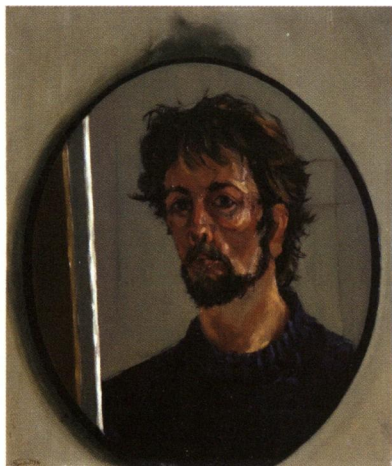


# Dual perspectives

In continuing our series on Irish artists abroad, **Geert Lernout** examines the career of Dubliner Pat Harris, who like Walter Osborne and Roderic O’Conor travelled to Antwerp’s Royal Academy to study, unlike them he stayed on to become its Professor of Painting



1 PAT HARRIS  
b.1953 SELF-  
PORTRAIT 1978  
oil on linen  
61x51cm

2 Pat Harris in  
Antwerp, 2012

3 PAT HARRIS  
LUPINE 2011  
oil on linen  
90x80cm

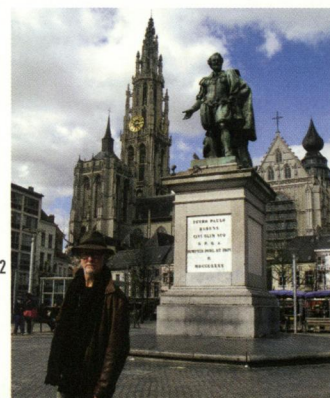
Most of the year, Dubliner Pat Harris lives with his Belgian wife Linda and his two children in a little town in rural Flanders. Tielrode is situated upstream from Antwerp, the city of Rubens, where he teaches painting at the Academy (Fig 2). The rest of his time is spent at the house and studios he recently built in North Mayo. Both in the Tielrode house and in his separate studio, formerly a coach house, he has a selection of paintings, records of an artistic quest that spans thirty-five years.

After secondary school Harris spent a year working for a stevedoring company in Dublin’s dockland. In the evenings he attended drawing classes at the National College of Art and Design (NCAD) and at the weekends he could be found browsing in the National Gallery of Ireland and in the Hugh Lane. Harris became more ambitious and evening classes were no longer enough; he enrolled as a full-time student at the NCAD. To his great relief his parents supported this strange career move.

The next year Harris did little else other than paint: from Cézanne he tried to learn the secret of creating a sense of space on the flat surface of a canvas. His diploma show at the NCAD consisted chiefly of portraits and landscapes in watercolour and egg tempera. Hungry for more, Harris travelled to London where he first saw Rembrandt’s late self-portraits and especially the full-length portrait of Margaretha de Geer. It was an encounter that was to radically change his approach to painting. The texture of the marks in this oil portrait became something he could not ignore but that he could not achieve in tempera. He spent days in front of the painting at the National Gallery and it continues to be a work that he returns to every time he visits London.

Harris next spent a postgraduate year at the NCAD focused on a systematic study of this painting. He was then [1977-8] one of the very few students painting from life and consequently had the luxury of a model entirely to himself. The American painter Charles Brady helped him, not so much technically or by telling him how to paint, but by offering support and advice at the most appropriate time. He did not say much, but when he did, it was always what was needed at that point in time. Witnessing his struggle with these first portraits, Charles told him: ‘You’re trying to paint her hair. Forget the hair! Paint the light!’

After his graduation, Harris received a scholarship for six weeks in Madrid: he took Spanish classes in the morning and spent the afternoons at the Prado



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to study the work of Velázquez and Goya, confirming that oil paintings have a structure and a depth that are lost in reproductions. The Spanish adventure had given him a taste for travel and he applied for a cultural exchange scholarship to the Higher Institute of Fine Arts in Antwerp. Without realizing it at the time, he was following in the footsteps of a much older generation of Irish painters like Walter Osborne, Roderic O’Conor and Joseph Malachy Kavanagh, who had all studied at the Antwerp Academy.

In Antwerp he turned to self-portraits. His range of colours became much more sombre: the dark tints may have been influenced by the modern Flemish painters he had discovered. Of course he already knew Ensor before coming to Belgium, but the dark canvases of Constant Permeke and the minimal paintings of Raoul de Keyser were new to him. The Flemish light turned out to be very different from what he was used to.

**HE CONTINUED TO BE FASCINATED BY SINGLE OBJECTS THAT KEPT CHANGING UNDER THE PLAY OF WIND, AIR, WATER, LIGHT: IT WAS THIS PLAY OF METAMORPHOSES THAT HE ATTEMPTED TO CAPTURE IN PAINT**

In the beginning he was completely on his own in Antwerp, having to read people without knowing their language. During his first term he had become isolated, something that is clearly visible in a self-portrait painted in December of that first year (Fig 1). The last marks were made minutes before he had to catch the bus to the airport to fly home for Christmas. All through the holidays he worried about the work’s strength, without being able to check. His body was in Dublin, but in his mind he spent most of the time in his studio in Antwerp.

