

Brent Harris 'Peaks' 2015



The origins of the imagery in the painting 'Peaks' are quite layered. So where to start?

My paintings and working methods have changed quite a bit over the last 9 years, since the survey exhibition at AGWA 'Swamp Op' in 2006 - curator Robert Cook.

Most of my work from this period displayed flat uninflected surfaces, often strong colour and forms quite sensually delineated, with this linear element/edge pronounced. The painting compositions were resolved off the canvas, through many drawings.

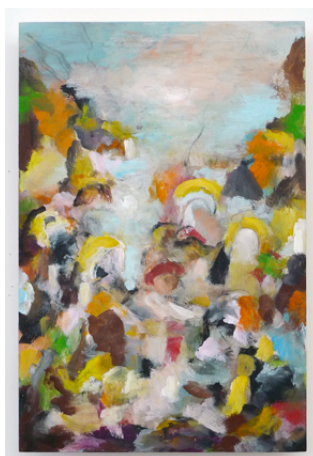
This approach changed with a series of drawings titled 'Deluge' shown at Tolarno in 2008. These drawings were started in front of a life model but were then allowed to develop beyond the anatomical - this method of working becoming most interesting when I started to follow what was coming up to the surface through more intuitive mark making - all manner of figuration was presenting itself. I decided I wanted this method of finding form to come to the paintings also - where the imagery is discovered during the works progress.

In 2009 I spent 3 months in the Australia Council studio in Rome, my project, to revisit an earlier series 'The Stations of the Cross' (In 1989 I produced a series of 14 quite large, hard edge geometric paintings and related aquatints on this subject). The question to myself was, what might happen if I applied the weird figuration that had been surfacing in my work over the past 20 years to this religious subject. However, once in Rome I couldn't hold onto this specific subject, finding the complexities of the Catholic Church to be overwhelming.

Instead I was most happy exploring all the glorious frescos in the area, and one painting in particular really struck me - 'The Transfiguration of Christ' by Raphael, in the Vatican collection. I loved the 'idea' of this subject, where Christ is levitating above the crowd, held aloft by the strength of his belief, a belief that I, a mere skeptical mortal could never muster. This subject and the glorious colour of numerous other examples led me to start work in Rome on a small series of small panels titled 'the ecstatic moment'.



Raphael



board



board

Back in Australia I pushed on with these small panels – two more series appeared - ‘Surrender and Catch’ (exhibited Tolarno, Melbourne 2010), and ‘the reassembled self’ (Martin Browne, Sydney 2011). In these two groups I was trying to connect psychoanalytic thought, in particular the thinking of Heinz Kohut, with the way I was intuitively finding the imagery. The idea of surrender and catch is that you must ‘surrender’ to what is happening and putting yourself in a position ready to ‘catch’ what is thrown up by the subconscious and the working process - letting things bubble to the surface without too many preconceived ideas, prefiguring the outcome. The reassembled self explores the idea that we are endlessly putting ourselves together, however, we never quite arrive as a whole.

These colourful works were followed in 2012 with a series of around one hundred monochrome monotypes.

The most striking deliberate shift with this group was the lack of colour.

I had thought these prints might become a new series of ‘The Stations’, but once again I couldn’t hold myself to the subject of Christ’s last day. As the imagery built into something more wide-ranging - ‘the fall’ the fall of man, seemed more appropriate. Although not all the works under this umbrella title are ‘doom and gloom’, they are mostly set in a dark place. All were started with ‘dumb’ mark making and then my following the form as it surfaced.

My next issue was with scale. How could I get this process of image finding up to a larger size and on canvas? Thinking about the range of imagery developed in the numerous monotypes, I thought to use these existing images or configurations as starting points to begin paintings with the re-introduction of colour (in fact, I think the two examples below use monotypes from the group in the AGWA collection).



In my most recent exhibition at Tolarno, 'Dreamer', February 2015, I have used some existing small panel paintings as starting points for new larger works.

The example below is a small pink board from 2010, (I'm using this example, as the imagery for 'Peaks' 2015 originates here)

Firstly I reworked this composition in oil on paper, the greatest change being at the top where a new narrative/figuration enters as this black frieze on orange. From this study the large painting 'the dream' 2015 was developed (bottom left)

It was during the making of this larger work that I focused on a figurative group forming at the lower right. I then reworked this group in another work on paper; I have flipped the image and refined the main character. (bottom right here)



board 2010



oil on paper 2014



'the dream' 2015



oil on paper 2015



I then thought there may be enough here to start a new work, this is the first colour blocking in for the 'Peaks' painting. Then the idea of a landscape is blocked in, with a small cross on the distant peak. The bearded creature in the foreground now seems to me to be some kind of witness, and at that point McCahon enters my mind. (as time passes and I look back over my work there do seem to be many characters occupying the position of the witness - I have identified this in many of McCahon's early figurative works also, as below). (I have always loved this work of McCahon's, but really! an ochre sky? - how very Gauguin of him).

