



THE WEIGHT OF LIGHT

'I'm trying to make the invisible visible' Pat Harris tells **Brian McAvera** on the eve of his exhibition at the Taylor Galleries, Dublin

Brian McAvera: Pat, you have had outsider status for almost thirty years so how do you view the development of Irish art over that period, and why did you recently return to Ireland?

Pat Harris: I was looking at Irish art from Antwerp. It was only really during the Celtic Tiger that it became very visible and there was enough money to present it. I think I've always looked at painting generally, rather than at Irish painting as such. My influences are largely from outside Ireland: Bomberg, Auerbach, Bacon, Sutherland, Morandi, De Keyser, Twombly, Rembrandt, and Van Dyck. With contemporary painting you are too close to it to be able to read it. You don't have the distance to see things correctly. I like Richter and Tuymans, different generations and different countries. I suppose my return to Ireland is due to its landscape. I feel a great affinity for the landscape of North Mayo.



My recent work and that of my wife Linda Ruttelynck, is almost solely concerned with the landscape of North Mayo. Landscape is more present in Ireland: and it has a huge presence in relation to Irish painting. Recently I saw the William Crozier show at IMMA and the work that he made after his move to West Cork; the landscapes were for me the strongest. In Ireland you feel comfortable making paintings about the landscape. In Belgium the landscape is less present.

BMcA: What are you producing now?

PH: I'm working on a two-person show for Ghent, Belgium, and a solo one at the Taylor Galleries in Dublin. I have the title for the Dublin show. A friend in Flanders, Geert Lernout, a Joyce expert, told me an anecdote. Joyce was talking to an artist in a café. 'It's not going bad. I may have a line'. I have all the words but I don't know the order yet'. Well I have the title: 'The Weight of Light'. Up in Mayo, the thing that is most present is the light. I walk the landscape, make small sketches, start things, then go into the studio. The light makes things visible, then half an hour later, invisible. What is amazing is its tangibility. You can feel the light, its weight, the huge space of the bogland; how the light manipulates everything. The exhibition will bring together a series of landscapes but also a series of small flower pieces – a single flower motif. Others are based on a single stack – and the mist, a lot of mist. Seeing and not seeing. In essence the motif is the landscape or the flower but it's really about paint and space. I'm trying to make the invisible visible.

BMcA: In 2015 you produced 'Thin Places', an exhibition of landscape paintings from North Mayo with the title referring to the Celtic belief that particular places exist where there is a thin veil between past, present and future. What was your intention?

PH: I stumbled on the idea. I found it a metaphor for painting. It's about looking out at rocks, at the space they occupy. In painting you are always coming from the tradition of painting.

1 PAT HARRIS
**SUNSET FOR
HOWARD** 2017 oil on
linen 80x100cm
2 Pat Harris in his
studio. Photo Linda
Ruttelynck



I THINK THAT IN A STRANGE WAY, MY INTERESTS WERE MORE IN MINIMALIST PAINTING THAN IN DUTCH STILL-LIFE

You cross roads with people and for some reason, some have a huge impact, will help determine the fabric of your life, will influence your direction in life. I have been lucky in this. As a painter you are coming out of the past. You are in the studio in the present but projecting yourself into the future. You see things behind a very thin veil. It's not the object but the space between you and the object that you are painting, that and what the object suggests. Painting is a Thin Place.

BMcA: You completed a PhD in Fine Art in 2008. What was your topic?

PH: The title was 'Reduction within Figurative Painting'. How can you make an image visible without any details? I wanted to explore the terrain between minimalism and figuration. How do you make a figurative image that recognises the quality of the paint?

BMcA: With *Tracings* (2006) and *The Loose Box* (2008) and then *Persian Flower* (2009), the Charles Brady influence comes to the forefront, perhaps crossed with Luc Tuyman. Forms aren't so much fragmentary and evanescent as unstable and in dissolution. How far is this an attitude of mind,

and how far the abstractionist in you playing with paint?

PH: Tuyman's breakthrough was in the 1990s, in Documenta '92. I remember visiting it, entering it. It was a very Catholic Documenta; in other words the most irrational Documenta you could have ever seen. In the entrance area there was Bruce Nauman with two videos, ants were painted on the walls and ceilings – it was a crazy entrance. Richter was there

as well, and then one walked into this little corridor space with small unframed canvases by Tuymans.

