

## **Philip Harris and the Poetics of Exactitude**

Henri Matisse famously said that "exactitude is not truth". Obviously, he was providing a justification for his own magical approach to painting, and attempting to explain to a wider public why his art didn't necessarily look like the things he was depicting.<sup>1</sup> For him, above all, painting was to do with a search for intrinsic values: "there is an inherent truth which must be disengaged from the outward appearance of the object to be represented. This is the only truth that matters". In other words, the superficial look of things isn't what they fundamentally really are, and the job of the artist is to separate the fleeting nature of appearances, from deeper meaning.

This raises interesting questions with regard to Philip Harris, one of the most prominent and accomplished British figurative painters of the last thirty or so years. His work does appear on first scrutiny to be a direct transcription onto the canvas of what he sees in front of him. But Harris is no more engaged in copying the world than Matisse was. While exactitude is a core aesthetic tool for him, he uses it to get beyond immediate appearances, as a means of exposing the underlying character of his subjects. Exactitude is truth in this situation, it is the means through which the artist creates his extraordinary visual poetry.

Philip Harris was born in Doncaster in 1965. After a conventional training, he rapidly made his mark, and firmly established for himself a way of making art. In 1993, at the tender age of 28, he won first prize in the BP Portrait Award at the National Portrait Gallery, the most important competition of its kind in Britain. Since then, he has been a constant presence on the national scene, regardless of the regular shifts of fashion in the art world.

This last point is important. Harris's singular vision and commitment separate him out from anything even vaguely like a group or tendency: "I don't think I fit into any category", he tells, us and adds that this isn't necessarily an advantage:

It has been a bit of a curse actually, because if they [critics, writers] don't think you fit in with anyone, they can't place you. I think it was Courbet who said he was sceptical of belonging to any school, and I identify with that.

He is especially wary of being mistaken for a Photorealist, the loose rolling movement that began in the 1960s, and still has its adherents:

Anyone who doesn't know much about painting always says "Oh yes, it's like a Photorealism". But I just don't have any common ground with that. I know a number of artists who are part of it - they are really nice - but I'm just not from that heritage. It isn't what I do.

He is so emphatic about this because his central focus, his underlying aim, and intellectual agenda, is very different from photo, hyper, and super-realism. Through all his work, the common thread is emotion. He positions figures in space in order to engage us with their feelings. His depiction of landscape invariably has the effect of intensifying the emotional content of the work, and of focusing us on the people. And when we look at them - from the small studies through to the large operatic works - invariably we enter a discussion with them. We want to know them, to find out about the situation they are in. In some cases, we fear what the world might do to them.

Outside of the commissioned portraits, he usually paints people he knows: "I pretty much always know my subjects. People who know I'm not going to be flattering them. I always

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<sup>1</sup> *Exactitude is not truth*, 1947, written in connection with Matisse's exhibition at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

explain to them that they are going to be a character in the thing, rather than *the subject*". This is because the subject is *feeling*: "the heart of the work is empathy, intimacy".

I have been lucky enough to curate two exhibitions over the last few years that included Harris's spectacular *Arizona Bloom*. It occurs to me that key themes in this piece recur across much of his production over the last five years. A man stands in a landscape that he doesn't appear to belong in. He is gathering flowers and he is dressed in a smart red suit. We don't know why. There is a sense of theatre, at least insofar as we have an actor, who presents himself in front of a backdrop. But despite the sense of the whole thing being staged, it all looks disturbingly *real*. The effect of the space is to focus us on the central character. We form a relationship with him, and we care about what he is up to. The artist tells us that:

The figures in my big works are almost life size, and you relate like a real person is in front of you. [In *Arizona Bloom*] I hope the landscape pulls you in, and forces you to look further, and focuses you into being intimate with the figure itself. I aim to make you become present in the space. I want you to think about what is going on with the character, is he isolated, confused? Where is he? How does he fit in?

The smaller landscapes in the exhibition often raise the same questions. Even the family groups and holiday scenes have a Vermeer-like sense of frozen time, and of things about to occur. We are always curious about the situation the artist places us in, the complexity of the emotional threads generating a melancholy that is hard to explain.

The working processes of painters is always interesting. Many, for example, produce smaller works as a bi-product of work on large canvases. Others work on a suite of paintings at the same time, gradually easing a number of pieces to completion as part of a single body. Harris doesn't work this way:

I nearly always work on one piece at a time. I spend the majority of my life obsessing over the processes I go through. *Arizona Bloom*, for example, was almost a year, sometimes 10 hours a day, just on that one work. It's an intense activity, and that work did become almost obsessional. It is important to keep looking at the piece even when you aren't actually working on it. The smaller works are the same, but perhaps a little more relaxed, because they have a greater flexibility to them, you can change them more easily.

He describes his process as one of adding layer to layer, until the work arrives at the right depth of intensity: "the paintings often come from quite simple ideas in themselves. Hopefully it is what I do to them that makes them what they are. The process is the undercurrent to it all". The initial stage is open and flexible: "it begins with sketches, then I'll often take hundreds of detailed photographs of the subject, in many positions, so that if something doesn't work, I can change it. Then it becomes a little like making a collage". After this, the painting process takes over, successive layers carrying the artist toward a magical specificity.

Exactitude in the service of poetry. Philip Harris is a very rare creature within contemporary art, one who shows us that 'truth' neither a theory, nor an aesthetic principle. It is a way of life.

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