

## PAT HARRIS

I would like to start this brief introduction to the exhibition by reading several quotations by Pat Harris from an interview which he gave in 2008 with Hans Theys, published in a catalogue of that year:

1. 'The mark is the paint stroke that you need in order to make something visible.'
2. 'I succeeded in translating the flowers into new marks that were completely absorbed into the surface of the painting'
3. 'I had been painting for many years when suddenly I realised that all you have at the end of the day is just a bit of pigment in oil on canvas'
4. 'Learning how to paint is an impossible task, because painting is trying to make something that you can't make, making the invisible visible and that in an ever changing manner, with new means, that constantly demand extending your capacities'
5. 'I always work from observation.'

Anyone who looks attentively at the paintings would probably agree with the truth and relevance of all these statements.

The paintings of Pat Harris are instantly recognisable as his, not because they have a 'style', much less a mannerism or a facile trade mark, but because the spectator is constantly aware of this struggle to make things visible.

One might say that all painters have this problem, but it is perhaps useful to distinguish some different approaches and intentions.

The purpose of painting is not to reproduce the external world but to enable the painter, and through him the spectator, to *see* it. I mean this literally. The way in which we see the real world is determined by the images which the visual artist makes of it. He may realise his work in photography or film, in architecture

or as sculpture. The intention may be to disguise reality, to promote an interest or to sell us something, but here to-day we are looking at a painter who wishes to show us the world as it is, or as it can be.

How the image, and which image, is made visible on the canvas will be the result of a variety of factors – of intellectual analysis, of temperament, of skill, of various kinds of ambition and of a knowledge and understanding of the history of art.

Since the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and well into the 20<sup>th</sup>, the awareness of history in general, not just of art history, was influenced by the philosophy of historicism. This belief, that there are rules and laws of development which have to be followed, led to all kinds of ideological excesses in politics and economics. In art it produced a succession of so-called ‘movements’, which eventually degenerated into ‘styles’ and fashions.

For those artists who rejected historicism, either instinctively or analytically, and I think that Pat Harris might be one, there was no alternative but to re-examine the basic situation of the painter: his confrontation with the external world and the canvas, and how to connect the two.

Pat Harris, to refer to his statements quoted earlier, decided to consider the fundamental procedure of the painter, that of making marks on the canvas as a response to observing the motif.

What is the motif? It can be an object or a space, or the space between objects. Pat Harris paints air and water, but does not produce the illusion of an atmospheric seascape. Seeing the marks imbedded in the surface of the paint are the equivalent of looking at the sea. They are the traces of his observation. The physical ground of the canvas, and the conceptual surface of the

picture plane become one, and represent, not reproduce, the sea and the air in front of the painter.

Do these objects and spaces have any significance outside of themselves? Flowers, fruit, chairs, rocks, water, sky, all may make a general iconographic reference to the human condition: endurance, frailty, beauty, existence in time and space. What they do not do is to subordinate painting to some supposedly more important purpose – whether sociological, political or pseudo-philosophical. Those activities are best left to professionals in their respective fields. These paintings, therefore, do not illustrate ideas or address issues, but they do generate speculation. Looking at the primary subject – perhaps a rock surrounded by water, is the starting point for a controlled meditation on wider aspects of the world.

What can we see in the marks which the painter uses to define these subjects on the canvas? They are clearly not part of a prescribed notation for a naturalistic image of the motif. Nor are they expressionist gestures which are supposed to reflect the emotional condition or the physical vitality of the artist. There is no trace of self-indulgence, there are no demonstrations of flamboyant dexterity.

Pat Harris is a painter and not an illustrator, neither of scenes nor ideas. He has understood that a central problem of our age is the prevalence of the virtual image, rather than the real presence. In opposition to that, he has found a way of integrating his marks on the canvas – the patches of green, blue, red, yellow and violet in subtle variations – with the ground painted on that canvas, and so to make visible the subject of the painting. To look at that subject is to experience reality.

Stephan McKenna

Introduction to 'Island' Westport, Mayo, Ireland, 2013

