

The Practice of Cultivating Beauty

On Gabryel Harrison's Collection *Learn the Flowers* by Pennylane Shen

The latest exhibition by artist Gabryel Harrison entitled **Learn the Flowers** is inspired by the final lines in Gary Snyder's poem of the same name:

*stay together
learn the flowers
go light*

Akin to these lines, the paintings simply and honestly convey a profound message, inviting viewers to cultivate compassion and generosity: to live with passion. Harrison has done just this through her engaged contemplation with the natural world. The pieces in this collection, she states, "are evidence of my trust in nature and the body/mind resonance with beauty to teach me of wisdom and balance. I believe beauty is still relevant."

We live in a post-modern age where subjectivity and relativity define our perceptions, where multiple entry points and possibilities often leave us in a restless liminal space. In beauty, we can find an undeniable truth and comfort. Despite this, it seems that somewhere along the way we have forgotten, lost, or perhaps even willingly discarded this idea. The notion that the essence of beauty can be defined as constant and unwavering has been left behind.

Swallowed up in a sea of irrelevance and irreverence, we have forgotten that beauty can be recognizable, undeniable, and vividly expressed, as it is here in **Learn the Flowers**. The artist states, "Beauty isn't merely 'taste' or 'aesthetics', it is more like the erotic impulse to engage life... a charge of attraction that compels us, it connects us, breaks us open. We must be unafraid of the conversation that includes beauty." Harrison's work exemplifies this by bringing to the fore a tangible and true beauty.



EVERYONE LOOKING FOR LOVE, 2012 , 50" x 60" oil on canvas (left)



EACH PETAL CONSENTS, 2011, 48" x 48" oil on canvas (right)

Flowers are used on occasions of importance, given in gestures meant to honour, congratulate and mourn. Each incorporation reinforces their aesthetic significance: they are simultaneously an emblem of beauty and of superficial functionality.

Beauty however, remains both temporary and transitory. Harrison observes flowers to be a symbol of "humanity's fragile transience and our increasingly disembodied relation to the physical world." Like youth, health, fame or fortune the loveliness of Harrison's roses are fleeting. Recognizing their ephemeral nature, she presents her floral subjects dramatically past their prime, their outer petals releasing a final exhale. Bursting past full bloom, the roses are often exaggerated by heavy drips of paint. Deep scarlet seeps off a mad bouquet in *Everyone Looking for Love*, streaming into the scrawled stanza: "*Beauty, Fragility...the Torn and Tender...*" An ivory peony weeps unabashedly down the frame in *Each Petal Consents*. A melodramatic pariah from her group, she is the Miss Havisham of the floral arrangement; a little indignant and a little sad. Sensual and bold, we see this imagery as a constant theme in Harrison's work, one the artist herself has described as "a final erotic declaration of passion."

Harrison notes that the stain of these roses, the distinct smell of petals and pigment, remain on her hands for days. Like blood or tears, this visceral lasting experience seems to translate itself onto the canvas. It is a stain that demands us not to turn away, but instead to face a passionate and powerful energy head-on.



SPILLING TEARS AND ROSES, 2011, 48" x 48" oil on canvas (left)



FIAT LUX, 2012, 30" x 40" oil on canvas (right)

The abstract floral pieces are a new development to this collection; raw, gestural and often untreated they are a push away from the floral still lifes. *Spilling Tears and Roses* for example, stitches together frenzied strokes of crude red against patches of clay grey, eventually exposing the bare canvas beneath. These paintings are a marriage of the two styles associated with Harrison's body of work: abstract and representational. In *Fiat Lux*, a balance of simplified forms and flat planes of colour are purposely arranged against a soft background to create something melancholy and emotional. *Ascension* suggests a floating floral arrangement, a nostalgic evocation aided by the flecks of fresh leaf greens and yellows.

The rose is a motif that Harrison has chosen to develop from the impetus of her career. Fully aware and embracing its cliché, the rose has admittedly become the obsessive muse to Harrison's masterpieces. A line can be drawn between its physical form and a symbolic relation to the creation of life. We begin with a dense center, moving outward layer by layer through a sequence of pattern and growth, becoming increasingly complex and eventually unraveling into the beyond. Not unlike the formation of a planet or the death of a star, it is out of an infinite point of density that creation is primordially borne.

