

## MARIE STRAUSS- ARTIST AT LARGE: FROM PAINTING TO FASHION DESIGN

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### AN INTERMEDIAL PRACTICE

Dunedin artist Marie Strauss produces a range of work in different media, marked by the intermedial nature of her practice.<sup>1</sup> For Strauss, "Fashion for me is like painting, or making a meal or creating a pot – to me it's all the same."<sup>2</sup> Through the intermedial continuum of her engagement, 'art' is released from traditional hierarchies and boundaries. While locally, perhaps, more routinely associated with her fashion label Dada Vintage and shop Dada Manifesto, located in Dunedin, Strauss is also a painter and ceramicist. The everyday practices of eating and dressing inflect the meaning of her ceramics (which are sculptural rather than utilitarian in nature) as well as her paintings.



Figure 1. Marie Strauss, Dada Vintage garment, 2014. iD Dunedin Fashion Week.  
Photograph: Chris Sullivan, courtesy Dada Vintage.



Figure 2. Marie Strauss, *Autumn*, 2016, oil on canvas, 60 x 75 cm. From the exhibition *Four Seasons*. Courtesy Eskdale Gallery.



Figure 3. Ceramics by Marie Strauss. From the exhibition *Nocturnal*, 2017. Courtesy Eskdale Gallery.

Strauss, who holds an MFA (2010) from the Otago Polytechnic/Te Kura Matatini ki Otago, immigrated to New Zealand from South Africa with her husband and three children in 1993, where she now lives in the South Island. She divides her time between her working farm (where her studio is located) in North Taieri and her shop in Dunedin on Moray Place, Dada Manifesto, which celebrated its tenth anniversary in 2018. More of a gallery than a boutique, this space boasts a curated collection that includes her own label, Dada Collection and Dada Knit, a selection of curios and jewellery, garments from international designers, and the creations of local artists including Madeleine Child and Philip Jarvis, as well as her own paintings and ceramics.

Strauss embraces fashion design in all its aspects and has regularly participated in iD Dunedin Fashion Week; however, she also has a national reputation as a painter and ceramicist. Her art has been the object of 48 solo shows since 1982 (South Africa, France, Australia and New Zealand), most recently at Mint Gallery, Dunedin (2015), and Eskdale Gallery, Dunedin (2017). Her work can be found in collections located in South Africa, France, Australia, New Zealand and Korea. In New Zealand, the Dowse Museum, the Forrester Gallery and the James Wallace Collection boast examples from her oeuvre.

Strauss explains that “for me ... ‘make’ is called art. But it doesn’t have to be art ... For me ... to cook, or to be involved in fashion, to make choices about knitwear, or colours [gives me] the same satisfaction as making a painting, a pot. Every now and then ... I have this need to paint.”<sup>3</sup> A preoccupation with colour, texture and form lends coherency to the objects that she makes, which emerge through a discipline that engages with traditional forms while working outside conventional practices. For example, she fires her ceramics multiple times to create a patina and layering of glazes. For New Zealand art historian and critic Rob Garrett, her “pots ooze: leaking surfaces and insides suggest the percolating of sodden ground and the weeping of mud banks of deep-cut streams,” evoking the landscapes of the South Island.<sup>4</sup> Her garments, impeccably tailored and cut, juxtapose unexpected textures, colours and fabrics, recalling a baby’s fascination with light, pattern and changing intensities. “My voice,” explains Strauss, “is in everything I do.”

Strauss admits that when she first came to New Zealand, she suffered from a sense of exile and dislocation,<sup>5</sup> particularly given that her creative impulses arise in response to her immediate environment. She expands: “My art

is about what I am doing at the time. ... I always work with what I know and what I live with. ... When my children were small, a lot of my work revolved around them." As her children matured and developed lives of their own, her sense of isolation increased; however, in 2008, she established Dada Manifesto, which gave her a new sense of belonging and place. In her own words, "The moment that I had the shop, things just settled down."

## DADA: WORKING OUTSIDE THE FASHION SYSTEM

The shop serves a number of purposes, including a financial one. Marie frequently comments that it is easier to sell clothes than 'art.' The shop provides a practical solution to the perennial problem of artists whose work arises out of passion or a drive to create, but who also have monetary obligations. While this eclectic boutique ensures Strauss a modest income, her relationship with fashion is unconventional. She does not produce a new line with each season, but operates through accretion, creating new patterns based on the old through subtle variations in cut and fabric. The fabrics themselves are sourced internationally, with a coat, for example, often made from a single unique piece of cloth brought back from Europe in a suitcase. She frequently claims that her designs are not about fashion – meaning the fashion system, with its cult of the new and of brand visibility.

