

Brent Harris: *the other side*

A Backroom Project at Tolarno Galleries, March 2016

'The other side' at Tolarno Galleries presents a small group of paintings that extends and develops a figurative element that first appeared in *the other side*, a painting I completed in early 2015. This element – a small standing figure with outstretched arms – had its genesis as a smudge of arching pink paint and has since become something of a witness within my new pictures.

My paintings develop pictorially through their making. The space in my pictures does not follow any logical sense of perspective. Similarly, the scale of forms or figurative elements and their relationships to one another are also generally free of logic. Absurdity is often a welcome driver of my compositions.



My imagery emerges as I work between printmaking, drawing and painting with compositional elements feeding my new work through an organic process that is constantly in flux. Monotype has been my main area of printmaking over the last few years. I have a small press in my studio, which allows me to print as I work, an important freedom in developing my imagery.



my studio 2012, working on the series *the fall*

When making a monotype, I generally print the plate on the same day of its making. If at the end of the day I have not created anything worth printing, I simply wipe the inky mess off the plate and start again the next

day. I use the dark field technique, where a plate of Perspex is rolled up completely black with ink and the image emerges by wiping into the surface. I wear a thin rubber glove, and most often use a piece of paper towel wrapped around my finger, or a cotton wool bud. If after a period of work I feel I have removed too much ink I push more ink onto the plate in selected areas with a finger, or otherwise completely reroll the plate with fresh ink and start again. It would certainly affect my method of working if I had a printer waiting at my side wanting to print.



My approach is intuitive, and I follow imagery as it comes to the surface. Unlike the visionary artist William Blake, I am unable to claim exceptional visionary powers. My head however is stuffed full of art historical references, both old and new, if a strong figurative composition takes hold I will follow it, sometimes with reference to other works. I try not to censor this when it happens, in the hope of generating new compositions and meanings. A friend remarked that one of the new monotypes in this group reminded her of Goya. I love Goya and carry many strong images of his work around in my head, however I am not working with Goya books open by my side!

Monotype; *the other side #4* 2016

I'm going to make an image with some weird creature reclining in a strange landscape, as in the monotype from 2012 *the fall no. 15* (below).

Likewise, I don't sit in front of the plate thinking now

Almost three years after the making of this monotype I decided to attempt a related painting.



Monotype; *the fall no. 15* 2012, collection NGV

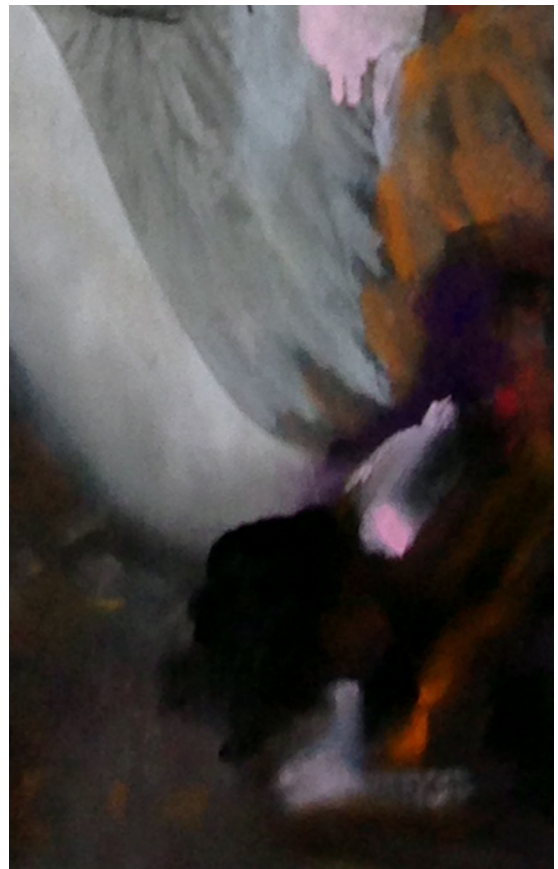


Study for 'the other side' 2014, oil on paper, and the beginning of canvas at 132 x 96cm

My first problem was how to translate the black and white image into a colored painting. I had some leftover yellow and black oil paint on my palette and decided to use it.



