

Peter Harris

*Past and Present*

# PETER HARRIS

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New Paintings

Essay by Sara Angel

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Over the past two decades, my paintings have been inspired by the urban landscape of my surroundings. In the early 2000s, I focused on highways, overpasses, and infrastructure, shifting to parking lots and street scenes in the 2010s, and for the past seven years, I have centered on architecture and interior spaces. Each series has drawn me closer to the subject matter, evolving from expansive portrayals of highway landscapes to more intimate depictions of interior spaces from the city's core. Throughout, my goal has been to meticulously explore the built environment, capturing its essence in a realist style that evokes familiarity.

Central to my work is the deliberate absence of human figures, allowing viewers to place themselves at the heart of each scene, envisioning themselves navigating the spaces I paint. This approach invites contemplation on the personal landscapes often overlooked in our daily lives and encourages reflection on our relationship with these environments.

My current exhibition continues my exploration of urban landscapes, focusing on architectural interiors inspired by my daily experiences and travels. Although rooted in architecture, I treat these locations as landscapes, carefully composing each space with attention to foregrounds, backgrounds, vistas, and spatial depth. Employing a one- and two-point perspective system, I meticulously redraw the spaces that I've photographed, enhancing the sensation of depth and drawing the viewer into the canvas with strong diagonals and precise spatial order.

As part of my artistic process, I consistently study the works of historical artists, particularly those connected to Canada. I am fascinated by how artists like the Group of Seven have established nature and landscapes as central to Canadian identity. Their renowned and widely distributed paintings have profoundly shaped our perception of the country and have influenced subsequent generations of artists. Their vision of Canada's landscape remains deeply ingrained in the collective consciousness of Canadians and continues to influence the interpretation of contemporary landscape paintings.

In this exhibition, I delved into the Canadian art canon to find historical paintings that I could integrate into my series of contemporary architecture subjects. My focus was on overlooked transitional spaces—airport carparks, elevators to lobbies, or subway cars opening onto platforms—as settings where contrasting artistic visions—historical and contemporary—could interact. I curated a historical painting for each space, positioning them within the direction of travel of a daily commute. Taking a famous Canadian work from the museum wall and placing it into a new setting was intended to provoke



surprise and incongruity for viewers encountering these paintings out of context. Whether it's a subway door opening to reveal a familiar Christopher Pratt painting or turning a corner in a carpark to encounter a Lawren Harris masterpiece, my paintings freeze the moment of disruption to viewers' expectations in these spaces. I envision an urban commuter encountering these past artistic visions as still potent reminders of the country's idealized natural landscape, in stark juxtaposition to the contemporary architectural spaces of their daily lives.

Peter Harris 2024

**Peter Harris** graduated from the University of Waterloo in 1997 with a degree in Fine Arts, and in the years since has exhibited his work in cities across North America, including Toronto, Montreal, Chicago, Vancouver and New York City. His work can be found in numerous private and corporate collections throughout North America and Europe, including Colart Collection, Montreal; OPSEU, Toronto and Schicker Thies, Erfurt, Germany. Peter Harris lives and works in Toronto.

Peter Harris *Subway onto Venus* (detail) 2024 oil on canvas 30 x 20 in.





## PAST AND PRESENT

Growing up in Tillsonburg and London, Ontario, the Group of Seven were the only artists that Peter Harris learned about at school. While he admired the landscapes and symbolic language of the famous painters, sometimes it could be too much. As Harris recalls, “Everyone would groan to ourselves, we’re going to hear about these guys again?” Decades later, this quandary is at the heart of “Past and Present”, which reflects the artist’s desire to refocus attention on works of Canadian art history, the wilderness, and national icons—as well as places so familiar that we often overlook them.

The exhibition is comprised of sixteen works that feature images by Canada’s best-known artists, who are mapped onto everyday urban settings. We see paintings by Greg Curnoe and Jack Bush on the walls of subway cars. Outside an elevator exit we come upon the famed *To Prince Edward Island* by Alex Colville. We discover an AJ Casson in a commercial lobby, and a masterpiece by Jean-Paul Lemieux in the waiting area of an airport.

