

## THE WEIGHT OF SPACE

### A conversation with Pat Harris

Pat Harris lives in a very special place, on the banks of a big river. After conducting our conversation, we stroll along the dike and look down on 400 meters of meadow. Five beautiful carriage horses gait stately and elegantly around the meadow. Harris points to an oval track, black against the blue silver grass, and says that for the first years the horses were in this huge field they followed each other and only walked this track. They had probably walked for years in a paddock or small field and their past prevented them from seeing the rest of the meadow. While Harris tells me this, we see that a horse, on its way from one end of the field to the other, falls back into the old track. In 2001 Harris used this image for the title of the exhibition 'Where the Horses Walk'. The catalogue from this exhibition opens with the poem 'Follower' by Seamus Heaney. In this poem the poet describes how as a child he stumblingly followed his ploughing father and how now it is his father that stumblingly follows him. Thus the painter appears to be determined twice: by the past, as a link in a long chain of painters, and by his own skill, a skill that seems constantly inadequate for exploring new ground. (But still, the horses now walk freely around.) If we hold onto this image of the oval black track in the blue-green field we can ask ourselves how this appears to us: sometimes it's as if the track pushes the green grass aside, sometimes the green seems to enclose and squeeze the black line. This is also how it goes with the birth of an image on Harris's canvases.

I'm happy that I can see your work in the flesh. The small books that have been made about your work give the impression that you paint in a soft, dry, pastel-like manner. But this is absolutely not so. You paint very wet and juicy, and in fact scrape the paint off the canvas with an aggressive mopping or pushing of the paintbrush. Through which, in some of the paintings of the pumpkins, the trunk of the pumpkin becomes almost transparent. The areas where the white of the canvas shimmers through the thin layers of paint remind me of the reflection of light on the shiny hard skin of a pumpkin, by which the depicted subject appears to bulge. But at the same time the fruit seems fragile and transparent. The brush stroke is exuberant, radical and stubborn and through its unruliness, also funny. You cannot see this on the existing photos because the photographer had to choose between relief (with shadows) or colour correctness and he or she chose for the latter.

Pat Harris · Until awhile ago the work was transparent. 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.

What do you mean by the word 'mark'?

- The mark is the paint stroke that you need in order to make something visible.

Whereby the main issue may be to place the marks in an unexpected manner. Like the upper edge of an ear in a Rembrandt that falls apart into contrasting and diversely directed areas of colour. Or the diagonal brush strokes by which Tuymans has a line of shadow fall apart. Or the crazy ringlets in the sky in Eugène Isabaye's 'Boat' that was so beautifully saluted recently by Philippe Vandenberg in The Museum of Fine Art in Ghent.

- That was a beautiful exhibition, with beautiful examples of the power of the mark. For instance: that painting with the black background, on which he wrote a text in a very strange, matt, white texture. That white was almost a kind of emulsion, almost watercolour, that kind of quality. It registered in a beautiful manner on that black, like chalk on a school board, like a written history. Last year from October to December I tried to find new ways of making marks, but I couldn't. I worked every day and at the end of each day I had nothing. The problem is you know how it should not look but not how it should look. You are the prisoner of your own knowledge, of your experience, of your command of the mark, of your facility. Finally something happened in December... I succeeded in translating the flowers into new marks that were completely absorbed into the surface of the painting. Previously my paintings were arranged around a single motif, if sometimes with echoes to the side. But now I've succeeded in spreading various elements across the surface of the canvas.

The paint around the motif appears to have become thicker than before, rougher, through which the motif gives the impression of just barely appearing or again almost immediately being swallowed up. That also seems to be a new element.

- Yes, I try to create a thick-layered space that the motif tries to overcome.

The space is more present than the motif, which has become even more fleeting, and is suggested with fewer marks than before. For instance the painting of the red apple that is almost scraped off the canvas with one or two uninterrupted brush strokes. Also, you no longer paint a shadow under or beside the subject.

- The table has also disappeared, the ground on which the apple, as it were, stands, so that the motif doesn't appear to rest on anything. The painting becomes flatter: more attuned to the flatness of the support.

At the edge there are still a couple of daubs of brown paint that remain from the image of the table.

· Yes, still a few traces.

The paintings of the flowers were probably made after that. The flowers appear to emerge, surface, almost like short accidents in the material, where large areas appear to be painted over.

· They are painted over.

Here and there the flowers break through the mist.

· I was delighted when I found this form. In a strange way I was happy that I searched for so long without finding. What's new is the way they are woven into the surface of the painting. As I said: in their scattered manner of appearing, a little like Cy Twombly.

The support has remained the same: primed canvas. First you stretch it over a board and when the work is finished you stretch it on a stretcher?

· Yes

Why?

· Because I paint quite aggressively. By which I sometimes damaged the canvas. Or you could see an imprint of the stretcher in the canvas, for example in the corners, and that wasn't my intention... What has changed also is the type of white that I use even if that has little to do with what has happened. Because I used to use Cremnitz white, lead white, the oldest form of white, which was also used by Rembrandt. It's paint with an unbelievably floury, buttery substance, that's ideal for a more structured mark. And just now when I want to work with more texture, I can't get that paint any more. I changed over to titanium white and then to a mixture of titanium and zinc. Because of the zinc the mixture is more transparent than Cremnitz white. It also dries slower, which made me start working on several canvases at the same time. For years I held back on the substance and texture as much as possible, but now I want the mark to sit in the paint.

