

The Interior Worlds of Kenny Harris

BY DAVID MASELLO



The fog was so dense on the November afternoon that I was to meet the painter Kenny Harris (b. 1974) that I called from my car and asked him to find me on a corner and lead me to his studio. His building is situated four blocks from the Pacific Ocean, in a Venice neighborhood that is both quaint with California Craftsman cottages and also grittily industrial, with whole blocks of cinderblock warehouses surrounded by cyclone fencing. As is typical of Venice, the pedestrians emerging from the thick mist ranged from young people carrying surfboards and tightly spiraled yoga mats to the homeless pushing shopping carts full of soda cans.

After we reached Harris's workspace on the second floor of a former distillery, I immediately noticed two of his self-portraits affixed to a wall. The larger one shows him bare-chested, wearing a hipster's knit hat, from under which peeks some black-flecked-with-gray hair. In the other picture, he looks several years younger, posed like an indifferent

graduate student, hatless and dressed in a T-shirt. Of the larger portrait, Harris says, "I wanted to show the collarbone. I like for there to be some structure in every painting I make."

Though he also paints landscapes and figures, most of Harris's pictures depict interiors — silent, people-less rooms of houses and dwellings in China, Istanbul, Tuscany, Normandy, Cuba, Portugal — spaces with diffuse natural light spilling across wooden floors and onto walls, illuminating some objects while merely suggesting others. The rooms he shows us are, indeed, about structure, the actual architecture and the arrangement of furniture within — but also the structure of light, which Harris renders as a nearly tangible material.

Limonaia, La Foce, Tuscany
2012, Oil on panel, 24 x 36 in.
George Billis Gallery, New York City





Castelnuovo Tancredi, Tuscany
2012, Oil on panel, 20 x 24 in.
George Billis Gallery, New York City

“I’m never interested in slavishly showing all of the detail in a room,” he emphasizes, referring to a remark he hears often about how his scenes evoke Dutch Golden Age interiors — those dimly lit, sepia-toned courtyards and rooms rendered by the likes of Vermeer and de Hooch. “You’ve got to let the viewer use his imagination to fill in all the rest,” Harris says. “The human eye is very good at making connections and being able to make a leap. I want viewers to complete the thought, instead of my having to cross every t and dot every i for them. My focus is on the light and not the specific elements. I try to articulate that feeling I get when I’m in transitional, low-light conditions. The most mundane of objects in the right light are poetry to me.” Just as Harris finished this sentence, I noticed that we were bathed in light emanating from a translucent, but not transparent, skylight, set in the pitch of his roof at a rakish angle.

While Harris’s interiors may be empty of people, they are not without a human character. Viewers can’t help but search these darkened corners, hallways, recesses, and alcoves for a person — for someone *does* feel present in each scene. “I want my paintings of interiors to pick up on that feeling a space

Pour
2011, Oil on linen, 24 x 36 in.
Private collection





Nusretiye Mosque with Old City, Istanbul
2012, Oil on panel, 24 x 20 in.
Private collection

has after a person has left it, that the room is charged with their energy,” the artist explains. “I don’t put people in my interiors because as soon as a person appears in a painting, you start wanting to know what the person is doing or thinking — and that confuses the character of the space itself. For me, it’s not about ghosts, not that mystery at all, but the idea that an interior, a room, a space, still registers a person’s having occupied it.”

Although Harris’s colors, brushes, and palette knives are necessary to his work, none of those materials are of much use until something more ephemeral is present: light. “Light is what I seek out,” he says. “When I’m working on an overcast day, I can see the half-tones of objects, the beautiful weight and presence of the air being charged around the objects I’m depicting. As soon as the sun comes out, though, all of the lighting I want goes away. The painting loses interest for me. Then, it’s time for lunch or a nap.”