Shine Your Light, *Heartbeat* and *Poppy* represent this best. We see these monumental poppies effloresce to full glory: from the radiant yellow beaming out the center of *Shine Your Light* to the subdued red rays of the quietly burning *Heartbeat*, and finally reduced to the dim swell of *Poppy*, an amassed darkness in a bruised core.



POPPY, 2012, 60" x 84" oil on canvas

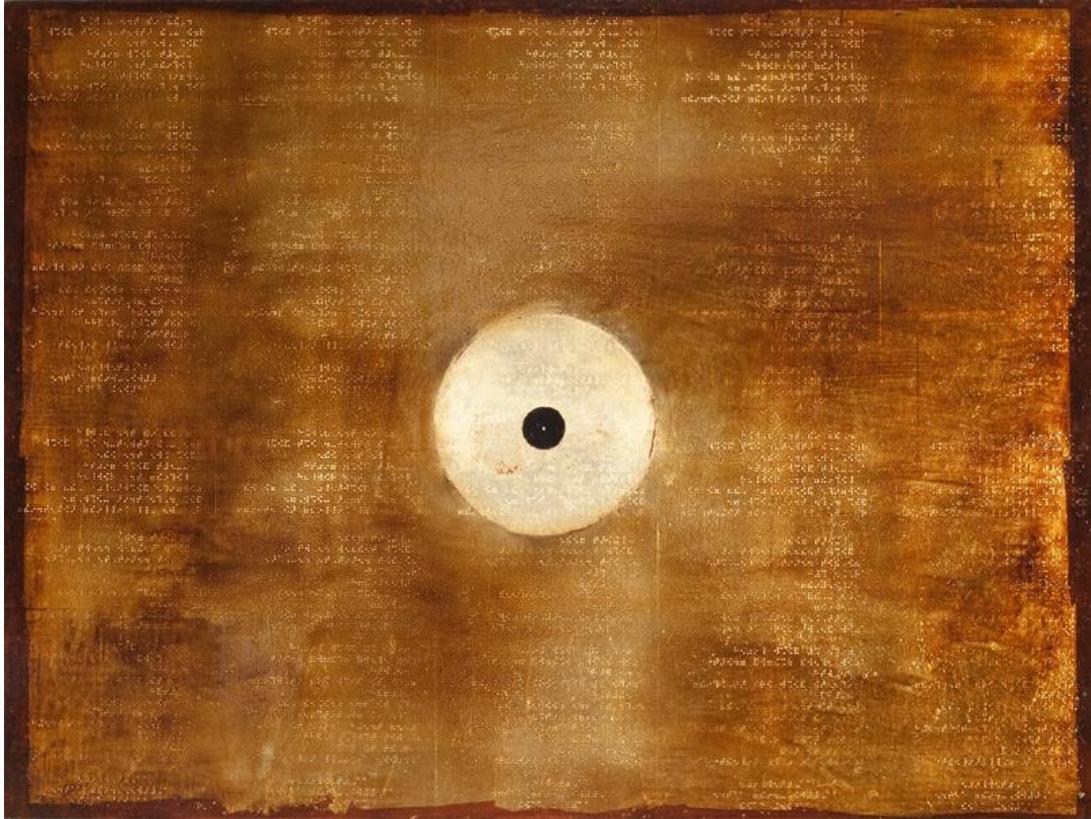
Despite the tremendous amount of darkness abundant in the series, light always remains a persistent thread throughout Harrison's work. In her own poem *Light Always Comes*, she writes:

trusting the dark
blood language, breath, flesh and bone, abandoned infinities
... every new night ablaze with all its spacious stars
light always comes

Whether it is a dull glow in the distance or one that emanates from the roses themselves, she is very conscious of the inclusion of light and the presence of hope.

The Tantra series (*of Compassion, of Eternity, of Union, and of Origin*) is inspired by the traditional Indian and Tibetan meditative process, whereby intense concentration is placed on pictorial shapes in order to expand one's consciousness. Working closely with these images and in regular practice of this spiritual exercise herself, the result of Harrison's paintings evokes a similar attention to the energy found in shapes.

