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HUFFPOST ARTS & CULTURE

Hilary Harkness: Painting Arrested Ambiguity at FLAG Art Foundation

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The now renowned artist Hilary Harkness arrived at the Yale University Art School -- during a time of pervasive identity politics -- without one.

John Currin had just graduated, leaving Yale professors and critics agape with his mash-ups of Renaissance craftsmanship against sexual and social satire. Contemporary darling Matthew Barney had come armed with "Drawing Restraint 7" -- installations built on the relationship between self-imposed social resistance and individual creativity. And Ann Gale, Marc Trujillo and Malerie Marder were in their initial attempts to discover and undress the human psyche in naked scenes of people and places.

Harkness came to the prestigious school with no other objective than to learn how to paint. Without an agenda, she started making self-portraits, drawing herself over and over, each time placing her face in a different presentation.

"Then I got bored," Harkness said touring the gallery of the FLAG Art Foundation where her new solo exhibition of nearly impossibly detailed paintings of a world inhabited by complex, inter-related and fated relationships opens on February 8th. "Yale didn't nurture me, but gave me a basic tool kit; getting paint to cleave to the canvas; understanding the purpose, limits, and benefits of painting mediums; and creating the illusion of space.

"Outside of Yale, the Master of Osservanza Triptych -- the works of il Sassetta -- opened the door to painting narratives in a simple and easy-to-understand fashion."

Maybe to Harkness, but not to her fans and patrons. In her new cutaway series, Harkness paints an almost labyrinthine and bewitching world of mostly women, engaging in acts of pleasure/pain, seduction/repulsion and caress/abrasion, in the context of battleships, prestigious auction houses and collectors' homes, among other settings. Sex, war, reproduction, class systems, free markets, manifest destiny and scientific experimentation all play out on uncensored Lilliputian stages -- "like ants in an ant farm," Harkness said - and manage to remain somewhat tethered to hypnagogic historical moments and surrealist settings that mock the real world.

"The attention to detail and riveting narratives recall one of my favorite paintings, Hieronymus Bosch's "Garden of Earthly Delights," said FLAG Director Stephanie Roach. But Harkness says she prefers the more playful Pieter Brueghel, a Flemish Renaissance painter and printmaker, "who had less implicit judgment on his figures.

"Bosch always looked on his figures as sinners going to hell. Brueghel painted peasants celebrating with comedy and joy even in the turmoil between the Catholics and the Protestants. I see it as even in the worst of times, people find room for relief."

No more is the theme of contained allayment apparent than in "Red Sky in the Morning," an oil-on-panel painting that imagines

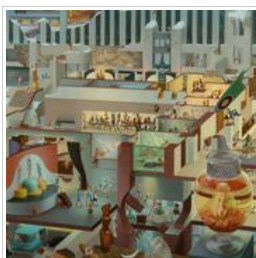
the happenings on the Japanese battleship Yamato, a historic World War II vessel sent on a suicide mission with its soldiers believing it was headed for food and fuel.



Harkness answers the hypothetical scenario of the Yamato by juxtaposing vengeful wives waiting for an adulterous female captain, nude and drunk women officers cavorting and dancing -- and then the lesser ranking female soldiers sinking in waters enveloping the ship. Spirit clouds and phantom geishas, however, protect all of them.

A triptych of an imagined Christie's Auction House across the gallery presents a similar confrontation, only surrounded by opulence, instead of the stark capsules of war. In "Mother Lode," three different armies of miniature women, including Muslim and American, lay down their arms and engage in an endless trade of luxury goods for prized embryos -- symbolic of Harkness' belief that the world revolves around babies, and their trade. This time, however, opulent antiques

and priceless artwork offer a stark counterpoint to the atrocities occurring within.



But it's the military to which Harkness always returns. Growing up with a grandfather who was a larger-than-life WWII veteran and soldier in the Battle of the Bulge, Harkness was fascinated by both his toughness and his reluctance to discuss his experiences on the front.

"I started painting the world in microcosm, often encapsulated in military vessels, because I was interested in what people would do when pushed to the edge," Harkness said. "I wanted to play out what might happen when there was inadequate supervision, when everything was at stake, and when traditional morality might fly out the window, justified by a larger cause."

Harkness, who typically exhibits with the Mary Boone Gallery and has works in the collection of the Whitney Museum, recently returned to New York permanently from splitting her time between here and Boston. It was the perfect timing for Roach and FLAG founder, former Goldman Sachs investment banker, Glenn Fuhrman, to approach Harkness for a show. Fuhrman had been following Harkness since her last exhibition at Mary Boone in 2011, a collection of fictional paintings about the relationship between Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas.

