

BRENT HARRIS

THE OTHER SIDE



ARTIST REFERENCE MATERIAL

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BRENT HARRIS

THE OTHER SIDE

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Cover

Brent Harris
The Dreamer, 2014, oil on
linen, on loan from Patricia
Mason and Paul Walker,
Melbourne

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BIOGRAPHY

Brent Harris was born in Palmerston North, Aotearoa New Zealand in 1956. He relocated to Melbourne, Australia in 1981 and received a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the Victorian College of the Arts in 1984. He is celebrated as one of Australia's leading contemporary artists.

As a painter and printmaker, Harris's practice moves between abstraction and figuration. His works are often described as being emotionally charged, psychological and intellectual explorations of familial relationships, religiosity and sexual identity as well as his own personal experiences of living as a young, gay man during the AIDS/HIV epidemic of the 1980s.

Harris has exhibited extensively in Australia and has featured in several notable international shows. He has been awarded a number of residencies including at Nagasawa Art Park, Japan, the Singapore Tyler Print Institute and the British School at Rome. He was also the recipient of three grants from the Visual Arts/Craft Board of the Australia Council, in 1988 and in 1997. His works are held in the collections of many large Australian and New Zealand institutions, including the National Gallery of Australia, the National Gallery of Victoria, the Art Gallery of New South Wales, the Art Gallery of Western Australia, Queensland Art Gallery of Modern Art, Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū and Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki.

He lives and works in Melbourne.

CHRONOLOGY

1956

Brent Harris is born in Palmerston North, New Zealand.

1975

Harris first sees Colin McCahon's *The Family*, 1947 at the exhibition *McCahon 'Religious' Works 1946–1952*, at Manawatu Art Gallery, Palmerston North. Harris says, 'the exhibition as a whole and this work in particular had a very powerful effect on me' (quoted in '*The Family*: Brent Harris', Colin McCahon House, <https://mccahonhouse.org.nz/100/brent-harris/>)

McCahon's influence is evident across Harris's oeuvre, particularly in his two series *The Stations*, 1989 and 2020–21.

1978

Harris relocates to Auckland, where he works as a carpenter.

1981

Harris moves to Melbourne, Australia and completes a Diploma of Art and Design at the Footscray College of TAFE.

1984

Brent Harris graduates from the Victorian College of the Arts with a Bachelor of Fine Arts.

He visits the exhibition *I will need words: Colin McCahon's Word and Number Paintings* at the Power Gallery of Contemporary Art in Sydney. Harris says, 'I have always lamented his statement "I will need words" because though I love all of McCahon's work I do find the late text paintings more and more belligerent, speaking less to me about his doubt and questioning of faith, and more of a repressed anger.' (Quoted in '*The Family*: Brent Harris', Colin McCahon House, <https://mccahonhouse.org.nz/100/brent-harris/>)

1987–89

Harris undertakes a two-year studio residency at 200 Gertrude Street, Melbourne.

1988

Brent Harris has his first solo exhibition at 13 Verity Street, Melbourne.

1989

Harris produces his first major series, *The Stations*, which is inspired by the works of Barnett Newman and Colin McCahon. A series of 14 paintings and prints, *The Stations* references the religious subject of the Stations of the Cross to reflect on mortality, including the death of Harris's friends to AIDS in the 1980s. Harris says, 'lots of friends of mine were dying young of AIDS in 1989. This was a narrative of being judged this morning and being dead this afternoon. And well, death is starting to look more serious and closer!' (Quoted in Kiran Dass, 'On

CHRONOLOGY CONT.

Swampy Ground: Painter and Printmaker Brent Harris Returns Home', *The Spinoff*, 18 Jan 2020, <https://thespinoff.co.nz/art/18-01-2020/on-swampy-ground-painter-and-printmaker-brent-harris-returns-home> The Stations is exhibited at 13 Verity Street, Melbourne)

1989–90

Harris travels to the United States of America. He sees Barnett Newman's *Stations of the Cross*, 1958–66 at the National Gallery of Art, Washington DC.

1993–94

Harris undertakes a six-month residency at the Cité Internationale des Artes in Paris.

1998

Harris's painting *To the Forest (No. 7 Small)*, 1998 is acquired by the Chartwell Trust.

1999

Harris undertakes a residency at Nagasawa Art Park, Japan. He learns traditional woodblock printing techniques.

2000

Harris produces the suite of seven intaglio prints titled *Swamp*. His 1998 painting *To the Forest (No. 7 Small)* is exhibited in *The Chartwell Collection: Recent Acquisitions* at Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki.

2001–02

Harris exhibits his series *Grotesquerie* at Tolarno Galleries in Melbourne and Kaliman Gallery in Sydney. The series, which would eventually comprise 26 paintings, three sets of prints and over 100 drawings would take over eight years to complete, from 2001 to 2009. On the subject of *Grotesquerie* Harris says, 'I didn't start [by] thinking, OK, now I am going to make a picture where I emerge into the canvas. It's not so didactic. I start to recognise the subject as it presents itself'. (Quoted in 'Striking the Right Mix', *The Age*, 10 Feb 2006, <https://www.theage.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/striking-the-right-mix-20060210-ge1qak.html>)

2004

Harris is the first Australian artist to undertake a residency at the Singapore Tyler Print Institute. He is introduced to a new medium, paper pulp, and produces 18 paper-pulp prints.

He has a solo show, *The Face*, at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. The exhibition features prints and paintings including *The Face*, 2004 and *The Beautiful Face of Christ Remembered*, 2004, which were influenced by Western religious artworks

including Michelangelo's *Pietà*, 1498–99 and works by Colin McCahon. Through the show Harris asks, 'How do I use the enormous history of Western religious art and Christian iconography as a starting point to produce new work, without calling forth questions of metaphysics and religious meaning?' (Quoted in 'The Face: Brent Harris', Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2004, https://archive.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/media/archives_2004/brent_harris/index.htm)

2005

The paper-pulp prints Harris produced during his residency in Singapore are exhibited at the Singapore Tyler Print Institute.

2006

Harris is the subject of two major institutional exhibitions: *Just a Feeling: Brent Harris, Selected Works 1987–2005*, at the Ian Potter Museum of Art, Melbourne, curated by Bala Starr; and *Swamp Op – Brent Harris* at the Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth, curated by Robert Cook.

2009

Harris undertakes a three-month residency at the Australia Council Studio at the British School at Rome. He originally intends to revisit the subject of the Stations of the Cross while in Rome, however he feels overwhelmed by the dominant presence of the Catholic Church in the city and abandoned that project. Instead, he creates a series of small paintings on board titled *The Ecstatic Moment*, which was inspired by frescoes. The series signals a new gestural, colourful and immediate approach to painting for Harris.

2011

Harris learns monotype techniques from printer Adrian Kellett in Melbourne after viewing Edgar Degas' monotypes at the *Degas and the Nude* exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, Massachusetts (2011–12).

Harris's work is exhibited at the British Museum in the exhibition *Out of Australia*.

2012

A significant self-titled survey show is curated by Jane Devery at the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Devery describes Harris as 'an artist who is acutely aware of the emotional and intellectual possibilities that his chosen mediums of painting, printmaking and drawing can offer'.

CHRONOLOGY CONT.

Harris's work is included in the Heide Museum of Modern Art's show *Louise Bourgeois and Australian Artists*. Harris has described Louise Bourgeois as one of the artists 'who have influenced my work most profoundly on a psychological level'. (Quoted in 'The Family: Brent Harris', Colin McCahon House, <https://mccahonhouse.org.nz/100/brent-harris/>)

2018

Harris's work is exhibited for the first time in New Zealand following his father's death in 2016, at Robert Heald Gallery, Wellington.

Three of Harris's paintings are included in a joint exhibition with Susan Te Kahurangi King at the Auckland Art Fair, with Robert Heald Gallery.

2019

Two of Harris's print series are gifted to Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki: *Swamp*, 2000; *The Other Side*, 2016–17.

Harris has a solo exhibition at Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū curated by Lara Strongman. Titled *Towards the Swamp*, the show centres around his series *Swamp*, 2000.

2020

Harris returns to the subject of the Stations of the Cross with a new series of paintings and prints entitled *The Stations*, 31 years after he first addressed this subject in 1989.

2022

Two of Harris's paintings are exhibited in the National Gallery of Victoria's *Queer: Stories from the NGV Collection*. These two works were produced in the 1980s during the HIV/AIDS crisis. Harris says 'the 1980s was a decade of high anxiety for me . . . As the 1980s progressed so did the presence of death.' Quoted in 'Brent Harris: The Stations – Q&A Brent Harris and Jane Devery', Galleries Now, <https://www.galleriesnow.net/viewing-room/21616-brent-harris-tolarno/>)

EXHIBITIONS

EXHIBITIONS CONT.

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2022

- *Monkey Business*, Tolarno Gallery, Melbourne, 27 Aug–24 Sept

2021

- *The Stations*, Robert Heald Gallery, Wellington, 24 June–24 July

2019

- *peaks*, Robert Heald Gallery, Wellington, 9 May–8 June
- *Brent Harris: Towards the Swamp*, Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū, 6 Nov–23 Feb 2020

2018

- *To the forest*, Robert Heald Gallery, Wellington, 29 Nov–22 Dec

2017

- *the small sword*, Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne, 28 Sept–4 Nov

2016

- *the other side*, Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne, 5 Mar–30 Apr
- *Brent Harris: Works on Paper*, Warrnambool Art Gallery, Victoria, 23 Apr–8 June
- *the other side*, Martin Browne Contemporary, Sydney, 27 Oct–20 Nov

2015

- *Dreamer*, Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne, 12 Feb–4 Apr
- *On Becoming: Brent Harris*, Hamilton Gallery, Victoria, 25 Apr–15 July

2013

- *embark*, Lister Gallery, Perth

2012

- *Brent Harris*, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 10 Mar–12 Aug
- *The Fall*, Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne, 24 Nov–15 Dec

2011

- *the reassembled self*, Martin Brown Contemporary, Sydney, 9 Nov–6 Dec

2010

- *Surrender and Catch*, Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne, 18 Sept–16 Oct

2008

- *Deluge*, Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne

2007

- *Heads*, Lister Gallery, Perth
- *Brent Harris: The borrowed plumage*, Kaliman Gallery, Sydney, 27 Apr–26 May

2006

- *Swamp Op* – Brent Harris, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth, 22 Jan–5 Jun
- *Just a Feeling: Brent Harris, Selected Works 1987–2005*, the Ian Potter Museum of Art, Melbourne, 11 Feb–7 May
- *Deities*, Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne, 9 Mar–1 Apr

2005

- *Brent Harris: Singapore Print and Paper Pulp Works*, Singapore Tyler Print Institute, Singapore, 15 Jul–6 Aug
- *Plato's cave*, Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne

2004

- *The face: Brent Harris*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 22 Apr–13 Jun

2003

- *Sleep: Twenty Small Paintings*, Kaliman Gallery, Sydney, 7–30 Aug

2002

- *Grotesquerie*, Kaliman Gallery, Sydney, 24 Oct–16 Nov
- *Grotesquerie*, Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne

2001

- *Prints 1988–2001*, Ben Grady Gallery, Canberra
- *Swamp*, Kaliman Gallery, Sydney

1999

- *Swamp*, Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne
- *The untimely*, Martin Browne Fine Art, Sydney, July

1998

- *'To the forest' and 'Drift', A Set of 10 Intaglio Prints*, Martin Browne Fine Art, Sydney, 22 Apr–17 May

1997

- *The untimely*, Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne, 16 Aug–13 Sept

1996

- Martin Browne Fine Art, Sydney
- *That uncertain feeling*, Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia, Adelaide, 5–28 July

1995

- Karyn Lovegrove Gallery Melbourne
- Martin Browne Fine Art, Sydney

EXHIBITIONS CONT.

