

HEART WIDE OPEN |

COLOUR, GESTURE, AND BUDDHIST INFLUENCE: GABRYEL HARRISON'S POEMS FOR THE EARTH
ALEX M.F. QUICHO



Gabryel Harrison, *Wreath*, 2013. Oil on canvas, 36 x72”

Gabryel Harrison works in an old fishery building on the banks of the Fraser River, tucked away in the bucolic landscape of aged houses and stables that make up Vancouver’s Southlands. The decision to work out of the city, but still within arms’ reach of it, is one that seems to possess those artists whose spiritual connection to their materials calls for quietude in their outer life: Jackson Pollock’s chilly outpost in the Hamptons comes to mind. Here, she stocks the woodstove, stretches and sands her canvases, and tends to the bees that huddle in the small apiary at her doorstep. Time passes more slowly. The surrounding landscape, in its wintertime browns and greens, surfaces in Harrison’s work: the slow glint of the moving river, the thatch of tall wetland grasses, the eagle-feathers that occasionally lie scattered like small treasures.

On the surface, Harrison’s paintings appear to be about what practitioners of Zen Buddhism may call ‘everyday suchness’ – the notion of perceiving an object only as it is, such as experiencing “a leaf purely as a leaf purely over a period of time”¹. The rose sheds its signifying layers, its syrupy cliché, and becomes only that: a rose. However, the latent themes in Harrison’s florals and landscapes, which seem darker and more evanescent than they have ever been, reach beyond the meditative ‘suchness’ of still life and into the phenomenological realm through gesture, colour, and poetry.

¹ Levy, Mark. *Void / In Art* (Wilton Manors, Florida: Bramble Books, 2006), 32.



Gabryel Harrison, *Heartbeat 2*, 2013. Oil on canvas, 55 x 77" | Gabryel Harrison, *Light Coming Down*, 2013. Oil on canvas, 24 x 24"

Under ‘influences’ Harrison cites Cy Twombly, whose hand appears as a new, anarchic element in Harrison’s more abstract work. Seeing *Heartbeat 2*’s slushy rounds, I’m suddenly reminded of the photograph of Twombly that accompanies his obituary in the New York Times: standing there, in his last years, before a wall-spanning field of blossoms which – much like Harrison’s – were more energy than flower. Over his lifetime, Twombly rarely offered insight on his own paintings, publishing only a single written statement in which he “tried to make clear that his intentions were not subversive but elementally human. Each line he made, he said, was ‘the actual experience’ of making the line, adding: ‘It does not illustrate. It is the sensation of its own realization.’”²

It’s this experiential vein that shines most strongly in Harrison’s work, whose Buddhist lineage lies in unexpected harmony with Twombly’s acute self-containment. The beauty in Harrison’s paintings is marred – but not diminished – by crude drips and slashes that move her oeuvre out of the realm of representation and into that of experience. This sensation is owed as much to her use of colour as it does to her energetic stroke. In *Remembering Her Light*, swathes of soft pinks and lavenders, golds and creams, remind us that colour “is not something daubed onto a pre-existing shape, filling a form”³: it has its own, phenomenological form that we experience both a retinal and bodily manner.



Gabryel Harrison, *Remembering Her Light*, 2013. Gouache on canvas, 50 x 60" | Gabryel Harrison, *Heart Wide Open*, 2013. Oil on canvas, 36 x 48"

² Kennedy, Randy. *Cy Twombly, Idiosyncratic Painter, Dies at 83* (New York, New York: The New York Times, July 5, 2011).

³ Taussig, Michael. ‘What Colour Is The Sacred’ *Critical Inquiry* No. 33 (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 25.

The stranger, indescribable properties of colour – those that can't be pinned down into language or grounded by science – are investigated by scholar Michael Taussig in his essay, *What Colour is the Sacred?*. “When we see a colour we are actually seeing a play with light in, through, and on a body – retracting, reflecting, and absorbing light,” he writes, “Something we are aware of but rarely as with sunlight filtering through a forest, black water glinting in its rush past the ice, or rainbows on oil slicks on a wet roadway.”⁴ It is this rare spark of awareness that Harrison encapsulates in her work: we see that depthless water in the lacquered blacks that fill out the void around *Wreath*, while *Heart Wide Open* is all sun-dappled illumination lapsed in time. Like Taussig, Harrison understands that colour *is* the sacred element. It's the strike of wonder that shifts us out of expected reality and into a sort of startling recognition that “cancels out the intellectual cross-references of the soul and creates a pure mood without thereby sacrificing the world.”⁵



Gabryel Harrison, *After the Dark*, 2013. Gouache on canvas, 58 x 65” | Gabryel Harrison, *River*, 2013. Oil and mixed media on canvas, 67 x 72”

The urgent, gestural elements in Harrison's landscape works are closely entwined with the Zen Buddhist practice of *haboku*, or 'flung ink'. Composed of graceful hashes of dark ink upon a plain paper ground, *haboku* paintings possess an essential immediacy where “the world of solid objects seems to dissolve and re-form according to the slow rhythm established by the breath.”⁶ We see this in *After the Dark* and in *River*: the jittery sienna marks that somehow become woodlands or islands are subsumed by lightness or scraped away again into an activated nothingness.

Breath is an essential foundation of Harrison's work. Both a painter and a poet, Harrison links the architecture of breath upon which all poetry is built to the fluidity of her brushstrokes – a meditative rise and fall across the canvas that, Harrison notes, “gives the viewer the opportunity to project themselves into the gesture of the work.”⁷ It's this inhalation and exhalation – this reforming and dissolution – that connects Harrison's exploration of natural matter to the atomic core of it. To practicing Buddhists, it's called the Void; to physicists, it's called energy, whether it's the imperceptible vibration of all the atoms in solid matter or the

⁴ Taussig, Michael. “What Colour Is The Sacred” *Critical Inquiry* No. 33 (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 47.

⁵ Benjamin, Walter. “Child's View of Colour.” *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 1 1913-1926*. (Boston, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 50.

⁶ Levy, Mark. *Void / In Art* (Wilton Manors, Florida: Bramble Books, 2006), 30.

⁷ Harrison, Gabryel. Interviewed by Alex M.F. Quicho and Chris Bentzen. *Gabryel Harrison*. Winsor Gallery/Hot Art Wet City Artist Video Series, 2013. Web (video). November 7, 2013.

explosion of light and heat that kick-started our universe. *Haboku*, in all its simplicity, embodies this idea concisely: each form is but a denser accumulation of the energy that surrounds it.

The Void is something that Harrison is deeply familiar with. A retreat she took in the wilds of interior British Columbia saw her plunged into a lightless dark for a period of several days. “I experienced the void as not nothing, but a space of becoming,”⁸ she wrote in the days following. In Buddhist emptiness, there is “a fullness [...], a sense of spaciousness that both holds and suffuses the stuff to the world.”⁹ We see this manifested literally in Harrison’s material treatment, where emptiness is created as paint is scraped away until bare canvas shows through again. The result is startling and paradoxical: the paintings become luminous and charged with energy where Harrison’s hand has wrought these small voids.

“I love that sense of destroying and building up again. You never actually lose it,” she says. “Whatever comes back, comes back with more power.”¹⁰

⁸ Harrison, Gabryel. Artist Statement. November 7, 2013.

⁹ Epstein, Mark. “Sip My Ocean,” *Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: The University of California Press, 2004), 34.

¹⁰ Harrison, Gabryel. Interviewed by Alex M.F. Quicho and Chris Bentzen. *Gabryel Harrison*. Winsor Gallery/Hot Art Wet City Artist Video Series, 2013. Web (video). November 7, 2013.