"At FLAG, we try to present artwork in different ways," Roach said. "In this case, we viewed this as a rare opportunity to present the cross section works, which span over a decade, all together.

"A viewer can see the evolution of Hilary's vision and style through the representation of the figure, the narratives and color palette."

At times, however, the question of identity politics does circle back to Harkness. She has been accused of painting images that are both sadist and sexist -- and for not doing enough to be anti-war -- among other things. But she counters those observations with the assertion that painting by default is a romantic, sometimes distorted, lens by which people can view the world.

"You're not going to change the world with hard-hitting investigative works of painting," Harkness said. "In general, my goal is two-fold: to create a work of art that intrigues me enough to force its creation, and personally come to terms with my own issues. The work that comes from it is either hyper-beautiful or decoratively gory and in some ways, the same thing: a grotesque distortion."

Hilary Harkness' solo exhibition will run from February 8 through May 18, 2013 at the FLAG Art Foundation on the 9th floor of the Chelsea Art Towers at 945 West 25th Street. Hours: Wednesday through Saturday from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. or by appointment.

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REAL / SURREAL

Selections from the
Whitney Museum of American Art

George Tooker, The Subway (detail), 1950. Egg tempera on composition board. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, purchase with funds from the Juliana Force Purchase Award 50.34. Courtesy of the Estate of George Tooker and D. C. Moore Gallery, New York.



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The FLAG Art Foundation presents two solo exhibitions: "Tom Molloy, Issue" and "Hilary Harkness"



Hilary Harkness, Fully Committed, Mighty Mo', April 11, 1945, 2007-2008. Oil/ Linen, 36 x 48 inches. Courtesy the artist and Mary Boone Gallery, New York.



NEW YORK, NY.- "Issue" is the first solo exhibition in New York of Irish artist Tom Molloy which examines power, explores the ways in which it has been perverted, and asks global questions about morality. An enthusiastic collector of images, and working through drawing, collage, photography and sculpture, Molloy challenges perceptions by creating ambiguous works, and investigating the overlap between representation and association. His deliberately minimal representations of significant political and historical moments are both subtle and highly charged.

"Issue" examines the veracity of photography through the elective and selective nature of images. These have been ruptured: either through editing, cropping, transference into another medium, or in their presentation in a non-linear chronology breaking their historical precedent. The idea of photography as an arbiter; the interface between image making and historical fact, is the principal focus of this exhibition.

The nine works featured in "Issue" address dominant themes of history and photography - illustrating several momentous Twentieth Century events, and exploring the subsequent implications for contemporary society. Tom Molloy's work, interrogates the communication and perception of truth, and different possibilities that could, and have arisen globally as a consequence of man's inhumanity to man.

Tom Molloy who exhibits with Lora Reynolds Gallery, Austin, Texas and Rubicon Gallery, Dublin was born in Ireland and works in Paris, France. He attended the National College of Art & Design Dublin. In addition to participating in several group exhibitions in 2005 a survey exhibition of his work was held at the Limerick City Gallery of Art and in 2008 at the Solstice Arts Centre, County Meath. In 2010 Molloy had a major exhibition at The Aldrick Museum of Contemporary Art in USA and is included in the permanent collections of the Irish Museum of Modern Art; The Blanton Museum of Art, Texas; The Arts Council/An Chomhairle Ealaíon, Dublin; The Zabłudowicz Collection, London; Fondazione Spinola Banna Per L'Arte, Turin; FRAC-Piemonte; FRAC Haute-Normandie and Princeton University Art. Recently Tom has been featured in the 10th edition of the Sharjah Biennial, "Plot for a Biennial"; Art² at the FLAG Art Foundation in New York; "The Jerusalem Show" Al Ma'mal Foundation, Jerusalem and NEWTOPIA - The state of Human Rights in Belgium.

Hilary Harkness

Best known for her impossibly-detailed paintings of a world inhabited only by women, Hilary Harkness is most obsessed with abuses of power, which she presents on an intimate, yet grand, scale. Sex, war, reproduction, class systems, free markets, manifest destiny, and scientific experimentation all play out in an uncensored stage -- yet are still tethered to historical moments and real world settings.

Spanning from 2000 - 2011, Harkness' cross-section paintings occupy a special place in her oeuvre and operate on many levels. Not only are the architectural cutaways a formal device that give her storytelling some level of veracity and structure, they also help heighten the psychological states of her characters and catalyze their complicated narratives.

In Harkness' classic military paintings, there are steely panopticons of surveillance and control, where hierarchies are underscored by the regimented bunks, cells, mess halls, machine rooms. But unlike the low-ranking minions swabbing the decks, the viewer has full access into restricted, don't-ask-don't-tell areas, where law and order may not exist.