1993

- Karyn Lovegrove Gallery, Melbourne

1992

- Karyn Lovegrove Gallery, Melbourne

1989

- *The Stations*, 13 Verity Street, Melbourne

1988

- 13 Verity Street, Melbourne

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2022

- *Queer: Stories from the NGV Collection*, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 10 Mar–31 Aug
- *Antidotes*, Robert Heald Gallery, Wellington, 10 June–2 July

2021

- *Mānawatia Takatāpui / Defending Plurality*, Tauranga Art Gallery, 23 July–10 Oct

2020

- *The Long Kiss Goodbye*, Perth Festival, Laurence Wilson Art Gallery, the University of Western Australia, 25 Feb–9 May
- *Monster Theatres*, Adelaide Biennial, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, 29 Feb–8 June
- *Te Wheke: Pathways Across Oceania*, Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū, 30 May–3 July 2022

2019

- *Ways of Seeing: Recent Acquisitions from the Collection*, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, 23 Feb–22 Apr
- *On Vulnerability and Doubt*, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, 29 June–1 Sept

2018

- *High Windows*, Robert Heald Gallery, Wellington, 25 Jan–17 Feb
- Auckland Art Fair with Robert Heald Gallery, Auckland, 23–27 May
- *Dark [Other] Times*, Plimsoll Gallery, Hobart, 9–24 June

2017

- *Versus Rodin: Bodies across space and time*, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, 4 Mar–2 July
- *Every Brilliant Eye*, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 2 June–1 Oct

2016

- *The Hunch*, Incinerator Gallery, Melbourne, 5 Aug–2 Oct

- *Rose Coloured Glass*, The Honeymoon Suite, Brunswick, Melbourne, 11 Aug–3 Sept

2014

- Art Basel Hong Kong with Tolarno Galleries, Hong Kong, 15–18 May
- |*The less there is to see the more important it is to look*, the Ian Potter Museum of Art, Melbourne, 4 June–21 Sept
- *TRANSMISSIONS: Archiving HIV/AIDS*, George Paton Gallery, Melbourne, 9–26 July

2013

- *Vibrant Matter*, Tarrawarra Museum of Art, Victoria, 20 Apr–16 June
- *Theatre of the World*, La Maison Rouge, Paris, France, 19 Oct–19 Jan 2014
- National Artists' Self-Portrait Prize, the University of Queensland, Brisbane, 19 Oct–16 Feb 2014
- Melbourne Now, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 22 Nov–23 Mar 2014

2012

- *Lightness & Gravity: Contemporary works from the Collection*, Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, 3 Mar–21 Oct
- *Theatre of the World*, Museum of Old and New Art, Hobart, 23 June–8 Apr 2013
- *Louise Bourgeois and Australian Artists*, Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne, 12 Oct–14 Apr 2013

2011

- *Out of Australia*, British Museum, London, 26 May–11 Sept

2010

- *Change*, Monash University Museum of Art, Melbourne, 27 Oct–18 Dec

2009

- *The things I have seen and the money I have spent*, British School at Rome, 11–19 Dec

2006

- *TarraWarra Biennial 2006 –Parallel Lives: Australian Painting Today*, Tarrawarra, Victoria, 4 Aug–12 Nov
- *Before the Body – Matter*, Monash University Museum of Art, Melbourne, 30 Nov–14 Mar

2005

- *DRAWN: From the Collection*, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 1 Dec–30 Apr 2006
- *Extra-Aesthetic: 25 Views of the Monash University Collection*, Monash University of Art, Melbourne, 1 Dec–25 Mar 2006

EXHIBITIONS CONT.

2004

- *Making Portraits: Five Years of National Portrait Gallery Commissions*, National Portrait Gallery, Canberra, 6 Mar–27 June
- *HANGA: Selected Artists from the Nagasawa Art Park Residency*, Devonport Regional Gallery, Tasmania, 18 June–25 July

2003

- *Orifice*, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, 8 Oct–30 Nov

2002

- *Archibald Prize*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 1 June–21 July
- *Fieldwork: Australian Art 1968-2002*, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 28 Nov–16 Feb 2003
- *it's a beautiful day: New Painting in Australia 2*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 23 Nov–9 Feb 2003

2001

- *Painting: An Arcane Technology*, the Ian Potter Museum of Art, Melbourne, 27 Jan–25 Mar
- *Art on Paper*, Kaliman Gallery, Sydney
- *Low-down: Recent Acquisitions, Monash University Collection*, Monash University Gallery, Melbourne, 20 Feb–17 Mar
- *A Studio in Paris: Australian Artists at the Cité Internationale des Artes, 1967–2000*, SH Ervin Gallery, Sydney, 5 May–1 July

2000

- *The Chartwell Collection: Recent Acquisitions*, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, 12 Feb–30 Apr
- *Sensational Painting*, Holmes à Court Gallery, Perth, 1 Sept–1 Oct
- *Spitting and Biting: Ten Contemporary Artists and the Print*, Monash University Gallery, Melbourne, 19 Sept–28 Oct
- *Workings of the Mind: Melbourne Printing 1960–2000*, Queensland University of Technology Art Museum, Brisbane, 12 Oct–19 Nov

1999

- *Woodblock Prints from Nagasawa AIR Program*, Sanko Gallery, Kobe, Japan

1998

- *Private Parts*, Monash University Gallery, Melbourne, 22 Apr–23 May
- *Sets and Series*, Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne

1997

- *Queer Crossing*, Ivan Dougherty Gallery, University of New South Wales, Sydney, 6 Feb–8 Mar

- *Geometric Painting in Australia* 1941–1997, University Art Museum, Brisbane, 15 Aug–19 Sept; 22 Sept–17 Oct
- *Drawn from Life*, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 14 Feb–1 Jan 1998

1996

- *Other Islands: Art of the Pacific Rim*, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 5 Oct–27 Jan 1997

1993

- *The Black Show*, Geelong Gallery, Victoria
- *Contemporary Australian Painting: the Allen, Allen and Hemsley Collection*, Westpac Gallery, Victorian Arts Centre, Melbourne, 9–26 Sept

1992

- *Recent Acquisitions*, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane
- *Rules for Drawing*, Mori Gallery, Sydney
- *Stations of the Cross, Patronage and the Visual Arts: Rod Milgate and Brent Harris*, Noosa Regional Gallery, Queensland
- *You Are Here*, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, Nov

1991

- *New Art: Contemporary Australian Art Acquisitions*, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 13 February–11 June
- *The 2nd Tokyo Art Expo 1991*, Tokyo International Trade Centre, 30 Mar–3 Apr
- *John McCaughey Memorial Art Prize*, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 5–29 May
- *Loaded*, 13 Verity Street, Melbourne, 20 Aug–20 Oct
- *Room for Abstraction*, Heide Park and Art Gallery, Melbourne, 20 Aug–20 Oct
- *The Sublime Imperative*, Australian Centre of Contemporary Art, Melbourne, 14 Nov–23 Dec
- *Pastels from the Collection*, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 21 December–5 April 1992
- *Möet & Chandon Australian Art Foundation Touring Exhibition*, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 13 Feb–31 Mar
- *Exposition*, Art Doc Noumea, New Caledonia
- *Painting + Perception*, Mori Gallery, Sydney
- *Recent Acquisitions*, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

1989

- *Möet & Chandon Australian Art Foundation Touring Exhibition*, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 25 Mar–16 Apr
- *ICI Contemporary Art Collection Exhibition*, Ballarat Fine Art Gallery, Victoria, May
- *Australian Perspecta* 1989, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 31 May–23 June

EXHIBITIONS CONT.

- *re: Creation/Re-creation: The Art of Copying 19th & 20th Centuries*, Monash University Gallery, Melbourne, 17 Oct–25 Nov

1988

- *The Gertrude Street Studio Artists*, 200 Gertrude Street Inc. Gertrude Street Artists' Spaces, Melbourne, 5–27 Feb
- *A New Generation 1983–1988*, the Philip Morris Arts Grant Purchases, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 4 June–17 July

1987

- *Keith and Elisabeth Murdoch Travelling Fellowship Exhibition*, Victorian College of the Arts, Melbourne, May

1985

- *Three New Painters*, 70 Arden Street, Melbourne

GRANTS AND RESIDENCIES

2016

- Australia Council Grant

2008

- Residency, British School at Rome, Australia Council

2004

- Residency, Singapore Tyler Print Institute

1999

- Residency, Nagasawa Art Park, Japan

1997

- Grant, Visual Arts/Craft Board of the Australia Council

1993–94

- Residency, Cité Internationale des Arts, Paris (Visual Arts/Craft Board of the Australia Council and Power Institute, the University of Sydney)

1988

- Grant, Visual Arts/Craft Board of the Australia Council

1987–89

- Residency, 200 Gertrude Street inc. Gertrude Street Artists' Spaces, Melbourne

ARTICLES

PUBLICATION:

JANE DEVERY AND BRENT HARRIS, 'THE OTHER SIDE:
JANE DEVERY & BRENT HARRIS IN CONVERSATION',
ART TOI, NO 9, MARCH 2023



Brent Harris, *Listener*, 2018, oil on canvas, Private Collection Melbourne, © the artist.

The Other Side

Jane Devery & Brent Harris in conversation

One of Australia's leading contemporary artists, Brent Harris is well known for haunting imagery that is often charged with an emotional intensity. Over a career of more than 40 years, Harris has developed a significant body of work including paintings, prints and drawings that address universal concerns such as desire, sexuality, familial relationships, mortality, identity and spirituality.

Born in Palmerston North in 1956, Harris moved to Melbourne in 1981 and he has lived there ever since. In 2016, following the death of his father, he felt able to return to his country of birth after an absence of several decades. It was an episode in his life that resulted in an intense period of artistic production. The exhibition *Brent Harris: The Other Side* is the first major survey exhibition of the artist's work to be held in Aotearoa New Zealand. It includes recent works that reflect the artist's reconnection with Aotearoa as well as paintings and prints drawn from his most important series of works dating from the late 1980s to the present. In the following conversation, we talk about specific works in the exhibition as a way of introducing broader questions about Harris's approach to art.

Jane Devery: *Let's start with the 2018 painting Listener. It's an important work as it dates from the time when you returned to Aotearoa after an absence of more than two decades. Like this exhibition, it signals a kind of homecoming and re-engagement with the place of your birth. Why did you first leave Aotearoa?*

Brent Harris: I moved to Melbourne in 1981 to study and got into the Victorian College of the Arts, for a three-year Bachelor of Fine Arts, in 1982. I was also putting distance between my past life in Palmerston North. I was married at 19 and divorced at 22. I came out as a gay man and moved to Auckland for three years before moving to Melbourne. I was also distancing myself from a domineering father who created a very complex family life. I had not spoken to him or seen him or my mother for the last 25 years of his life. *Listener* is pretty much a self-portrait, or family portrait. The large figure heading off to the right represents the self. Within the dark hair, a profile is forming: this indicates my dead father, now only present in my head. He is looking down at the mother in the lower left. She remains sightless and mute. The two large ears represent my eagerness to hear something from either of them as I head back to New Zealand with a painting stretcher over my shoulder.