Garments by local designers (such as the label Karena Carran), New Zealand designers (such as Karen Walker), a few European designers and companies operating in a national (Standard Issue) and international (American Vintage) market complement Strauss's own creations. All garments are carefully chosen by Strauss, with the clothing taking its identity from the shop rather than from a 'brand' or 'label.' The particular aesthetic of the shop is emphasised through the inclusion of artwork by Strauss and other local artists, as well as a selection of costume jewellery in bright colours. The boutique enjoys a certain status as an insider's retreat, facilitated by its location near the back entrance of the Dunedin Public Art Gallery, slightly removed (yet accessible) from Dunedin's principal shopping area and offering an alternative to the New Zealand look routinely associated with Dunedin and its "Black Brigade."<sup>6</sup>

Strauss frequently explains that the shop makes it possible for her to work as an artist; it supports her art and, in particular, funds her trips to Europe. Undertaken with a view to ordering stock for her shop, they also fulfill the more personal goal of developing Strauss's extensive knowledge of art. On occasion, she also has organised tours for groups of women who are similarly motivated to explore the art of the past, who share her passion and appreciate her perspectives. The shop provides a locus for various entrepreneurial initiatives; however, the boutique (and by extension the tours) are in addition and, perhaps more importantly, a manifestation of Strauss's philosophy of art and life.

She explains: "Art is part of life ... What you wear is part of art and art is part of life. So, you can live that. That's the main, the important thing ... that you can live art. It's a creative choice. ... There are aspects that you can incorporate into your life ... [something] that gives you joy. I mean that's what art also does." Fashion, here, becomes an extension of that impulse to make art, but also a means of extending the reach of art. As Strauss points out, many people are intimidated by art but not by fashion. Dada Manifesto offers that group the possibility of experiencing what Strauss feels to be the joy of art as an inclusive experience, expanding her practice within an arena that specifically addresses women – that of fashion.

## DADA MANIFESTO

The name "Dada Manifesto" itself refers to the European post-World War I avant-garde art movement that, in Strauss' words, "embraced the absurd." The original Dada movement had a political side and was highly critical of the social conditions that had produced World War I and later World War II; Strauss, however, does not directly address the overtly radical goals of the movement. Rather, she seeks joy in the absurd as an antidote to the rationalisation of human existence that subtends modernity and contemporary urban life. Her activities constitute a form of resistance to the impersonality and flat affect promoted by contemporary corporate culture, for example.

The joy in the absurd constitutes a refutation of a philosophy in which human activity must have a utilitarian purpose and be remunerated accordingly, but also a world in which speculation and the accumulation of capital are the ultimate goal of human enterprise. Strauss confesses: "I am not actually going to the dark side." Rather, she feels an affinity with Dada as it leads into Surrealism, what she calls its "silliness;" its "playfulness." The shop is marginally successful in monetary terms; Marie has no desire to make it more 'profitable' from a financial perspective. She does not seek to expand its market and demographic, for example, these being the kinds of issues that preoccupy most contemporary designers, whether on a small scale, in the case of designers with a regional reputation, or on a larger scale in the case of the global brands, typically owned by multinational corporations.

Strauss's endeavours function much like the traditional potlach, a ceremony in which gifts are exchanged and which was attributed to indigenous peoples in North America. The point of these ceremonies was to give away as much as possible, with respect and influence accorded not to the person who had amassed the largest amount, but to he (and the hosts were male) who could give away the most. While ethnological understanding of the potlach has evolved in the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, this initial conceptualisation was extremely influential during much of the twentieth century, within political and artistic circles, with the potlach considered to reflect a general resistance in certain sectors to the idea that the accumulation of wealth for its own sake was a laudable human goal.<sup>7</sup>

This dimension of Strauss's project is most obviously present in the events that she initiates in collaboration with the Antarctic Riviera Collective (Madeleine Child and Philip Jarvis), held at the Mint (Eskdale) Gallery in Dunedin.<sup>8</sup> At these events, she will typically serve food that she has cooked herself. Indeed, she frequently regales a customer stopping by her shop with a piece of cake, chocolate or honey-lavender oil (with the lavender and honey from her farm). She orchestrated, with Antarctic Riviera, an ambitious *happening* that served as a ten-year birthday celebration for her shop and customers, "DADA Birthday," held in the Dunedin Public Art Gallery on 2 May 2018, which sat comfortably between performance art and a fashion show. "Models" were members of a dance collective, or neighbours, incorporating a range of sizes and ages not routinely seen on the catwalk.