I think that living in that sort of atmosphere influenced me more. I'm both warm and cold towards Tuymans. I like the earlier work better. He's not often rated as a plastic painter but he is. If you look at the paintings, how they're painted, he's saying 'This is a painting. This is paint on canvas, that's all.'

BMcA: In the new millennium, two traits seem to be apparent: a rigorous simplification, and a subdued sense of objects as symbols. What prompted the simplification, and how interested are you in Dutch still-life?

PH: I think that in a strange way, my interests were more in minimalist painting than in Dutch still-life. The distillation has been there for many years. At the moment, when I'm painting, I listen to Bach's Cello Suites.

I play Bach every day in my studio: they're minimalist pieces. I've also a huge obsession with Robert Ryman, Raoul de Keyser and Cy Twombly who did a marvelous series of roses. So I think that minimalism has had a huge effect. In



the early years I was reading Samuel Beckett and T S Eliot, two writers very much concerned with language. A minimalist is acutely aware of language issues and acutely aware of every mark. How can you keep the quality of the paint alive on the surface? Think of Richter – I saw the Tate retrospective and his interview with Serota. Richter questioned the image more than the language of painting. In the interview he said 'In the small figurative pieces I'm on holidays. In the big abstract pieces I have to work.'

BMcA: You were born in Eccles Street, Dublin in 1953. What were your formative memories?

PH: Eccles Street was off Dorset Street on the North side of Dublin: tenement buildings, so there was a social contract, with parents chatting outside on the steps. My father was a coach painter for CIE. He mixed the colours and was a very good tradesman.

Mother was a Duffy from Drumcondra whereas my father's family came from Kildare. When they had a row, my mother would accuse my father's people of being 'chimney pot snipers'! She considered herself to be a city girl and himself to be a countryman. There was a lot of affection, and much sharp Irish wit. On my father's side there was a very sharp eye for colour. At my first exhibition, I remember

him looking at the colours, how one colour ran into another. Other than that, there was no artistic activity at home.

BMcA: You were an evening student at NCAD (1972-73) and then a full-time student from 1973-77 where you studied painting. What impelled you to become an artist and what kind of teaching did you receive?

PH: A friend of mine at Primary School, Tom (Toddy) Doyle (we are still friends to this day) told me he didn't want to continue into secondary school with the Christian Brothers and convinced me likewise. We ended up in Great Denmark Street Tec, mostly due to Toddy. There were two important teachers, a Miss Burns in Denmark Street who stimulated my interest in writing and reading, and later in the North Strand Tech, Lua Breen who taught art and he encouraged four of us work-ing-class boys, me, Kevin Gill, Tom Grace and Tony Murray we ended up going to night-school at NCAD. After that year we enrolled full-time. NCAD was mainly middle-class then. There was no living to be made from being an artist. We had great staff but they were troubled times and in the first year we had various student sit-ins and staff strikes. Then Campbell Bruce came in and brought in a young staff and also people from the art scene in Dublin. If Robert Ballagh, Micheal Farrell or Sean Scully were exhibiting, he brought

3 NUDE 1988 oil on linen 130x98cm

4 SPRING PORTRAIT 1989 oil on canvas 60x75cm. National Self-Portrait Collection of Ireland

5 RED FLOWER 2018 oil on linen 60x50

6 THE WEIGHT OF LIGHT 2016 oil on linen 60x80cm

them in. I remember Scully being positive and helpful, and Ballagh introduced me to Gordon Lambert which led to a commission. Charlie Brady, Jackie Stanley and Charlie Cullen were brought in to lecture. Carey Clarke gave us the basis: how to prepare a canvas, set up your paints, how to look at the tempera-ture of colour, things I still use to this day.

BMcA: Straight after college you spent a year as a lecturer in Life Drawing at the College of Marketing & Design in Dublin (1977-78). How did you get the job and why this job, and how important has Life Drawing been for you?

