

## Brent Harris: The Stations

### Q&A Brent Harris and Jane Devery

Brent Harris is well known for haunting imagery that drifts between abstraction and figuration. For more than four decades, the artist has engaged in a sustained investigation into the human condition, producing paintings, prints and drawings that address universal themes such as intimacy, desire, spirituality, sexuality and mortality. More than thirty years ago, Harris produced a series on the Stations of the Cross for which he received widespread critical acclaim as a young artist. In 2020, Harris returned to the subject with a new body of work. In the following conversation, he discusses his new prints *The Stations 2021* with curator Jane Devery.

**JD** In 1989, you made your first series of *The Stations*: a group of fourteen paintings and a corresponding set of intaglio prints that address one of the great subjects of western art history, Christ's journey toward death. What attracted to you to the subject?

**BH** My first awareness of the subject was through art, rather than religion. Growing up in New Zealand, I was aware of Colin McCahon's engagement with religious subject matter. From his early figurative religious paintings to his later works that often refer to the Stations by virtue of either a series of paintings numbering fourteen or the numerals 1 to 14 written out across the surface of a single work. Even though the narrative has a distinct beginning and end, with McCahon, I always felt that his handling of the subject evoked bigger questions. The 1980s was a decade of high anxiety for me. I had just started art school in Melbourne as the AIDS pandemic was beginning to emerge. As the 1980s progressed so did the presence of death.

**JD** As a young gay man, it must have been very confronting to be faced with your own mortality in this way. How did your experiences of this dark episode in recent history find expression in your work?

**BH** By the late 1980s, the AIDS pandemic was a central narrative in mine and many others lives. I recognised the Stations story – Jesus' final journey to mortal death – as a resonant equivalent narrative. As an artist, particularly one very interested in the metaphoric and spiritual ambitions of abstract art, it was a question of finding an effective vehicle to describe and to memorialise the journey of loss and ultimate closure. And it is a journey. Whereas an older person shuffles toward death (their lives running down, yes, but rich in memory and experience), young men – friends of mine – arrived at their abrupt deaths very unwillingly, their lives and their ambitions cruelly cut short.

With the fourteen stages toward death described in the Stations, I found the framework to explore my own feelings of loss and mourning, the abstracted forms standing as emblems for the inevitably sad yet episodic journey. Numbers three, seven and nine all deal with the fall of Christ, as he stumbles under the burden of his cross. In each fall his ego is reduced and by the time he is brought to the cross he is more or less resigned to his fate. In the fifth station, Simon helps carry the cross, acknowledging the burden we all must carry with each other's deaths. Historically, in images of the sixth station where Veronica wipes the face of Christ, a small amount of blood appears on her proffered veil. In my version, it becomes a river of red: a river of blood. By 1989, with the tragic realities of AIDS, but also with the panic, blood had become bad. The blood rule had been introduced to sport, and gays were banned from donating their own. Yet in the Entombment, the final episode, my image ends with a block of light — the light representing at least some small hope.

**JD** The idea of revisiting the Stations of the Cross in your work was something you considered for a long time. What prompted you to finally return to the subject in 2020?

**BH** I had attempted to re-embrace the subject a few times over the last decades – it being such a rich and central narrative of mortality – but each time it ultimately felt too forced. In 2009, for instance, I was awarded a three-month studio residency through the Australia Council Studio at The British School at Rome. My initial intention was to work on a new series of the Stations of the Cross, feeling Rome might be an appropriate location – ideal in fact – to address this subject again twenty years later. Yet strangely, in Rome, I felt so overwhelmed by the broader ‘church’ that I couldn’t hold on to the precision of the subject. More inspiring were the buoyant and colourful frescos I encountered almost daily. This led to a series of small gouache on board paintings I titled, ‘the ecstatic moment’. Any return to the Stations was put on hold yet again.

But more recently, and as I continue to age, fleshy mortality is coming back into sharper focus. The Stations still registers with me, as a visual depiction of the passage of life toward a death but my engagement with the subject now, thirty years later, is gentler and more visually literal, rather than expressed through the austere abstraction of thirty years back. Mirroring the wider shift in my work across time, landscape elements have entered the images, a more open view and a wider appreciation of life in relation to death.

**JD** It’s tempting to draw parallels between the context of the AIDS crisis in which you made the first version of *The Stations* and the global pandemic that we are currently living through. Do you think there is significance in this correspondence?

**BH** I guess there has to be, as death is lurking. Beyond this, the different lockdown scenarios we have lived through over the past eighteen months created an ideal time for concentration on this subject. Working on the new *Stations* series has been a twelve-month project.

**JD** Colin McCahon’s 1966 version of the *Stations of the Cross*, was a direct reference for your 1989 series, but the American artist Barnett Newman’s 1958-66 rendition, was more so. Your version shared formal affinities with Newman’s austere geometric abstraction and marked a departure from the expressionistic works you had previously been making. Did you return to the same art historical references in any conscious way, when making your latest series?

**BH** No, not to the same extent, however the ideas still resonate. My engagement with McCahon’s work has been more emotional than my use of Barnett Newman’s. Newman’s are an essay on his own mortality following a heart attack, but of course the subject goes beyond the personal. McCahon’s work also addresses mortality head-on, but with a more moral swerve.