PAINTING ONESELF

Raised in the Bay Area, Harris received his B.A. in fine art from Colorado College. During his junior year abroad, he studied in Florence, immersing himself in the history of Renaissance art and in classical figure drawing in the atelier of Charles Cecil. After painting in San Francisco, Harris moved to New York City, where he studied under Frank Mason at the Art Students League. In 2001 he settled in Venice Beach, though travel remains a constant in his life.

Where he works every day — literally next to his wife, Judy Nimtz, who is also a painter — Harris can look constantly at his two self-portraits.

Zhouzhuang, China
2011, Oil on linen, 48 x 32 in.
Koplin Del Rio, Los Angeles

He is a decidedly handsome, still boyish man of 38, and he exudes a casual, Venice-dude confidence, the kind of guy you could imagine riding a surfboard to shore with a Starbucks cup in hand. Though he also teaches part-time at the Laguna College of Art and Design, Harris makes his living selling canvases via George Billis Gallery in New York City (which typically shows his interiors and cityscapes) and Koplin Del Rio in Culver City (Los Angeles), where the more figurative works are featured.

In what might just be a first in art history, Harris is now working on a double-headed self-portrait. The twist here is that the canvas was started six years ago, so Harris has juxtaposed his current self beside his younger one. “The more recent head shows more bags under the eyes, that some of my hair has fallen out — but, hey, that’s reality. At the same time, I think I’m a better painter now than I was when I started this, and it’s interesting to see my two painterly selves on the same canvas.”

While Harris comes across as confident and engaging, he is not haughty or imperious. Yet I wonder what kind of confidence it takes to look at self-portraits of yourself all day, every day. Harris acknowledges that “The reasons for painting self-portraits result from a bunch of things. There’s first and foremost the convenience of using yourself as a model who, after all, is someone who doesn’t need breaks, doesn’t complain, is always there for you. There’s also the basic idea of self-exploration and how you see yourself.” He adds, “As soon as I think I’m being self-indulgent, I immediately recall the long tradition of self-portraiture, even among artists not known for their portraits. Canaletto, for







Camilla's Flat, Florence
2006, Oil on canvas,
48 x 32 in.
Private collection



Parlor to Foyer, Normandy

2010, Oil on canvas, 32 x 21 in.

George Billis Gallery, New York City

Harris turned off the spotlights in his studio to show me that he prefers painting solely with what comes through his skylight, but on this foggy day, nature just wasn't sufficient. "When the conditions are right, the light from the skylight creates this kind of bluish cast," he says, pointing to the color of the wall that served as the backdrop to his self-portraits. Harris adds that he is attracted to particular conditions of light in rooms, especially those that contain elements other than furniture, such as "isolation, reflections, or atmospheric perspective. I like to convey what I feel when I'm in low-lit places."

For those moments that we stood together in the dim, we were immersed in just such a place. I felt I was occupying the internal state that Harris covets, sees, and renders. ■

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instance, did a self-portrait. Bernini did some, and many artists, like Caravaggio, posed themselves in narrative scenes. After I've had an exhibition and am at a loss for what to do next, I go back to self-portraits. Through them, I can re-experiment with technique, self-reflect, meditate even."

When asked, though, if he, or any artist, can remain truly honest when doing self-portraits, Harris replies, "I think I edit myself as much as I edit anyone I paint. I'm not interested in getting every wrinkle or crack in the skin, but I do look for the bigger form."

PAINTING HONESTLY

Harris prides himself on working fast and completing canvases quickly, often finishing an 8 x 10-inch interior within a single day, so long as the sunlight has cooperated. "I enjoy having a certain sense of urgency about a work; otherwise it can become stagnant," he explains. "The more time I take, the more fussy the painting might get. But I do find myself often scraping through a painting, rebuilding it; then I can break through to a more honest painting." He insists, "I know, too, when a painting is finished. Paintings that are not done annoy you, they mock you. When something stops mocking me, it's finished."

Isolated Chair, Cuba

2005, Oil on canvas, 60 x 36 in.

Private collection