JD: *Even though your career has largely taken place in Australia, there were a number of early experiences you had as a young man in Aotearoa that influenced your development as an artist. Seeing the exhibition McCahon 'Religious' Works 1946–1952, a touring show that started at the Manawatu Art Gallery in 1975*

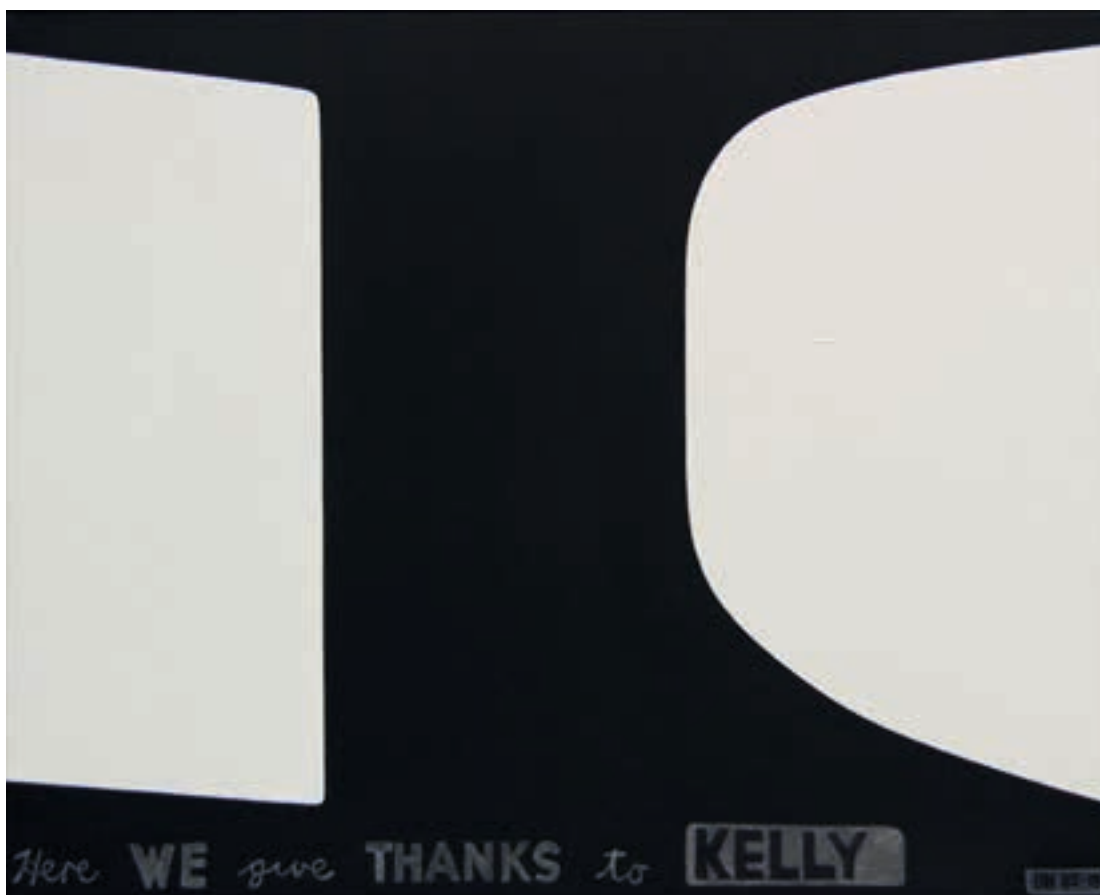
in your hometown of Palmerston North, for example. What was it about this encounter with the work of Colin McCahon that made an impact on you?

BH: I got married in 1975. I knew I was gay but never thought I could live a life as such. The exhibition of McCahon's religious paintings really affected me. The way he presented religious stories seemed very personal. I was so full of questions and doubt, guilt and shame. I felt I was identifying with McCahon's own questioning and his seemingly endless search for redemption. I felt he was seeking redemption for us all but as I have matured, I believe his mission was personal. Religious storytelling is still a very active narrative in my work, and my own attempt at understanding and dealing with human frustrations.

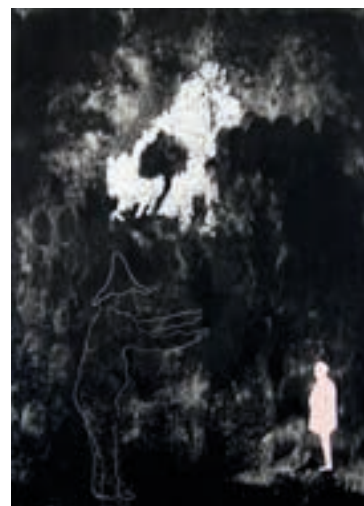
JD: *Traces of McCahon can clearly be seen in some of the earliest of your works in the exhibition, dating from the late 1980s. So can the influence of American artists such as Ellsworth Kelly, Jasper Johns and Barnett Newman. This was a time when you were working*



Colin McCahon, *Here I give thanks to Mondrian*, 1961, oil (alkyd) on hardboard, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, gift of the Friends of the Auckland Art Gallery, 1964. Reproduced with permission of the Colin McCahon Research and Publication Trust.



Brent Harris, *Here we give thanks to Kelly*, 1988–2018, oil on canvas, Collection of the artist, © the artist.



Brent Harris, *The Other Side*, 2017, photopolymer gravure and screenprints, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, gift of Patricia Mason and Paul Walker, 2019, © the artist.

through influences and testing various strategies as a way of forging your own visual language. How do you see this stage in your career from the standpoint of 2023?

BH: Post-art school, McCahon was the hurdle. I often returned to McCahon's painting *Here I give thanks to Mondrian*, 1961 (in the collection of Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki). It's one of the few occasions McCahon acknowledges his debt to another artist. There are two paintings in my exhibition that directly name other artists' influence: *Here we give thanks to Kelly*, 1988, a work based on an Ellsworth Kelly drawing; and *Painting Spot (Here we give thanks to Kelley)*, 1993 – Mike Kelley in this case. As a visual artist I live in a world of pictures, my own and others.

JD: *Let's talk about the title of the exhibition, The Other Side, which is taken from a series of prints, also in the Gallery's collection. They contain cartoon-like figures set against ambiguous forms that can be read as metaphors for the unknown, alluding to a space beyond*

reality as we know it. It strikes me that this is a kind of psychological landscape that your art often occupies. How did this imagery come about?

BH: *The Other Side*, 2017 series of prints is based on monotypes I had been working on since 2012. The technique used is called 'dark field' and starts with a printing plate completely rolled in black ink and as you start wiping away the ink, the image appears as light areas. I began with no imagery in mind, just smudging away and following what may come to the surface. I was seeing a psychologist at the time, and he introduced me to the work of American psychologist Kurt Wolff and his idea of putting oneself in a position of surrender and then a preparedness to catch possible outcomes. My shrink likened this to my way of working from a blank starting point and remaining open to possible emerging imagery, almost as a form of automatic writing, accessing the subconscious.



Brent Harris, *Sleep no. 7 (Silence)*, 2003, oil on canvas, Private Collection, © the artist

PUBLICATION: JANE DEVERY AND BRENT HARRIS, 'THE OTHER SIDE: JANE DEVERY & BRENT HARRIS IN CONVERSATION', *ART TOI*, NO 9, MARCH 2023



Brent Harris, *The Dreamer*, 2014, oil on canvas, Private Collection, Melbourne, © the artist.

JD: *It seems to me that accessing the subconscious realm is a significant motivator for you as an artist. In some cases, it also becomes the subject of your work. In the exhibition, this is perhaps most clearly manifest in works such as The Dreamer, 2014 as well as earlier smaller paintings such as Sleep no. 7 (Silence), 2003. Would you say that being in a state of unknowing, or surrender, to use Wolff's term, is a necessary condition for you as an artist?*

BH: Yes. *The Dreamer* is a painting that formed unconsciously during its process of making, with no preconceived meaning. There is a figure seen in outline, lying across the bottom on the canvas, perhaps recalling Goya's print *The Sleep of Reason*, circa 1799, imaging the mind's veiled contents. *Sleep* is a series of 20 small paintings from 2003. We close our eyes but there is still a visual realm operating. Around this time, I had contemplated painting a portrait of a rather important Australian art world figure and I suggested painting him with his eyes closed. This was met with firm resistance, as if it implied he had poor vision. He was in fact a character of enormous inner vision that he projected onto the Australian art world with lasting impression. My *Sleep* series refers to this. Even with our eyes closed in sleep we are often still inundated with visual overload.

JD: *The way that your art addresses themes of family, sexuality and the subconscious realm suggests an affinity with the work of the great 20th-century American artist Louise Bourgeois. Certainly, you both have a shared interest in psychological dimensions of the human condition. I understand you once met her.*

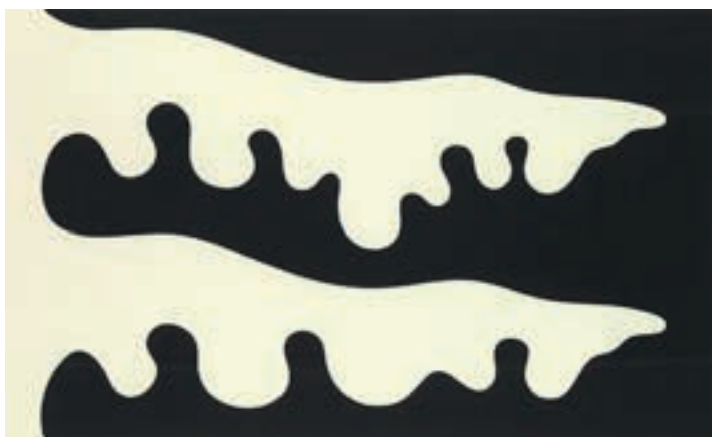
BH: Yes, I met Louise Bourgeois in 1989 at her house in Chelsea in New York. Her assistant Jerry Gorovoy took me there. She was quite fiery, launching attacks on a few other artists. Louise Nevelson and Cy Twombly were in her

sights on that particular day. In hindsight you could perhaps see it as a performance, but there was a lot of energy there and I think this kind of energy was used as a generator for her work. The main attraction for me to her work was, and still is, her ability to visualise psychological states.

JD: *Edvard Munch, whose works similarly convey intense emotions, has been another important influence. Your painting To the Forest (No. 7 Small), 1998 for example, pays homage to Edvard Munch's 1915*



Edvard Munch, *Towards the forest II (Mot skogen II)*, 1915, colour woodcut, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 1974, Felton Bequest, (P152-1974).



Brent Harris, *To the Forest (no. 7 Small)*, 1998, oil on canvas, Chartwell Collection, Auckland, © the artist.



Brent Harris, *The Stations of the Cross*, 1989, etching, aquatint, colour aquatint, roulette, soft ground, burnished aquatint, plate-tone, plate-tone printed à la poupée, Private Collection Melbourne, © the artist.

woodblock print Towards the forest II (Mot skogen II). Can you describe your attraction to Munch and also the particular relationship between his brooding image and your painting?

BH: The psychological impact of Munch's print comes from the movement of two figures moving into the forest. Over time it has represented different meanings for me. The overwhelming reference in relation to my painting *To the Forest (No. 7 Small)*, is found at the upper horizon in Munch's image – the descending slippage about to swamp the scene. My painting takes this slippage back to nature in the form of a snow-covered bow of a fir tree. My reading of the Munch print now is that this couple is moving toward death, the forest representing a return to nature, the earth. The comfort in the image is that they are supporting each other.

JD: *To the Forest (No. 7 Small)* is a good example of the painting style for which you became renowned in the 1990s. *Pristine uninflected surfaces, organic shapes and stark contrasts between black and white (and later colour) were a way for you to convey both bodily and psychological states. How did you arrive at this distinctive visual language?*

BH: Through my engagement with other artists. You know, it's a pretty long list, including Gordon Walters and Myron Stout, a little-known American artist who once said of his paintings, 'the source of the curve – of circularity – is in one's body'. The American artist John Wesley was another. His way of depicting

cartoon imagery, where space and form are flattened out, really appealed to me, with its bald, no bullshit, no light source, no modelling. It carries something of Matisse's flattened interlocking areas, taken to a Pop extreme. I have still thought it possible to inject this non-emotive way of painting with emotive subject matter.

JD: *Your interest in the body and its vulnerability is apparent in some of the earliest works in the exhibition that relate your experience as a young gay man. Could you recount some of the episodes that inform some of these works? I'm thinking in particular of your experience living through the AIDS crisis and how that informed your series The Stations of the Cross, 1989.*

BH: I have never really identified as a gay artist. I have lived in fairly tolerant countries and times. But the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s and 1990s was a terrifying and sad time for most gay people. I was not involved in political activism around the AIDS crisis but was very active in care teams early on when things were at their worst. Around this time, I made my first series of *The Stations of the Cross*, and I approached the subject as a readymade narrative for a young person going to an early death: judged this morning, dead this afternoon. An older person going toward death is starting to tire of the body – you know things are starting to break down – but the speed with which AIDS reduced young bodies was alarming.

JD: *Another work, the painting Apron of abuse, 1992, similarly references a personal experience of being a*



Brent Harris, *Apron of abuse*, 1992, oil on canvas, Collection of the artist, © the artist.



Brent Harris, *Appalling Moment*, 1994, oil on canvas, Private collection, Melbourne, © the artist.

young gay man. Could you describe the episode that precipitated this work?