Looking back into the rich history of abstract painting, it seems that Harrison is contributing to a greater conversation, one that has been occurring for the past century. Perhaps, she is simply tapping into a frequency regarding the power of absolute forms, a dialogue Rothko engaged in, and Kandinsky before him.

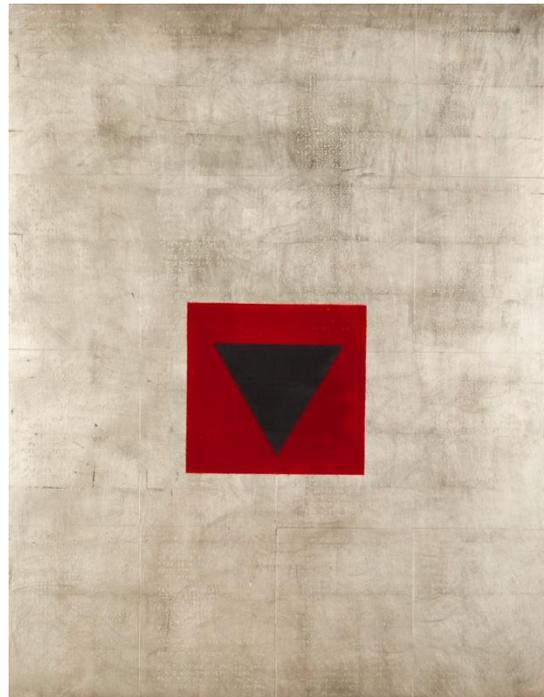


TANTRA OF ORIGIN (4), 2012, 30" x 40" Braille, gold leaf, diamond, oil and tar on panel

Using Braille text as a platform in the Tantra pieces is not a new technique for Harrison. Over time, she has gradually incorporated such text into her repertoire of techniques. A skilled poet, Harrison's original words make up the poetry translated to Braille in this series.

Harrison's interest in Braille as both a texture and a language lies in its ability to provide another means of interpreting the world. Another layer to the unraveling rose; it is a hidden message beneath the skin of one's fingers and requires a certain intimacy to encrypt its meaning.

Using Braille as a metaphor for internal blindness, we can relate its use to grander ideas; the depreciation of physical communication and self-awareness found within our society. In many respects "we view the lives of others more clearly than we view our own" (Harrison). We are all fumbling around in the dark, wading through noise and distraction in an effort to find meaning or to find one another.



TANTRA OF UNION (3), 2012

Humankind's technological rat race of evolution has become counterintuitive and in many aspects has regressed, undermining nature's fine balance. The wantonness of advancement has resulted in a culture that rewards mass production, consumerism and progress, cultivating greed and isolation. Echoing the sobering words of Albert Einstein nearly a century ago, our culture has created a society that honours the "faithful servant (the rational mind)" and forgotten "the sacred gift (the intuitive mind)".



TANTRA OF UNION (3), 2012, 34" x 44" Braille, diamond, white gold, oil on panel (detail)

The hope of **Learn the Flowers** is to become still in the presence of beauty and to approach it with a kind of reverence. Encouraging a meaningful interaction with the artwork, Harrison's aim is for the viewer to "slow down in front of these offerings, to apprehend the smallest reflection of their own inner wholeness...a part of the necessary restoration of balance within us as individuals and each of us in relation to the world."

With this in mind, viewing becomes an emotional exchange, and vision, a tool used for self-growth. According to writer Suzi Gablik, "Vision is not defined by the disembodied eye, as we have been trained to believe. Vision is a social practice that is rooted in the whole of being...Beauty is an activity rather than an entity." The imagery of **Learn the Flowers** compels a visceral engagement. Something we simply cannot disregard when valuing art. It is what psychologist James Hillman calls "the soul's desperate concerns."

Harrison proposes that if we are to "*re-ensoul* a world tipped in the balance toward mind, materialism and technology, we must live a life that makes beauty relevant...The ability to perceive, to respond, to create beauty in times of darkness is what elevates humanity in its triumph against brutality."

Gary Snyder instructs us to *learn the flowers*, to learn their beauty. Gabryel Harrison's new collection provides a means as to how: *go light*.



SPRING PASSION, 2011, 24" x 48", oil on canvas