In these fictitious scenes, Harris introduces replicas by the Group of Seven and other great Canadian painters into the architecture of the everyday so that we might both take greater note of the works, as well as everyday settings that have become overly familiar. With this sleight of hand, Harris transports his audience into a meditative state and suddenly his depictions of doors, entryways, and foyers with a vista onto art no longer become places that we pass through quickly. They turn into areas where we slow down and engage in meditation, examination, and contemplation.

With “Past and Present” Harris articulates the premise of Sigmund Freud’s 1919 text “The Uncanny”; namely, that something can be familiar and foreign at the same time. The exhibition’s pieces have an affinity to the international intellectual movement of Surrealism, launched in 1924 by the poet and critic André Breton. Harris’s works have a kinship with paintings like *Personal Values* (1952) by the Belgian Surrealist René Magritte in which a comb, shaving brush, glass and matchstick take on oversized and human proportions to make the ordinary become extraordinary, and the normal seem strange. They also have a relationship with the art of Alex Colville, whose highly recognizable painting *Horse and Train* (1954)—of a stallion running towards a locomotive—presents a clash of nature and machine, order and chaos, the waking world and dreams.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Cronin, Ray. *Alex Colville: Life & Work*. Toronto: Art Canada Institute, 2017.

Yet unlike the paintings of Magritte and Colville, Harris’s images are absent of people. We are alone in the artist’s spaces. In them, we are asked to question the resonance of historical Canadian art in our contemporary daily lives. Within this liminal terrain we are forced to ask: How do I react to the works compared to the urban architecture around me? Does the art read as a Canadian narrative? Are ubiquitous city locations more resonant when contrasted with images of Canadian landscapes?

Harris’s unique artistic take stretches back to his childhood in Southern Ontario when he first started creating paintings of imagined landscapes and still-life setups on the kitchen table belonging to his artist grandmother, Doris, while growing up. He was only ten years old when she ignited his interest in the arts, one that led to long visits to Texas together where they created plein-air works. The passion imbued in him by his maternal mentor led him to complete a degree in Fine Arts at the University of Waterloo in 1997.

There, he was taught by Art Green and Tony Urquhart who both became important influences. Frankfort, Indiana-born Green, one of the original members of the Art Institute of Chicago-based initiative “Hairy Who?”, taught Harris about how in the 1960s and 1970s, he and his cohort became known for staking out a place with Surrealist, fantasy-based work that showed complete indifference to New York art world trends.<sup>2</sup> Through Niagara Falls, Ontario-born Urquhart, Harris came to know one of Canada’s pioneering abstractionists of the late 1950s and early 1960s, who followed an independent and autonomous path in his art, centred upon his distinctive box sculptures. His work, says Harris, was full of “layering and juxtapositions that brought together lots of influences, making art a process of discovery.”

Upon graduation, Harris started painting large-scale depictions of highways and overpasses that were at first inspired by the revered London-Ontario based regionalist and realist painter Jack Chambers and his celebrated work *401 Towards London No. 1* (1968–69). By the early 2000s, Harris turned his focus on presenting the landscape of urban scenes including buildings, gas stations, and streetcars. These works generated acclaim and were shown in solo and group exhibitions in galleries across Canada and the United States.

<sup>2</sup> Ken Johnson, “Art in Review”; Ray Yoshida, *The New York Times*, September 17, 1999. Christine Newman, “When Jim Met Gladys”, *Chicago Magazine*, Vol. 60 No. 2, February 2011, pp. 78-81, 92, 146-148, 164.

By 2010 Harris shifted his gaze. One night, while scouting around a generic-looking office plaza in South Etobicoke, he caught sight of a grandiose Tuscan painting inside the lobby of a building. The incongruity between the vibrant work of art and the building's nondescript façade struck Harris. He started to think about painting architectural interiors rather than exteriors—and how, like the vision he had just confronted, he might create scenes of the commonplace juxtaposed against the magnificent. By 2011, Harris finished *Executive Suites*, which captured what he caught sight of a year earlier—a romanticized Italian work from another era smack in the centre of twenty-first century suburbia.