In her refusal to subscribe to the new credos of what has been termed the "creative industries," with their focus on profit margins, Strauss and her work occupy a place outside the dominant fashion and art systems of the twenty-first century. Strauss's relationship with art in its expanded form is deeply personal; her preoccupation with community seeks not to enrich it materially, but to evoke a common ground of joy and pleasure in life as it presents itself at a primary level – the play of intensities that pediatrician and psychoanalyst Daniel Stern describes as "vitality affects." These are evidenced in the pleasure that a very young child, an *infans*, before the acquisition of language, takes in movement, colour and sound, for example, when looking at the mobile hung above his or her head, or when experiencing a rocking movement in the arms of his or her mother, accompanied by the changing tones of a lullaby.<sup>9</sup> It is a preoccupation with this level of experience (Stern's "vitality affects") that unites Strauss's work as a whole across the various media with which she works.

#### "DREAMING ONESELF INTO EXISTENCE"<sup>10</sup>

Art within this context targets psychic existence, making manifest the emotional life of the artist. The multifaceted nature of Strauss's practice serves as a means whereby the artist dreams herself "into existence" – giving birth to a 'self' constituted through emotion, attachment, play and desire. This self emerges out of the personal work of the artist into the environment, one that encloses and invites the viewer into this dream world, encouraging, within the constraints of a profit-driven economy, a more democratic encounter with art, beyond the 'white cube.' Pursuing this perspective, the three primary media (design, painting and ceramics) of Strauss's corpus correspond to the different dimensions of the self-world that she has created.

The first, most obvious world, manifested through the environments that she creates in her home and in her shop (encompassing activities such as cooking, sewing, embroidering) is one that revolves around inclusion and sociality, the creating of a communicative fabric with others. In, perhaps, overly simplistic terms, women who enter the shop dress themselves for themselves, encouraged rather than instructed by Strauss. The garments that she designs are transformed and made over (as are all garments) by those who wear them and those who participate in their creation. They are always collaborative from their inception, as are most garments, transformed anew by the wearer. The second world is provided by her painting, which Strauss herself compares to dreaming. For her, "painting is like dreaming." It is an activity undertaken by a subject who is conscious of that activity, but not completely in control of it. A third world, or underworld, is manifested through the ceramic pieces that further escape the subject's control and that are very specifically of the 'earth.' Not coincidentally, Strauss's engagement with ceramics emerged only after she had immigrated to New Zealand. The latter two activities exist at a certain remove from her social world; they are solitary pursuits that nonetheless have a communicative function.

The nexus of activities surrounding the shop Dada is perhaps the most visible dimension of her work, at least with regard to the Dunedin community; however, in some ways both her painting and her ceramics are more fundamental to her interior identity as an artist. She has often confided that she loves the shop and fashion, but that she could also conceive of a life without them. In contrast, she could never stop painting.

### PAINTING: THE DREAM

Strauss's painting is expressive and personal, engaged with the play of textures, surface and colour. It serves to express the emotions aroused by certain kinds of everyday moments, to make those emotions visible and palpable to the viewer and perhaps the artist herself. The works become a means of seizing intangible feelings and thus recording and examining them. A 2014 painting, *Newborn*, offers an apt example of the role played by painting for this artist.



Figure 4. Marie Strauss, *Newborn*, 2014, oil on canvas, 92 x 62 cm. Photograph courtesy Mint Gallery.

Commemorating the birth of her first grandchild, a little boy, the work illustrates the intimate connections between Strauss, art and her immediate emotional life. The child's clothing is rendered in pink, or pinkish hues, giving the child a rosy glow; he is a being not as yet subject to the expectations of society and culture. The baby sleeps peacefully, occupying the right side of the canvas, the hood of his buggy illuminated by the play of sunlight, the flowers in the garden echoing the tones of the baby's garments. A dog, belonging to the parents of the child, occupies the left side of the canvas. The dog is alert and watchful, looking attentively outside the frame of the canvas, addressing the viewer: The child's eyes appear slightly open; he may be slyly looking at the viewer, while still ensconced in his cozy nest. The dog, in contrast, is mindful of his surroundings, taking a protective stance vis-à-vis the helpless baby. The viewer is then caught between the animal gaze and the softer look of the child, situated outside the frame to the left as an observer who is secondary to the scene depicted.<sup>11</sup>

This is a family scene, infused with delight, expressed through colour and the vibrancy of the brush strokes, their happy abandon, that figure forth the artist's own pleasure and quiet joy at the new addition to her family. The watchful dog, a black and imposing figure on the canvas, conveys a lurking concern about an inevitably uncertain future. The painting can be read as a commentary on the complexity of the artist's response to the birth as a moment to be celebrated and a subject of tacit maternal concern, emblematised by the watchful dog. While not all her paintings are as obviously autobiographical as *Newborn*, they convey a similar emotional intensity in their depiction of everyday objects and scenes. The ceramics are much darker in nature, much more difficult to grasp than the paintings, though they frequently evoke an immediate and almost visceral response.

