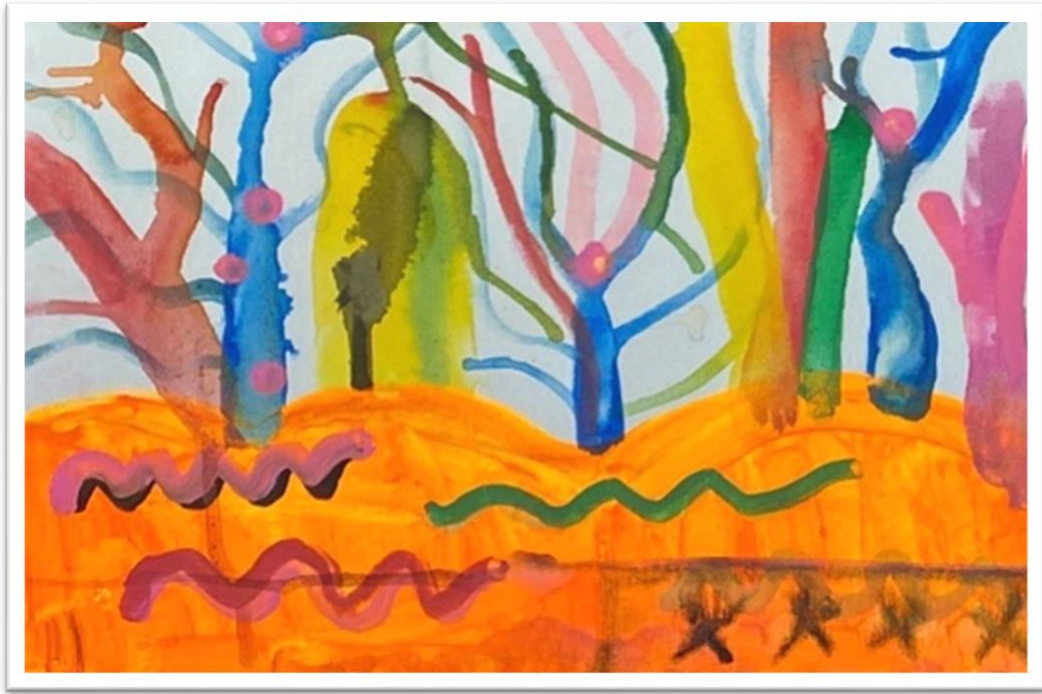


FELIX HARRIS



Silence in Paradise

FELIX HARRIS
Silence in Paradise

Essays on the Occasion of the Exhibition
at Olga Gallery,
32 Moray Place, Dunedin
2-30 June 2023

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“Felix Harris” © Bridie Lonie

“The Cat’s Tale” © Hilary Radner

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For the Ages

for Felix Harris

The years came
as they went,

indistinct, battering at the doors
of each other. They barked

and brayed, tussled and plotted their
next move. Even the more temperate years—

a lakeside convalescence, a first
wedding anniversary or the twelve months

between shovel and stone
being laid—there was

no settling or assuaging them.
They were a making up

for lost time. Some years
had more to say, others sang.