Real WWII battleships in paintings like "Mighty Mo: Fully Committed" contrast workaday military duties with embellished bacchanalia; "Heavy Cruisers" portrays a ship as a hothouse womb, rife with pregnant officers and even a pregnant whale. "Red Sky in the Morning" imagines the suicide mission of the Japanese battleship Yamato, and wonders: when faced with extreme extenuating circumstances such as war, can anyone possibly behave appropriately?

In other paintings, the viewer's eyes are allowed to trip around the painting like Eloise at The Plaza, weaving in and out of chateaus, chalets, and auction houses. "Nervous in the Service" gives us a God's-eye view of a slapstick decadent cocktail party. Two paintings of Christie's at Rockefeller Center propose that the embryo trade would supplant the sales of luxury goods in a world led by armies of women. The opulent surroundings with priceless antiques and artworks are often a counterpoint to the atrocities occurring within.

These cross-sections, which present Harkness' macro and micro views of history -- both visually and emotionally -- are all linked by her attempt to portray public triumphs and personal weaknesses in an irrational world.

Hilary Harkness, who exhibits with the Mary Boone Gallery in New York City, is a graduate of the University of California-Berkeley and holds a Master of Fine Arts from the Yale University School of Art. Her work has been exhibited worldwide, including the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid, Spain, and

the Deste Foundation in Athens, Greece and is in the collection of the Whitney Museum. She has taught painting and sculpture as Artist in Residence at Yale Summer School of Art and Music, and lectured widely at institutions.

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George Tooker, The Subway (detail), 1959. Egg tempera on composition board. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase, with funds from the Juliana Force Purchase Award 50.23. Courtesy of the Estate of George Tooker and D. C. Moore Gallery, New York.

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Relentless Yet Dispassionate: Hilary Harkness at the FLAG Art Foundation

By DAVID COHEN | MAY 14, 2013



Hilary Harkness, *Red Sky in the Morning*, 2010-11. Oil on panel, 37 x 42 inches. Courtesy The FLAG Art Foundation. Photo by Genevieve Hanson

In a variation within our series, A TOPICAL PICK FROM THE ARCHIVES, David Cohen offers his thoughts on a survey of the artist's cutaway painting on top of his reviews on the same body of work on three previous occasions (the latter originally published in the *New York Sun*). Readers new to Harkness will want to read the reviews in order of publication.

2013

The other day I was musing on a profound subject: who will star in the first movie made of a Hilary Harkness painting?

The obvious casting choices for the party-girl warriors who populate, in miniature, her dense, chirpy yet grotesque scenes are those acrobatically proven in the action movie genre—Angelina Jolie, say, whose assassin or tomb-raiding getup recalls the bikini-booted scanty efficiency of the Harkness babe.

But why would anyone turn an artwork into a movie, you might be asking? The traffic in contemporary culture is entirely the other way around, with artists raiding cinema. Hollywood – adapting novels and historic events, regurgitating TV shows, and Broadway musicals, remaking other, old or not so old Hollywood movies – has surely never, in similar fashion, made a film of a painting. Art history-savvy directors make compositional sense of them in individual shots, but that is a different matter. There was *"Girl with the Pearl Earring,"* (2003) but that's from a novel that spins a yarn around a painting, and is thus at several stages removed. What I have in mind for Harkness is something more like director Lech Majewski's *"The Mill and the Cross"* (2011) but even there the narrative arc takes in Brueghel the Elder, author of the 1564 masterpiece, *"The Way to Calvary,"* that is the movie's painterly progenitor.

This is all a rather discursive way of saying two things about Harkness. First, that there is a narrative logic in her work that compares to literature or movies more than to the static medium of easel painting, at least at the pace

that form has demanded of viewers for the last few centuries. In Harkness, local incident unfolds over time as the eye is obliged to read accumulative detail. And secondly, “bad girl” transgressive as they remain, these sado-masochistic scenarios warrant big audience attention rather than art world connoisseurship. The ingenuity of Hilary Harkness has (or ought to have) blockbuster appeal.

The Flag Art Foundation has brought together fifteen, which is to say almost all of these labor-intensive and thus rare works from Harkness’s signature idiom, the cutaway babe-infested setting, whether terrestrial or nautical. As the artist has begun to move decisively in the direction of more traditional, single-scene images staffed by dramatis personae of legible individuality (her Gertrude Stein series), the Flag show affords that first chapter in her work a retrospective sense of closure. Her newer work dispenses with the assured absurdist humor of her trademark strategy and puts her in uncharted water in which human foible takes over from inhuman gesture. Meanwhile, the display of her cutaways of battleships, mansions, and even an auction house with their stylized, weirdly good-humored depravity confirmed to this now hardened fan (note the skepticism in the earlier reviews reposted below) her unexpected capacity to build distinct mood within each work despite the seeming ubiquity of her aesthetic and moral world view.

