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Julie Harris

Story Pamela Hansford

JULIE HARRIS' PAINTINGS are almost always inspired by a place. Her method of working simultaneously involves experimentation with ideas, an accumulation of facts collected to form a series, and an interpretation of a location. Her original concept of a 'walkthrough' is a way of naming this process and consolidating her experience into large compositions with multiple panels. ARTIST PROFILE was welcomed into Harris' studio to discuss the processes and practices behind her work.

When you begin a work how do you start out?

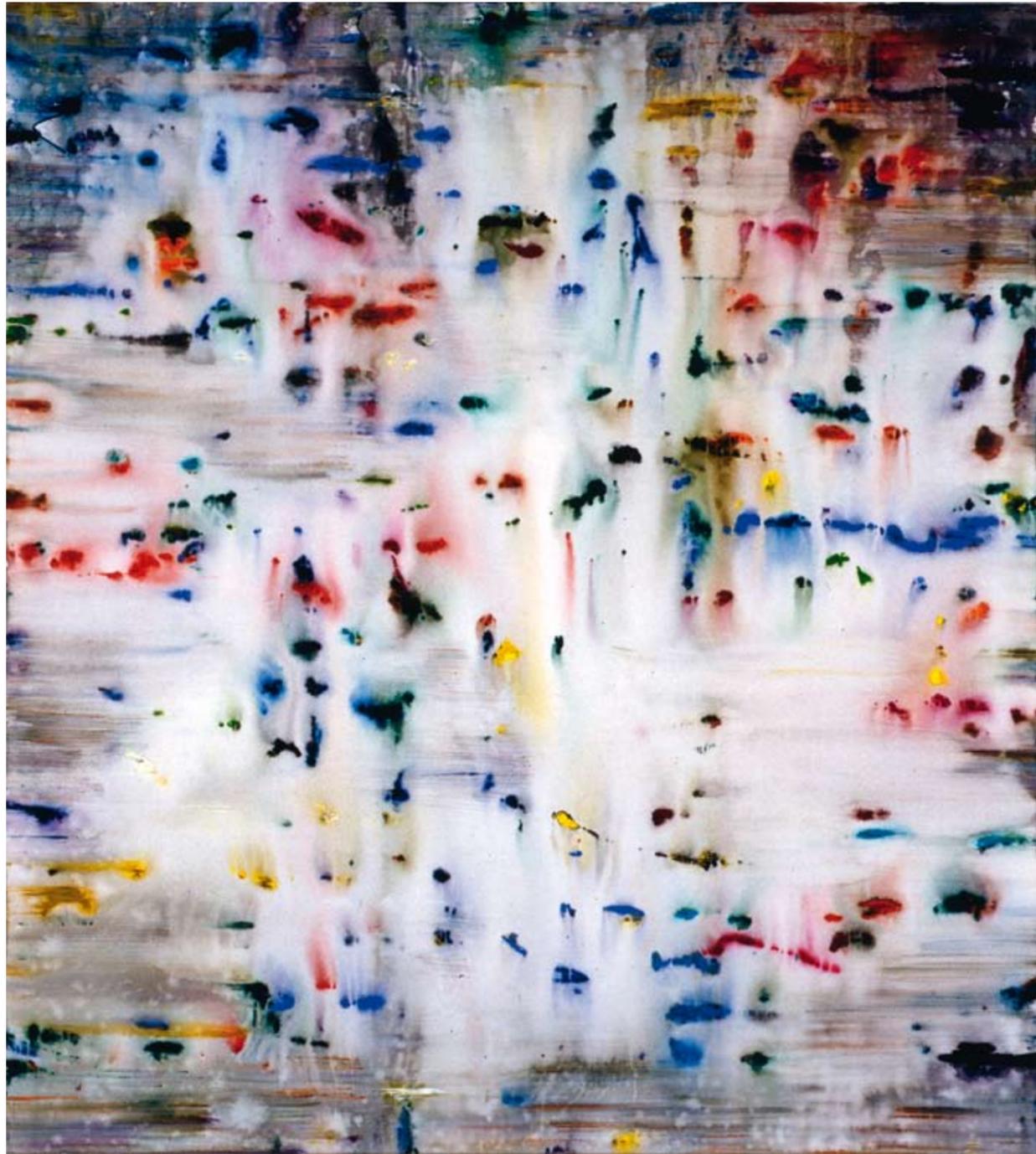
I go in search of a painting and there is no predetermining. I think that creative processes—painting, writing, and composing, are essentially the same. Music is at the pinnacle in the way it envelops and transports me—it plays a very important role in the way I prepare myself – it's my way of becoming mindful of particular moments. It creates a space in which memories can coalesce and appear, where I can connect with the past, people and the essence of the present moment. I concentrate on remembering the texture and intensity of relationships, experiences, things, and landscapes which start to form in my mind's eye.

When you imagine a landscape do you have a certain kind of place or space in mind?

I'm always aware of trying to create space. It's a space I want for the viewer and for myself with the meditative qualities of the great vistas found in deserts, oceans, rolling plains. I try to produce a flicker-effect where the viewer can travel through the work at great height or distance and then swoop close up. I try to change the space from something perceived from afar and then back again without using the usual visual aids of perspective.

What processes do you use to bring a painting to life?