Others still were a grinding
of gears or a driving

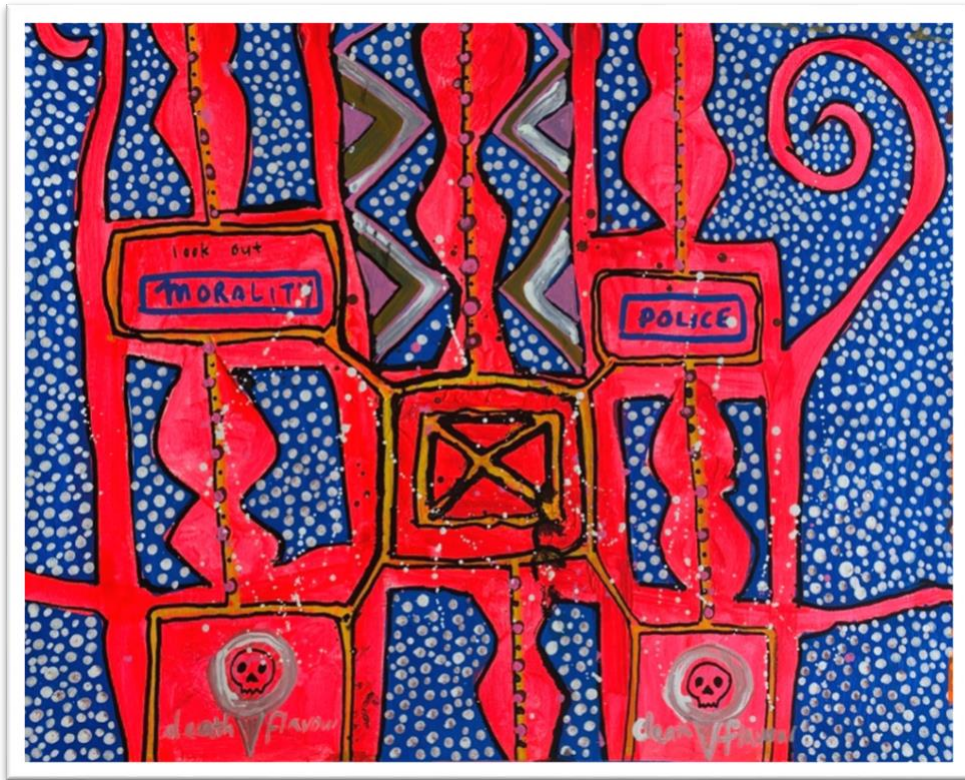
of piles, a setting off
of car alarms, a stadium

of beery anthems. The years came up
for air, painted their faces, but not

so we could recognise
them, shaded their eyes

then went back down, a rabble,
a carnival as they were a ruckus, a lost cause.

Gregory O'Brien



Morality Police

Acrylic on canvas sheet, dimensions: h. 16 inches x w. 20 inches



Instructions (Sexy Land)

Acrylic on canvas sheet, dimensions: h. 16 inches x w. 20 inches

Felix Harris

By Bridie Lonie

Felix Harris paints as though there is a very thin skin between his feelings and the world his works address, as if that world is designed for his use. That's a risky place to be, today: the appropriation of private life as the subject-matter of art has led to a critical theory alive with socio-political interpretive strategies that both generate identity positions and police them. For Harris, though, the space between private life and public art is as close as mother's milk: for his artist parents, the soul's struggles form their artworks' core.

But today, the heart is much more visible and privacy almost impossible to defend. I've watched painting after painting arrive on Facebook, with defiantly non-digital imagery running, bleeding and scattering across the pages of this medium designed for the fast flickering effects of the virtual, as if the images are keeping up with what is happening on it. That flow of the digital is necessarily fragmentary, reluctant to stand still and be examined, unwrapping nuance and resonance over days, weeks and years.

Yet painting remains, astonishingly, and for this artist, a stable place for the world's soul, reached through the flicker of affect and feeling, till it lands, still, on a flat place, with marks that may be read or felt, or both, altogether, all in it together.



Hang in There X Baby (2022)
Acrylic on canvas sheet, dimensions: h. 16 inches x w. 20 inches



Painting Is the Lover (2022).
Acrylic on canvas sheet, dimensions: h. 12 inches x w. 16 inches

The Cat's Tale: Two Paintings by Felix Harris

By Hilary Radner

Art historian Edward Hanfling praises Felix Harris for “the scope of his pictorial sensibility” as well as his “capacity for unfettered imagination,” commenting that it seems “as if he paints in the same way that some people write diaries.”¹ Harris’s visual diary, in its double nature (as writing and image), might be best understood as the product of a thought process marked by everyday language, deployed in the context of an inverted and profoundly personal visual vocabulary.

His paintings are permeated with sayings that are close kin to contemporary “memes”—brief phrases echoed endlessly across what we now call the “metaverse,” such as “My body is a temple” or “Death to the Dictator.” In contrast, his images are unexpected, even awkward, played against the slippery slickness of the quoted phrases, which often draw upon the titles of films and novels: *Silence in Paradise*; *The Go-Between*; *Ship of Fools* (which manages, among other things, to be the title of a famous painting, a novel, a film and more recently a video game—the phrase itself originating in Plato’s *The Republic*, Book VI).