BH: In 1992, as I was walking down Brunswick Street in the Melbourne inner-city suburb of Fitzroy, a man coming toward me spat out his abuse, calling me a 'fucking pansy', a term which is sort of redundant these days. I was into the German artist Sigmar Polke's work at the time and his *Large Cloth of Abuse*, 1968 came to mind – a large four-metre square cloth scrawled with apparently filthy abusive text. I remember having seen a photograph of Polke wearing his cloth, almost as a protective garment. If he is embracing the abuse and claiming it, those directing abuse at him are rendered rather superfluous. At the time, I was also obsessed with the work of the American artist Robert Gober and

a work of his came to mind, *Slip covered armchair*, 1986 which contains a painted pansy. I decided to address my own moment of applied abuse through a work. I domesticated Polke's large cloth into an apron, and added a fringe of pansies stolen from Gober, with a nod to McCahon in attaching my title almost as a label – the apron being a garment to shield against dirt.

JD: *One of the distinguishing features of your approach is the way that you employ humour and embrace absurdity in your art, even when addressing difficult ideas. There was a period in the 1990s, following the six months you spent in Paris as artist in residence at the Cité internationale des arts, that marked a turning point when you allowed the 'absurd' to enter your work as a 'legitimate' subject matter. Could you describe this moment?*



Brent Harris, *Appalling Moment (black and white)*, 1996, oil on canvas, Collection of the artist, © the artist

BH: My time in Paris was great. I was quite irritated by the good taste on display everywhere, including in most art galleries. I was working on a series of my own refined abstract drawings at the time when a ridiculous elephant head with trunk suggested itself to me. Such animal figuration would normally have been banished. I decided to accept this visual insult as my 'appalling moment' when I allowed this image to remain and become the subject of a number of works. For me, the *Appalling Moment* series was about the difficulty of expressing or describing a troubled human subjectivity.

JD: Finally, the idea of searching for the self is a constant theme that runs throughout the exhibition and which you have returned to time and again over

your entire career. My sense is that this is connected to your preoccupation with mortality and the quest to find meaning in life generally. Would you agree that this existential search is a driving force in your art?

BH: Yes, I suspect most artists are in search of their own mark. No matter how the work presents itself – abstract, figurative, conceptual, sculptural, post this or pre that, whatever – the artist is generally working from their present position in time. How does the work fit into the world now? How is it present? How does it relate to history? Is it making history? Oddly, time seems to sort art out. There are lots of misfits in human history who fit, in time.

Brent Harris: The Other Side opens 6 May.

PUBLICATION:

HELEN HUGHES, '*MONKEY BUSINESS*', TOLARNO
GALLERIES, MELBOURNE, AUGUST 2022

Brent Harris
Monkey Business

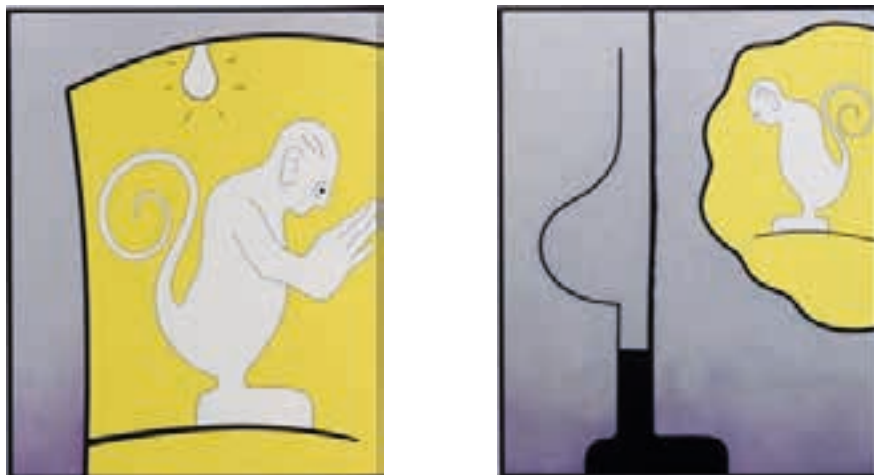
Painting can be a forcefield, a place with edges, finitude—even if what plays out within its borders is a kind of absurd, stuttering chaos. For Brent Harris, painting is a place to frame and momentarily circumscribe shifting psychological states and philosophical questions that threaten to overwhelm us at times. This is why their forms are inexhaustible, always requiring recombination, reassessment, another painting.

Harris chose the exhibition title “Monkey Business” (with its allusions to playful, mischievous, or even inappropriate behaviour) as an umbrella term that encapsulates divergent subject matter, allowing for more ambiguity and multiplicity of meaning than in some of his earlier series, such as a recent reworking of the orderly narrative of the fourteen Stations of the Cross.



*

In *Monkey Business #14 (the plank)*, a half-human/half-monkey figure with a long spiralling tail rests or butts its head against a wall. Its eyes gaze downwards; it is armless. The figure is, in the artist's own words, ‘up against it’—that is, in a difficult situation. But, as with so many pictorial elements in Harris's oeuvre, like his eyes that are targets that are voids that are eggs that are breasts, this wall is not one but many things. Its meticulously painted wooden grain may also signify Christ's crucifix, just as Harris depicted it in his *Stations of the Cross* series (both the abstract, McCahon-inspired original from 1989 and its recent revisioning in grey and fleshy pink tones in 2021), as well as his close-up profile of Christ on the cross in *The face* of 2004 (held in the collection of the Art Gallery of New South Wales). Flush against the right-hand edge of *Monkey Business #14*, the wooden grain may also be read as an X-ray view of the wooden stretcher beneath the canvas: that which gives form to and describes the limit of the painting itself. In which case, the ‘it’ against which the monkey is ‘up’ marries the formal concerns of painting with existential questions about life itself—about life's journey towards death that is so powerfully captured in the narrative of the Stations and its accompanying imagery throughout Western art history.



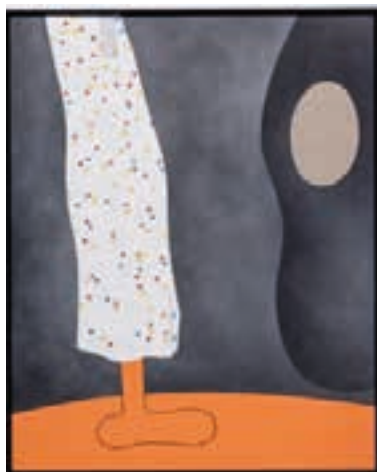
The monkey figure, which Harris treats as a stand-in for the self, appears in two other paintings in the series. In *Monkey Business #16 (inside)*, eyes again trained downwards, the figure tests the limit of its enclosure with an oversized hand, pressing the edge of the canvas with long prehensile fingers—here butting up against the objecthood of the black frame itself. In this version, the yellow, non-volumetric pictorial space of *Monkey Business #14* has shrunk to become a painting within a painting. The monkey appears for a third time in *Monkey Business #15 (jump)*, where it floats in a thought bubble, which may also be a fried egg yolk. The figure is not physically up against the wall in this composition, but the canvas is clearly bisected by a kind of impenetrable wall: a thick black line (or Newman ‘zip’) that forms the front of a body, signalled by the curvaceous bottom and black-booted foot which adorn the otherwise uninterrupted straight line.

As we begin to see by considering this trio of works, to look carefully at Harris’s work is to be inducted into a capacious, self-generating universe of symbols, compositional choices, art-historical references, and colours. These components seem to be endlessly interchangeable within Harris’s compositions, where they are arranged and rearranged in order to visualise different psychological states. The monkey itself derives from an earlier work, *Rome #6 (the devil loves you)* from 2009, where it appears as a silhouette being “buggered” against flame-like red and orange gouache. In Harris’s work, it is as though certain forms (the target/eye/breast/egg), colours (fleshy pink, baby blue, searing orange), compositional techniques (extreme closeup, figure–ground confusion), and art-historical references are inexhaustible, un-exorcisable—each an object of obsessive inquiry. Indeed, each of Harris’s compositions seems to be haunted by the next one that it prefigures, and the one after that.



A version of the wall that is a body in *Monkey Business #15 (jump)* also appears in *Monkey Business #12 (the lamp)*, where it is enrobed in a polka-dot dress. Opposite is a pink, kinked worm-like figure, subtly kowtowing. Weighted by a large cement-grey boot (reminiscent of Guston's severed foot motif), it sports a dubious disguise: a brown hat and giant black moustache. This figure is also self-illuminating. Its hat doubles as a lampshade, and the spikes of yellow hair as radiant light, recalling Kippenberger's wobbly lampposts, like *Street Lamp for Drunks* of 1988.

Harris has based the polka-dot dress on the well-known painting of Kelly Gang member Steven Hart, part of Nolan's iconic 1946–7 Kelly series that hangs at the National Gallery of Australia. Hart purportedly disguised himself as a woman and rode side-saddle to evade the police, before dying at just 21 years old in the famous siege at Glenrowan. Along with Dan Kelly, Hart found himself right 'up against it' when the police decided to smoke the bushrangers out of the Inn—their only other options being to burn alive or commit suicide, the latter of which it is thought the duo opted for. In his treatment of Hart, it is not the grand Australian narrative Nolan was aiming for that Harris is pursuing, however, but something more universal: Hart, like Christ, confronted with the reality of his own imminent death.



In *Monkey Business #8 (the walk with SH)*, Hart's vertical presence persists but the lamp figure of *Monkey Business #12* has been replaced by an ominous black biomorphic shape. Here, an eye/hole punctures the black oil paint to reveal the weave of the raw linen beneath. To move between the two compositions (#12 and #8) is almost to flick the light on and off, an action that delineates form from non-form, order from chaos—formal tensions that characterise much of Harris's work. In *Monkey Business #8*, the dark formless shadow is, for Harris, death itself, which hovers in the wings of the painting.



If Hart is a newfound protagonist in this series, then it is worth also mentioning the purple-faced pansy, which appears in *Monkey Business #9 (the walk)* and others. Harris first painted this pansy in the 1992 work *Apron of abuse*, which he made after being called a “pansy” by a stranger in Fitzroy but never exhibited until 2018. For the artist, “The pansy is a pretty cocky little flower. Due to its small size, I think it tries to outperform others with its courageous colour combinations. It’s also a flower that performs well in the massed company of its own.” Harris took the pansy motif from Robert Gober’s hand-painted and -sewn *Slip Covered Armchair* of 1986–7, and the form of the apron from Sigmar Polke’s *Large Cloth of Abuse* 1968—a 4 x 4 metre list of German obscenities inscribed directly onto flannel. In a photograph from this time, a print of which has been lying around Harris’s studio recently, Polke is pictured draping the painting around his shoulders like a regal cape, the terms of abuse trailing off his shoulders and over the ground. The *Large Cloth* enfolds Polke, almost forming a protective forcefield around him—just as the slip cover protects the armchair. The pansies reappear in *Monkey Business #10*, where they jump straight into an open mouth, and in *Large Apron of Abuse*, 2022, which is a return to and upscaling of the more diminutive 1992 painting in line with the overwhelming size of Polke’s *Large Cloth*.

