

Harris, Pat (b. 1953), painter.

'With what mark do I make a piece of fruit visible and how can I make time tangible?': that is the question that Pat Harris attempts to answer through his paintings (Harris in conversation with Hans Theys, *The Loose Box*, p. 9). How does an artist make the subject in its particular timeframe visible with the limited tools of pigment, oil and canvas?

Born in Dublin and a graduate of NCAD, Pat Harris began his career with paintings and drawings of the nude, portraits, landscapes and still lifes, the conventional themes that have concerned artists since the Renaissance. Yet his question, especially when its receiver is simultaneously confronting one of Harris's paintings, assumes a weight that is rarely reflected in a more detailed exploration of those same motifs in the hands of other

206. Pat Harris, *Self-portrait*, 1978, oil on linen, 60 x 50 cm

artists. He has the courage, as William Gallagher put it in 2008, to 'risk looking simple' (Gallagher, p. 94).

Harris's work, shown in Dublin since the 1990s, represents a significant shift from his early pencil and watercolour triptych of *Gordon Lambert* (1980); yet even then Harris was exploring the medium, his subjects and their spatial and temporal context. A year in Madrid and undergraduate studies from 1978 to 1981 at the Higher Institute for Fine Arts in Antwerp, where Harris now lives, served to deepen this exploration, although his work has changed from the linear, Giacometti-like qualities it displayed in the mid-1980s. Harris explores his bigger existential question in paintings dealing with a limited range of motifs, including the self-portrait [206], still lifes of skinned rabbits and pools in the landscape. Pools of still water now occupy the craters aggressively excavated from the fields of Belgium by wartime artillery

fire, and fragile poppies glow out of the hollows created by gun shells; the painter's task is to make their opposing energies, and the time in which they unfolded, visible. Initially, Harris concentrated on the single object at the centre of the canvas, 'but now I've succeeded in spreading various elements across the surface of the canvas' (The Loose Box, p. 6). The spaces between the scattered elements and paint surfaces created by layering and scraping, not with a knife but with an aggressive brush, carry the weight of their history. Because of the brutality of the brushwork that evokes his delicate results, Harris paints onto canvas stretched across wooden boards in order to protect it. He then removes the finished painting from the board, re-stretching the canvas on to normal stretchers. The struggle that has taken place on its surface is visible only to the most carefully observant; visibility itself has become the core of the work. Explaining his process and his intention, Harris said: 'I wanted to make the marks more visible and the only way I found was to take the paint away. The mark arose as a trace in the remaining paint.' (The Loose Box, p. 6) Structural lines and pencil marks have blended, over the years, with the tactile qualities of paint into a more integrated kind of expression, where the pigment, traces of the brush – even, on occasion, blown charcoal dust – are combined, creating figurative motifs that appear independent of the elements from which they are formed. Spring Self-portrait (1989, NSPC), painted in the colours of the landscape, reveals not just the individuality of the artist but the indissoluble link between man and his temporal and spatial coordinates.

Pat Harris is professor of painting at the Royal Academy of Fine Art, Antwerp. His work can be seen in the collections of IMMA, CAG, AC/ACE and the OPW.

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