In *Hang in There X Baby*, for example, the viewer is confronted with a phantasmatic animal, conceived outside the strictures of good taste. A cat (identified as such by the artist) with eyes, a nose (three dots), a faint line that may (or may not) indicate a mouth, three legs with blue spots, and a deep pink body adorned with something that might be breasts with blue nipples overlaying the pink—a figure that is arresting in its

implausibility, seemingly belying the colloquial ubiquity of the phrase “hang in there.” Hitting perhaps a more disturbing note is a large amorphous shape (a dark shade of “Aubergine,” verging on brown) dangling from the rear end of the animal, an ominously suggestive element, certain to provoke anxiety in a pet owner, if not in the pet herself.

The original hanging cat attached to the phrase “hang in there, baby,” has had a long life originating in a photograph by Victor Baldwin taken in 1963. One internet commentator opined that this photograph, due to its incredible popularity, might be considered “the first of the modern kind of meme.” The photograph, circulated as a poster, depicted a kitten hanging from a bamboo pole accompanied by the phrase “hang in there, baby.”² And yes, the kitten looks terrified, but recognizably a kitten—unlike Harris’s cat. The poster acquired a life of its own and garnered considerable attention, while the phrase itself has been completely absorbed into the vernacular, such that it becomes almost meaningless, a moment of phatic communication. Indeed, the artist confessed that he was unaware of the original poster, but, rather, had been influenced by later iterations of the “meme.”³

Victor Baldwin is reported to have sold 350,000 copies of the poster by 1973. The image, and the accompanying phrase, have been cited and re-worked again and again, across all media, including a video game (“Outlast 2”)—to the point that its origins have been lost. Thus, animal rights activists have expressed concerns about the image, seeing it as celebrating abuse, rather than, in Harris’s words, “hopeful,” the purpose of which is “to remind us not to give up.”⁴ In this sense, Harris’s re-articulation of Baldwin’s initial concept underlines the impossibility of

communication—or at least a considerable lack of transparency inherent in any message that attempts universality. And yet, the vibrancy of colour and composition, in Harris's rendition, brings to mind an almost Panglossian optimism fuelling the artist's diaristic creations.

The artist himself is a quiet, thoughtful man, approaching the middle of his life's journey, a journey that has left him chastened and subdued by its vicissitudes. His art, however, seems forever youthful, almost innocent, expressing continued amazement at the vagaries of human behaviour. As viewers we are asked to take the position of a kind of contemporary Candide, a character created by Voltaire, the nom de plume of an eighteenth century French philosopher. We are requested to ponder, not with despair, but with disbelief, and perhaps indignation, the abuses that define contemporary culture, without forgetting the perennial pleasures of light, form and colour that Harris offers us as viewers. In this sense the artist asks us to be both Voltaire, who criticises the unthinking celebration of life, but also Candide who never truly abandons his joy in this world.

This joy takes us, as it were, by surprise in an existence marked by sorrow, indignity and injustice, encouraging us to cultivate our garden as Candide chose to do at the conclusion of his travels. This position is one that we are more likely to encounter in popular culture than in the twenty-first century art world imbued as it is with postmodern malaise—think Forrest Gump as opposed to Anselm Kiefer. Harris deliberately points to this contradiction through his reference to the artist Marlene Dumas (whom Harris admires) in *Painting Is the Lover*.

