

David Harrison

David Harrison's paintings, sculptures and collages make strange our relationship to the natural world, in order to rethink and revivify it. Harrison reworks what might ostensibly be thought of as traditional or disregarded subjects or genres – landscapes and fairy stories, most notably – into extraordinary, magical narratives entirely of our own time. Harrison's paintings are frequently peopled with improbable characters in unlikely scenarios. "In fairy stories", Harrison remarks, "the natural and the supernatural go hand in hand, whether in 'Alice in Wonderland' or the 'The Wind in the Willows'; 'The Master and Margarita' to Gogol's short stories".

The artist's paintings are created on surfaces ranging from rough scraps of board to monumental canvases, and vary from intimate, naturalistic vignettes to grand compositions. Such varied imagery, however, is unified by Harrison's idiosyncratic approach, which invariably yokes the fantastical and the real. The artist gives vivid shape to imaginary worlds that are all too similar to our own, but seemingly outside of time, outside of place. Here, his magical realism defamiliarises the natural world, and in this parallel universe, it is animals rather than human characters who invite our imaginative empathy. Birds, most often pictured in twilight or nocturnal environments, play a special role in Harrison's iconography. Winking, smiling, or staring theatrically out of the picture at us, they are ordinarily pictured alone, so that we identify with them as individuals, rather than as indistinguishable members of another species. Occasionally, the birds populate rural places known to the artist, providing him with the opportunity to transform the sites of memories into a vivid personal mythology. But more often, they inhabit the less lovable sites of an imaginary metropolis.

Surrounded by dirt, detritus, or ruins, Harrison's creatures still inspire the sense of wonder that the animal kingdom – in its infinite variety and complexity – can rouse in us. Even when in the blighted corners of the city, his birds exude a magical presence, whilst underlining the madness of man's desire to destroy or deface his own environment. In "Blackpool Night-Owl", reproduced here, this mix of urban decay and the unbelievable are particularly pronounced. Owls are one of the most traditional symbols of magic and the black arts, yet Harrison renews their symbolic power and strangeness. Each of his images is invariably composed of collisions between incommensurable elements. The magical, mythical and poetic sit alongside "day-to-day oddities that are often overlooked by most people". This play between the wondrous, the ordinary and the malign facets of the world mean his protagonists are never simply playful or macabre, but seemingly both: the tone is at once elegiac, dramatic and optimistic.

In Harrison's hands, animals perform manifold roles. As we read them as being above or beyond these unnatural habitats, they appear as witnesses to our own folly and vice, whilst belonging to another reality that lies free from human pollution. "Birds", Harrison notes, "prove their superiority over mankind. As we set about destroying the planet, they fly like angels and jewel-coloured fairy folk amongst the debris, heralding sanctuary for the rest of nature to begin its' clean-up process." The bird's posture and gaze in 'Blackpool Night-Owl' is bellicose – almost accusatory – so that we become complicit in the drama. Addressing us directly, and costumed in absurd and incongruous evening dress, the night-owl is positioned in a space beyond the foreground: he feels to be pushing out through the imaginary 'window' that the picture offers. The effect is to create a conspiratorial intimacy, that simultaneously feels unnervingly threatening.

The absurdity of the tuxedo exaggerates the sense that the owl is half-way between the genteel and bestial. The naturalistic, yet abbreviated treatment of the bird's features underline this; Harrison's short, concentric brushmarks form a star-shaped halo around the owl's pupils, returning us to the gravitational pull of his gaze. Here, birds are omniscient observers overseeing all of our human affairs – as the artist notes, "birds are always looking. As they make their homes amongst us, from the spire of a gothic cathedral, under the eaves of an ancient cottage, amidst the shards of concrete shooting up at jagged angles towards heaven." The animals appear as witnesses to some dark or devastating narrative, where the fall-out of man's actions is at stake. Entropy and regeneration sit together in tension, as "whatever we make ugly, nature makes beautiful again".

Yet the artist forges a territory between the outrageously fantastic and the pungently real, so that we never cease to suspend disbelief. The canvases, accordingly, have the quality of mythical stories that ring true. Accordingly, the animals seem like intermediaries in Greek tragedies, who from the front of the stage, narrate their fabulous stories by being our guides to the tragedy behind. Harrison's use of his medium in the service of such an extravagant imagination recalls JK Huysmans's description of painting as a medium in 'Against Nature' – though Harrison's intentions are at the exact polar opposite to the title. Huysmans's hero, Des Essentes, "seeks out evocative works which would transport him to some unfamiliar world and point the way to new possibilities, shaking up his nervous system by means of erudite fancies, complicated nightmares and sinister visions.... [his paintings] were ardent aspirations towards an ideal, towards a distant beatitude..."

'Blackpool Night-Owl', 2004, oil on board