PH: The director's wife, Nuala Creag, was teaching in NCAD, and I had finished my diploma year in 1977. Campbell had



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offered me a post-grad. I had a huge obsession with Rembrandt and would go over to the National Gallery in London at weekends where I spent most of my time in the Rembrandt room. In that period I was talking to Campbell about Rembrandt, asking what made him so special, and he said 'It's the paint!' I thought at the time that it was a banal comment. I was looking for mystery and alchemy. My diploma work consisted of small works on paper, water-colour and egg tempera, mostly portraits of Thom McGinty: The Diceman. I headed off again to London and walked into the Rembrandt room and suddenly I registered his Margaretha de Geer and for the first time a painting made me cry. I saw that Campbell was right: it lay in his use of paint. I understood what I couldn't do but what I wanted to do. This guy from the 17th century was moving

7 STACK VANCOUVER ISLAND 2018 oil on linen 80x110cm
8 AMARYLLIS II 2009 oil on linen 120x110cm

paint around the surface and creating an amazing amount of emotion and presence. She is part of my painting life. Her hands are heavy, like shovels, and her face is a landscape of time. In the post-graduate year I painted only portraits. I stretched canvases of the same size as the Rembrandt. It became my obsession and I very much wanted to go abroad. I was awarded a summer scholarship and spent it in Spain, in the Prado, looking at Velásquez and Goya. Goya doesn't reproduce well, the paint is so complex and delicate, so looking at him in the flesh was a revelation.

On my return I ended up in the College of Marketing & Design teaching life drawing, doing the post-grad at the same time. Life drawing is very important to me: it teaches you to look, to see things. In its early years NCAD was a very academic structure. Under the new system there was very little life drawing but Campbell knew of my figurative direction and I got a model for myself, five days a week!

BMcA: You left for Antwerp, following a long-established route for Irish artists, where you studied at the National Higher Institute of Fine Arts (1978-81). Why did you leave and how did the Institute of Fine Arts contrast with NCAD?

PH: When I decided to go for the Antwerp scholarship, I was aware that Rubens had been in Antwerp working in the baroque tradition, and Rembrandt in Amsterdam working within the Protestant tradition. They were so close in time and place and yet working so differently. Rembrandt using biblical motifs and also painting for merchants on a smaller sober scale while Rubens was working for the Catholic Church, making big, colourful baroque paintings. The difference couldn't have been greater and I think it was very much determined by the Protestant and Catholic cultures in which they lived and worked. This was the motivation on my application: the impact of Calvinism on Rembrandt and Catholicism on Rubens, and Antwerp is on the border of the two cultures. Rubens is working within a baroque context and you don't get the same intensity with him in portraiture. Rembrandt is stripping away the imagery, working within the sober Dutch culture, forced to concentrate on the head and figure; riveting portraits. We are the product of where we came from. Antwerp was more academic than NCAD and figure drawing was compulsory.

You got your own studio and a key to it so that you were independent. It gave me a chance to visit the great European collections in Antwerp, Paris and in Germany. When I first arrived in Antwerp in 1978 they didn't have electric light on the first floor, only daylight so that at 4pm the evening light would fade and the paintings looked very different – very quiet.

BMcA: You have been on study trips to Madrid, Prague, Munich, New York, and Portland in Oregon amongst others. Were any of these particularly beneficial?

PH: Yes, all of them in an artistic sense. I went to Portland to work in North Light Studios, a print studio. In Flanders you





Ingres were stronger than the Picassos! In New York I also saw the De Koonings, Cézannes, Pop Art...life is an adventure. If you can find one painting in a museum that moves you, then your day is made. And those six weeks in Madrid had a huge effect!

BMcA: By 1986 you have become a lecturer in Painting at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp where you stayed for the best part of thirty years. How far did teaching influence your own work?

PH: I got a job initially in an Evening School and was then appointed a Professor in the Academy of Antwerp. What does teaching do? If you can survive from only making paintings, then that is the best route but 95% of artists cannot live from the sales of their work. Teaching gives you a certain space and you question everything, you have to. You don't take painting for granted. You have to analyse, to step outside of your own box. You try to place everything within a certain context; you try to understand what the student is trying to do so it broadens your spectrum. At a certain stage the impossibility of painting becomes so big that you have to retreat into the studio. I accepted that I couldn't do what I wanted to do. There was only one option: I had to try to solve things in the confines of my own studio.

