and dignified people. There is no getting around the jarring effects of the cultural crossover, Straka herself saying 'even though we try to understand another culture, there's always a disconnect.' 2.

Maeve Hughes

1. *Mid Canterbury Herald*, December 14th, 2011. P. 13

2. Heather Straka, Francis Hodgkins Fellowship, *Thecentral.co.nz* 2008, retrieved 2021.