Later paintings within the Flag group witness odd shifts in scale and the introduction of male and animal characters, but still, you might wonder, what would there be for an actress to do, to say, to emote in such emotionally vacuous situations as Harkness offers? Angelina will require adversaries, of course, so step up Milla Jovovich and Charlize Theron. But how would these players “co star” when casts of thousands are actually rendered equals, each with their deadpan walk-on macabre moment? I guess it will have to be one of those movies where the star mutates, like the namesake lead in “Being John Malkovich” (1999), and like a comic book-derived action movie all the while regaining pristine calm as they are choreographed from one act of chilled meanness to the next.

In a way the Surrealists would have loved, where one message in my inbox this morning reminded me that the Flag Foundation show is about to close, the next message put Ms. Jolie herself in a headline with news that the actress has undergone a double mastectomy to diminish her odds of cancer. Life is never the jolly game that art can be, snipping the wires between violence, beauty and pain. If there can possibly be meaning in this bizarre juxtaposition of data (not to force equivalence) it will have to do with second chapters, courage and sparky women.

2008

Ms. Harkness, who has been written about in-depth in these pages before, is a mannerist with an unwavering ability to marry perversity and skill. She is a master of kinky scale, packing busy compositions with tiny yet dynamic figures engaged in strange activities that fuse cruelty and pleasure. Their industry — relentless yet dispassionate — mirrors that of their own making, and our viewing. The figures in the paintings, and the paintings themselves, exude a cold, absurdist eroticism.

She paints armies of Barbie doll-like stick-figure women, their tight-fitting apparel, rather like Lara Croft’s, suited equally to the bedroom and the battlefield. Their activities generally involve pleasuring or torturing, but with little emotional involvement in either case.

The scene has a Second World War ambiance, though often with contemporary details thrown in. Her style is a cross between comic book fetishist Eric Stanton and Hieronymous Bosch. She will present a building or battleship in cutaway isometric so that you can see room to room overrun with her women, ant-like in the way they devour space.

“Pearl Trader” (2006) makes the Christies auction house at Rockefeller Center, with its distinctive curved façade and Sol le Witt mural, the locale for a battle orgy surrounded by art. In one room there is a Damien Hirst tank and a Roy Lichtenstein “girl” signaling suitable touchstones for Ms. Harkness’s reductive eroticism and chilled cruelty.

Ms. Harkness shares with Sade not just the pathology to which the Marquis lent his name but also an essential element of style — endless variation, at once exhilarating and enervating, upon an obsessive theme.

In a departure from Ms. Harkness's normal procedure, "Gertrude Stein & Alice B. Toklas, Paris, October, 1939" (2007–08), painted on copper, increases the scale of individual figures, and is overtly quotational. It is a handsome work, and it is understandable that the artist should look for an escape from her bizarre servitude to the miniature, but it does not yet have the bravura awkwardness that is her essential hallmark.

2005

The narrative energy in Hilary Harkness is in a higher gear than in [Elizabeth] Huey [discussed earlier in the same review]: the focus of her sapphic, sado-masochistic orgy scenes, pillages and riots is unrelenting. Her skills are in harmony with her vision: where Ms. Huey paints with an awkward approximation of old master painterliness, Ms. Harkness has the hard, clean, nerdish exactitude of a cartoonist. She can be old masterly, too, but in her case it is the finesse of mannerist paintings on copper that come to mind: paint is transparent, surfaces sealed.

But while a typical Harkness is crowded to bursting point with legions of near-identical figures—willowy, leggy stick figures running around torturing each other and exuding as much individuality and personality in the process as laboratory mice—they actually share with Ms. Huey's angels and children a vacant sense of alienation. Her cloned cast is a herd of loners.

Less than a year ago Mary Boone presented her first show of this fascinatingly perverse artist: three relatively small panels were given a wall each of her Chelsea barn. Now, in a less precious display, an exhibition ostensibly devoted to drawings, which actually includes new panels and works in oil and watercolor on paper alongside line drawings, is offered at their uptown gallery. Morally speaking, it is business as usual: a massacre on a beach, a shoot out amidst back to the future modernist skyscrapers, a mass ablution in a luxurious ladies room.