That first year in Antwerp changed his art in significant ways: he began to work on a larger scale, concentrating on a single figure. Harris’ work is still concerned with the sin-

gle image: a human figure, a pear, a pond, a rock, a shell-crater. He has always concentrated on a single object, but of course this involves a confrontation between that object and the ego of the painter. Most of his work in Antwerp consisted of portraits and self-portraits with only the occasional still life or nude: his graduation exhibition in 1981 consisted entirely of dark and minimal portraits and nudes all captured in their own personal space.

By this time he had fallen in love with Linda Ruttelynck, a fellow graduate student and the pair decided to stay in Belgium: at that time Antwerp was a vibrant artistic centre, full of new impulses unavailable in Dublin. In addition, from Antwerp you could visit exhibitions in Amsterdam, Paris or Cologne in only a matter of hours.

They moved to the countryside in 1987, just after Harris had been appointed lecturer in portrait painting at the

Academy in Antwerp. But he had begun to move away from portraits: even his nudes had begun to resemble landscapes. Living in Tielrode beside the rivers Scheldt and Durme, Harris became fascinated with the rhythm of the tides in the Scheldt and its small tributary. Capturing the impact of the changing riverscapes became an obsession: not just the tides, but also the light, the reflection of the air in the water. Harris kept coming back to the same spot to paint the constantly changing landscape. He also travelled to Flanders Fields in the West of Belgium to paint a number of small ponds that are really shell-craters, scars in the landscape left after the violence of the First World War (Fig 5). But then another meeting intervened.



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In 1997 Seán McSweeney visited Harris in Tielrode; as they walked by the river Harris showed his visitor the landscape that had become so important to him. Although McSweeney did not say as much, it was clear that he preferred other landscapes, other possibilities. McSweeney lives in Sligo and on his return to Ireland he contacted the Ballinglen Arts Foundations in Ballycastle, Co Mayo, which subsequently offered Harris a fellowship that he used in three separate stays: winter, spring and summer. The Mayo landscape was so overwhelming that Harris returned the next summer: a new obsession had begun.

In Mayo the landscape is of an unearthly scale: the water is not just a sea, but an entire ocean thrown against the rocks with the force of half a world of water (Fig 4). Mayo has air, water, clouds, rocks, and the deep green of the grass, the brown of the bogs. He continued to be fascinated by single objects that kept changing under the play of wind, air, water, light: it was this play of metamorphoses that he attempted to capture in paint.

Almost at the same time something else happened in his painting that he only recognized later. In 1996 he had an exhibition with flowers, a new theme in his work, and it was only later that he realized that these had something to do with his father's failing health. Harris would bring flowers into the studio; because the process of painting them took so long that they would wilt, a change that he would attempt to capture in the painting. It was only later that he realized that his concern with the process of fading and decay had something to do with his father's illness. After the latter's death, Harris held an exhibition entitled 'Passings', with mostly portraits of lilies: the flowers were present in the paintings but more often than not, they were beginning to disappear. On some canvases only a trace of absence



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remains: it is as if the flowers have melted into the background. A year later Harris also started to paint single fruit pieces (Fig 7). This was an homage to his old friend and teacher Charles Brady. Like the landscapes and like the flowers, these paintings depict a single object, in which the border between object and background becomes ever more problematic: the stroke of the brush becomes a mark. Not just a mark of a presence of the object, but of its absence as well. The paintings also contain a record of how they were created, how a flower or a piece of fruit was painted and then wiped away, melting into the background. These canvases seem to represent the space around the object as much as they depict the flower or the fruit.

In 2008 he defended his PhD on 'Minimalism in Figurative Painting' with an exhibition in London of paintings with the minimal, silent suggestion of flower motifs, the end product of a development in his work that has not yet reached its culmination. Showing his work in Ireland still remains the high point of Harris's calendar and he is now working on a show due to open in November at Taylor Galleries in Dublin.

Pat Harris's *oeuvre* is the result of an extensive personal and painterly quest that has taken him from Dublin to Antwerp and then to Mayo. His work too has travelled: he has had the opportunity of working with international galleries and of showing his work at art fairs from Basle, Cologne to Chicago. In Antwerp he became a Flemish painter, influenced by light and contemporary Flemish artists, but his new house in North Mayo will bring him back to Ireland more often. ■

Pat Harris is working towards an exhibition at the Taylor Galleries, Dublin planned for November 2012.

Geert Lernout teaches comparative literature at the University of Antwerp and has published books on James Joyce, religion, Friedrich Hölderlin and Bach's *Goldberg Variations*.

4 HEADLAND AT KILGALLIGAN 2009 oil on linen 60x75cm

5 SHELL CRATER 1997 oil on linen 50x60cm

6 IRIS 2011 oil on linen 80x100cm

7 ANNEMIE'S APPLE 2001 oil on linen 50x40cm