



Jeffrey Harris New Paintings

An art of difficult beauty

Paintings of humans in their characteristic environs don't just say 'this is what we look like', but also, importantly 'this is what we are'. The most notable feature of the paintings of Jeffrey Harris is that this intelligence is tragic: we are each of us a Hamlet or an Ophelia, and our lives are similarly shot through with the deserts of our flawed deliberations. But clearly for Harris the most beautiful hero, or heroine, is the tragic one, and it is to the dreadful but tremendous entanglements in the weft and warp of humanity that the Harris canvas is addressed.

These tragedies take place in a fallen world, a world that is a curious mixture of dream and waking states. In that place there is sufficient adherence to some of the qualities of things to make them recognisably the landscapes, domestic interiors and figures, the crucifixes, telephone receivers and other mundane objects of the waking world. But that is where the likenesses end. The forms of things are distorted. Human beings are disfigured so that they are stiff where they should be supple, involuted where there should be density and mass. In appearance they insinuate the anonymous figures of anxiety dreams. But also, crucially, they share the quality of those figures being mere ciphers, dolls, pawns, indeed puppets, through which flow forces greater than any which they can control.

For all their war-paint then, the stiff Harris dolls are possessed of a maimed impotence. In their paintings they are for ever entrapped in scenarios of undermining or overwhelming magnitude: scenarios in which they are caught at the interstices of transformation or destruction. In some paintings they are active as if upon a psychic battleground. Other times they are functions of the narrative that surrounds them: narratives of which they are tragically both perpetrator and victim.

The styles in which Harris paints span the extremes of the human disposition. At one end stands a canvas that is visually close to the world but emotionally flat, tending to queasy harmonies and pastel shades. At the other end stands a 'manic' canvas: emotionally close in its liquid colours but almost on the point of losing the appearances of things in its jabbing array of brushstrokes. The years since 1981, when milestone paintings such as *My Lai* and *Two Young Russians* appeared, have seen Harris develop a versatile 'mainstream' style which combines elements of both of these extremes of visual and expressive dynamism. In this style, of which *Untitled* 1983/1984, *Untitled* 1984 and *'Every Soul is a Circus'* are examples, a dialogue is set up between the white unpainted area of canvas, the wild, furious lines and soiled hazes so representative of the

artist, and areas of solid blocked-in colour. In allowing an expressive language which is at once economical and yet capable of much subtlety, these 'eighties' paintings herald an era of increased assurance for Harris, an assurance auspiciously marked by no diminution whatsoever in the characteristic severity of Harris's vision.

The equation of tragedy with beauty in this severe style of painting is a difficult one. That is because, to borrow an idea from the aesthete Bernard Bosanquet¹, Harris's painting constitutes an art of difficult beauty. Bosanquet meant by difficult beauty that which pushes the subjective and physical discord of artworks to the limit, thereby in some sense straining the tolerance of the spectator. In Harris, at least some part of that strained tolerance is due to the refusal of the conventional gratification of the aesthetic bribe: the harmonious, natural beauty which usually bestows a clarity and order upon its content. But that direct kind of beauty, it might be argued, is a quality which tragic art ought properly to do without. For by its very nature the human suffering at the root of tragedy is neither simple nor attractive. Hence to sweeten or sterilise the point in art would be to rob that art of its truth to life; paradoxically, to vulgarise it.

Nonetheless the attack on common sensibility in Harris's paintings comprises rather more than the refusal of the illusion of beauty. There is also, patently, a refusal of common investments in formal style. For if Harris at first looks to be a naive or primitive painter, clearly his work is not based on the modelling or perspective that characterises those styles. In fact, rather than follow the artist's usual course of manipulating elements of a formal style for his own expressive purposes, Harris has formalised elements of his own natural expression, cultivating them into a language. That spurning course, however, has facilitated the immediacy of the artist's painting: an immediacy which greatly heightens its impact. If for most painters in this area it is sufficient to creep up to the precipice of anxiety and in measured degree to peek over, Harris plunges into it. That is to plunge into a world of vicissitudes and oppositions and, in the 1980s, into a world increasingly climactic in theme. The paintings of recent months follow out aspects of human relationship in an agony of transitional destructiveness. The male and female of the two figure paintings of 1984 (*Two figures, This Sweet Sickness*) are crumpled as if burning in anguish; a molten landscape slides down towards the bottom of the painting where the woman's feet are engulfed in a yellow-orange element suggestive of flame. That association with flame is continued in the child-woman paintings such as *Lost to Beauty/Pillar of Fire*, in which the figure's immature status suggests both innocence and danger. The yellow-orange colour recurs in a representation of male sexual guilt in the central panel of the tryptych, *The Greek coast*. But sadly – tragically – this is not a world in which there is good and evil, winners and losers, white knights and vanquished foes. It is a world where antipathy is sometimes unity, freedom sometimes sacrifice and strength sometimes weakness. The causality of human interaction can not be read, for it follows no known logic. And yet not to know its vicissitudes, its wildnesses, its intricacies, is not to have lived at all.

Louise Wilton

1. Bernard Bosanquet, *Three Lectures on Aesthetics*, London 1915.

Biography

Jeffrey Harris was born in Akaroa in 1949. Self-taught, he attended Otago Polytechnic part time (1971-72) and worked with Walden Tucker.

His first exhibition was in the Otago Museum foyer in 1969. Has exhibited regularly since then, mainly in the South Island. Lived in Wellington during 1973, Banks Peninsula from 1974 to 1976. Since 1977 has been settled in Dunedin.

The Frances Hodgkins Fellowship was awarded to Harris in 1977, and he travelled to Europe and the United States in 1982, and again to Europe in 1984.

His main exhibitions have been at the Canterbury Society of Arts (1972) the Manawatu Art Gallery (1978) and the Dunedin Public Art Gallery (1981).

FOR FURTHER READING see:

Ireland, Peter Art New Zealand no. 6
Leech, Peter Art New Zealand nos. 24 & 32
Hutchings, P. Islands no. 7

Catalogue

- 1 **Untitled** (triptych) 1983
oil on canvas 1838x4578mm
collection: National Art Gallery, Wellington
- 2 **The Greek coast** (triptych) 1984/1985
oil on canvas 1838x4578mm
collection: the artist
- 3 **Chance** (triptych) 1985
oil on canvas 1838x4578mm
collection: the artist/Bosshard Galleries, Dunedin
- 4 **Floating woman** 1984
oil on canvas 1838x1526mm
collection: Carnegie Centre, Dunedin
- 5 **Untitled** 1983/1984
oil on canvas 2140x1526mm
collection: Anderson Park Art Gallery, Invercargill
- 6 **Lost to Beauty/Pillar of Fire** 1984
oil on canvas 2140x1526mm
collection: the artist
- 7 **Untitled** 1984
oil on canvas 2140x1526mm
collection: private collection, Dunedin
- 8 **Renegotiating a Loan** 1984
oil on canvas 2140x1526mm
collection: Peter Webb, Auckland
- 9 **'Every Soul is a Circus'** 1984
oil on canvas 2140x1526mm
collection: Bosshard Galleries, Dunedin
- 10 **This Sweet Sickness** 1984
oil on canvas 2140x1526mm
collection: Chartwell Trust, Hamilton
- 11 **6 a.m. or nearer** 1984/1985
oil on canvas 2140x1658mm
collection: Paris family collection, Wellington
- 12 **Two Figures** 1985
oil on canvas 2140x1658mm
collection: private collection, Dunedin



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