**JD** There are obvious stylistic differences between your 1989 and 2020 version of the Stations. The earlier is abstract, the latter is figurative, for a start. How do you see the differences between the two versions? Differences, perhaps, that aren't immediately obvious?

**BH** Well over the past thirty years it's become obvious that I'm a figurative artist. Not exactly realist but, in a wacky way, a figuration that is more of my own making. The space is also different in the new works; it's more open as in the suggested landscape. There are also references back to earlier works where the space was more claustrophobic, and the only sense of a possible escape is through these portals or eyeball-like orifices.

**JD** Your works often suggest bodily references in ways that aren't clearly figurative, or, as you suggest, they are figurative in a 'whacky' and ambiguous way that can also appear as a kind of abstraction. The eyeball-orifice-portals which you mention, that populate many of your works, are a good example. The Philip Guston-like pink that you have used in these prints is also very bodily. I'm interested in your use of this pink.

**BH** Well, I'm drawn to the bodily flesh reference. It's hard to avoid the Guston reference, but I was also looking at Degas and some of his delicious works on pink papers. I started my new series of the Stations by colouring fourteen sheets of paper with pink and pinning them around my studio wall. Above these I hung the 1989 set and whichever early print I felt most drawn to, is where I would start drawing below on the pink ground. The pink could have been a different colour I guess, it was mostly a surface breaker, you know, like a circuit breaker from the terror of the blank white emptiness.



**JD** You worked closely with master printer John Loane to produce the new series. What was involved in the process?

**BH** As John printed the first series, the thirty-year gap also had significance for him. He had to be the printer. The medium is polymer gravure etching. The process involved the study drawing being scanned and transferred from computer to plate. The polymer plate was then inked and printed as one would from any intaglio etching plate. As with the printing of any etching, multiple proofs were made before deciding on how to proceed with an edition. As I have worked with John over the years, I have grown to totally trust and admire his touch on the plate. The pink of the final print is hand-coloured and applied while the print is still damp. This has resulted in each print being unique. There are print cycles for most of my series of works, starting with the 1989 Stations. James Mollison had a lot to do with my adventures in printmaking. From 1990 on, he encouraged me to make prints by offering to swap prints I had made for Fred Williams prints from his own collection.

**JD** Swapping your own work for Fred Williams prints with that kind of provenance seems like a good deal, not to mention a good incentive for a young artist!

**BH** Yes it was hugely encouraging, and I now live with a collection of nineteen Williams prints. James saw further into the future than a young artist might, by suggesting there was real value in having a serious body of work on paper to complement any other medium one might focus on (for me, painting). James also introduced me to Louise Bourgeois at the end of 1989, taking me to her house, as we were both in New York at the same time. He very firmly alerted me to her serious drawing and printmaking practice, spanning her whole career, and suggested a museum could make an interesting survey of Bourgeois' developments through works on paper alone. I still think this is sound advice to any young artist.

**JD** In recent years, it seems that you have consciously re-orientated yourself towards Aotearoa New Zealand, the place of your birth. Would you say that this reconnection informed your latest series of *The Stations* in any way?

**BH** Yes, it's amazing how the death of a father can reorient the picture of one's place in the world. As I mature, the space I now imagine in my works embraces the distant and the external, whereas up until about a decade ago the space in my work was really quite internal and more psychological. I think this shift is evident in these new prints and it is connected somehow to my re-engagement with New Zealand. A kind of landscape space has also entered the new series, perhaps as an echo of the 1966 McCahon paintings.

**JD** McCahon has had an enduring influence on your work generally. For most New Zealand artists, McCahon is a figure to be reckoned with in one way or another. Have your attitudes to his work changed over the years?

**BH** I'm not sure if McCahon has as strong a pull on current generations of New Zealand artists as he did for me and mine. My connection to McCahon is now mostly emotional. Sadly, fathers must die.

**JD** Many of the artists that you have gravitated to over the years – I'm thinking here of McCahon but also Edvard Munch, Louise Bourgeois and Agnes Martin – had in common a desire to make sense of the human condition through their art. Although working at different moments in time under very different circumstances, and quite unrelated in their individual approaches, each was driven by a desire to unravel the mysteries of life and its pain and suffering as much as its joy and beauty. Would you agree, and would you say that the same concerns are present in your current work?

**BH** Yes. I would say I am most drawn to artists who could be loosely corralled into a 'modernist melancholic' paddock. These are the artists that have formed me as an artist. Munch for his melancholic diggings into the torture of relationships. Agnes Martin for her engaging avoidance strategies while plucking a universal spiritual string. Louise Bourgeois for her ability to image her psychological states graphically and sculpturally. Colin McCahon for his repression. And Philip Guston for his can opening abilities. All embrace the absurdity of the human condition we are all a part of.

**JD** Do you consider yourself religious?

**BH** No, I don't think so. I was giving a talk to some students at RMIT University a few years ago and I was talking about the *Stations of the Cross* and other related works of mine with religious subjects. I repeated myself several times stating 'I am not Religious'. One of the students spoke up and said, 'Brent, it's OK if you want to be religious.' I do now reserve the right to be religious.

Jane Devery is an independent curator and writer based in Melbourne. Currently employed as Project Curator at Heide Museum of Modern Art, she previously held the position of Curator, Contemporary Art at the National Gallery of Victoria where she curated Brent Harris's solo exhibition in 2012.