

Paul Harbutt

Catalogue essay for painter Paul Harbutt, Rome, 2002

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Paul Harbutt is that rare thing, a solar artist of rigorous means. Even his most austere works are studded with quirks of line, caprices of color and a gestural expansiveness that testifies, among other things, to the cordial relations he maintains with his own unconscious. Oneiric in essence, his paintings seem animated by an illimitable formal buoyancy, a place where large, sometimes unwieldy shapes float to the canvas to be filled with sublimations of color and light. If craft for the Moderns was the final unshakeable proof of authenticity, then authenticity is writ large in the expert Dureresque pen and ink nature studies of the 1980's, the drenched fresco colors and voluted whorls of his paintings of the early 90's, the swollen volumes of his more recent lyric "Spanish" phase, and his superb present series, three of which are reproduced here, and which in their mix of faultless technique and cheerful, metaphysically terrifying subject matter, exemplify what Harbutt does best.

As an artist, he is a Proteus, a shape-shifting *bricoleur*, roughing up received categories of "high" and "low", "academic" and "pop", while rummaging with equal élan in art history and children's books. He is as happy riffing on contemporary culture as he is launching poisoned—if affectionate—arrows at the moralizing self-improving tendencies of the 18th and 19th centuries. This is evident not only in the free quotations from Leger and Picasso and Guston in his work, but as well in the deliberate range of reference from Hogarth to Thomas Nast, country almanacs to current fashion and even an appearance by Struwwelpeter, the iconic cartoon creation of Heinrich Hoffman which WH. Auden numbered among the most terrifying things he'd ever seen as a child. All of it is grist for Harbutt's manufactory—that place of visual puns, formal deftness, hot and cold-running mysteries, and endless, streaming appetite for paint.

To draw a leitmotif from an oeuvre this varied would be next to impossible, but if there is a connecting thread, it would attach to the body. The body recurs constantly in his work, depicted with immense love and care as an open field of figuration, capable of the most fantastic mutation. In one painting a giant hand enfists a television morphed magically into a head hosting the nightly newsreel of guns and horror. In yet another, human hair unattached to any skull weaves in a recurrent flaxen waveform through the picture frame. In a third, misshapen torsos spout prodigies of limbs.

In response to the liberty-taking lessons of his great Modernist forebears, Paul Harbutt proposes a model of visual art as something whose essential wit, like that of the great 17th century Metaphysical poets, reveals a store of profound sensuality and truth. His project is votive without any of the trappings of the sacred, and most deadly serious when most comically deep. But not solemn. No, never that.

