



NEW ZEALAND-KOREAN ARTIST HYE RIM LEE AND EXPAT PRODUCER RYAN MULCOCK, WITH PETER STICHBURY'S PORTRAIT OF JESSE PEACH AT LEFT.

## THE PAINTER, THE PEACH & THE BIG APPLE

*An Auckland artist in New York.*

STORY FRANCES MORTON

There he is. The one with the smooth, high forehead and a navy scarf looped artfully around his neck. The painting is undeniably of Jesse Peach, the babyfaced TV3 reporter and theatre company director, and yet it's unsettlingly not him at the same time. The young man in the picture has downcast eyes and an air of despondency.

Peach's likeness, by Auckland painter Peter Stichbury, is hanging in the white-box Tracy Williams Gallery in the west Manhattan neighbourhood of Chelsea, hallowed ground for contemporary artists.

The show, called *Superfluous Man*, is Stichbury's second exhibition at the gallery. His first, *The Proteus Effect*, was in 2010, and it's taken him the whole year to prepare these new, meticulous acrylic portraits that are simultaneously perfected and imperfect.

Stichbury had been ruminating on the idea of superfluous men for about a decade, since his wife Hilary introduced him to the idea through her Russian studies. The superfluous man (closely related to the Byronic hero) is a figure from 19th century

Russian literature: a man with a privileged existence of wealth and standing, who rejects social norms and is characterised by cynicism and boredom. He's unempathetic to others, but feels deeply.

It was the ambiguous quality — abstract concepts beneath hyper-real portraits — along with mastery of the paintbrush, that got under gallery owner Williams' skin. She first saw his work at an art fair in Los Angeles, and says she was both attracted to and bugged by the painting of Estelle, a blonde, gamine model Stichbury has painted repeatedly over the years, including for this most recent show.

### Stichbury's style has been likened to that of Otto Dix and Lucien Freud.

"Come with me," says Williams, rolling back a door to her office which is filled with abstract works by other artists in her stable. Stichbury is the only figurative artist and the only New Zealander she represents. Collectors have likened his style to Otto Dix and Lucien Freud, she says. "I don't think there is anyone like him [now]."

There's a creative expat community in New York and many of them turned up to sip chardonnay and support the artist, who was the smartest guy in the room with his black Crane Brothers suit, no tie and deep, almond eyes.

Artists Martin Basher and Hye Rim Lee,

photographer Paul Nathan, rock-rapper-cum-hair-product-creator Tyson Kennedy and his buddy Dave Gibson of Elemenor fame were there. Labour's deputy leader, Grant Robertson, rolled up late: he was in town after a tour observing the US elections. There was also a contingent from the Hyperfactory, the mobile marketing company born in New Zealand and now headquartered in New York.

By chance, Jesse Peach turned up too. He'd arrived in New York the day of the opening, had nowhere to stay and didn't know where to ask the cab to go. But he had the number of a friendly NY-based Kiwi stranger who soon jacked up accommodation for him at a musician's house.

By the time Peach bowled out of the lift into the gallery he was looking bewildered and excited, not jaded like the men in Stichbury's paintings.

He had seen his own portrait before but not in a gallery. "It's not really me," he says. "What's it called?" I ask.

"I can't remember. Something starting with P."

Peach's portrait is called *Pechorin Peach*, named after the main character of Mikhail Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time*.

According to Stichbury, the superfluous man in modern times is someone like Gregory House, from the medical television drama *House*: beneath the cynicism, a force for good.

The pensive portraits that look gloomily down on the opening night crowd glimmer with faint optimism.