#### CERAMICS, MUD AND THE "UNTHOUGHT KNOWN"



Figure 5. Marie Strauss, *Untitled*, 2003, hand-built stoneware with multi-fired slips and glazes, 24 x 29 cm each. Collection of the Forrester Gallery (FG2003.8.1). Photograph courtesy Forrester Gallery.

Strauss's 2003 ceramic figures – for example, those owned by the Forrester Gallery – defy analysis, their suppurating surface recalling their literal origins in the earth.<sup>12</sup> They evoke what the psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas terms “the unthought known,” ideas and emotions encompassed by the unconscious, but not obviously available to the conscious mind.<sup>13</sup> As the product of a very visceral engagement with a primary material, earth or mud, that is

indigenous to New Zealand and a direct consequence of being *here* rather than *elsewhere*, these objects, at least initially, perhaps, express her difficulty in anchoring herself in New Zealand at a very primal level as an immigrant. From a broader perspective, they raise questions about the relations between the imagination and the material reality of existence, about our ability to give form to that existence when it is located, as it is in various instances and various times in our lives, on the very periphery of meaning.

Some of her more recent ceramics, while retaining a sense of affinity with the earth as *dark matter*, have acquired a more playful dimension, as in the case of the figure of the morepork, repeated in several different forms as part of a 2017 exhibition, *Nocturnal*.



Figure 6. Marie Strauss, *Untitled* ["Morepork"], 2017, hand-built stoneware with multi-fired slips and glazes, 20 x 28 cm. Photograph courtesy Eskdale Gallery.



Figure 7. Marie Strauss, embroidered morepork on Dada Vintage jersey. Marie Strauss, "DAda Birthday," 2018, performance, 2 May 2018. Photography courtesy Justin Spiers.

The morepork or owl motif<sup>44</sup> also reappears on an embroidered jersey, transformed into a carnivalesque celebratory figure as part of the "DAda Birthday" performance/event. The model/dancer completes her outfit with Dada Vintage trousers made of Dutch wax-printed fabric by Vlisco (historically one of the most prestigious firms engaged in the making of this fabric), marking the formative influence of Strauss's childhood in South Africa. The handbag worn as a hat, hiding the performer's face, contributes to the general elated anarchy of the *happening*. The choice to incorporate a Vlisco textile into this performance highlights the complex interweavings of personal memory and global history in the creation of individual subjectivity.<sup>15</sup>

## THE JOYFUL RETURN

The image of the owl on the Dada Vintage jersey re-emerges as an emblem of joy. The ceramic moreporks' expressions of sadness, and their status as nocturnal, secret and even abject (with "more pork" recalling the child's plaintive cry for more food, more nurturance) has been answered and requited in this later embroidered depiction. Similarly, the viewer is invited to remember the past, but to also appreciate the inherent aesthetic qualities of the wax-printed fabric in terms of colour, composition and surface. Notably, the figure of the black owl recalls for Strauss both the African owl of her childhood and the moreporks around her New Zealand home – one in particular that was rescued by her husband and which he and she nursed to maturity and then returned to the bird's natural habitat.<sup>16</sup> She also has plans to create a summer dress that displays a painted line drawing of an owl on its front panel. The dress would be cut to accommodate the drawing as the first stage in the creation of the garment. Regardless of whether Strauss makes this dress in due course, the use of the morepork figure in her work offers a clear example of the function of art (here as an intermedial practice) in appeasing, taming and transforming the desires and anguishes (sometime inchoate) of the human psyche.

Fashion within Strauss's work as defined intermedially becomes a highly personal expression of allegiance, festivity and attachment. The play of colour and vibrancy of texture, as shifting intensities, evoke the innocent delights of childhood and an optimism about the human condition in which such mutual pleasures provide a common ground that promotes our understanding of a more utopian future. The double valence of fashion, as both a *consumer non-durable* and art, recalls the views of the German Jewish philosopher Walter Benjamin who saw in fashion, and our acquiescence to its system, a symptom of commodity fetishism in one of its more virulent forms, but also deemed it a manifestation of the human subject's continued search and desire for a more utopian future.<sup>17</sup> Fashion by its nature as ever changing expresses a dissatisfaction with the present and a belief in a better future, according to Benjamin's formulations of its paradoxical role. The intermedial connections sustained by Marie Strauss's project demonstrate fashion's potential to connect the subject to the aesthetic impulse defined by Stern through his notion of vitality affects – an appreciation of life and beauty that is arguably a human right allocated to all by birth, the sign of a shared humanity that has the potential to draw us together in celebration rather than war.

