

Brent Harris
Monkey Business

Painting can be a forcefield, a place with edges, finitude—even if what plays out within its borders is a kind of absurd, stuttering chaos. For Brent Harris, painting is a place to frame and momentarily circumscribe shifting psychological states and philosophical questions that threaten to overwhelm us at times. This is why their forms are inexhaustible, always requiring recombination, reassessment, another painting.

Harris chose the exhibition title “Monkey Business” (with its allusions to playful, mischievous, or even inappropriate behaviour) as an umbrella term that encapsulates divergent subject matter, allowing for more ambiguity and multiplicity of meaning than in some of his earlier series, such as a recent reworking of the orderly narrative of the fourteen Stations of the Cross.



*

In *Monkey Business #14 (the plank)*, a half-human/half-monkey figure with a long spiralling tail rests or butts its head against a wall. Its eyes gaze downwards; it is armless. The figure is, in the artist’s own words, ‘up against it’—that is, in a difficult situation. But, as with so many pictorial elements in Harris’s oeuvre, like his eyes that are targets that are voids that are eggs that are breasts, this wall is not one but many things. Its meticulously painted wooden grain may also signify Christ’s crucifix, just as Harris depicted it in his *Stations of the Cross* series (both the abstract, McCahon-inspired original from 1989 and its recent revisioning in grey and fleshy pink tones in 2021), as well as his close-up profile of Christ on the cross in *The face* of 2004 (held in the collection of the Art Gallery of New South Wales). Flush against the right-hand edge of *Monkey Business #14*, the wooden grain may also be read as an X-ray view of the wooden stretcher beneath the canvas: that which gives form to and describes the limit of the painting itself. In which case, the ‘it’ against which the monkey is ‘up’ marries the formal concerns of painting with existential questions about life itself—about life’s journey towards death that is so powerfully captured in the narrative of the Stations and its accompanying imagery throughout Western art history.



The monkey figure, which Harris treats as a stand-in for himself, appears in two other paintings in the series. In *Monkey Business #16 (inside)*, eyes again trained downwards, the figure tests the limit of its enclosure with an oversized hand, pressing the edge of the canvas with long prehensile fingers—here butting up against the objecthood of the black frame itself. In this version, the yellow, non-volumetric pictorial space of *Monkey Business #14* has shrunk to become a painting within a painting. The monkey appears for a third time in *Monkey Business #15 (jump)*, where it floats in a thought bubble, which may also be a fried egg yolk. The figure is not physically up against the wall in this composition, but the canvas is clearly bisected by a kind of impenetrable wall: a thick black line (or Newman ‘zip’) that forms the front of a body, signalled by the curvaceous bottom and black-booted foot which adorn the otherwise uninterrupted straight line.

As we begin to see by considering this trio of works, to look carefully at Harris’s work is to be inducted into a capacious, self-generating universe of symbols, compositional choices, art-historical references, and colours. These components seem to be endlessly interchangeable within Harris’s compositions, where they are arranged and rearranged in order to visualise different psychological states. The monkey itself derives from an earlier work, *Rome #6 (the devil loves you)* from 2009, where it appears as a silhouette being “buggered” against flame-like red and orange gouache. In Harris’s work, it is as though certain forms (the target/eye/breast/egg), colours (fleshy pink, baby blue, searing orange), compositional techniques (extreme closeup, figure–ground confusion), and art-historical references are inexhaustible, un-exorcisable—each an object of obsessive inquiry. Indeed, each of Harris’s compositions seems to be haunted by the next one that it prefigures, and the one after that.



A version of the wall that is a body in *Monkey Business #15 (jump)* also appears in *Monkey Business #12 (the lamp)*, where it is enrobed in a polka-dot dress. Opposite is a pink, kinked worm-like figure, subtly kowtowing. Weighted by a large cement-grey boot (reminiscent of Guston's severed foot motif), it sports a dubious disguise: a brown hat and giant black moustache. This figure is also self-illuminating. Its hat doubles as a lampshade, and the spikes of yellow hair as radiant light, recalling Kippenberger's wobbly lampposts, like *Street Lamp for Drunks* of 1988.

Harris has based the polka-dot dress on the well-known painting of Kelly Gang member Steven Hart, part of Nolan's iconic 1946–7 Kelly series that hangs at the National Gallery of Australia. Hart purportedly disguised himself as a woman and rode side-saddle to evade the police, before dying at just 21 years old in the famous siege at Glenrowan. Along with Dan Kelly, Hart found himself right 'up against it' when the police decided to smoke the bushrangers out of the Inn—their only other options being to burn alive or commit suicide, the latter of which it is thought the duo opted for. In his treatment of Hart, it is not the grand Australian narrative Nolan was aiming for that Harris is pursuing, however, but something more universal: Hart, like Christ, confronted with the reality of his own imminent death.



In *Monkey Business #8 (the walk with SH)*, Hart's vertical presence persists but the lamp figure of *Monkey Business #12* has been replaced by an ominous black biomorphic shape. Here, an eye/hole punctures the black oil paint to reveal the weave of the raw linen beneath. To move between the two compositions (#12 and #8) is almost to flick the light on and off, an action that delineates form from non-form, order from chaos—formal tensions that characterise much of Harris's work. In *Monkey Business #8*, the dark formless shadow is, for Harris, death itself, which hovers in the wings of the painting.



If Hart is a newfound protagonist in this series, then it is worth also mentioning the purple-faced pansy, which appears in *Monkey Business #9 (the walk)* and others. Harris first painted this pansy in the 1992 work *Apron of abuse*, which he made after being called a “pansy” by a stranger in Fitzroy but never exhibited until 2018. For the artist, “The pansy is a pretty cocky little flower. Due to its small size, I think it tries to outperform others with its courageous colour combinations. It’s also a flower that performs well in the massed company of its own.” Harris took the pansy motif from Robert Gober’s hand-painted and -sewn *Slip Covered Armchair* of 1986–7, and the form of the apron from Sigmar Polke’s *Large Cloth of Abuse* 1968—a 4 x 4 metre list of German obscenities inscribed directly onto flannel. In a photograph from this time, a print of which has been lying around Harris’s studio recently, Polke is pictured draping the painting around his shoulders like a regal cape, the terms of abuse trailing off his shoulders and over the ground. The *Large Cloth* enfolds Polke, almost forming a protective forcefield around him—just as the slip cover protects the armchair. The pansies reappear in *Monkey Business #10*, where they jump straight into an open mouth, and in *Large Apron of Abuse*, 2022, which is a return to and upscaling of the more diminutive 1992 painting in line with the overwhelming size of Polke’s *Large Cloth*.

Helen Hughes
 Senior Lecturer, Art History, Theory and Curatorship
 Monash University