So in goes my ochre over the blue and black, all very thin paint at this stage.

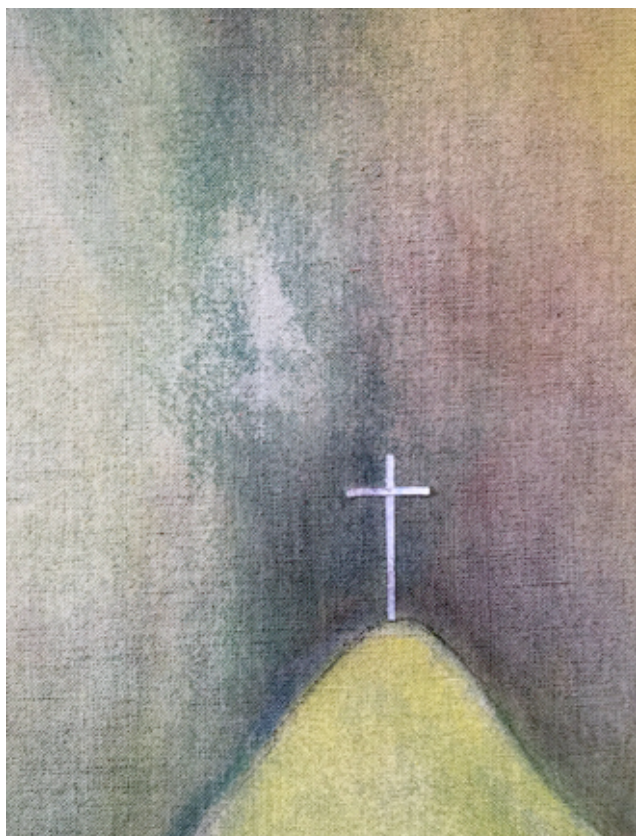


Colin McCahon 'Crucifixion according to Mark' 1947

Well the ochre didn't work for me, so off comes the ochre (!) though a remnant / trace remains... and other strange forms come to the washed out surface.



The cross returns, and now my eye is starting to focus on the small pale shape above and to the left of the cross.



The painting is now starting to drag me around – as I mentioned above, the process and what is thrown up at various points helps to direct the next move - I darken the sky and pull up what is now appearing as a figure in flight (and why not).

A palette of pinks have started to surface, as I have been washing out oranges and reds, this palette leads my mind to Piero della Francesca, and 'The Resurrection', the fresco in Sansepolcro, which encourages me to give my fly away figure a pink outfit and an orange beard.



Piero della Francesca, 'The Resurrection'



Piero della Francesca, 'The dream of Constantine'

Once my mind is on Piero, I start thinking of another of his works, 'The dream of Constantine', part of the fresco cycle 'The Legend of the True Cross', in Arezzo. The peaks in my new painting have me thinking of Piero's pitched tents, I love the colours of this painting, and decide to draw mine closer. His painting has got it all, peaks, great colours, a white cross, and a flying creature.



detail of 'The dream of Constantine'



Myself in Arezzo 2015



Yet, finally the white cross didn't hold on in 'Peaks' 2015 (above). I have no explanation for the dark shadow figure; you can see it forming in the original board (detail above right), by the time it arrives in the Peaks painting it has taken on a strong presence beyond its origins – an enigma or apparition...

Some one who saw this painting in my studio recently said 'what do you think that's about?' Well I can't give it a definitive meaning. Often when I reach this point with myself, and my own work, I am reminded of that great observation of Paul Valery's - that a bad poem 'vanishes into meaning'. Justin Clemens first brought this quote to my attention when he was writing on my 'Surrender and Catch' series. My work proceeds in these strange bursts - something totally unexpected will come to the surface in the making of the work. I may follow this, hold onto it or scrub it out and move on. At another level, more formal picture making concerns come to the fore - composition... how the picture holds itself together, colour balance, thoughts about subject. And then the way historical art creeps up on me, I have to admit my head is stuffed full of other painters paintings, both old and new. I think in my recent paintings I am starting to re introduce earlier methods of working - flat delineated areas of colour, mashed into the new more intuitively found gestural surfaces. I also intend following odd figuration when it presents itself. An example of what I mean by this is the way this small flying figure has appeared in the Peaks painting, it's first appearance as a surface smudge, and then my imagination takes hold of it. This kind of strangely out of scale and even out of context figuration has been occurring more frequently and is something that I intend trusting and pursuing when it presents itself in the future.



detail from 'Dreamer (green)' 2014/15



detail from 'The Other Side' 2014/15



peaks 2015
oil on linen
132 x 96 cm
Collection: Art Gallery of Western Australia