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**Marie Strauss** holds an MFA (2010) from the Otago Polytechnic/Te Kura Matatini ki Otago and currently resides in Dunedin. Since moving to New Zealand from South Africa, she has developed a national reputation as a painter, a ceramicist and more recently a fashion designer through her label Dada. Her art has been the object of 48 solo shows since 1982 (South Africa, France, Australia and New Zealand), most recently at Mint Gallery, Dunedin (2015) and Eskdale Gallery, Dunedin (2017). Her work is included in collections in South Africa, France, New Zealand, Australia and Korea. In New Zealand, the Dowse Museum, the Forrester Gallery and the James Wallace Collection boast examples from her oeuvre.



- 1 This article was initially inspired by a verbal co-presentation scheduled for inclusion in "Unbound: Liberating Women – A Symposium," CTANZ, Dunedin, New Zealand, 21-23 September 2018, by Hilary Radner and Victoria Bell.
- 2 Hannah Collier, "Interview: Marie Strauss – Owner and Designer at Dada," *Critic*, 23 March 2014, <https://www.critic.co.nz/culture/article/3722/interview-marie-strauss>.
- 3 All quotations by Marie Strauss are from recorded conversations held in March and April 2018, unless otherwise indicated.
- 4 Rob Garrett, "Marie Strauss: Mud, Coats and Cheese," *Ceramics: Art & Perception*, 70 (2007), 25.
- 5 Elizabeth Rankin and Marténe Mentis, "Unsettled/Unsettling Images: Issues of Identity in the Work of South African Artists in New Zealand," *de arte*, 40:71 (2005), 49-50. DOI: 10.1080/00043389.2005.11877036.
- 6 Russell Kleyn, "Photographing Dunedin's Black Brigade," 27 August 2015, [https://i-d.vice.com/en\\_uk/article/vbepz9/photographing-dunedin39s-black-brigade-uk-translation](https://i-d.vice.com/en_uk/article/vbepz9/photographing-dunedin39s-black-brigade-uk-translation).
- 7 See Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. Ian Cunnison (London: Cohen & West, 1966). For a recent evaluation of Mauss's concepts, see Volker M Heins, Christine Unrau and Kristine Avaram, "Gift-giving and Reciprocity in Global Society: Introducing Marcel Mauss in International Studies," *Journal of International Political Theory*, 14:2 (2018), 126-44.
- 8 Run by Murray Eskdale, the gallery was originally known as Mint Gallery (opening in 2011), but later took the name Eskdale Gallery (2017).
- 9 For a discussion of Daniel Stern's concepts and the creative process, see Alistair Fox, *Speaking Pictures: Neuropsychology and Authorship in Film and Literature* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2016), 81-9.
- 10 Thomas H Ogden, *This Art of Psychoanalysis: Dreaming Undreamt Dreams and Interrupted Cries* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 8.
- 11 I am indebted to Cecilia Novero for this comment.
- 12 Garrett, "Marie Strauss: Mud, Coats and Cheese," 25-7.
- 13 See Christopher Bollas, *In the Shadow of the Object: Psychoanalysis of the Unthought Known* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989).
- 14 For Strauss, all these figures (of which the owl is only one example) across different media are not actual representations of a specific bird or flower; for example, but of a concatenation of various birds. In the case of these 'owls,' Strauss sometimes refers to them as moreporks, a native New Zealand owl, and at other times as South African owls. Marie Strauss, conversation with the artist, Dunedin, New Zealand, 8 June 2018.
- 15 Dutch wax-printed fabric, popular in Africa for more than a century, has been the subject of debate and controversy within visual culture scholarship. For Strauss, the fabric recalls her early experiences in South Africa and the layers of meaning generated by the imposition of subsequent encounters with this same fabric, including, more recently, within the fashion industry and the contemporary art world, suggesting the complexity of emotional attachment. A full examination of the implications of this particular fabric in terms of Strauss's own history and the history into which she was born would require an article in itself. In the interests of space, this discussion must unfortunately be deferred.
- 16 Marie Strauss, conversation with the artist, 15 June 2018.
- 17 Hilary Radner, "Cinema," in *The End of Fashion*, eds Vicki Karaminas and Adam Gezky (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 96.

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