The phrase “painting is the lover” is scrawled in the right hand corner of the work in question in black on a deep pink ground. Above, in fainter letters, only slightly darker than the deep pink background, the artist has written “cure through love.” The theme of “love” figured prominently in the works, largely completed in 2021, included in the 2022 exhibition “Felix Harris: Magical *Thinking*.”⁵ Less present in his 2023 exhibition “Silence in Paradise,” this theme is notably highlighted in *Painting Is the Lover* with its enigmatic additional pre-title comment “a cure through love.” The comment is quotation from *Love and Its Place in Nature: A Philosophical Interpretation of Freudian Psychoanalysis*.⁶

The volume’s author, Jonathan Lear notes, citing a letter from Sigmund Freud to Carl Jung, “Psychoanalysis, Freud once said, is a cure through love.”⁷ Lear contends that, by this, “Freud meant that psychoanalytic therapy requires the analysand’s emotional engagement with the analyst and the analyst’s empathetic understanding of his patient.”⁸ Lear pushes this concept further to state that the ultimate implication of this statement is that the goal of psychoanalysis is “individuation”—in other words, ultimately a cure for “love” itself as the desire to lose oneself in another as the residual effects of primary attachments.⁹

The sequence of statements—“a cure through love” to “painting is the lover”—intimates that painting is the cure for love, or perhaps the creation of a new kind of love that manifests itself through individuation. In this sense, this painting and its title may constitute Harris’s manifesto as an artist and his sense of partisanship with, his connection to, artists as a particular group of humans struggling with the problem of individuation in a culture that stresses attachment and conformity.

Harris draws the phrase “painting is the lover” from a catalogue accompanying an exhibition by Marlene Dumas, *Measuring Your Own Grave* (2008).¹⁰ The phrase itself was written by art historian Richard Shiff commenting on Dumas’ work in the context of photography. Shiff explains that for Dumas, “the potential for meaning becomes all the stronger to the extent that painting remains open and ambiguous, resisting the photographic fixations of culture. This is its value, relative to photography. Culture is the objectifying fetishist, served by photographic imagery.”¹¹ Shiff concludes that “painting is the lover,”¹² evoking how Dumas almost magically through painting and what she calls “the trace of the human touch”¹³ transforms the pornographic photograph (a strategy for which she is well known) into something else, open to the interpretation of the viewer unconstrained by the pre-ordained meanings codified through culture.

In Harris’s *Painting Is the Lover*, the scrawl of words is integrated into a mass of shapes and colours as almost a footnote to a controlled composition (with intermittent splash-outs) of green, pink, purple, black and orange, all with hints of blue, in drips and blobs. Somewhere close to half the canvas is covered in an expanse of intense pink that conjures up an irregular terrain, out of which a profusion of upward thrusting forms (plants?) emerge and bloom in a kind of pictorial flourishing that is not without darker undertones.

Like Dumas, Harris releases the image and the word from the literal reality (what Shiff designates as “nominal identity”¹⁴) that we associate, wrongly or rightly, with the photograph. Like Dumas, Harris does this through the medium of paint—the stroke of the hand freed from the constraints of mechanical reproduction—with even his painted lettering

bearing “the feel of the surface” (in Dumas’s terms). The addition of words, which are ideas (they carry denoted and connoted meanings) as well as material and form (with their own connoted meanings), create a kind of “interpretive” loop with the images that these accompany. This loop can take the viewer anywhere and nowhere in endless threads of association that question the role of what Shiff is calling “nominal identity”¹⁵ in defining the meaning of a given image or word. As Dumas comments, not without irony, “now that we know that images can mean whatever,” we confront the disappearance of what she describes as “the so-called passive spectator.”¹⁶ Meaning is unstable and consequently so is morality. “I paint my anxiety,” Dumas clarifies.¹⁷

And yet, paradoxically, herein lies the pleasure of Harris’s meditations—the invitation to “un-fetter” our imagination and enjoy what remains of life—our private “box of chocolates,” in Forrest Gump’s terms, despite our “anxiety”—to achieve a degree of freedom in the indecipherability of existence. In so doing, Harris invites us to see the world anew, to hear its songs as though we had not heard them many times before, to overcome our postmodern “always already” malaise and cultivate our gardens—without for that matter forgetting the world that holds this garden.

It is not an accident that Harris draws upon Dumas as an artist who sees possibility in even the most degraded of visual forms, in pornography, news photos, the detritus of print and then digital culture. Felix Harris’s garden is not a walled enclosure, but one that exists in the interstices of the world from which he literally draws—the neighbourhoods, the institutions, the cultural practices, the music that surrounds him—the

possibilities and constraints that define the “whatever” of his, and our, experiences.