Once a painter asked James Joyce how his work went that day, Joyce answered: 'It went okay, I have all the words, I just have to find the right sequence'. That's how it is with painting. You know what sort of marks you need to place, you just need to find the right cohesion, a new way to turn the paint into marks, to get them to work in creating an image. 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.

I think only when you realise and accept that, can you make good work. That's

how Rembrandt could make so many self-portraits: it's not about the subject (motif), it's about the quality of the paint. What matters is the specific manner in which you can transform paint into marks and images. That's why painting gets continuously more difficult. The more capable you become, the more difficult it becomes to find new marks, a new cohesion, to surprise yourself. 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. All you can do is to hope for new events and the insight to retain them. When it's there you recognise it and you know it should remain. Painting is a form of thinking. By rejecting or retaining different stages in a painting, a sort of research dialogue comes into being.

The contact between the marks and the layers next to them has also become very important in these paintings. I want them to find and hold each other. I want to somehow pin the marks down, as butterflies in a glass-case, through translating a three dimensional space into two dimensions. I begin with a figurative element, a motif, from which I try to retain the essential.

(Suddenly I hear, very still, music)  
What's that music?

· Variations from Bach played by Richter. I love the way he creates a presence for the spaces between the notes.

In your work the indeterminate space almost occupies the whole canvas. The flowers are painted over. The red shimmers from behind the white. The silence weighs. Is this the reason why you also based some paintings on the image of shell-craters?

· I find shell-craters very moving; they are serene traces of short brutal moments. And just there, where the earth is disturbed, poppies grow. Paintings are similar records of what is sometimes a violent and intense activity.

Their texture lends itself of course to painting. (Just like the oval black tracks made by the short-sighted, roaming carriage horses.)

· I love this verse by Dylan Thomas: 'Do not go gentle into that good night... Rage, rage against the dying of the light.'

(He points to the only two postcards that are pinned to the studio wall.)

· These are two prints of paintings by Bonnard. In this one he has depicted himself as a boxer. He was then an old and weak man, you can feel how vulnerable he had become, but despite all he still had the will to fight, to go on. But what you say about the weight of silence is right. With what mark do I make a piece of fruit visible and how can I make time tangible? I also like to choose subjects that in themselves don't have any real significance: apples, flowers, because if you can translate them into paint you can create a new form of significance.

Once you have accepted that a painting is only paint on canvas, you start admiring the way the mark can evoke powerful emotions or thoughts in the spectator. Before I realised this, which was crucial in my understanding of painting, I needed all sorts of things to believe that painting had significance. But now a bit of pigment and oil is enough. It is like Joyce said: the meaning comes about by creating the rhythm and the sound.

I was in Düsseldorf beside some woman who loudly compared two of Tuymans's paintings. The first work was a heap of plates. The second was his well-known painting based on the image of a gas chamber. The woman found the second work more charged. From my standpoint, I mean by looking at it as surface, they were both equally charged.

Of course. But also as subject. The plates that were used to lay the table were probably just as charged for Tuymans as the war-topics his parents discussed at the table. I don't know the painting of the plates, but I can accept that its texture, for example by evoking the forms simply by painting their fragmented shadows, could be disturbing. Just like the warm tones in the painting depicting a gas chamber. I don't think Tuymans hung these works side by side by accident.

· That has something to do with the fact that you can never really finish a theme or subject within the confines of one canvas, certainly I can't. Only at the end do I discover what I wanted to make visible in the painting. I thereby have to start a new work to continue my search. For example in this painting you can recognise one flower. To the right of it traces have remained of stems and leaves. I have retained a sort of process in the work. But generally the flowers become less and less recognisable from canvas to canvas... At the same time I think that everything that's painted away never really disappears, but just piles up inside. That's why I once worked on a project called 'Rear-View Mirror'. Everything that has passed, we carry with and reread it completely to know what it is about. In this poem everything is built around the image of a loose-box as metaphor for a poem (or painting) and on two events in the life of the famous Irish nationalist Michael Collins, who in his childhood years allowed himself to fall through a trap door of a loft into a pile of hay and dried flowers only barely to survive suffocation, while in the end he was shot dead at a place called 'Bèal na Blàth' ('Mouth of the Flowers').

Something like that also happens in your canvases of flowers. Where two or three emerging fragments form the negative anchors for the highly present but indeterminate space around them.

- What interests me now is how an object occupies a space and how I can suggest that space; what is necessary to make an object visible. In this painting the apple seems to almost disappear into the very space that it needs in order to exist.

Its delicate, shimmering presence comes about through a looser, even more transparent mark, which you set in contrast with the solid, almost enclosed, textured material around it.

- Yes. I'm looking for a soft, transparent nuance, for something that is not opaque and for a space that by its presence makes the volume of an object tangible without having to depend on a gradation from light to dark to suggest the form.

You have extended Cézanne's attempt to paint an apple without using shadow, to painting the space around the apple...

- Mostly in the paintings of flowers, where the motif appears in different areas, so that I can create a presence for the space between the objects.

Looking at it like that not only does the pictorial space appear as a 'loose-box' but also the space that the objects occupy. Like a box that can collapse at any moment.

- But offers strong resistance...

(Laugh)

Montagne de Miel, 7 May 2008

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