As ever, formally speaking, there is an amazing balance of detail and all-overness. "Heavy Cruisers" presents in cut-away cross section the bowels of a ship heavily populated by sailorettes equally busy with the naughty and the nautical. If the title is a suitably unsubtle pun, the handling of different mediums nonetheless reveals the extraordinary touch and control of this weird young woman. The firm delicacy of her line drawing, for instance, which have the legato exactitude of engravings, recall the neoclassical draughtsman John Flaxman. It makes one think: if Flaxman had honed his skills to Sade rather than Dante art history would have had its Harkness two centuries earlier.

2004

Hilary Harkness is a deliciously perverse absurdist in paint who brings together the unemotional nastiness of [Cindy] Sherman and the crowd addiction of [Spencer] Tunick [discussed earlier in the same review]. The somewhat precious display of just three smallish pictures at Mary Boone's Chelsea barn, Ms. Harkness's first show with this dealer, is a perfect complement to the masquerades and mass actions explored in these other exhibitions.

Ms. Harkness's all-female S/M orgies and girl's own adventures at sea are a chilly marriage of medievalism and the comic strip. In "Matterhorn," (2003-04) for instance, Hieronymous Bosch and Lucas Cranach team up with Quentin Tarantino, Henry Darger, Balthus and his oddball occultist brother Pierre Klossowski, gay illustrator Tom of Finland, and vintage bandes-dessinées pornographer Eric Stanton. In what reads like a sliced-open doll's house, she offers cross-sectional, compartmentalized views of an army of skinny young women kitted out in black with sexy boots, hotpants, bikinis, and military caps who in each room torture, abuse, molest, and mortally dispatch sartorially and anatomically similar fellows. In fact, as no discernible emotion is displayed on the perfunctory faces or standardized bodies of any of the participants, it is not too easy to say what criterion, fate, or preference determines whether you are a perpetrator or a victim, although the majority of the latter are wearing white socks, which might signify something. No one registers much by way of pleasure or pain on their cute, dumb faces.

In painterly terms, Ms. Harkness favors a flat, nerdish, swiftly dispatched naïvete, in harmony, some might argue, with her moral maturity. What does actually make these sick, silly pictures interesting beyond the shlock-horror inventiveness of her abuse fantasies, and her nostalgic eye for period charm, is a compellingly crafted ratio of

detail to whole, a weird sense of decorative balance and all-overness. Mind you, once you allow so formalist a take of scenes of rape and pillage, the artist's warped values are obviously working.

24 Questions for Painter of Lady-Filled Microcosms, Hilary Harkness

By JULIA HALPERIN | NOVEMBER 3, 2013



Hilary Harkness at the opening of her FLAG Art Foundation exhibition, next to her painting "Red Sky in the Morning" (2010-11)
(Photo: Paul Porter/BFAnyc.com)

City/Neighborhood: Prospect Heights, Brooklyn

This exhibition at the FLAG Art Foundation presents your military paintings, which depict intricate panopticons, cells, mess halls, and machine rooms populated exclusively by women. Do you think these images will mean something different to future generations now that women are permitted to fight in direct combat?

Even if the military bans men and fills every position with a lesbian, I suspect these paintings will keep their *joie de vivre*. I'm not intending to make commentary on gender roles because they are nothing more than kitschy fun in my own all-girl household. The reality of women in uniform validates that we are virile and capable of representing the best of both sexes. Painting all-female environments enables me to explore universals (such as power struggles, chains of command, and the sheer exertion of will and desire) without the distraction of gender biases.

In Susan Sontag's famous essay, "Looking at War," she writes that "the appetite for pictures showing bodies in pain is almost as keen as the desire for one that show bodies naked." In what way are your military paintings confronting our fantasies about power and violence? What can artists contribute to our understanding of war?

Painting is a way for me to explore what life is like outside of everyday moral constraints. When you look into my paintings at the compartmentalized, teeming microcosms, the characters have no idea their heroism (or hedonism) is being observed. Going to war on a battleship is an irrevocable journey away from your moral context – they're historically are little societies where you can forget outside rules and do things that were forbidden back home because you think nobody is watching. The social mores about what to do with your body just fall by the wayside because people need each other to stay alive, and there aren't many options. It would be easy to lose your mind and go morally adrift.

In war, rules don't exist and everything is at stake. Making or looking at art is a safe way to consider what life might be like in those circumstances.

Before you were an artist, you studied biochemistry at the University of California-Berkeley and worked as a professional violinist. How do those experiences inform your art-making?

They resonate in that music and chemistry are arrays of intricately interlocking ideas, and I get that same sort of feeling when I'm drawing complicated three-dimensional spaces that interact with whatever narrative ideas I have in mind.

