

# FELIX HARRIS



## MAGICAL THINKING

RDS Gallery  
2022



**FELIX HARRIS**

*MAGICAL THINKING*

Essays on the Occasion of the Exhibition  
*Felix Harris: Magical Thinking*, at RDS Gallery,  
6 Castle Street, Dunedin,  
11 February – 12 March 2022

Occasional Essays Series

Editors

Alistair Fox and Hilary Radner

RDS GALLERY

Cover Image: *Alma*, Felix Harris (2021), acrylic and oil pastel on canvas panel, 30.5 x 40.5 cm.

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*Easy St*, Felix Harris (2021), acrylic and oil pastel on canvas panel, 30.5 x 40.5 cm.



*Care of the Soul*, Felix Harris (2021), acrylic and oil pastel on canvas panel, 41 x 50.5 cm.

## **Vestibles of a Heavenly Conspicuous— Paintings by Felix Harris**

*By Gregory O'Brien*

There's a curious moment early in Flann O'Brien's novel *The Dalkey Archive* when the narrator observes a thicket to one side of the enigmatically titled Vico Road. Gazing beyond the familiar, quotidian world, he recognises "a farrago of light, colour, haze and copious air, a wonder that is quite vert, verdant, vertical, verticillate, vertiginous, in the shade of branches even vespertine."<sup>1</sup> Ushering us into a dense, dark linguistic forest, the novelist's language is strangely beautiful yet also disconcerting. From that point on, his narrative is accompanied by a roiling undercurrent of psychosexual as well as surreal/metaphysical elements.

While Flann O'Brien uses rhyme, rhythm, and the tricks of language to impart a sense of strangeness and heightened awareness, Felix Harris uses disjunctive colours, patterns, and pictorial discontinuities to a similar end—taking his sources from both outside and within the Western visual art tradition: Joan Miró, Denis Diderot, Roland Barthes, William Blake, and the Beats. There are, at the same time, some fundamental differences between Harris's torrent of imagery (with inbuilt sentence-fragments) and the precisely calibrated and

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<sup>1</sup> Flann O'Brien, *The Dalkey Archive* (London: Picador, 1976 (1964)), 7.

mannered prose of the Irish novelist. Harris's art is a thick, spontaneous soup of emotional and imaginative ingredients. Nothing appears to be settled until it has arrived on the surface of the painting. Colours and forms are tossed around—and the viewer must find their own footing or toehold in this percolating quasi-reality.

A number of questions haunt these paintings: Is this an inner world or an outer one? (In a similar fashion, the narrator setting forth in *The Dalkey Archive* has no idea whether he is entering a dreamworld/inward state or some previously uncharted external /objective territory.) Everything in Harris's art remains in a state of growth and re-arrangement. While his world can be distraught and uncomfortable, his colours chime and his forms hint at an ordering or resolution, albeit only a momentary one. In Harris's clanging, disjunctive particulars some notion of transcendence, “a heavenly conspection”—to borrow another phrase from *The Dalkey Archive*—persists.<sup>2</sup> Also, a tenuously held sense of closeness, intimacy, or communion. Or at least the possibility of such.

When you close your eyes what do you see? A place of peaceful habitation. Or post-apocalyptic dreamscape. We follow the actual roads and sightlines into Felix Harris's most ambiguous of settings—further on up Flann O'Brien's Vico Road (a highway named, not incidentally, after the 17th century Enlightenment philosopher Giambattista Vico). From amidst the dense foliage, roadside

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<sup>2</sup> O'Brien, 7.



vegetation, and undergrowth of his imagery, messages can be heard—clearly enunciated or slurred, whole or in tatters, broadcasts, or proclamations on behalf of an inner life. “I’m yours, don’t give myself back to me.” A balloon or speech bubble contains a star-like scrawl, hovering over an orderly allotment of buildings. “Boom, crisis, slump.” Laden with words and other signs of human habitation, Felix Harris’s paintings configure as a village as well as a thicket (think Hundertwasser). They dream a complete, enclosed, secure life. They are also an archive of an emotional life (think Roland Barthes’ *A Lover’s Discourse*).<sup>3</sup> As intended, the questioning persists: How does the soul relate to the heart? And what part do mind and eye and hand play in this? And what accommodation might the world offer them?