2 early states of the canvas



In the right hand corner of this state the standing figure makes its first tentative appearance as a pink smudge that looks like someone leaning back, looking up into the painting.



I then proceeded to realize this figure giving it arms and legs and accentuating it's somewhat shocked gesture.



the other side 2014/15
oil on linen
132 x 96cm
private collection, Sydney

In the finished picture I flipped and repeated this standing pink figure in the lower left corner. The two figures are witnesses to the action, taking place in the painting. Almost a year later I decided to develop this pink standing figure. It appears in three new paintings, several drawings, and a monotype.

Starting with one of the smaller paintings in this group



the fall 2015, oil on linen, 92 x73cm

Some early states of this painting below



To start I painted two figures with no clear idea as to what they may be witnessing. After some time drawing on the canvas with charcoal and pushing areas of paint around I remembered this monotype from 2013.



It was one of 20 monotypes and 9 paintings on board titled 'embark' that I exhibited in Perth at Lister Gallery in November 2013. I had already used imagery from this monotype in two previous paintings, however I was now drawn to the group of small figures standing on the low horizon. Their witnessing of some event, almost as on a large screen above them, related to the two figures I had just placed at the bottom of my new painting. I was also drawn to the linear aspect of the pointing white haired figure at right.

Monotype
Embark #5 2013
Private collection, Perth

I proceeded to work on the painting with these figurative elements (see image below). I won't show other images of the painting from around this time, but I really tortured the upper left figure.



The composition of the painting at this stage began to form an X, with four principal characters. This began to irritate me, so I removed the figure in the upper left, and then the lower standing observer.

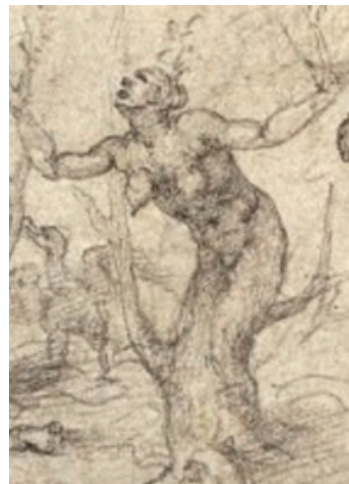


I did like the way the upper right hand figure landed on the canvas, with his transparency and linear nature almost forming a distant mountain. With the two left hand figures removed I was left with a void, to contemplate. My feelings at this point led me to see a figure moving forward out of the darkness, or a falling figure in this dark space.

This in turn led my mind to the famous Michelangelo drawing, *The fall of Phaeton*, 1531-33, in the British Museum (lower left). I have seen the drawing a couple of times in the Prints and Drawings Study Room in London.

For my purpose here, I'm not interested in the myth of Phaeton, but rather Michelangelo's great falling figure. Michelangelo had given other artists his drawings on several occasions to use as compositional fabric, so I'm quite comfortable borrowing this motif.

Without wanting to over cook this, I also saw a connection with my standing pink figure and one of the gestures of Michelangelo's figures at the bottom of his drawing, observing to their peril the fall.

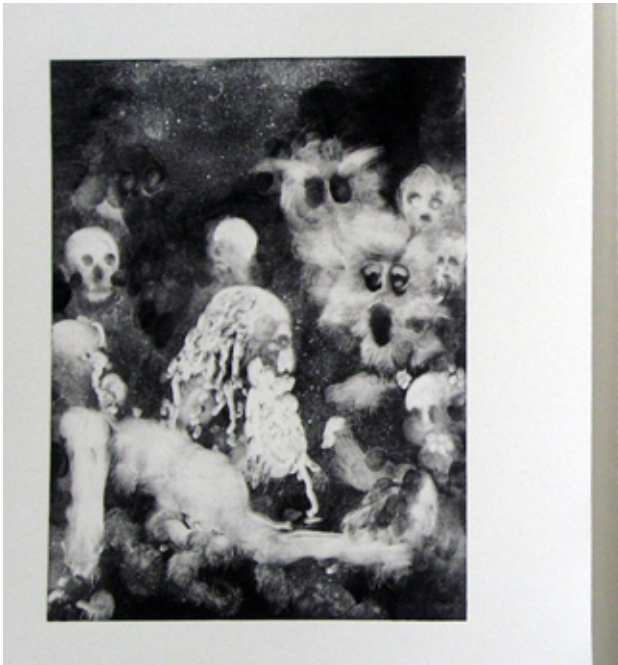


This leads me back to another monotype in this new group, *the other side #5* 2012/16

In 2011 I was in Boston to see the large Degas exhibition 'Degas and the nude'. On display were many monotypes where the dark field technique had been used, as well as many coloured pastel drawings that had been made over the top of the second impression of monotypes. It was during this exhibition visit that I thought I could work on monotypes of the same scale, as my studio press is not large.