¹ Edward Hanfling, review of "Felix Harris: Magical Thinking," in *Art New Zealand* 182 (Winter 2022): 51.

² Damian Robb, "‘Hang in There,’ Baby Poster," [damianrobb.com](https://damianrobb.com/2019/07/05/reviews-hang-in-there-baby-poster/), 5 July 2019, <https://damianrobb.com/2019/07/05/reviews-hang-in-there-baby-poster/>.

³ Felix Harris, conversation with the author, 25 April 2023.

⁴ Felix Harris, email to author, 7 April 2023.

⁵ "Felix Harris: Magical Thinking," 11 February–12 March 2022, RDS Gallery, 6 Castle Street, Dunedin, New Zealand.

⁶ Jonathan Lear, *Love and Its Place in Nature: A Philosophical Interpretation of Freudian Psychoanalysis* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1990).

⁷ Lear, *Love and Its Place in Nature*, 27.

⁸ Lear, *Love and Its Place in Nature*, 27.

⁹ Lear, *Love and Its Place in Nature*, 27-28.

¹⁰ Felix Harris, email to author, 7 April 2023. Cornelia Butler, ed., *Marlene Dumas: Measuring Your Own Grave* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2008).

¹¹ Shiff, "Less Dead," in *Marlene Dumas: Measuring Your Own Grave*, ed. Cornelia Butler, 161.

¹² Shiff, "Less Dead," 161.

¹³ Marlene Dumas, quoted in Shiff, "Less Dead," 151.

¹⁴ Shiff, "Less Dead," 151.

¹⁵ Shiff, "Less Dead," 151.

¹⁶ Marlene Dumas, quoted in Shiff, "Less Dead," 153.

¹⁷ Marlene Dumas, quoted in Shiff, "Less Dead," 153.

Artist

Felix Harris

Felix Harris (b. 1978, Dunedin, New Zealand) grew up surrounded by a family of artists and intellectuals who encouraged him to develop his imaginative capacities. He graduated from the Elam School of Fine Arts in 2006, continuing his education with a Bachelor of Art and Design (Honours) from Auckland University of Technology (awarded 2014). He has travelled extensively overseas and was based in Seattle, Washington, from 2007 to 2009. An active visual artist, he has also worked as a producer/emcee under the name “fatigue,” with contemporary music continuing to play an important role in his life.

Recent activities include, as artist, the solo exhibition “Felix Harris: Magical Thinking” at RDS Gallery, 11 February–12 March 2022 and, as co-curator, “Joanna Margaret Paul–The Amorous Encounter,” at Brett McDowell Gallery, 26 August–15th September 2022.

Harris, an avid and eclectic viewer and reader, counts a wide spectrum of artists—from Marlene Dumas to R. Crumb—as well as a varied array authors such as Charles Bukowski, Roland Barthes, Gabor Maté, and Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Rūmī, popularly known as “Rumi”—as significant influences on his work.

Contributors

Bridie Lonie

Bridie Lonie has worked in art education throughout her life and is an Emeritus Member of Otago Polytechnic. She was a founding member of the Women's Gallery, Wellington in 1980, and has published on feminist artists, and art on climate change and the Anthropocene.

Gregory O'Brien

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 October 2023.

Hilary Radner

Hilary Radner began her career as a video artist in the late 1970s and early 1980s, with work shown at MOMA (1981), and the Biennale of Sydney (1982). In 1988, she completed a PhD at the University of Texas, Austin and was awarded the position of Assistant Professor, and later Associate Professor (1995), at the University of Notre Dame, Indiana. In 2002, she was appointed Foundation Professor of Film and Media Studies at the University of Otago. She currently holds the title of Professor Emeritus, University of Otago, and has published widely in the areas of visual culture and cinema studies, most recently *Raymond Bellour: Cinema and the Moving Image*, with Alistair Fox (Edinburgh UP, 2018).

