Jeffrey Harris

b.1949

Self-taught

Imagine Jeffrey Harris's *Squares* are like stills from a movie. Stacked together in a grid we want to read them as scenes from a story, from left to right, top to bottom. The problem is, they just don't seem to make sense. We can't tell what kind of story this is. Horror? Comedy? Drama? The title tells us nothing – it is just a description of how the painting is put together.

But then can we be certain that the artist actually wants to tell us a story? What if he deliberately leaves us puzzled because he wants something more of the viewer? Do your own work, he might be saying, because I've done mine already. I painted the picture. Now it is your job as the viewer to immerse yourself in the image. If, ultimately, it is not meant to be 'understood' like a story, Harris wants you to at least 'experience' the image – wants you to be unsettled by it. He doesn't care whether you like it or not, but he wants a 'reaction'. This is the kind of artist that Harris is. He loves ambiguity, confusing emotional situations that don't make sense, jumps and cuts in continuity that leave you uncertain of what is going on. Slow down, and take a look at each panel.

Squares is a good example of the way Harris paints, a style that appears to be naïve, even a little awkward, as though he lacks skills and training. But don't be fooled. Harris knows a lot about art. He's studied and looked at it a great deal and has a strong sense of its history and what the rules are. In fact, you might say that, because he knows the rules of painting, he is able to break them so well. His bright colours, sharp edges and distorted figures are all designed to pump up the emotion, make everything vivid and intense. He also wants to avoid slickness in his art.

In making his pictures around this time, Harris also looked at family snapshots – photos of people doing things, standing self-consciously in front of scenic views, on holiday – the kind of images that don't always obey the rules of 'good photography'. Harris seemed to be attracted to the moments when people are together, but seem very alone. He put these things to good use, creating strange and unsettling pictures that are hard to pin down, and powerful because you can't easily explain them.

In 1977, the year *Squares* was painted, Harris received a fellowship at the University of Otago in which he could paint full-time. He produced a huge amount of work, including paintings, drawings and etchings. Many of the works dealt with the death of his daughter, Imogen, who died of a heart condition in 1976 when she was less than a year old. Paintings from this time might be considered a kind of mourning, expressions of grief for the artist's loss. There are a number of images and symbols in *Squares* that might be interpreted as referring to Imogen – figures with blank faces, forms that look like embryos, a baby cradled in someone's arms. Harris did describe his work as 'a diary of painted pain', but you have to be careful – it would be easy to assume that this painting is somehow a literal statement of what the artist felt, without taking into account that first and foremost it is a work of art. It doesn't necessarily reveal the 'truth'.

Damian Skinner

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.

Jeffrey Harris | *Squares* | 1977 | Oil on board | 406x404mm