On my return to Melbourne I contacted Adrian Kellet, a well-known Melbourne printmaker. Adrian came to my studio bringing with him an all important ink roller, and he proceeded to give me a one-day crash course in dark field monotypes. I made around 100 monotypes during 2012, corralled under the umbrella title *the fall*, which were shown at Tolarno Galleries in November - December 2012.

When making monotypes it is possible to take a second impression to pick up the faint remnant of ink left on the plate. Of the 100 monotypes made I only pulled 5 second impressions, the image to the left here is one of those.



the fall no. 8 2012, collection NGV
and second pale impression



the other side #5 2012/16
black coloured pencil, gouache and oil
over a second impression monotype

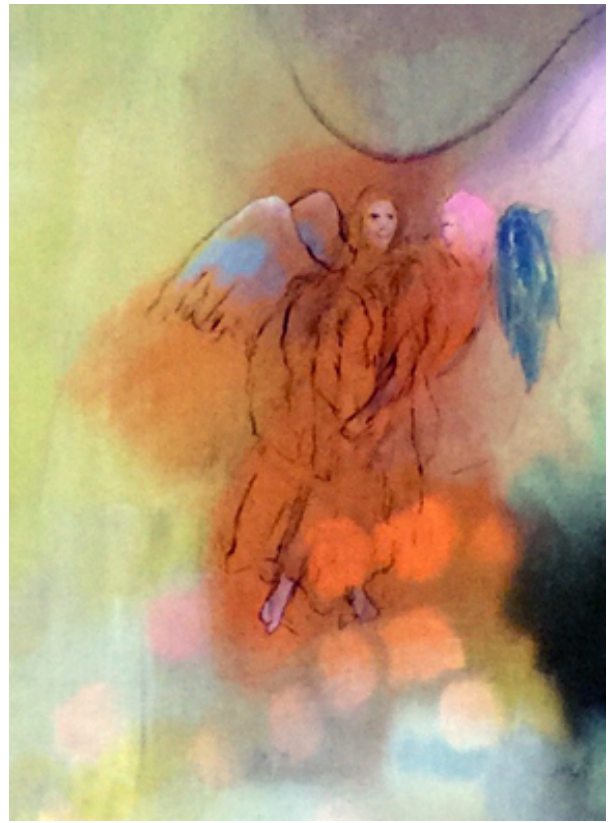
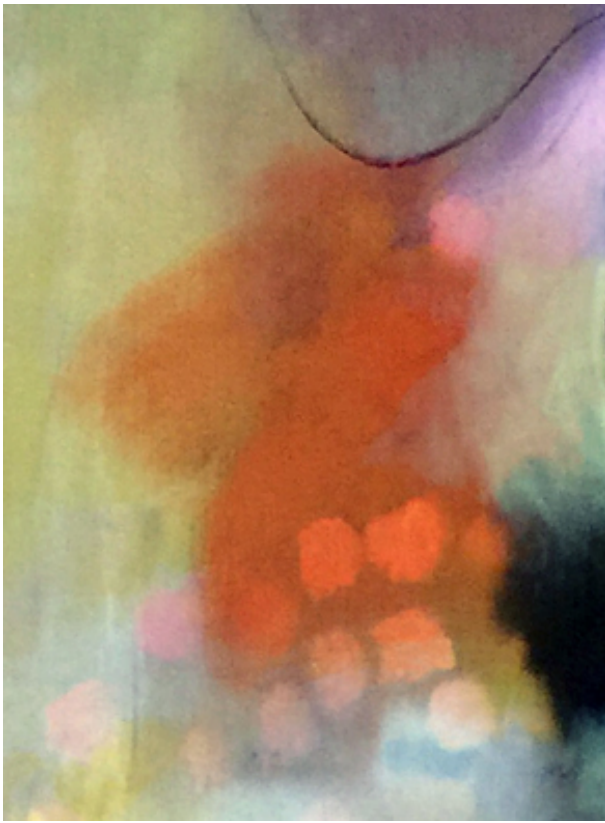
A few weeks ago I came across this second impression monotype in my studio from 2012 (at right). I pinned it up and over a week or so I thought about the idea of "the other side". I started to see the motley crew of characters in this monotype as definitely looking otherworldly. Leaving room for a witness, enter my aghast standing figure. My second impression was much paler than it appears above. In the second impression the standing figure was painted in gouache and oil. In the pale second impression I worked over the whole sheet with a black coloured pencil. The new print becomes part of *the other side* group.