BMcA: Your early work was directly figurative: portraits, self-portraits, landscapes, nudes and street scenes. Critics such as Seán McCrum commented that you were much more at ease with the female nude than you were with self-portraits. Two years later Brian Fallon talked of 'an academic mentality', Desmond McAvock considered that your work was in the tradition of the Belgian Expressionists. How far do these reviewers' comments from the 1980s reflect your own assessment of what you were doing?

PH: The obsession I had was an obsession with paint. I wanted a painting, not an illustration. I had discovered the power of paint, its transparency, delicacy, and its texture. In those years I was trying to bring the power of the image together with the absolute qualities of paint. It is a dilemma that the critics rightly saw. How can I get that image *with* painting, not just using paint to illustrate it but rather to remake the image in marks, in paint. I think of Kossoff, Auerbach and Bomberg, the latter was very successful as a non-figurative painter, then rediscovered figuration.

BMcA: In the 1990s, there is a much stronger sense of critical acclaim. Fallon calls you 'a genuine individualist'. How do you see your development?

PH: I think that from 1981 onwards, I'm still dealing with the conflict and it takes me to the 1990s before things start to gel. In the 1990s, I'm starting to relax a bit more. The nudes become reclining nudes and look more like landscapes, and suddenly I'm painting Flemish landscapes and I get into still-lives. The outcome is never planned. Charles

have the Frans Maserel print studio. I met my wife, Linda Ruttelynck, there. She's a printmaker and photographer, and she was doing a residency. Later Linda met the printers that ran the studio in Portland and they invited us to do a workshop in monoprint. We were able to work intensively.

New York was also incredible. It was the first time I had been there and I visited MOMA, the Met, and the Frick collection. Up until then I had never been a great fan of Ingres though Carey Clarke had a small obsession with him. I walked into the Frick and saw a portrait of a lady in a blue satin dress with a red ribbon in her hair: a symphony of colour. It was like seeing the De Geer in the National in London. Ingres was probably one of the most abstract painters you could come across. Not at all academic. I saw an exhibition in Paris of those artists Picasso stole from. The



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Brady came to a show at Taylor's in 1996. It was Charlie's slot – he usually exhibited there at that time of year but had cancelled – and he appeared at the opening. I knew that he was dying. At that stage I was making large flower pieces and landscapes. I wanted to give him a painting before he died. I remember going back to Antwerp and I set up some small still-lives of single objects, a pear, an apple a gourd. It was difficult. By the time they were made he had passed away. Indirectly they got me into that sort of still-life. It was an homage.

When Basil Blackshaw died, I was working on two paintings, of rocks, and I continued working on them, thinking of him. When Seán McSweeney died – I was in Antwerp – and I couldn't get back in time for the funeral, I went into the studio on the day he was buried and made a painting in a day, thinking of him. I think he would have liked that. Sheila and Seán McSweeney visited us in Belgium in 1997. Seán felt I should work with the Irish landscape. I think he contacted the Ballinglen Arts Foundation in Ballycastle to that effect. I got a fellowship shortly afterwards and I ended up painting

in County Mayo.

BMcA: Do you see yourself as an abstracting figurist, or a figurative abstractionist?

PH: I just see myself as a painter! I remember asking Charlie Cullen why there was always coffee or tea stains on his drawings. He said he was afraid of white canvases but that imperfection was something to enter a dialogue with. In my case I also need something to have a dialogue with. I need to reference something: still-lives, landscapes, the flower motif, so I'm in the category of figurative art but at the same time I'm very much aware of the power of paint and I'm trying somehow to fuse image and paint together. I remember reading a Pablo Casals interview that he gave towards the end of his life. 'Why do you still practise six hours a day?' The response was 'Because I think that I might be getting somewhere!' I think painting is like that. I've a feeling that I might be getting somewhere, so I'm just not going to give up!

Brian McAvock is an art critic at Taylor Galleries, Dublin until 8 December 2018.

9 ROSE 2018 oil on linen 50x40cm

10 THE LAST SPADE OF SUMMER 2005 oil on linen 50x40cm

11 ISLAND FOR A PAINTER 2018 oil on linen 60x80cm