As an account of the human condition, Felix Harris’s works frequently adapt the formal language of circuit diagram or flow-chart. With their visual hazards, collisions, and mashups, they also owe something to traditions of map-making. Bearing that in mind, the paintings might best be thought of as maps whose purpose is to help the map-reader get lost. To lose their bearings. To follow the dots, or else be subsumed into a blizzard of them. In this schema, the artist is not only a maker of maps and diagrams but also a groundsperson charged with picking up the pieces. An art of

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<sup>3</sup> In the painting *Lips*, Felix Harris quotes “Bring you lips to mine so that out of my mouth my soul may pass into yours.” This is a line by the French philosopher and writer Diderot borrowed by Roland Barthes in his volume translated as *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978). Diderot’s original poem reads: “Ou, si ma plainte te touche, / Penche tes lèvres sur moi; / Et qu’au sortir de ma bouche / Mon âme repasse en toi; / Et qu’au sortir, etc. (Denis Diderot, “Chanson dans le goût de la romance,” *Œuvres de Denis Diderot: Romans et contes*, III [Paris: J. L. J. Brière, 1821]), 494. (Editors’ note.)

threads and strands and remnants. Of battered and discarded things.

One of modern art's most alluring paradoxes: how an Expressionist painting can simultaneously offer a deluge of life-affirming colour, form and movement while imparting a tragic or violent vision of life (think Max Beckmann). Such is the well-trodden yet necessarily unstable turf that Harris stands on. Ultimately, one wonders what the art is seeking—with its passages of suffocating darkness upon which are bestowed the radiant, festive colours of a fairground. A balancing of light and dark? Most likely a state of equilibrium which exists within flux, rather than outside of it. As Tomas Tranströmer has written: “In the middle of the forest there’s an unexpected / clearing which can only be found by those who / have gotten lost.”<sup>4</sup> Felix Harris is not offering a set of instructions on how to get out of the maze of human existence. Rather his works enact a manner of thinking/being that locates itself at the heart of an effervescent fog, the blazing details of an incendiary but also revelatory world, the art itself becoming “a farrago of light, colour, haze and copious air, a wonder.”

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<sup>4</sup> Tomas Tranströmer, “The Clearing in the Forest,” translated by Robert Bly, *The Sun*, January 2022, <https://www.thesunmagazine.org/issues/59/the-clearing-in-the-forest>, accessed 24 January 2022.

## 2

### **The Dreamscapes of Felix Harris**

*By Taarn Scott*

To encounter the paintings of Felix Harris is to fall into Felix's world, one of childlike dreamscapes and an inner discourse continuously shifting from one thing to another. Tiny houses and paths of neon and electric colour extend beyond the frame, running into one another, like half-finished thoughts and musings. Akin to picture books for those burdened with the tasks of an adult existence, these pieces do not transport so much as they repackage universal experiences of heartbreak, grief, and the inescapably inconsistent nature of existence.

Felix draws with a playful application of colour and depictions that feel childlike in their naivety. There are images and symbols in the pieces which are recognisable, but these do not represent an attempt to recreate the world that we see. Regardless, there is little about his work that is truly naive. These pieces wail and shout, raw and romantic in their expression. This is particularly evident in *I'm Yours* (Felix Harris, 2020) and *Lips* (Felix Harris, 2020). In the former, Felix plaintively cries "I am yours. / Don't give myself back to me"—lines attributed to Rūmī, or Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, thirteenth century Sufi mystic and Persian poet. This piece sections off the image and text,