The large painting in this group



the other side (large) 2015/16

The painting above was developed over a 4-month period with many changes; one of the constant elements has been the angels in the upper center of the composition. I cannot explain their presence, except that they appeared early on and I was unable to move them on. I don't think they are the subject of the painting however. Again they suggested themselves in a few smudges of paint and I quickly sketched them in charcoal, pretty much as they appear now.



At an early stage my observant figure appeared in troubled waters, and a falling figure appeared in a smudge of paint, (below)
I tried to draw him out but I started to think of 9/11 and backed off, even though it worked pictorially.



Once the falling figure was dropped, the painting started to take on a vertical climb rather than a descent. The linear elements that were forming in the upper atmosphere have been cobbled together from different sources, twisted and repeated to satisfy my own pictorial needs.



At this point I took strong support from an early Picasso painting *The Burial of Casagemas* 1901. I have loved this painting since my art school days and was always drawn to the way its' space and figuration climb up the picture plane. It is also obvious that Picasso in turn was acknowledging El Greco's ascending pictorial constructions.



Picasso *The Burial of Casagemas* 1901
oil on linen 150.5 x 90.5 cm
Musée d'art Moderne, Paris



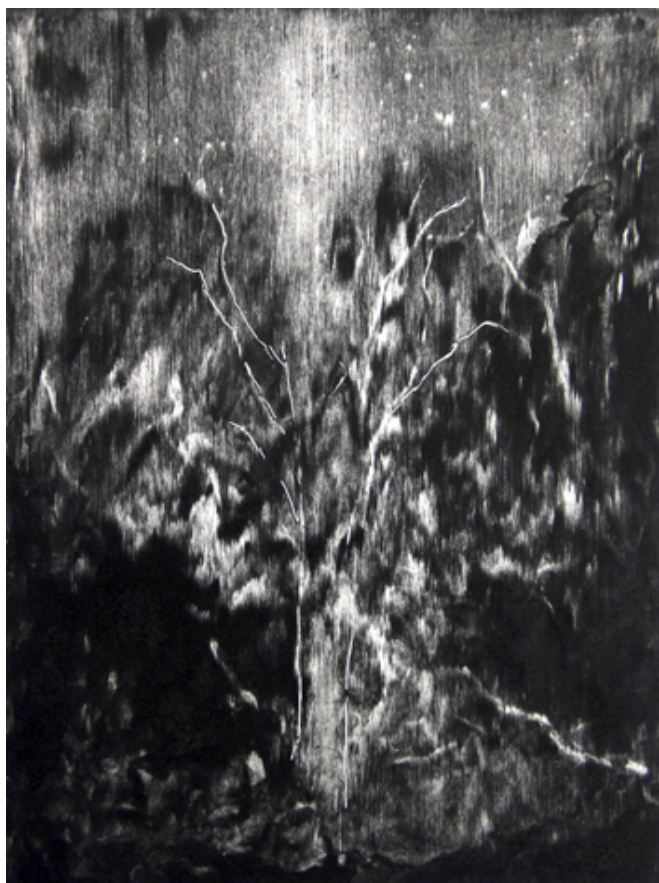
the other side 2016
oil on linen 244 x 175 cm
Courtesy Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne

Unlike the Picasso, the upper part of my painting does not represent a group of prostitutes. I love this in the Picasso; Casagemas was apparently quite a supporter of prostitutes, and Picasso seems to depict them accompanying Casagemas on his journey to the other side.

