

**BRENT HARRIS**

***DRAWINGS AND NEW PAINTINGS***



Brent Harris, *Stumble* 2024, oil on linen, 92 x 73 cm

The exhibition follows on from *Brent Harris: Surrender & Catch*, which opened at TarraWarra Museum of Art in December 2023 before transferring to the Art Gallery of South Australia (AGSA) from July to October 2024.

Curated by Maria Zagala, Curator of Prints, Drawings and Photographs at AGSA, *Surrender & Catch* brought together paintings, prints and drawings made by the New Zealand-born, Melbourne-based artist over four decades.

Preceding this was a separate exhibition at Auckland Art Gallery, *Brent Harris: The Other Side*, guest curated by Jane Devery, Senior Curator, Exhibitions, at MCA Australia, which ran from May to September 2023.

In the lead-up to these exhibitions, Harris spent a great deal of time reviewing his comprehensive body of work, in the company of the curators and alone in his studio.

"Following those three retrospectives, and as a now older artist, I feel even more equipped to draw on my own history of image making and narrative building," Harris says.

This new exhibition, installed across both gallery spaces of Tolarno, encompasses 13 oil paintings alongside studies in coloured pencil, charcoal and gouache.

“These new works present a layering of motifs that have populated my compositions for some decades, stimulating configurations that reveal new meanings for both myself and the viewer,” he says.

Harris’s minimal-line paintings present as lucid dreamscapes, incorporating both abstract and figurative elements to surreal and disquieting ends.

Igniting the imagination with their playful ambiguity and inherent sense of narrative, these immaculately executed pictures are receptive to multiple readings.

We are never quite sure what we’re looking at, and that visual unease is part of the fun.

Take *Suddenly 2024*, which is composed of five elements: a pair of dangling legs, a dark-red mountain range, a curvy pink vertical mass, an eyeball and a grey background.



Brent Harris, *Suddenly* 2024

oil on linen

152 x 113 cm

“The painting is basically a portrait, but of itself – it’s virtually putting itself together out of disparate parts,” Harris says, adding that the elements are derived from around six paintings made over the past 25 years.

“The main grey body of the painting is the face, with a bulbous nose pushing into the pink – that’s from a 2009 painting,” he explains.

“The pink shape holding to the right-hand edge, forming a mouth, ready to consume – the curvature of this shape comes directly from a 1998 painting, *Untimely No. 9*.”

“The curving shape at the bottom edge, which appears as either mountains or a smiling mouth for the face, references a 2007 painting, *The trap*.”

And the feet of the dangling legs hark back to paintings from 2017 and 2019.

Meanwhile, *Visitor* 2024, includes – opposite a pair of dangling legs – a figure in a white dress decorated with coloured dots, another motif he’s used before.



Brent Harris, *Visitor* 2024

oil on linen

220 x 160 cm

The dress is a reference to Kelly Gang member Stephen Hart (1859–1880), who is said to have donned women’s clothes and ridden side saddle in an attempt to dodge the authorities.

Harris borrowed the dress from Sidney Nolan’s painting *Steven Hart Dressed As a Girl* 1947, part of Nolan’s celebrated 1946–47 Ned Kelly series in the collection of the Nation Gallery of Australia.

“I feel warmth towards Steve Hart in his floral dress, as depicted by Nolan,” Harris says. “Not that I’m a cross-dresser, but I do see this dress as a reference to my own gender, the dress tempering Steve Hart’s macho gangster profile.”

In *Visitor*, the dress-wearing figure appears to have lost their head – or have they spilt ice cream down the front of them because they were startled by the dangling legs?

“The dress is a stand-in for the self, so this painting is somehow a self-portrait,” Harris explains. “The shape floating on the dress first appeared in another painting ... and I began to see in this blob the beginnings of a profile of a boy.”

“I now see this as an image of myself as a boy, layered over the gender-referencing dress,” he continues. “The legs are presented as an appearance of the ‘other’ – something beyond the self’s grasp at meaning.”

The dress pops up elsewhere – as a magic surfboard in *Dreamer* 2024, and as a spotty backdrop in *The Lamp* 2024.



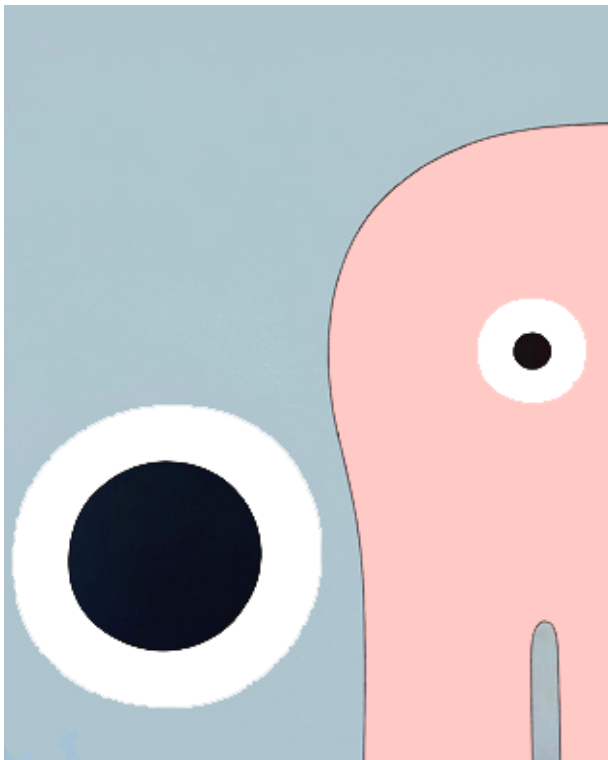
Brent Harris, *The Lamp* 2024

oil on linen

75 x 60 cm

"I like the idea of the dream and have titled a few works 'Dreamer' in the past," Harris say. "I am drawn to the psychological readings of a dream, where meaning goes beyond the clearly understood."

Another painting, *Appalling Moment* 2024, pictures a playful-looking elephant facing off against a giant eyeball – or is it the sun?



Brent Harris, *Appalling Moment* 2024  
oil on linen  
101 x 81 cm

The work relates to a charcoal drawing from 1994, which Harris had not seen in years before its appearance in the exhibition at AGSA.

"On seeing it, I could not understand why I hadn't attempted a painting of it at the time," he says.

And in *Rokeby Shadow* 2024, Harris zooms in on the back of the head and left shoulder of Velázquez's mirror-gazing Venus.



Brent Harris, *Rokeby Shadow* 2024

oil on linen

75 x 60 cm

"I have always had a strong connection to the history of painting and now my head is quite stuffed with a world of other artists' imagery, from Piero della Francesca and Goya to Philip Guston, Louise Bourgeois and Nolan," he says.

It's rare for an artist to enjoy one retrospective in their lifetime, let alone three. For Harris, the experience has been immensely valuable, if a little overwhelming.

"It was daunting, digesting the decades laid out and realising how circuitous the process has been," Harris says. "Certain obsessions and narratives surface then recede, only to emerge again, while others linger longer in the shadows."

— Tony Magnussen, 2024