

Pat Harris

Pat Harris's paintings risk looking simple. They can make it seem as if painting might well be an easy thing to achieve. Little colour, not much paint, often just a single object in an unfocussed space. Not a lot there. And yet there isn't much like them. For all their understatement they stand out.

He has cut his own path through the central traditions of painting, first figuration and portraiture, then landscapes and still lifes. Though they were rarely quite any of these either; his paintings have been little inclined to retread the inherited conventions of each genre. His earlier works, particularly self-portraits, along with nudes and animal studies, were as much about the spaces around the subject, the possibilities of paint, or as he put it 'light, form and space, and my endeavours to untangle them'. His paintings then had a linear emphasis, and a concern for formal structure as though seeking a framework to hold together their animated surfaces. In time the sensual won out. But though he simplified his forms he kept this balance he had achieved between expressive painterly accident and underlying order.

Pat Harris settled away from Ireland, living since the 1980s in Belgium (where he is Professor of Painting at The Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp). He moved away from figuration to landscape in the early 1990s, towards a painting that made greater demands on the image, reducing and compressing it towards abstraction, more sophisticated and evolved.

What are his paintings of? As little as possible, and that is more than enough. A single fruit, a pool in a field. They are made big by this reduction; a kind of less is more. Like other painters, though differently, process becomes content – the gestural confidence, the trained instinct of touch, the taking away, the experience and understanding of what to do with paint. His themes are just as concentrated. An elegiac expression of beauty and loss lies behind the pools of water – old bomb craters – in the fields of Loker or the paintings of poppies that evoke the clay of Flanders. Whether a painting of North Mayo, a pear or flower in a studio, there is a sense of place and moment, and a classical regard for essence rather than description. His still lifes are not still, his fruit seem to vibrate in space, the edges dissolve, their materiality affirmed only by their shadow. They are paintings that take time, and work over time.

William Gallagher

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