You've taken dramatic steps to cure creative blocks, like when you visited a 19th-century hydraulic mine to determine the correct color palette for your own mine painting or flew to a beach in Kauai to finish a painting of the South Pacific. For images as surreal as yours, why does this kind of verisimilitude matter?

The more abstract – or cartoony - a depiction is, the more specific it has to be to ring true. For example, when animated film director Hayao Miyazaki was making *Spirited Away*, he sent his dragon-animation team to a market to study how live eels wriggle.

As an artist, you might have to go to further extremes than you like to get something right, so it's best not to waste time struggling and just do what it takes in the first place.

What project are you working on now?

I'm painting the HMS Prince of Wales just after an attack in the Pacific at an ungodly hour in the morning. Another painting in progress is a large beach scene called "Sexologists of the Galapagos."

What's the last show that you saw?

"Matisse: In Search of True Painting."

What's the last show that surprised you? Why?

When I was in Paris last fall, I saw a show that included still lifes of flowers by Renoir that looked fantastic. It's taken me many years to appreciate certain artists, such as Corot whom I came to appreciate at age 28, Cezanne (age 31), and Turner (age 34), and I was surprised by those awakenings because I originally found their work to be irritating. These breakthroughs led me to half-jokingly think that sooner or later I'll come around to liking just about all art, with work by Renoir being the last in line. That I've come around to Renoir this early in life makes me a bit paranoid.

Describe a typical day in your life as an artist.

I work at home so I can slide out of bed and paint in my pajamas, usually with a mug of tea or coffee. My cat Harriet keeps me company. If I'm drawing, I keep things quiet, but if I'm painting I'll listen to podcasts, especially interviews with authors.

What's the most indispensable item in your studio?

My Staedtler precision rulers.

Where are you finding ideas for your work these days?

Some of my best ideas have come to me while I'm attending interdisciplinary conferences that include scientists.

Do you collect anything?

I'm interested in drawings made by video and performance artists.

What's the last artwork you purchased?

Six gouaches by Kalup Linzy.

What's the first artwork you ever sold?

It was a drawing of an ornery naked woman masturbating beneath an Agnes Martin painting. \$50.

What's the weirdest thing you ever saw happen in a museum or gallery?

There's a rumor that a collector broke a penis off a Jake and Dinos Chapman sculpture at an art fair...

What's your art-world pet peeve?

Artists who don't have websites.

What's your favorite post-gallery watering hole or restaurant?

Sullivan Bakery on 9th Avenue in Chelsea for the pizza.

Do you have a gallery/museum-going routine?

I go to a museum with either a sketchbook or a date. Bringing both at the same time is a bad idea.

What's the last great book you read?

How Should a Person Be? by Sheila Heti.

What work of art do you wish you owned?

Chaim Soutine's Still Life with Skate. I've seen it twice in my life, with two decades between the viewings, in special exhibits at the Musée de l'Orangerie in Paris.

What would you do to get it?

Let's hope The Cleveland Museum, of Art which owns it, has the funds to keep it safe.

What international art destination do you most want to visit?

Art Dubai; also, Vienna, for the Bruegels.

What under-appreciated artist, gallery, or work do you think people should know about?

The artist Cary Leibowitz, sometimes known as Candy Ass, is my hero. Jerry Saltz has dubbed him the poster child of Loser Art, but I think of him more as the patron saint of artists having a shitty days. He makes multiples in large editions so there is enough for everybody. A must-have is his brown scarf that reads "I Love Andy Warhol Piss Paintings."

Who's your favorite living artist?

Ellen Altfest, because she's a badass sitting outside eight hours a day in this freezing weather painting a log from life.

What are your hobbies?

I blog about art and science for the Huffington Post. I love to play chess badly on my iPhone and I go to the opera whenever possible.

Gallerist

If Memory Serves...: Hilary Harkness on her Paintings, at the Andaz Hotel

By ANDREW RUSSETH | FEBRUARY 5, 2013



'Crossing the Equator' (2003). (Courtesy the artist and Mary Boone Gallery)

It was a raucous scene at the Andaz Hotel one rainy evening last week, with bartenders noisily shaking cocktails and patrons chattering away, but the pixie-ish painter Hilary Harkness, for whose talk everyone had ostensibly come there, was unflappable.

Her 2003 painting *Crossing the Equator* popped up on the screen beside her. Scores of tiny, cartoonish-looking young sailors—mostly women—in skintight, skimpy outfits are engaging in all manner of sexual and violent acts on the deck of a battleship. Stephanie Roach, director of Chelsea's Flag Art Foundation, which sponsored the event (disclosure: *The Observer* was a media partner) asked Ms. Harkness what was going on in the piece.

