Jeffrey Harris

b.1949

Self-taught

In the early stages of his art practice, Jeffrey Harris spent a lot of time making drawings and prints, though not as much as painting. Some people prefer the drawings to the paintings, perhaps because the narrative and autobiographical elements are easier to discern and they have no colour. At the time, colour in his paintings was like a Fauve weapon with which he attacked the viewer.

Here's an early pencil drawing. The main figure on the right is the forlorn artist holding a tiny paintbrush – symbolising his own helplessness. All around is a jumbled chaos of family members, girlfriends, cars, planes, bottles, speech bubbles, stark landscapes and buildings; memories held in the artist's mind, which he is trying to make sense out of. He is trying to create an effective emotional statement out of this confusing whirling pile of fragments.

Out of these, some linear forms dominate – portions of personal narrative, exuding tortured self-doubt and suspicion of others, rendered in a variety of styles from fastidiously precise to deliberately casual. The work is basically a free form doodle where the composition has been arrived at in the process of adding new elements. We see a beach in a bay with hills – probably Okains Bay in Banks Peninsula where Harris was living at the time with his then wife Joanna Paul and their three children. There is a hilly skyline with various religious symbols, a cliff, the sea and sand. Everywhere is an abundance of faces, bodies and objects like bottles and animal traps, all loaded with psychological significance. Even a passing passenger plane is dropping a bomb.

The collaged piece of newspaper clipping at the top says: "It takes a lot of willpower for a private person to do this", implying that because the work is confessional, it is causing the artist considerable mental distress. Along the bottom right-hand edge he has written "certified". Various speech bubbles contain a reclining woman, a dog, and exclamation or question marks. There are at least three self-portraits – possibly seven – including one of a bespectacled figure on a tightrope, with little stumps for arms and wheels for feet; and another in the sky with a huge teardrop and bottle-shaped head.

The organisation of the improvised elements is like a jazz solo where the musician discovers a direction as he or she goes along, one undetermined when starting. There are no really large images apart from the self-portrait at the front: mainly medium sized ones positioned as quickly as they are created.

For a 1970s Harris drawing, this example is unusual because of its loose casualness. Most of his graphic imagery from this time is meticulously planned with carefully articulated, angular, imagery rendered with very sharp pencils, and nothing accidental. This drawing however, seems to have started in an unconcentrated, rambling, day-dreamy manner and gradually developed into a coherent statement.

John Hurrell

Galleries and museums:

www.aucklandartgallery.govt.nz

www.chartwell.org.nz

www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz

www.dunedin.art.museum/collection.asp

www.tepapa.govt.nz

Articles:

www.art-newzealand.com/Issues1to40/harris06.htm

Books:

Barr, J. and M. (1980). *Contemporary New Zealand Painters: Artists A–M,* Alister Taylor, New Zealand.

Paton, J. (2006). *Jeffrey Harris*, Victoria University Press.

Web search:

Fauvism

Jeffrey Harris | *It All Ends* | 1974 | Ink on paper with collage | 455x310mm