I start a painting with a series of marks worked in with scrapers, rollers, brushes and water. Then the paint is washed away and replaced until something starts to take shape. It's a constant



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process of construction and de-construction. I'm interested in the way paint forms on the canvas and in different ways of applying paint. I let the mediums and nature, and by that I mean the wind, sun, temperature and so forth, drive the process and produce the work. I am a facilitator of a painting.

There is an intuitive process with the washing away and reapplying paint, and when it's working and reaching some sort of logic it becomes the opposite of chance. I like the approach of 'achieving knowledge through diligence and contemplative reflection'. Everything is absorbed and then worked through—not to control but to occupy. I think Cézanne was talking about this very state of mind when he refers to a tumultuous sense of being in the world as 'iridescent chaos'.

The surprise of nature is that everything feels right. Self-consciousness disrupts this harmony and can often degenerate into being ponderous and dull. Surprise needs to be constant in order to invent.

I find it very interesting how the channels of communication an artist intentionally forms, or that slip beyond intentionality to form themselves, are resolved into so-called 'finished' works. This channelling process leaves more or less evident imprints in art works.

Yes, that's true. I think all creativity relies on being in touch, with being in the right space and time to produce something with integrity and spirit. Every now and then it all comes together and something good is created, sometimes it takes a while to see, sometimes you leave the studio thinking you have a work only to

return the next day to realise it's not there. That's the process and the artist has to keep faith in making art, it is difficult.

Can you explain how you create relationships between chance, surprise, series and process?

I experiment with combining separate panels, as in the *Colin McCahon* (2009) work, all of which present as a single canvas in this finished work. Placing the panels together acts the way collages do. This provides a diverse way of interpreting different visual stories according to the way in which the panels are placed together or in which sequence they're read, it adds another dimension to the way I would automatically see things hence the element of surprise and excitement in breaking down the habitual way of working.

When I organise the works into a group they can be quite disparate and yet form a comprehensive reading of the whole. The *Colin McCahon* walkthrough starts with the white piece of paper which was worked on until I had a particular configuration emerging and was then reminiscent of the spongy white moss and the patterns beside Mt. Ruapehu where I sat to work. The second panel is the mountains and grey light, the third panel an arrangement which to me refers to the Maori piu piu skirts, and then the final panel the traditional black and white geometric patterns being a reference to Colin McCahon's work ('the teaching aids').

Altogether this walkthrough reads as a response to New Zealand where I travelled with a group of artists organised by ARTIST PROFILE and Winsor & Newton, and the ensuing exhibition was held at various regional galleries.

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Does your idea of a 'walkthrough' encourage communication between several dimensions at once?

Yes, I guess so. In the walkthroughs I try and incorporate signs or my own shorthand for a place. I'm trying to invent my own language for landscape, time and involvement.

The experience in New Zealand was very powerful. To put it in visual terms my overall impression was one of mainly black, white and dark green, then turquoise, orange and purple of the Paua shells. It felt like a young landscape, robust and clear and dramatic. To come back to Australia and then work, I had to feel for the right way of portraying that experience. *The North Island* (2009) is a composite of colours and drama. It becomes like an aerial shot of the whole island and you can then travel in and out of the detail. I wanted to conjure up the effect the island had on me.

How is the 'walkthrough' reflected in recent work such as *The Stations*?

The Stations (2010) came about because I was asked to do *Station 13* (2010) by Douglas Purnell who puts a show together each Easter, asking different artists to do a Station of the Cross.

In thinking how I would interpret this task I thought I would have to produce the whole story of the Stations to make sense of the individual work, and I wanted it to be read as part of a larger framework. Both Colin McCahon and Barnett Newman had each done the Stations and they were very powerful works.

I needed to tease out the interpretation of the Stations. I saw the biblical story as a metaphor for a life's journey so it felt right to use my existing works and print them onto polycarbonate film, which

of course has this fragile, transparent quality. The height and width relate to human scale, and hanging from the ceiling enables the viewer to participate with them and to walk around them. They evoked the journey starting with Christ being condemned and finally being laid to rest—the journey of the cross to Golgotha.

You've recently exhibited at Richard Martin and the McGlade Gallery and you have a show coming up with Peloton. How do you see your work developing in the near future?

It's exciting to have a clear space in which to consolidate what I've been working on but to also rethink my approach to colour. The last works lead on to the next with a lot of experimentation until something starts to happen. I also want to work with the time capsules which are my left over paint scrapings and paint skins, they are the products of the process which guide me on a sculptural path separate but connected to my painting. ■

Julie Harris is represented by Richard Martin Art, Sydney and Charles Nodrum Gallery, Melbourne.

www.richardmartinart.com.au
www.charlesnodrumgallery.com.au
www.peloton.net.au
www.julieharris.com.au

EXHIBITION
 ego'pop
 15 Sep to 8 Oct 2011
 Peloton, Sydney

- 01 Floating Skies 2, 2006, acrylic on polycanvas, 160 x 200cm
 - 02 Photograph: Asia Upward
 - 03 Sacred nation, scared nation, indoctrination, 2003, oil on canvas, 183 x 640cm
 - 04 White Walkthroughs, 2008, acrylic on paper, 100 x 140cm
 - 05 Southcoast Walkthroughs, "Thinking of Arthur's skate", 2001, ink gouache on paper on canvas, 75 x 200cm
 - 06 Shoalhaven Walkthroughs, 2001, ink gouache on paper on canvas, 75 x 200cm
- Courtesy the artist and Richard Martin Art, Sydney