The ship is the HMS Royal Oak, a British vessel that was sunk off the coast of Scotland in 1939 by German torpedoes. "The 18-year-old boys, who were so happy to enlist, went straight to the bottom of the North Sea," Ms. Harkness said. "I've dredged them up from the bottom of the ocean and sent them on a pleasure cruise across the equator." This earned applause from the crowd.

"When you cross the equator," she continued, "there's hazing going on. If you haven't crossed it before, basically, you can be subjected to gang rape by your elders." The room went dead. "Ah," she marveled. "It got really quiet back there when I said 'gang rape.'"

The lion's share of Ms. Harkness's paintings, updates on Bosch and Breugel, regularly contain such outré, morally dubious scenarios. "They're fantasies about fantasies," she said.

Red Sky in the Morning (2011) appeared on the screen. It shows a Japanese ship, the Yamato, heading back to Okinawa on a suicide mission near the end of World War II. The ship's exterior is cut away to reveal all sorts of shenanigans taking place inside. "Like an ant farm," Ms. Harkness suggested.

“There are all sorts of sexual acts going on,” Flag Foundation founder Glenn Fuhrman observed, peering at the tiny female figures. And then he tossed Ms. Harkness the pitch for the evening’s zinger. “Are you painting from imagination?”

“I would say, memory,” Ms. Harkness said with a smile. More applause. “The officers knew that it was the last night of their lives,” she went on. “This is my imagination of what might happen at the end of their world.”

On Feb. 8, Flag’s exhibition space in Chelsea will open a show of Ms. Harkness’s work that includes similarly epic scenes set in, of all places, Christie’s auction house. “I really like the idea of a painting being up for auction,” Ms. Harkness said. “When it’s on the stand, anyone can buy it. Anyone has access. When you go into a gallery, you might have to get on a wait list.” (There was no visible reaction to this from Ron Warren, the director of Mary Boone Gallery, where Ms. Harkness shows.) “In the Christie’s paintings,” she said, “there are three different armies—a Muslim army, the Americans and the Japanese army. They’re laying down their weapons for the sake of commerce, and basically they’re bidding on genetic material for the most important thing in the world—which are babies.”

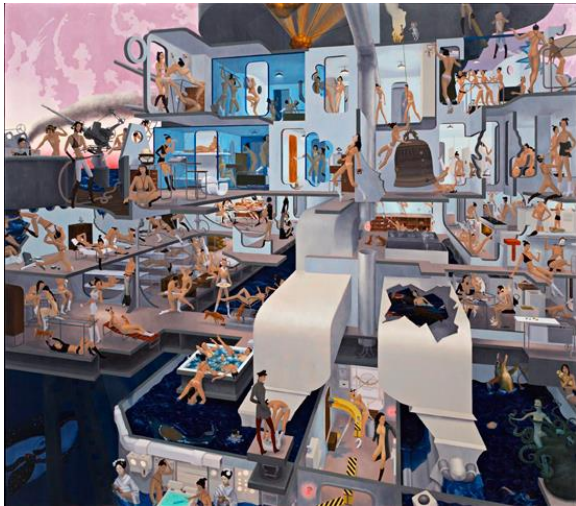
Tonight was all about the battleships, though. Another piece appeared onscreen, *Fully Committed: Mighty Mo, April 11, 1945* (2008), a cutaway view of the interior of a battleship that has just survived a kamikaze attack. Everyone is partying and having sex here too, because, Ms. Harkness explained, they are “pretty much scared shitless.”

Despite her obsession with combat, she is pretty frightened of it. “I think I would have a heart attack just getting on a battleship and going off to war,” she said. “This was me imagining: what the hell would I do?” She looked at the painting. “There’s someone hiding in a bin of laundry, which I relate to.”

HUFFPOST ARTS & CULTURE

Hilary Harkness: Painting Arrested Ambiguity at FLAG Art Foundation

By ADRIAN MARGARET BRUNE | FEBRUARY 12, 2013



Red Sky by Hilary Harkness. (Courtesy the artist)

The now renowned artist Hilary Harkness arrived at the Yale University Art School -- during a time of pervasive identity politics -- without one.

John Currin had just graduated, leaving Yale professors and critics agape with his mash-ups of Renaissance craftsmanship against sexual and social satire. Contemporary darling Matthew Barney had come armed with "Drawing Restraint 7" -- installations built on the relationship between self-imposed social resistance and individual creativity. And Ann Gale, Marc Trujillo and Malerie Marder were in their initial attempts to discover and undress the human psyche in naked scenes of people and places.