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PUBLICATION: HELEN HUGHES, 'BRENT HARRIS,
THE SMALL SWORD', TOLARNO GALLERIES,
MELBOURNE, 7 OCT 2017

PUBLICATION: HELEN HUGHES, 'BRENT HARRIS, *THE SMALL SWORD*',
TOLARNO GALLERIES, MELBOURNE, 7 OCT 2017

Brent Harris: the small sword

Tolarno Galleries

7 Oct 2017



Brent Harris, *the small sword*

Tolarno Galleries, 28 September – 4 November 2017

By Helen Hughes

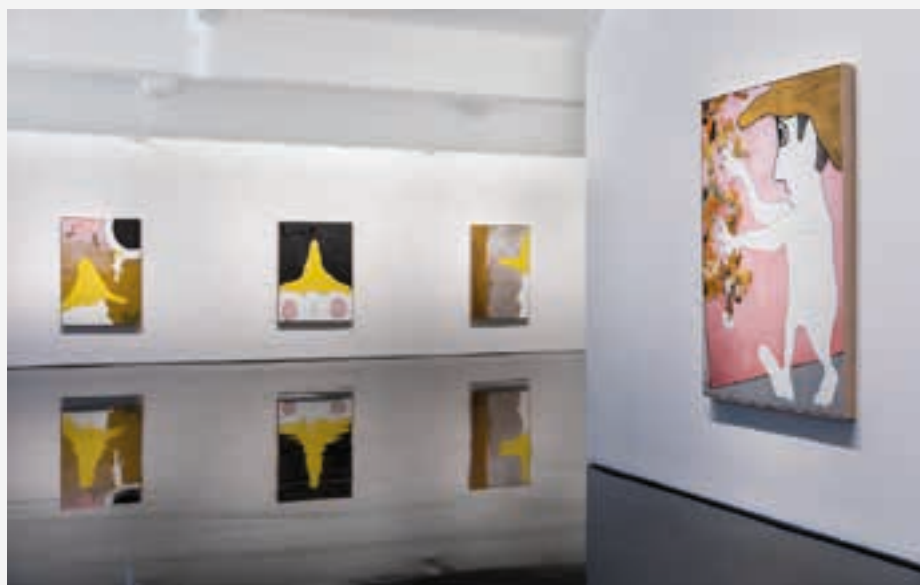
Hallucinations between figure and ground flicker across the surface of many of Brent Harris's compositions in his new exhibition at Tolarno Galleries, *the small sword*. In *the studio* (2017), for example, the main figure's cartoonish outline—that most primitive of compositional devices that distinguishes an object from its background—wobbles and warps, as if filtered through the mottled lens of a mirage. The painting *lands end #1* (2017) reads like an aerial view of a meandering coastline, with matte black oil blocking out the landmass and a subtle grey-brown gradient indicating the body of water. Harris has painted an eyeball onto the water near its border zone with the land, which allows the viewer to see both 'grounds' as 'figure' (or, better, 'face')—not unlike the optical illusion of the old/young woman. In the oil painting *the other side* (2015–17), a cluster of bodies morphs into a backdrop mountain range thereby recalling an earlier 2014 painting also titled *the other side*, where a group of reclining male figures become the silhouetted mountainous backdrop against which another reclining male nude poses in the work's foreground, suggesting a fractal-like continuity of figure-become-ground. And, in a series of photopolymer gravure/screen prints executed with master printmaker Trent Walter of Negative Press, again titled *the other side* (2016–17), ghoulish white faces emerge ever so faintly from smudges of black ink, before retreating again into darkness.



PUBLICATION: HELEN HUGHES, 'BRENT HARRIS, *THE SMALL SWORD*',
TOLARNO GALLERIES, MELBOURNE, 7 OCT 2017

Brent Harris, *the other side*, 2017. Photography by Andrew Curtis.

This tension that Harris manages to create and sustain as an image-maker—his capacity to hold our attention on a subject at precisely the same moment that it feels to be eluding our perceptual grasp—binds him into a certain modernist and avant-garde pictorial tradition. The tradition is found in both Cubist collage and the interpenetration of back- and foreground that is familiar to the paintings of Italian Futurism and Russian Rayonism. This interplay between foreground and background (what we might call Harris's manipulation of gestalt principles of perception) is also echoed in his deliberately ambiguous treatment of absence and presence, and likewise his undecided affiliation with abstraction and figuration. Justin Clemens, for instance, once wrote that Harris's eyes—which appear as a motif everywhere in the artist's compositions—are not so much eyes in a static sense, but instead cycle through a series of identifications: they are eyes that become targets become voids become orifices ... Harris's compositions captivate and compel us precisely because of this implied instability between figure and ground, form and formlessness, something and nothing.



Brent Harris, *the small sword*, installation shot, Tolarno Galleries, 2017.

What is the significance, then, of Harris's evident skill as an image-maker? Of his special ability to render visible the in-between and the undecided? A clue can be found in the artist's repeated use of the title 'the other side' for

his paintings, prints and drawings. Alongside the themes of sex and death, the spiritual realm and the notion of transcendence are key subjects for Harris, who cites New Zealand modernist Colin McCahon and American abstract expressionist Barnett Newman as major influences on his work. Both McCahon and Newman addressed the spiritual, divine or sublime in their respectively figurative and abstract painting practices. Harris has cited these modernists alongside doyens of the Renaissance—Raphael, Pierra della Francesca, Titian—and their treatment of Christian iconography as being formative in several of his artist statements. The repeatedly deployed title 'the other side', one presumes, thus addresses the crossing-over from a base or physical realm into an abstract or celestial order. Yet Harris's treatment of this subject matter sits at an angle to that of other, perhaps more popular contemporary artists. Bill Viola, for instance, produces hyper-stylised, hyper-symbolic video portraits of individuals crossing thresholds representative of the life–death barrier. His thresholds are typically depicted as identifiable, physical and tangible, the crossing of which therefore produces a distinctly linear temporality: a before and an after. (See, for example, the water wall through which Viola's subjects pass in his *Ocean without a shore* of 2007.) Harris's 'other side', by contrast, is always captured in a state of oscillation or transition. He has explained that, in his work, he tries to create the 'sensation of being in a body ... The sensation is only ever forming/transforming, never whole.' As with Newman, who strove for immediacy and totality in his art (what he, echoing Greenberg, described as the visual over the narrative modality), in Harris's paintings, prints and drawings, 'the beginning and the end are there at once'.

PUBLICATION: HELEN HUGHES, 'BRENT HARRIS, *THE SMALL SWORD*',
TOLARNO GALLERIES, MELBOURNE, 7 OCT 2017



Brent Harris, *the visit*, 2017. Photography by Andrew Curtis.

In the Book of Revelation, the beginning and the end—the initials of Alpha and Omega from the Greek alphabet—are used to denote God and Christ. Harris articulates the spiritual through more specifically Christian tropes throughout the exhibition. Both the printed and painted versions of *the other side* feature cartoon renditions of Adam and Eve who flank the left- and right-hand sides of the composition, turning inwards towards the centre of the work while reeling backwards from their hips away from it, awe-struck. In the early 1950s, Newman famously painted Adam and Eve as vertical 'zips' in blood red and crimson hues (*Adam*, 1951–52; *Eve*, 1950). They were 'zips' because these vertical lines were not intended to separate but rather unify the composition. In one of the most striking and unusual compositions in *the small sword*, Harris's portrait-oriented oil painting *the visit* (2017) mimics Newman's famous zip compositions in an almost comical fashion. *The visit* is divided into three vertical strips: two black strips flanking a fleshy pink interior strip. Wedged between the two black strips are the head, shoulders and gangly arms of a bearded Christ figure. Christ's arms

cross in front of his body to push outwards at the left and right edges of the canvas—seemingly in an effort to stave off the encroaching darkness. Instead of the decisive gesture of separation attributed to God in Genesis—of light from darkness, day from night, heaven from earth, dry land from water, and so on—this Christ figure simply maintains a division that could just as soon close up on him again. For all the resoluteness of the canvas's composition—its thick black cartoon outlines delineating the white skin and the perfectly smooth gradations of the brown hair and beard—at the centre of Christ's face there is mostly just absence: no nose, no mouth, no cheeks, no eyebrows; just two down-cast, Joy Hester-like eyes, which could also be droopy breasts or cracked eggs, sketched on in grey lead pencil. Moreover, these pencil lines appear to have been rubbed out and redrawn a few times. In this way, the sense of becoming—of transcendence as perpetual transition—is not only captured compositionally, but also through Harris's handling of the medium.



Brent Harris, *the small sword*, installation shot, Tolarno Galleries, 2017.

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Title image: Brent Harris, *land's end* # 1, 2017. Photography by Andrew Curtis.

25 Nov 2017

Memo Review is an online publication dedicated to accessible reviews of a broad variety of exhibitions at public art museums, commercial galleries and smaller artist-run spaces in Melbourne. Reviews will be published weekly each Saturday

PUBLICATION:

MARIA ZAGALA, 'SHADOW WORLDS: THE MONOTYPES OF BRENT HARRIS AND SUSAN WALD', *IMPRINT*, VOL 51, NO 4, 2016

Shadow Worlds: The Monotypes of Brent Harris and Susan Wald



A

Monotype is a relatively rare medium that has been valued by its practitioners for its immediacy and experimental possibilities. Unlike other printmaking techniques, such as etching or woodcut, monotype is less tethered to traditions of form or subject. The first monotypes were created in the 17th century by Giovanni Battista Castiglione. In 1645 in his search to create light and dark effects – in particular illumination of nocturnal scenes – Castiglione drew with a pointed tool on a smooth surface (such as a copper plate) covered in printing ink and then impressed the design onto a sheet of dampened paper. In this way, he discovered he could create a dramatic white design on a black ground. The yield, as the name suggests, is essentially one richly dark impression. If a second sheet is pulled from the plate its appearance is entirely different to the first: it is silvery grey with hints of the composition just evident on its surface.

A. —
Edgar Degas, *A party in the waiting room*, c.1879-80, monotype, printed in black ink, 11.8 x 16.2 cm (plate). Collection: National Gallery of Australia. Purchased 1980.

B. —
Susan Wald, *The Exile Trilogy, Levad 16*, 2013, ink on Arches paper, 29.5 x 21.5 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

C. —
Susan Wald, *The Exile Trilogy, Levad 22*, 2014, ink on Hahnemuhle paper, 69 x 49 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

D. —
Brent Harris, *The Fall no. 8*, 2012, monotype printed in black ink, 31.2 x 23.5 cm (plate). Collection: National Gallery of Victoria. Courtesy of the artist.

E. —
Brent Harris, *the other side no. 5*, 2016, monotype printed in black ink, coloured pencil, oil and gouache over second impression, 31.2 x 23.5 cm (plate). Private collection, Melbourne. Courtesy of the artist.

The experimental possibilities of monotype have been explored by two Melbourne-based artists, Susan Wald and Brent Harris, who both came to the medium after discovering the revelatory prints of 19th century French artist Edgar Degas. Like Degas, Wald and Harris maintain a painting and printmaking practice, developing an approach to their subject matter across both mediums. They use the process of solving conceptual and technical problems in each as a departure point for work in the other. Wald began making monotypes in the late 1980s and early 1990s, while studying at Victoria College, Prahran, after seeing Degas' monotypes reproduced in a book. Harris was inspired to make his first monotypes in 2011 after seeing the artist's prints in a major exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.¹

Degas' virtuosity in monotype is particularly important to Wald and Harris, serving as an example of what can be achieved with essentially very limited means. Over the course of a decade from the mid-1870s, and then again in a short burst from the early 1890s, Degas created more than 300 monotypes.² One of the most striking characteristics of his monotypes is the variety and richness of his mark making, which in turn creates a great spectrum of tonal effects. At close range Degas' monotypes look on the brink of abstraction, yet viewed at arm's length the compositions coalesce into a legible whole. Degas often depicted figures in tight interiors, at close quarters, illuminated by artificial light, at a café, concert hall or theatre.

Like Degas, Wald sought out the stage as a subject for her art. Between 1991 and 1994 she spent six weeks drawing rehearsals of plays staged at the Anthill Theatre, Melbourne, including Jean Pierre Mignon's direction of Beckett's *End Game*, and in 1992 Barrie Kosky's production of Gilgul's *The Exile Trilogy*.³ These experiences had a profound influence on her work and have become one of the major subjects of her creative output. Wald notes: 'He [Degas] uses the ballet as a vehicle. My wish is not to paint ballet or illustrate theatre, but to condense it down to the essence of the experience, and when possible to use metaphor to provoke the imagination.'⁴ Like Degas' attraction to the ballet, Wald's interest in the theatre is about the metaphoric space of the stage. Her subject is human nature, and she approaches its painful limits through the representation of the human body in the moment of performance.

Observational drawing is at the root of Wald's process: she begins by rapidly sketching actors at rehearsal. The monotypes evolve from sketchbook drawings and photographs, the finished works imaginative responses to the intense experience of the plays. Working on inked copper and Perspex plates, she uses a rag, paintbrushes, toothbrushes, cotton tips and sharp implements to draw and scratch her images into the ink. Figures stand or sit with minimal props in the charged space of the theatre. The monotype allows her to translate the psychological revelation of the theatre into the symbolic language of light and dark.



B



C



D



E

The emotional truth of the moment captured is reduced to the barest of essentials: the gesture and posture of each figure, alone or locked in an exchange. Wald uses both the first and ghost impressions in her series *The Exile Trilogy*. In *Levad 16*, she works over the pale ghost impression with brush and ink, adding thick layers of ink with a roller. The scene appears illuminated as though by a strong spotlight.