as if asking the viewer to digest the power of the text in its own right, with the painted houses and dotted trees offering a secondary respite. Indeed, one could argue that this contradiction in his works, the naivety of the figures and marks with the deliberate application of text allows an access point. Layered references to conversations, texts, novels, and film offer a multitude of strands for the viewer to grasp, with quotations acting as clues, inviting one to form connections between them. With influences spanning from cartoonists to poets and philosophers, the common element in these paintings is not their topic or their medium, but simply the fact that Felix, arbitrator of his world, has connected with it. In the world that he constructs, he is the king—a simple, yet defining, regime. In choosing his images, Felix does not let aesthetic determinations, or the privileging of certain voices or hierarchies take control: he appears to create uninhibited by these pressures.

Joan Didion's book *The Year of Magical Thinking* was an early source of inspiration for this exhibition.<sup>5</sup> The book explores Didion's grief at the death of her husband while her daughter is comatose, including Didion's attempts to manage her grief through "magical thinking." The title "takes its inspiration from the anthropological use of the term 'magical thinking,' by which catastrophic events can be averted."<sup>6</sup> To understand this connection is to look at the Felix's paintings differently, informed by an understanding that the artist is

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<sup>5</sup> Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, New York). Felix Harris, conversation with the artist, October 2021.

<sup>6</sup> Robert McCrum, review of *The Year of Magical Thinking* by Joan Didion, *The Guardian*, 8 February 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/feb/08/100-best-nonfiction-books-2-the-year-of-magical-thinking-joan-didion-robert-mccrum>, accessed 27 January 2022.

drawn to magical thinking and that these pieces emerge from, or enact, this. His paintings not only construct a kingdom of which he is king, but also provide a necessary space in which he can explore alternate realities.

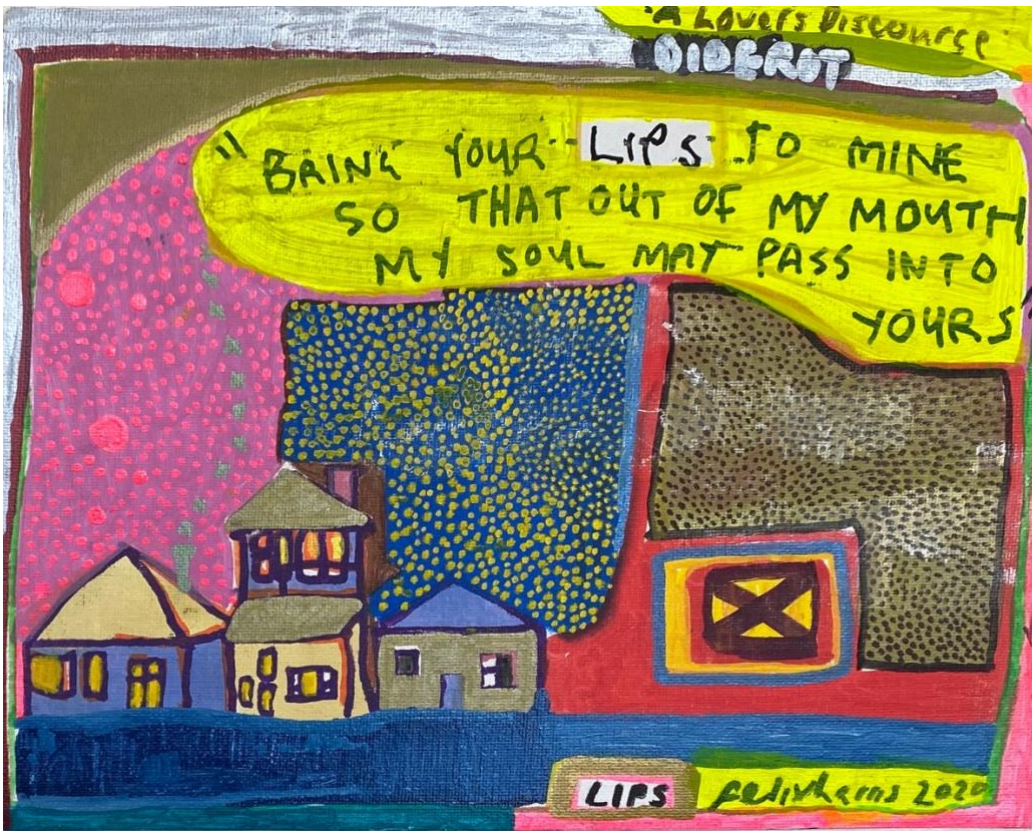
Matching vibrant illustrative images with words that discuss love, loss, and mental health, generates a contrast that works to surprise and jolt the viewer out of any complacent reverie. In *Lips* (Felix Harris, 2020), the words of Diderot ask the viewer to “Bring your lips to mine so that out of my mouth my soul may pass into yours.”<sup>7</sup> These words dream up the contented seclusion of lovers, a romantic, even picturesque appeal emblazoned on a fluorescent bubble navigating sectioned patterns which evoke skylscapes and domesticity. That's where the strength of these pieces lies, retaining the playfulness of one who consciously chooses to express with real freedom. These are simultaneously diary pages, workbook scrawlings, and concise composites of mark making that demand you look inward. In *Alma*, he scrawls “*I forgot to be your lover....*” a visual play on words that are susceptible to a multitude of interpretations—simultaneously a sort of acceptance and a tragic reflection. Like letters to lost lovers, these works have moments of genuine connection dashed within symbols and colour, moving through a chaotic abyss in search of authenticity and stillness.