Harkness came to the prestigious school with no other objective than to learn how to paint. Without an agenda, she started making self-portraits, drawing herself over and over, each time placing her face in a different presentation.

"Then I got bored," Harkness said touring the gallery of the FLAG Art Foundation where her new solo exhibition of nearly impossibly detailed paintings of a world inhabited by complex, inter-related and fated relationships opens on February 8th. "Yale didn't nurture me, but gave me a basic tool kit; getting paint to cleave to the canvas; understanding the purpose, limits, and benefits of painting mediums; and creating the illusion of space.

"Outside of Yale, the Master of Osservanza Triptych -- the works of il Sassetta -- opened the door to painting narratives in a simple and easy-to-understand fashion."

Maybe to Harkness, but not to her fans and patrons. In her new cutaway series, Harkness paints an almost labyrinthine and bewitching world of mostly women, engaging in acts of pleasure/pain, seduction/repulsion and caress/abrasion, in the context of battleships, prestigious auction houses and collectors' homes, among other settings. Sex, war, reproduction, class systems, free markets, manifest destiny and scientific experimentation all

play out on uncensored Lilliputian stages -- "like ants in an ant farm," Harkness said - and manage to remain somewhat tethered to hypnagogic historical moments and surrealist settings that mock the real world.

"The attention to detail and riveting narratives recall one of my favorite paintings, Hieronymus Bosch's "Garden of Earthly Delights," said FLAG Director Stephanie Roach. But Harkness says she prefers the more playful Pieter Brueghel, a Flemish Renaissance painter and printmaker, "who had less implicit judgment on his figures.

"Bosch always looked on his figures as sinners going to hell. Brueghel painted peasants celebrating with comedy and joy even in the turmoil between the Catholics and the Protestants. I see it as even in the worst of times, people find room for relief."

No more is the theme of contained allayment apparent than in "Red Sky in the Morning," an oil-on-panel painting that imagines the happenings on the Japanese battleship Yamato, a historic World War II vessel sent on a suicide mission with its soldiers believing it was headed for food and fuel.

Harkness answers the hypothetical scenario of the Yamato by juxtaposing vengeful wives waiting for an adulterous female captain, nude and drunk women officers cavorting and dancing -- and then the lesser ranking female soldiers sinking in waters enveloping the ship. Spirit clouds and phantom geishas, however, protect all of them.

A triptych of an imagined Christie's Auction House across the gallery presents a similar confrontation, only surrounded by opulence, instead of the stark capsules of war. In "Mother Lode," three different armies of miniature women, including Muslim and American, lay down their arms and engage in an endless trade of luxury goods for prized embryos -- symbolic of Harkness' belief that the world revolves around babies, and their trade. This time, however, opulent antiques and priceless artwork offer a stark counterpoint to the atrocities occurring within.

But it's the military to which Harkness always returns. Growing up with a grandfather who was a larger-than-life WWII veteran and soldier in the Battle of the Bulge, Harkness was fascinated by both his toughness and his reluctance to discuss his experiences on the front.

"I started painting the world in microcosm, often encapsulated in military vessels, because I was interested in what people would do when pushed to the edge," Harkness said. "I wanted to play out what might happen when there was inadequate supervision, when everything was at stake, and when traditional morality might fly out the window, justified by a larger cause."

Harkness, who typically exhibits with the Mary Boone Gallery and has works in the collection of the Whitney Museum, recently returned to New York permanently from splitting her time between here and Boston. It was the perfect timing for Roach and FLAG founder, former Goldman Sachs investment banker, Glenn Fuhrman, to approach Harkness for a show. Fuhrman had been following Harkness since her last exhibition at Mary Boone in 2011, a collection of fictional paintings about the relationship between Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas.

"At FLAG, we try to present artwork in different ways," Roach said. "In this case, we viewed this as a rare opportunity to present the cross section works, which span over a decade, all together.

"A viewer can see the evolution of Hilary's vision and style through the representation of the figure, the narratives and color palette."

At times, however, the question of identity politics does circle back to Harkness. She has been accused of painting images that are both sadist and sexist -- and for not doing enough to be anti-war -- among other things. But she counters those observations with the assertion that painting by default is a romantic, sometimes distorted, lens by which people can view the world.

"You're not going to change the world with hard-hitting investigative works of painting," Harkness said. "In general, my goal is two-fold: to create a work of art that intrigues me enough to force its creation, and personally come to

terms with my own issues. The work that comes from it is either hyper-beautiful or decoratively gory and in some ways, the same thing: a grotesque distortion."