In 2011, Harris's study of Degas' monotypes in Boston led him to learn the technique from printer Adrian Kellett on his return to Melbourne. He set to work in his studio using a press that was on hand and found that the simplicity and speed of the process encouraged him to experiment with a new freedom. In a burst of energy he created 100 monotypes called *The Fall* and in 2013 a further 20 called *Embark*. Harris's use of religious iconography in his images and as titles – such as *The Fall* – is complex. He does not identify as a believer, yet the Bible provides a matrix for the questions of his art. His concerns – of whether there is meaning in death, or an afterlife; the nature of evil, and human suffering – have been significantly shaped by his coming of age as a gay man during the AIDS epidemic.

In contrast to Wald, Harris's subject matter did not evolve from the outside world. Rather, he uses monotype as a method of unearthing latent imagery from his subconscious. This has been an increased preoccupation since the mid-1990s; however, in recent years Harris has embraced the accidental image as a method of creation, inspired by Dario Gamboni's writings on the role of accident in Italian Renaissance art.⁵ Harris came to see the role of accident – and by extension the absurd – as a defining plank of his methodology. The tone of Harris's *The Fall* combines seriousness and levity, and his inclusion of hooded figures in his composition bring to mind Philip Guston's figurative paintings from the 1970s. Of Guston's paintings, John Kauffmann has recently observed that they combine '... goofiness, anger, slapstick sentimentality and existential pathos ...'⁶ – a description that too grasps the tone of Harris's work.

While creating *The Fall* monotypes Harris was forced to work quickly – before the ink dried – and he found that he was able to access the accidental and absurd in an unforced way. On a perspex plate covered in thick, sticky black ink, Harris used his fingers, the corner of a rag, or a cotton tip to flick, smudge and dab ink off the surface, waiting for recognisable forms to emerge from the darkness. The resultant images depict a crowded space that cannot be read as natural. Strange creatures bubble to the surface from what looks like a shadowy under world, an association confirmed by Harris's title.

The 100 monotypes that make up Harris's *The Fall* are all first, dark impressions; however, in 2016 he found a ghost impression of *The Fall no. 8* in his studio. Inspired by Degas – who worked in pastel over his ghost impressions in the 1890s – Harris transformed the composition with pencil, gouache and oil, adding a new figure in the foreground. The clearly delineated form is rendered in a flat, pop style that hovers over the shadow world, comically alarmed.

Although they employ fundamentally different methodologies in the development of their work, Wald and Harris share a desire to penetrate the intricacies of the monotype process. It is a quest that uniquely matches the malleable character of the medium with the dark subject matter of their art. Like Degas before them, they are drawn to the spontaneity of monotype to grasp an elusive shadow world, which, when found, they trap like a butterfly under glass.

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PUBLICATION:

BRENT HARRIS, '*THE OTHER SIDE*: A BACKROOM
PROJECT AT TOLARNO GALLERIES', MARCH 2016

PUBLICATION: BRENT HARRIS, 'THE OTHER SIDE: A BACKROOM PROJECT AT TOLARNO GALLERIES', MARCH 2016

Brent Harris: *the other side*

A Backroom Project at Tolarno Galleries, March 2016

'The other side' at Tolarno Galleries presents a small group of paintings that extends and develops a figurative element that first appeared in *the other side*, a painting I completed in early 2015. This element – a small standing figure with outstretched arms – had its genesis as a smudge of arching pink paint and has since become something of a witness within my new pictures.

My paintings develop pictorially through their making. The space in my pictures does not follow any logical sense of perspective. Similarly, the scale of forms or figurative elements and their relationships to one another are also generally free of logic. Absurdity is often a welcome driver of my compositions.



My imagery emerges as I work between printmaking, drawing and painting with compositional elements feeding my new work through an organic process that is constantly in flux. Monotype has been my main area of printmaking over the last few years. I have a small press in my studio, which allows me to print as I work, an important freedom in developing my imagery.



my studio 2012, working on the series *the fall*

When making a monotype, I generally print the plate on the same day of its making. If at the end of the day I have not created anything worth printing, I simply wipe the inky mess off the plate and start again the next day. I use the dark field technique, where a plate of Perspex is rolled up completely black with ink and the image emerges by wiping into the surface. I wear a thin rubber glove, and most often use a piece of paper towel wrapped around my finger, or a cotton wool bud.



If after a period of work I feel I have removed too much ink I push more ink onto the plate in selected areas with a finger, or otherwise completely reroll the plate with fresh ink and start again. It would certainly affect my method of working if I had a printer waiting at my side wanting to print.

My approach is intuitive, and I follow imagery as it comes to the surface. Unlike the visionary artist William Blake, I am unable to claim exceptional visionary powers. My head however is stuffed full of art historical references, both old and new, if a strong figurative composition takes hold I will follow it, sometimes with reference to other works. I try not to censor this when it happens, in the hope of generating new compositions and meanings. A friend remarked that one of the new monotypes in this group reminded her of Goya. I love Goya and carry many strong images of his work around in my head, however I am not working with Goya books open by my side!

Monotype; *the other side* #4 2016

Likewise, I don't sit in front of the plate thinking now I'm going to make an image with some weird creature reclining in a strange landscape, as in the monotype from 2012 *the fall* no. 15 (below).

PUBLICATION: BRENT HARRIS, 'THE OTHER SIDE: A BACKROOM PROJECT AT TOLARNO GALLERIES', MARCH 2016

Almost three years after the making of this monotype I decided to attempt a related painting.



Monotype; *the fall no. 15* 2012, collection NGV



Study for 'the other side' 2014, oil on paper, and the beginning of canvas at 132 x 96cm

My first problem was how to translate the black and white image into a colored painting. I had some leftover yellow and black oil paint on my palette and decided to use it.



2 early states of the canvas



In the right hand corner of this state the standing figure makes its first tentative appearance as a pink smudge that looks like someone leaning back, looking up into the painting.

PUBLICATION: BRENT HARRIS, 'THE OTHER SIDE: A BACKROOM PROJECT AT TOLARNO GALLERIES', MARCH 2016



I then proceeded to realize this figure giving it arms and legs and accentuating it's somewhat shocked gesture.



the other side 2014/15
oil on linen
132 x 96cm
private collection, Sydney

In the finished picture I flipped and repeated this standing pink figure in the lower left corner. The two figures are witnesses to the action, taking place in the painting. Almost a year later I decided to develop this pink standing figure. It appears in three new paintings, several drawings, and a monotype.

Starting with one of the smaller paintings in this group



the fall 2015, oil on linen, 92 x73cm

PUBLICATION: BRENT HARRIS, 'THE OTHER SIDE: A BACKROOM PROJECT AT TOLARNO GALLERIES', MARCH 2016

Some early states of this painting below



To start I painted two figures with no clear idea as to what they may be witnessing. After some time drawing on the canvas with charcoal and pushing areas of paint around I remembered this monotype from 2013.



It was one of 20 monotypes and 9 paintings on board titled 'embark' that I exhibited in Perth at Lister Gallery in November 2013. I had already used imagery from this monotype in two previous paintings, however I was now drawn to the group of small figures standing on the low horizon. Their witnessing of some event, almost as on a large screen above them, related to the two figures I had just placed at the bottom of my new painting. I was also drawn to the linear aspect of the pointing white haired figure at right.

Monotype
Embark #5 2013
Private collection, Perth

I proceeded to work on the painting with these figurative elements (see image below). I won't show other images of the painting from around this time, but I really tortured the upper left figure.



The composition of the painting at this stage began to form an X, with four principal characters. This began to irritate me, so I removed the figure in the upper left, and then the lower standing observer.



I did like the way the upper right hand figure landed on the canvas, with his transparency and linear nature almost forming a distant mountain. With the two left hand figures removed I was left with a void, to contemplate. My feelings at this point led me to see a figure moving forward out of the darkness, or a falling figure in this dark space.

PUBLICATION: BRENT HARRIS, 'THE OTHER SIDE: A BACKROOM PROJECT AT TOLARNO GALLERIES', MARCH 2016

This in turn led my mind to the famous Michelangelo drawing, *The fall of Phaeton*, 1531-33, in the British Museum (lower left). I have seen the drawing a couple of times in the Prints and Drawings Study Room in London.

For my purpose here, I'm not interested in the myth of Phaeton, but rather Michelangelo's great falling figure. Michelangelo had given other artists his drawings on several occasions to use as compositional fabric, so I'm quite comfortable borrowing this motif.

Without wanting to over cook this, I also saw a connection with my standing pink figure and one of the gestures of Michelangelo's figures at the bottom of his drawing, observing to their peril the fall.



This leads me back to another monotype in this new group, *the other side #5* 2012/16

In 2011 I was in Boston to see the large Degas exhibition 'Degas and the nude'. On display were many monotypes where the dark field technique had been used, as well as many coloured pastel drawings that had been made over the top of the second impression of monotypes. It was during this exhibition visit that I thought I could work on monotypes of the same scale, as my studio press is not large.

On my return to Melbourne I contacted Adrian Kellet, a well-known Melbourne printmaker. Adrian came to my studio bringing with him an all important ink roller, and he proceeded to give me a one-day crash course in dark field monotypes. I made around 100 monotypes during 2012, corralled under the umbrella title *the fall*, which were shown at Tolarno Galleries in November - December 2012.

When making monotypes it is possible to take a second impression to pick up the faint remnant of ink left on the plate. Of the 100 monotypes made I only pulled 5 second impressions, the image to the left here is one of those.



the fall no. 8 2012, collection NGV
and second pale impression



the other side #5 2012/16
black coloured pencil, gouache and oil
over a second impression monotype

A few weeks ago I came across this second impression monotype in my studio from 2012 (at right). I pinned it up and over a week or so I thought about the idea of "the other side". I started to see the motley crew of characters in this monotype as definitely looking otherworldly. Leaving room for a witness, enter my aghast standing figure. My second impression was much paler than it appears above. In the second impression the standing figure was painted in gouache and oil. In the pale second impression I worked over the whole sheet with a black coloured pencil. The new print becomes part of *the other side* group.

PUBLICATION: BRENT HARRIS, 'THE OTHER SIDE: A BACKROOM PROJECT AT TOLARNO GALLERIES', MARCH 2016

The large painting in this group



the other side (large) 2015/16

The painting above was developed over a 4-month period with many changes; one of the constant elements has been the angels in the upper center of the composition. I cannot explain their presence, except that they appeared early on and I was unable to move them on. I don't think they are the subject of the painting however. Again they suggested themselves in a few smudges of paint and I quickly sketched them in charcoal, pretty much as they appear now.



At an early stage my observant figure appeared in troubled waters, and a falling figure appeared in a smudge of paint, (below)
I tried to draw him out but I started to think of 9/11 and backed off, even though it worked pictorially.



Once the falling figure was dropped, the painting started to take on a vertical climb rather than a descent. The linear elements that were forming in the upper atmosphere have been cobbled together from different sources, twisted and repeated to satisfy my own pictorial needs.

PUBLICATION: BRENT HARRIS, 'THE OTHER SIDE: A BACKROOM PROJECT AT TOLARNO GALLERIES', MARCH 2016



At this point I took strong support from an early Picasso painting *The Burial of Casagemas* 1901. I have loved this painting since my art school days and was always drawn to the way its' space and figuration climb up the picture plane. It is also obvious that Picasso in turn was acknowledging El Greco's ascending pictorial constructions.



Picasso *The Burial of Casagemas* 1901
oil on linen 150.5 x 90.5 cm
Musee d'art Moderne, Paris



the other side 2016
oil on linen 244 x 175 cm
Courtesy Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne

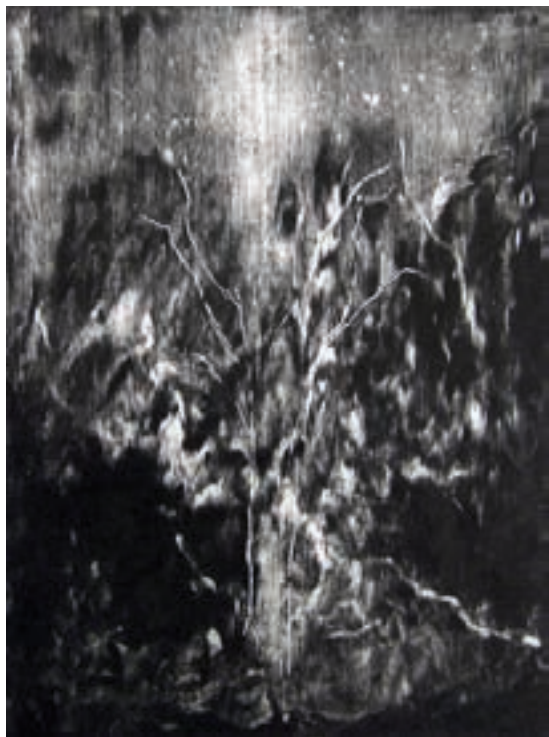
Unlike the Picasso, the upper part of my painting does not represent a group of prostitutes. I love this in the Picasso; Casagemas was apparently quite a supporter of prostitutes, and Picasso seems to depict them accompanying Casagemas on his journey to the other side.

