THE ART OF CHRIS HARRIS

In Chris Harris's painting, *Go, Don't Go,* a ring of impossibly curved bones is balanced upright on a small hill. The precariousness of its footing is an absurd complement to the complete impossibility of its existence in the first place. But, within a painting that is highly inflected and abstract, a collage of forms and brush methods, it is also the embodiment of a contradiction. For this is a painting that wants to be both abstract and representational. Harris's work, and *Go, Don't Go* is a good example, is full of such contradictions. The strength of his work is that this sense of conflict, like a rift vailey, runs through all its aspects; from its content, through the actual painting style, to the more general level of a meditation on painting itself. Its drama is the heroic struggle to bridge an abyss through faith in the power of art to be that bridge.

In his thirties now and just reaching his stride as a painter, Harris's personal history is typical of many of his generation. Finishing art school in the early seventies and wanting to paint, he found that painting was moving out of sight in an art world dominated by video, performance, and conceptualism. What followed was a period of personal isolation as he lived for eighteen months at a lighthouse on Vancouver Island, working on his first series of paintings which were exhibited at the Surrey Art Gallery in 1978. This is significant, for though young painters may have felt out of step with the times in the seventies, Harris consciously chose to distance himself still further, and this distance from the art world, both psychological and actual, persists. One quarter Cree Indian, Harris considers himself an outsider, suspended between two cultures and not really belonging to either. Of course, one could make a case that alienation, and above all, a sense of cultural disinheritance, is the normal experience of an artist in the west today, but Harris's experience is more concrete than most. He shows his work in the mainstream art context, but maintains strong social and artistic contacts among the West Coast Indians.

This doesn't mean that it has no local roots. The anxiousness and obsessive sexual energy that pervades Harris's work is typical of a west coast idea of spirituality, an idea that often equates the spiritual with the magical and the religious. A transcendent knowledge of the Spirit is not the same as an evocation of spirits or ghosts, and it is spirits that often haunt the works of artists most sensitive to this place.

In both tone and style there is also a clear resemblance to the early figurative work of Claude Breeze, such as his *Lovers in a Landscape* series. *Voodoo Computer* is a good example. Breeze's works were equally eclectic and synthetic in style, mixing flat hard-edged areas of colour with flurries of broken strokes,

and he was also influenced by Persian art, about which more later. And though they lack obvious connections with west coast Indian Art, formally Harris's pictures do have qualities that tie in with his own indigenous ancestors. Tacked to the wall, the canvas shrinks a bit when it is primed, creating a scalloped edge. Then, painted right to the edge and exhibited unstretched, stuck to the wall with pins, it resembles nothing so much as an animal skin, its painted markings the leftovers of some ritual evocation.

The spirits that Harris must evoke and assuage are really the painful situations of his personal life. *Go, Don't Go,* for example, is about the break up of a relationship and the ambivalence of Harris's feelings at that time. The tension of that moment of transition is represented in the image of a wheel poised, perhaps only momentarily, on the top of a hill. *Metamorphosis* and *Burnt Offering* deal with the same theme but develop it further into depth. The central image in these two pieces is a shape reminiscent of a door, or perhaps an arch, or even a cocoon, all of which, in Harris's personal symbolism, refer to a transformation or a movement from one condition in life to another. In *Metamorphosis,* the door shape is bracketed by what seems to be the pitched roof and walls of a schematic house, locating the focus of the work in his domestic situation.

In other pieces, such as *Birdcage,* Harris generalizes his experience into a more readable and universally applicable symbolism. The bird itself is brilliantly coloured, a vivid flame of life on a grey abstract ground. The image is clearly about freedom, and as such it resonates with Harris's own experience of art — as a drive for liberating self-expression that paradoxically ends in a frozen object of contemplation. Yet that object can somehow carry within itself the experience of a moment of freedom. Painted birds don't fly or sing, except in their making.

Harris's work is an improvisation and variation on a number of imagistic and formal themes. Like an abstract painter, he wrests meaning from the materials at his disposal. He doesn't let the idea develop the image, but his stock images take on a different form in accord with the idea of each piece. In most of the pieces in this show, *Birdcage* for instance, that image is a circular form on top of a pole planted in a mound or hill. Human figures revolve around its base in a kind of dance or worship. In other works the central image is the doorway-cocoon. So his imagery, in addition to its symbolic content, also talks about two conflicting aspects of art that must be reconciled, both in the individual works and in the body of work as a whole: art as object for a viewer's contemplation and art as process, as a transformative experience for the creator.

In his attempt to join a universal symbolic imagery with the uninhibited personal gesture, Harris resembles the early abstract expressionists. In fact the bird in *Birdcage,* with its ambiguity and its tormented cry, recalls some of the surrealist-inspired art of the forties. But whereas the abstract expressionists

chose to drop the image and reorganize their gestures into a grand decoration, Harris wants to keep his symbolism and reach for a higher unity of form and content. The way he goes about this is partly inspired by Persian art.

Harris's drive is to contain and channel his turmoil into a decorative unity. Likewise, in Persian painting, often violent scenes, and a highly animated landscape, are tamed and ordered into a pattern of gem-like tones. Miniature painting has such richness and complexity, with so many different colours, and so many different tints of the same colour, that its effect can be almost delirious. All passion is sublimated into a frozen order that is too complex to apprehend at once, and so still mimics an experience that can engulf consciousness and transcend the self. But Harris, fundamentally a product of western civilization, is too restless and too assertive to seek the same goal. His work retains the muscularity and arbitrariness of abstract expressionism, which within the western ethic are signs of freedom, spontaneity, and self-realization. And here is perhaps the crucial conflict and most sought-after reconciliation in Harris's work. Not just between an idea of freedom as a state of being to be won and experienced and the object nature of art which demands finality and stasis in order for the work to exist at all, but, more fundamentally, between the self and the world around it. Harris's personal symbolism is difficult to read, naturally enough, because it is personal. It requires prolonged meditation, a difficult demand in a world attuned to the quick glance and instant recognition, in which the communicative role of art has been usurped by advertising. Harris's dilemma is the dilemma of the

self, hyper-conscious of its isolation, trying to make contact with the world, and struggling to create out of the material available, out of paint, the medium between its subjectivity and the world's ''objectivity''. The spectrum of work in this show, from the most hermetically personal, such as *Burnt Offering,* to the most didactic and public, such as *Voodoo Computer,* is testimony to his deep belief in the possibility that art today can be both a repository of subjectivity and a bearer of meaning to the world. And in search of this synthesis he has forged a style that, though it links all of the work together, itself embraces a host of differences.

In a period when ''self'' and ''self-expression'' have become clichés of a totally conventionalized painting, Harris's work has considerable authenticity. In his isolation, he has accustomed himself to take a large view and to ask a lot of his painting. His ambitiousness has paid off in a body of painting that works simultaneously on many levels, and that really does achieve a unity of form and content. But it is also a kind of self-expression that does not ask us to accept a lot on faith, but that brings into focus the predicament of the self. Harris always starts in pain and anxiety and works toward resolution and harmony. But whatever the therapeutic effect for him, the work in its objective aspect works that way as well, bringing signs of individuality into balance with a universal symbolism.

Robert Linsley