

## An Empty Moon

*Every moon is atrocious and every sun bitter.*

Arthur Rimbaud, *Le Bateau Ivre*

In his 1970 essay ‘The Artist Grows Old’, Kenneth Clark describes the ageing Goethe as looking towards the rising moon for a poetic muse in the face of mortality and melancholy. Clark compares the late style of poets (mawkish) with the maturity of the painter’s (“making the moment comprehensible”). While Brent Harris has taken the moon as the genesis for the series of fifteen drawings at the heart of this exhibition, the artist’s work sits squarely in Clark’s latter camp. It is no surprise that this prospect, of the moon and melancholia, has attracted Harris: after all, what concern has characterised the artist’s career more profoundly than mortality? Harris has described death as “probably the driving question in my work”, a sentiment that seeps into each of the paintings and drawings in this exhibition. These pictures are coloured by a reflective meditation; on loss and grief, a four decade career of image-making, and a lifetime of moonlit thinking, dreaming and watching.

The drawings in this show could be read like a dictionary of the oneiric symbols and motifs that have appeared as actors in the series of Harris’s practice. The tau cross, the snow-capped peaks, the duelling sprites, the hanging, tormented body: these leitmotifs feel like old friends, transfigured. Their persistence through decades of Harris’s painting offers them a poignant presence; yet here they are placed in unlikely combinations, endowed with new meanings. Embedded within these pictures is a subtle game of push and pull, bringing signs forth and sending them back in turn, concealed in the nocturnal void. While their medium—black conté on laid paper—borrows something from those made by Seurat in his final years, the repertoire of figures fashioned by this game is entirely Harris’s own. As Yve-Alain Bois writes of Seurat; “no image could exist before being embodied in this paper and in this blackness, which give it birth”.<sup>1</sup> Harris’s drawings, even denser and darker, share in this spirit of optical and generative tactility.

“How difficult it is to speak of the moon and not lose one’s head, the witless moon”, Samuel Beckett laments in *Molloy*.<sup>2</sup> It is no easier to limn it in drawing. The moonlight in these pictures is an evasive one, cast by an absent sphere. It is reflected, blank, the ‘counterfeit lustre’ described by Catullus.<sup>3</sup> It shrouds these pictures and their symbols in a soft penumbra, the icy remoteness of Giotto and della Francesca. Brent Harris has a fondness for Valéry’s maxim that a bad poem “vanishes into meaning”. So too, noted Philip Guston, does a didactic painting “vanish into recognition”. Failure comes readily at the point where aesthetic experience is eclipsed: to attempt to spin a narrative from these works other than that which they embody would be to betray them. Their oblique message is a personal one, arising from constant experimentation and automatic drawing; received in the light of the moon or developing through progress. Leaving interpretation aside, it is enough to simply inhabit Harris’s crepuscular world; to bask in the vague light of a forsaken moon and embrace the network of semiotic connections that it illumines.

*Hugh L. Magnus, April 2026*

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<sup>1</sup> Yve-Alain Bois, “Georges Seurat: The Drawings”, *Artforum*, April 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Samuel Beckett, *The Beckett Trilogy: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*, (John Calder, 1997), 39.

<sup>3</sup> Catullus 34, trans. Peter Green (UC Press, 2005).