The standing figure at the lower left of my painting has ended up occupying an idyllic garden setting. It observes a burst of fiery paint which depicts groping hands in search of form. The ghoulish figure attempting an exit in the upper section appears engaged in some pagan ritual. The Picasso painting is a burial scene, with the passage of Casagemas's spirit imagined moving onto another plane. In my painting the small standing figure is observing, witnessing, imagining the other side. 'The scene is set', yet the main character of the imagined drama hasn't turned up yet. A mirror with an undefined reflection is held up amidst the fiery forms. The real subject is thus only partially depicted. That's one interpretation of my painting, after the fact of it's making.

PUBLICATION: BRENT HARRIS, 'THE OTHER SIDE: A BACKROOM PROJECT AT TOLARNO GALLERIES', MARCH 2016

The charcoal and coloured pencil drawing in this group had its starting point in the monotype *the fall no.91* 2012, now in the collection of AGWA. I have made several attempts to use it over the past four years but never quite nailed it. I can't explain my attraction to this image, but I think it won't diminish until I have been able to make something else of it.

Below here I have inverted the image as a way of getting another reading of it.



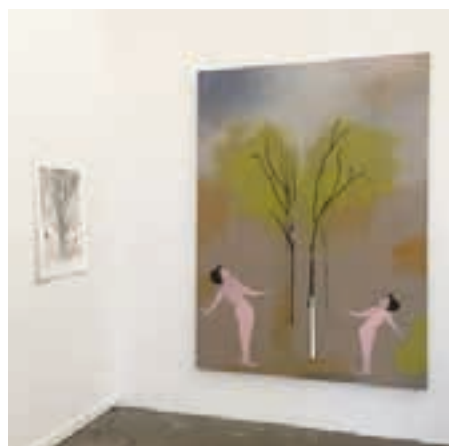
monotype, *the fall no.91* 2012
collection AGWA



inverted image of *the fall no.91*



I decided to make a drawing from the inverted image. The start of that drawing is on the left, with two of the observant figures dropped into the lower right and left. Below is my first attempt to get a painting from it. The painting is still in my studio, in quite a different state to the one below, not dead just waiting.



The finished drawing:



other side 2015
charcoal and gouache on paper
61.5 x 45.5 cm image size

PUBLICATION: BRENT HARRIS, 'THE OTHER SIDE: A BACKROOM PROJECT AT TOLARNO GALLERIES', MARCH 2016



the other side #2 2016 is the third monotype in this exhibition. It is also a second impression monotype reworked with a black coloured pencil only. Illustrated below is the first impression. The second impression was quite pale and I worked on the surface with black pencil. I moved across the surface, pulling up darker areas and watching for new figuration to come up in a play with the shadowy ground. The standing figure at centre left was the only clear figural element in the pale second impression. I don't know what's going on here, but it has an 'over there' feeling about it.

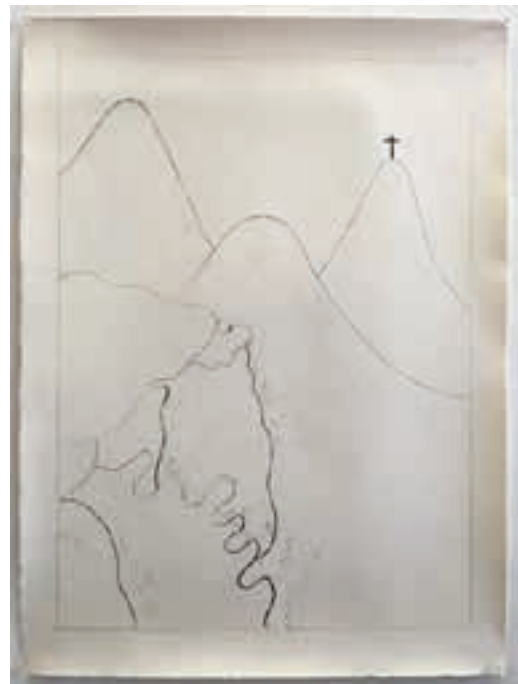
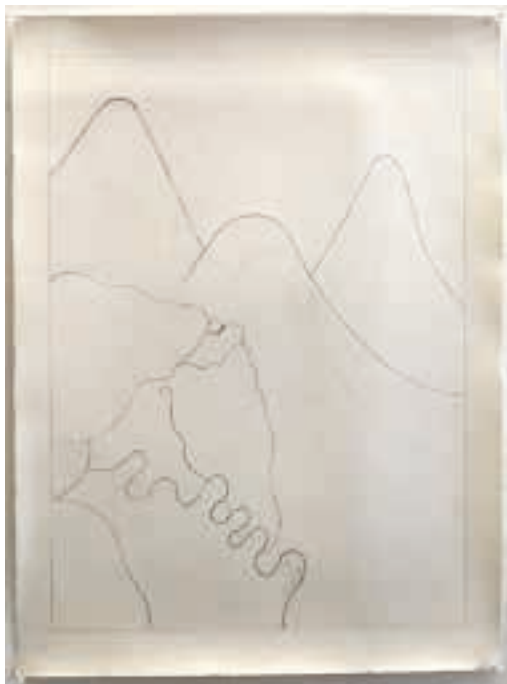
the other side # 2 2016
black coloured pencil
on second impression monotype



the other side # 1 2016
first impression monotype

There are three other works in this exhibition, and I would like to focus on how the imagery moves between the mediums of drawing, printmaking and painting.

The small charcoal drawing on the left shows the beginnings of this work. Then the other three drawings on this page show the same drawing being developed on a paper prepared for oil paint. When I was happy with the composition I transferred it to the canvas.



PUBLICATION: BRENT HARRIS, 'THE OTHER SIDE: A BACKROOM PROJECT AT TOLARNO GALLERIES', MARCH 2016



With the drawing on the canvas in charcoal, I continued to make changes before starting to paint. You can see the changes between the study on paper and the painting, (above, side by side in the studio) in the peaks, the beard under the nose, and where the figurative elements hit the bottom edge of the composition, the ruffles (if that is what they are) in the dark maroon shape change from five to four.

With the painting on canvas almost finished, I returned to the study drawing on prepared paper. I didn't make any changes to this drawing and proceeded to paint it in oil.



Study for *peaks (white cross)* 2015
oil and charcoal on prepared paper
66.0 x48.0 cm

There are many white crosses in paintings from Gauguin, Colin McCahon, Piero della Francesca, to name a few. I have been trying to get a white cross into a painting of my own for a while, so here it is. I think this painting is about salvation, distant and out of reach.



peaks (white cross) 2015
oil on linen
88.5 x65.0 cm

I have made an earlier PDF about the origin of the character at the bottom left here. He has made an appearance in four other paintings to date, and is perhaps a stand in for the artist.

PUBLICATION: BRENT HARRIS, 'THE OTHER SIDE: A BACKROOM PROJECT AT TOLARNO GALLERIES', MARCH 2016

The final work in this exhibition is a new print I made with Trent Walter of Negative Press. The Print Council of Australia commissioned the print to help raise money to pay writers fees for its journal Imprint. The result was *The Problem*, an edition of thirty photopolymer gravure and multi-layer screenprints. I have included this print here because it again shows how I work between mediums.

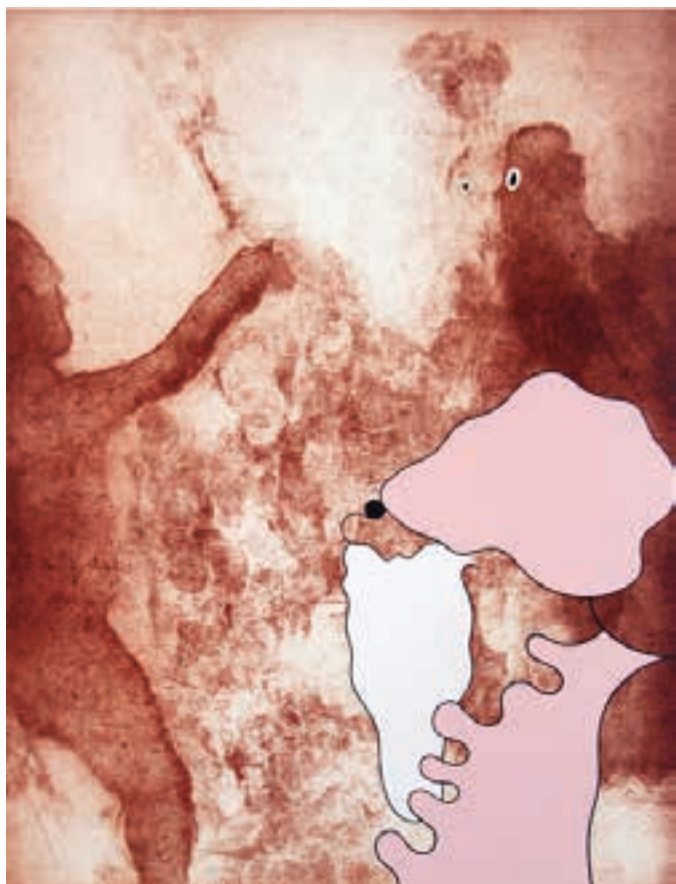


The photopolymer plate (below) started life as a monotype from 2012 (left).

I have inverted the imagery and introduced some new characters, most obviously the witness type character at bottom right. These elements have been screenprinted over the photopolymer gravure plate.

There is a full description of the making of this print on the Print Council of Australia website.

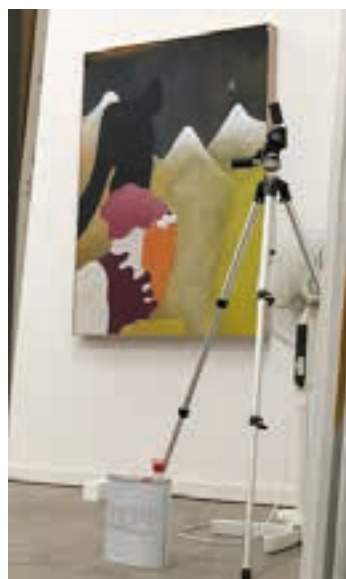
monotype *the fall no. 7* 2012
private collection Melbourne



Brent Harris
The Problem 2015 Photopolymer gravure and
multi-layer screenprint
76 x 56 cm, edition of 30. Printed by Trent
Walter, Negative Press.

PUBLICATION: BRENT HARRIS, 'PEAKS', 2015

Brent Harris 'Peaks' 2015



The origins of the imagery in the painting 'Peaks' are quite layered. So where to start?

My paintings and working methods have changed quite a bit over the last 9 years, since the survey exhibition at AGWA 'Swamp Op' in 2006 - curator Robert Cook.

Most of my work from this period displayed flat uninflected surfaces, often strong colour and forms quite sensually delineated, with this linear element/edge pronounced. The painting compositions were resolved off the canvas, through many drawings.

This approach changed with a series of drawings titled 'Deluge' shown at Tolarno in 2008. These drawings were started in front of a life model but were then allowed to develop beyond the anatomical - this method of working becoming most interesting when I started to follow what was coming up to the surface through more intuitive mark making - all manner of figuration was presenting itself. I decided I wanted this method of finding form to come to the paintings also - where the imagery is discovered during the works progress.

In 2009 I spent 3 months in the Australia Council studio in Rome, my project, to revisit an earlier series 'The Stations of the Cross' (In 1989 I produced a series of 14 quite large, hard edge geometric paintings and related aquatints on this subject). The question to myself was, what might happen if I applied the weird figuration that had been surfacing in my work over the past 20 years to this religious subject. However, once in Rome I couldn't hold onto this specific subject, finding the complexities of the Catholic Church to be overwhelming.