The standing figure at the lower left of my painting has ended up occupying an idyllic garden setting. It observes a burst of fiery paint which depicts groping hands in search of form. The ghoulish figure attempting an exit in the upper section appears engaged in some pagan ritual. The Picasso painting is a burial scene, with the passage of Casagemas's spirit imagined moving onto another plane. In my painting the small standing figure is observing, witnessing, imagining the other side. 'The scene is set', yet the main character of the imagined drama hasn't turned up yet. A mirror with an undefined reflection is held up amidst the fiery forms. The real subject is thus only partially depicted. That's one interpretation of my painting, after the fact of it's making.

The charcoal and coloured pencil drawing in this group had its starting point in the monotype *the fall no.91* 2012, now in the collection of AGWA. I have made several attempts to use it over the past four years but never quite nailed it. I can't explain my attraction to this image, but I think it won't diminish until I have been able to make something else of it.

Below here I have inverted the image as a way of getting another reading of it.



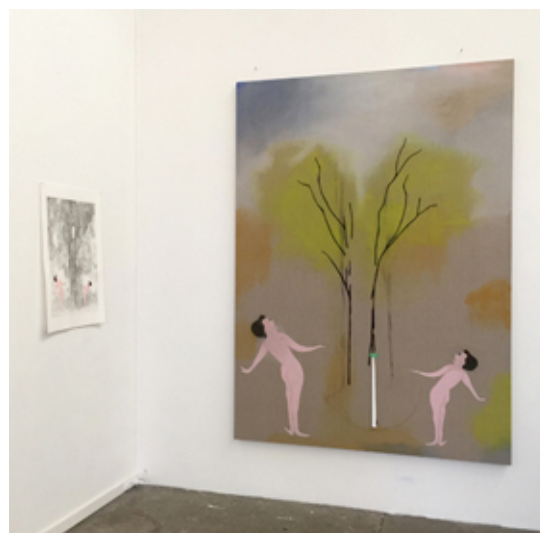
monotype, *the fall no.91* 2012
collection AGWA



inverted image of *the fall no.91*



I decided to make a drawing from the inverted image. The start of that drawing is on the left, with two of the observant figures dropped into the lower right and left. Below is my first attempt to get a painting from it. The painting is still in my studio, in quite a different state to the one below, not dead just waiting.



The finished drawing:



other side 2015
charcoal and gouache on paper
61.5 x 45.5 cm image size



the other side #2 2016 is the third monotype in this exhibition. It is also a second impression monotype reworked with a black coloured pencil only. Illustrated below is the first impression. The second impression was quite pale and I worked on the surface with black pencil. I moved across the surface, pulling up darker areas and watching for new figuration to come up in a play with the shadowy ground. The standing figure at centre left was the only clear figural element in the pale second impression. I don't know what's going on here, but it has an 'over there' feeling about it.