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<sup>7</sup> See Footnote 3, p. 3, in this issue.



Scenic, Felix Harris (2021), acrylic on canvas panel, 30 x 38 cm.



Lips, Felix Harris (2020), acrylic on canvas panel, 23 x 27.5 cm.

## Contributors

**Felix Harris** (b. 1978, Dunedin, New Zealand) graduated from the Elam School of Fine Arts in 2006. He also holds a Bachelor of Art and Design (Honours) from Auckland University of Technology, awarded in 2014. Felix has travelled extensively overseas and was based in Seattle, Washington, 2007-2009. He has a strong interest in contemporary music and has worked as a producer/emcee under that name "fatigue." Largely influenced by Mexican Folk Art and Muralists, Felix also loves contemporary work by cartoonist Robert Crumb and author Charles Bukowski. He will be curating an exhibition of work by his mother Joanna Paul in 2022 for Brett McDowell Gallery.

**Gregory O'Brien** is an independent writer, painter, and art curator. He has written many books of poetry, fiction, essays, and commentary. His books include *A Micronaut in the Wide World: The Imaginative Life and Times of Graham Percy* (Auckland University Press, 2011) and the multi-award-winning introductions to art for the young and curious: *Welcome to the South Seas* (Auckland University Press, 2004) and *Back and Beyond* (Auckland University Press, 2008), which both won the Non-Fiction Prize at the New Zealand Post Book Awards for Children and Young Adults. His book *Always Song in the Water: An Oceanic Sketchbook* was published in 2019, and a major work on the artist Don Binney will appear in 2023. Gregory O'Brien became an Arts Foundation Laureate and won the Prime Minister's Award for Literary Achievement in 2012, and in 2017 became a Member of the New Zealand Order of Merit and received an honorary doctorate from Victoria University of Wellington. (Courtesy of Auckland UP.)

**Taarn Scott**, an Ōtepoti-based artist, graduated with a BFA (HONS) from the Elam School of Arts, University of Auckland, in 2019. She currently serves as Exhibitions Coordinator and Assistant Curator at RDS Gallery in Dunedin. Recent exhibitions include the solo exhibition "Outlining/Shifting Channels" at Refinery ArtSpace (Nelson), 2021-22, and the group exhibition "All Is Full of Love," curated by Wesley John Fourie, Broker Gallery (Queenstown), August 2021. She is interested in illustrative practices, community art, and exploring drawing through a variety of media focusing on ideas around the body.