Instead I was most happy exploring all the glorious frescos in the area, and one painting in particular really struck me - 'The Transfiguration of Christ' by Raphael, in the Vatican collection. I loved the 'idea' of this subject, where Christ is levitating above the crowd, held aloft by the strength of his belief, a belief that I, a mere skeptical mortal could never muster. This subject and the glorious colour of numerous other examples led me to start work in Rome on a small series of small panels titled 'the ecstatic moment'.



Raphael



board



board

Back in Australia I pushed on with these small panels – two more series appeared - ‘Surrender and Catch’ (exhibited Tolarno, Melbourne 2010), and ‘the reassembled self’ (Martin Browne, Sydney 2011). In these two groups I was trying to connect psychoanalytic thought, in particular the thinking of Heinz Kohut, with the way I was intuitively finding the imagery. The idea of surrender and catch is that you must ‘surrender’ to what is happening and putting yourself in a position ready to ‘catch’ what is thrown up by the subconscious and the working process - letting things bubble to the surface without too many preconceived ideas, prefiguring the outcome. The reassembled self explores the idea that we are endlessly putting ourselves together, however, we never quite arrive as a whole.

These colourful works were followed in 2012 with a series of around one hundred monochrome monotypes.

The most striking deliberate shift with this group was the lack of colour.

I had thought these prints might become a new series of ‘The Stations’, but once again I couldn’t hold myself to the subject of Christ’s last day. As the imagery built into something more wide-ranging - ‘the fall’ the fall of man, seemed more appropriate. Although not all the works under this umbrella title are ‘doom and gloom’, they are mostly set in a dark place. All were started with ‘dumb’ mark making and then my following the form as it surfaced.

My next issue was with scale. How could I get this process of image finding up to a larger size and on canvas? Thinking about the range of imagery developed in the numerous monotypes, I thought to use these existing images or configurations as starting points to begin paintings with the re-introduction of colour (in fact, I think the two examples below use monotypes from the group in the AGWA collection).



PUBLICATION: BRENT HARRIS, 'PEAKS', 2015

In my most recent exhibition at Tolarno, 'Dreamer', February 2015, I have used some existing small panel paintings as starting points for new larger works.

The example below is a small pink board from 2010, (I'm using this example, as the imagery for 'Peaks' 2015 originates here)

Firstly I reworked this composition in oil on paper, the greatest change being at the top where a new narrative/figuration enters as this black frieze on orange. From this study the large painting 'the dream' 2015 was developed (bottom left)

It was during the making of this larger work that I focused on a figurative group forming at the lower right. I then reworked this group in another work on paper; I have flipped the image and refined the main character. (bottom right here)



board 2010



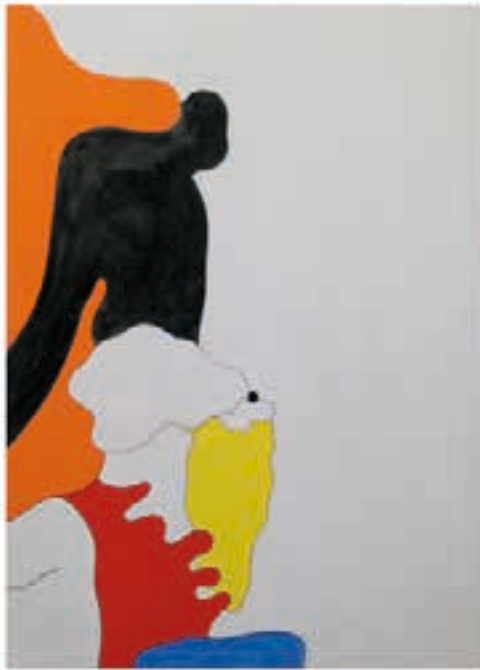
oil on paper 2014



'the dream' 2015



oil on paper 2015



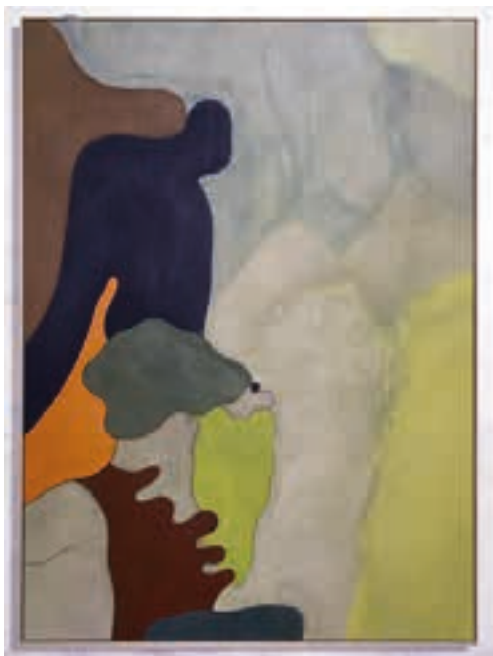
I then thought there may be enough here to start a new work, this is the first colour blocking in for the 'Peaks' painting. Then the idea of a landscape is blocked in, with a small cross on the distant peak. The bearded creature in the foreground now seems to me to be some kind of witness, and at that point McCahon enters my mind. (as time passes and I look back over my work there do seem to be many characters occupying the position of the witness - I have identified this in many of McCahon's early figurative works also, as below). (I have always loved this work of McCahon's, but really! an ochre sky? - how very Gauguin of him).

So in goes my ochre over the blue and black, all very thin paint at this stage.



Colin McCahon 'Crucifixion according to Mark' 1947

Well the ochre didn't work for me, so off comes the ochre (!) though a remnant / trace remains... and other strange forms come to the washed out surface.



The cross returns, and now my eye is starting to focus on the small pale shape above and to the left of the cross.



The painting is now starting to drag me around – as I mentioned above, the process and what is thrown up at various points helps to direct the next move - I darken the sky and pull up what is now appearing as a figure in flight (and why not).

A palette of pinks have started to surface, as I have been washing out oranges and reds, this palette leads my mind to Piero della Francesca, and 'The Resurrection', the fresco in Sansepolcro, which encourages me to give my fly away figure a pink outfit and an orange beard.



Piero della Francesca, 'The Resurrection'

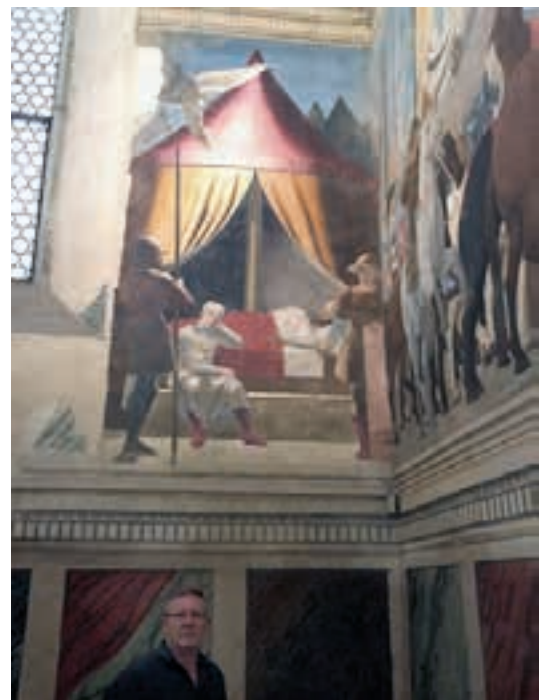


Piero della Francesca, 'The dream of Constantine'

Once my mind is on Piero, I start thinking of another of his works, 'The dream of Constantine', part of the fresco cycle 'The Legend of the True Cross', in Arezzo. The peaks in my new painting have me thinking of Piero's pitched tents, I love the colours of this painting, and decide to draw mine closer. His painting has got it all, peaks, great colours, a white cross, and a flying creature.



detail of 'The dream of Constantine'

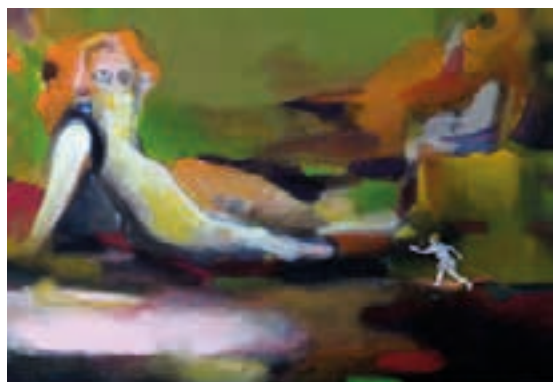


Myself in Arezzo 2015



Yet, finally the white cross didn't hold on in 'Peaks' 2015 (above). I have no explanation for the dark shadow figure; you can see it forming in the original board (detail above right), by the time it arrives in the Peaks painting it has taken on a strong presence beyond its origins – an enigma or apparition...

Some one who saw this painting in my studio recently said 'what do you think that's about?' Well I can't give it a definitive meaning. Often when I reach this point with myself, and my own work, I am reminded of that great observation of Paul Valery's - that a bad poem 'vanishes into meaning'. Justin Clemens first brought this quote to my attention when he was writing on my 'Surrender and Catch' series. My work proceeds in these strange bursts - something totally unexpected will come to the surface in the making of the work. I may follow this, hold onto it or scrub it out and move on. At another level, more formal picture making concerns come to the fore - composition... how the picture holds itself together, colour balance, thoughts about subject. And then the way historical art creeps up on me, I have to admit my head is stuffed full of other painters paintings, both old and new. I think in my recent paintings I am starting to re introduce earlier methods of working - flat delineated areas of colour, mashed into the new more intuitively found gestural surfaces. I also intend following odd figuration when it presents itself. An example of what I mean by this is the way this small flying figure has appeared in the Peaks painting, it's first appearance as a surface smudge, and then my imagination takes hold of it. This kind of strangely out of scale and even out of context figuration has been occurring more frequently and is something that I intend trusting and pursuing when it presents itself in the future.



detail from 'Dreamer (green)' 2014/15



detail from 'The Other Side' 2014/15



peaks 2015
oil on linen
132 x 96 cm
Collection: Art Gallery of Western Australia

PUBLICATION:

JUSTIN CLEMENS, 'A SHALLOW CALUMNIATED DEATH',
TOLARNO GALLERIES, MELBOURNE, 2010

A shallow calumniated stream death

Justin Clemens 2010

What holds an image together given every image is essentially multiple? Marks, colours, forms, allusions, genres — some images just fall apart, unable to bind the tensions of their seriously unstable situation into something more than a heap of broken elements. Something enigmatic must be at work to gather it all together, eminently visible since an image shows itself absolutely in appearing, yet somehow invisible too because it cannot be identified with any particular part or relation of the image. At once visible and invisible, seductive, sinister, the enigma of *this* image recedes as you advance. Imagine making a single one of these images: a set of intuitive gestures in colour demands to be modelled; the modelling becomes an injunction to line; the lines transmogrify to a composition; the composition in turn becomes a new experiment with colours from which forms emerge as line is submerged; the forms suggest characters, scenes, narratives which never quite, to quote Paul Valéry, 'vanish into meaning'; the scenes shift before they settle. For something to come, something has to go; something has to be surrendered in order for something to be embraced. In these little images, the devil loves you and Freud dreams, eyes turn into targets and voids and orifices, surfaces foam and fall like waterfalls of hair that veil spectral bones, a snake writhes in distressed air, downcast mouths are sealed or sewn, while dabs or streaks of colour remain just that, colour, resisting the transition to sense. In a sequence of poems entitled *Tombeaux*, tombs — but also with a nod to falling, *tomber* — the French Symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé celebrated the remains of his dead artist heroes, including Edgar Allan Poe and Charles Baudelaire. The final line of Mallarmé's sonnet to the poet Paul Verlaine — vagabond, alcoholic and one-time lover of another great French poet Arthur Rimbaud — is the extraordinarily compressed line '*Un peu profond ruisseau calomnié la mort,*' 'A shallow calumniated stream death.' For Mallarmé, each work of art is the tomb of another in which the dead live on. It is the little stream death that bubbles through the image, gathering as it divides all its parts.



This text accompanied the exhibition by **Brent Harris**

Surrender and Catch
14th Sept – 16th Oct 2010
Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne

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Brent Harris
Listener, 2018,
on loan from Patricia Mason
and Paul Walker, Melbourne