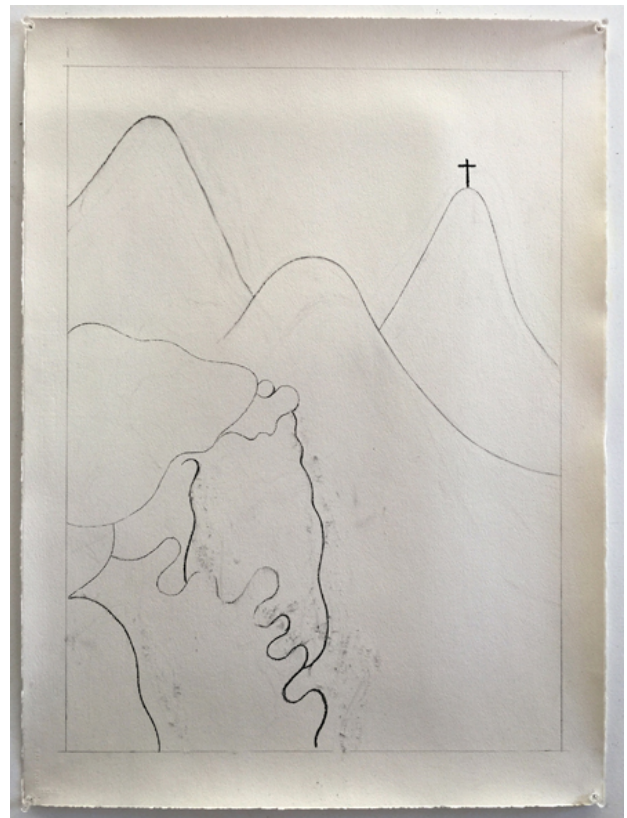
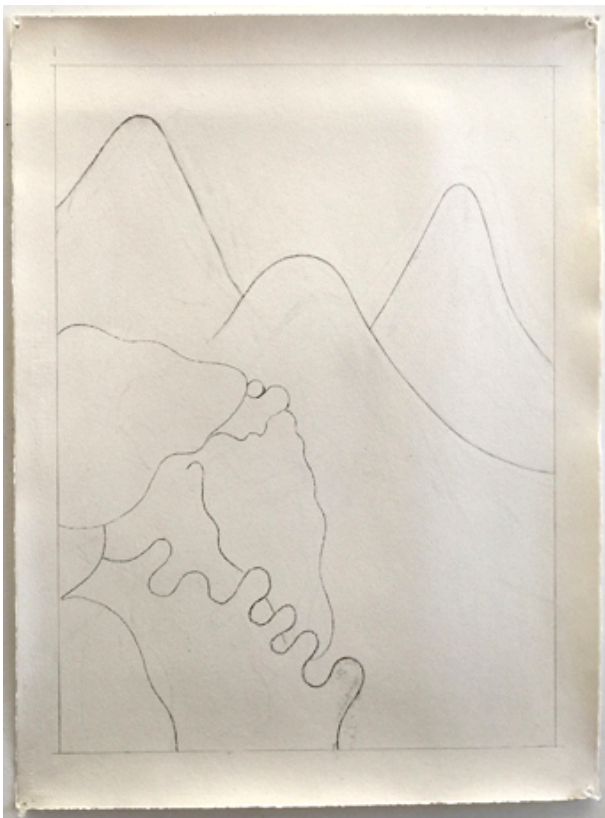
the other side # 2 2016
black coloured pencil
on second impression monotype



the other side # 1 2016
first impression monotype

There are three other works in this exhibition, and I would like to focus on how the imagery moves between the mediums of drawing, printmaking and painting.

The small charcoal drawing on the left shows the beginnings of this work. Then the other three drawings on this page show the same drawing being developed on a paper prepared for oil paint. When I was happy with the composition I transferred it to the canvas.





With the drawing on the canvas in charcoal, I continued to make changes before starting to paint. You can see the changes between the study on paper and the painting, (above, side by side in the studio) in the peaks, the beard under the nose, and where the figurative elements hit the bottom edge of the composition, the ruffles (if that is what they are) in the dark maroon shape change from five to four.

With the painting on canvas almost finished, I returned to the study drawing on prepared paper. I didn't make any changes to this drawing and proceeded to paint it in oil.



Study for *peaks (white cross)* 2015
oil and charcoal on prepared paper
66.0 x48.0 cm

There are many white crosses in paintings from Gauguin, Colin McCahon, Piero della Francesca, to name a few. I have been trying to get a white cross into a painting of my own for a while, so here it is. I think this painting is about salvation, distant and out of reach.



peaks (white cross) 2015
oil on linen
88.5 x 65.0 cm

I have made an earlier PDF about the origin of the character at the bottom left here. He has made an appearance in four other paintings to date, and is perhaps a stand in for the artist.

The final work in this exhibition is a new print I made with Trent Walter of Negative Press. The Print Council of Australia commissioned the print to help raise money to pay writers fees for its journal Imprint. The result was *The Problem*, an edition of thirty photopolymer gravure and multi-layer screenprints. I have included this print here because it again shows how I work between mediums.



The photopolymer plate (below) started life as a monotype from 2012 (left).

I have inverted the imagery and introduced some new characters, most obviously the witness type character at bottom right. These elements have been screenprinted over the photopolymer gravure plate.

There is a full description of the making of this print on the Print Council of Australia website.

monotype *the fall no. 7* 2012
private collection Melbourne



Brent Harris
The Problem 2015 Photopolymer gravure and
multi-layer screenprint
76 x 56 cm, edition of 30. Printed by Trent
Walter, Negative Press.