By 2012 Harris, with the Group of Seven ever present on his mind, created *Jack Pine with Bush*, where he depicted both Tom Thomson's famous work *Jack Pine* (1916-17) as well as an abstract painting by Jack Bush inside a building, as seen from its exterior. It was the first instance of Harris taking on the role of both painter and curator—an interest that stuck.

He then worked on inserting famous artworks into building interiors, from the perspective of someone outside, looking in at night. He focused largely on images of mainly Canadian landscapes seen through windows while at the same time he completed a body of work that explored the oeuvre of the early twentieth-century genre-defining American painter Edward Hopper. Harris paid homage to the artist's legacy by manufacturing scenes of his now historic paintings in contemporary urban landscapes. Whereas with Hopper, Harris explored the isolation and dislocation of the urban figure in relation to the city, the artist's images on Canadian art in interiors presented a different commentary: The wilderness, no matter where we are, is always present.

For Harris the idea of placing notable art from the past into contemporary urban settings allowed him to create a new type of landscape and to probe new questions. As he explains, "I've always lived in the city, and I enjoy living in the city. Instead of travelling to make art about the Canadian landscape, I wanted to think about the city as my version of it. I wanted to share this view with people living in the city who might have a certain idea of the paintings of Lawren Harris, Tom Thomson, and other historic artists and say, okay, let's stop, look around us, and think about what we know as landscape."

Citing as influences such American Photorealist artists as Richard Estes and Robert Bechtel, Harris works from a large collection of photographs and as he puts it, "uses his camera as a sketchbook." His preference is to find urban backdrops that have a strong sense of familiarity, places that he visits

and revisits multiple times. Without the use of studies, Harris then begins each of his paintings as a very precise drawing on the canvas. From there, he builds up colors in oil paint, spending between 120 to 250 hours on each work, placing pigment in careful layers, one on top of another to achieve the vibrant and rich hues that he is after. Focusing most of his paintings on a one-point perspective, Harris draws us into the focal points of his work. In doing so, we become the people in his imaginary spaces.

As we look at "Past and Present", we take in a collection of images that look back at us, their every meticulous detail giving us another reason to take a pause and to move into a fresh Canadian landscape—one that is of the present and, at the same time, often a century old. A place where art history and the present world blend together seamlessly and take us into a mesmerizing new place.

Sara Angel, CM, PhD  
2024

**Sara Angel**, CM, PhD, is the Founder, Executive Director, and Publisher of the Art Canada Institute, which she launched in 2013.

In 2024 Angel received the Order of Canada in recognition of her contribution to the Canadian art world. She holds a PhD from the University of Toronto, where she received a Trudeau Doctoral Scholarship, the most prestigious award of its kind in Canada, given for innovative ideas that help solve issues of critical importance.

She has been an arts commentator for CBC and writes for publications including Maclean's, ArtNews, The Walrus, and the Globe and Mail.







*Airport Study 1, 2024, India ink on paper, 10 x 11 in.*



*Airport Study 2, 2024, India ink on paper, 10 1/4 x 12 1/8 in.*



*Airport Study 3, 2024, India ink on paper, 10 1/4 x 14 1/8 in.*



*Passage Study 1, 2024, India ink on paper, 9 x 12 in.*



*Montreal Metro Station Study, 2024, India ink on paper, 11 3/4 x 19 1/4 in.*



*Metro Study, 2024, India ink on paper, 11 3/4 x 11 in.*



**Elevator onto Colville**  
2024  
oil on canvas  
28 x 30 inches



**Floor 5 with Group of 7**  
2024  
oil on canvas  
24 x 30 inches





**Canadian in Barcelona**  
2024  
oil on canvas  
24 x 20 inches



**Elevator onto Harris**  
2024  
oil on canvas  
22 x 18 inches





**Canadian in NYC**  
2024  
oil on canvas  
26 x 20 inches



**Group of 7 on Floor 7**  
2024  
oil on canvas  
26 x 32 inches



**200 King with Snow**  
2024  
oil on canvas  
24 x 36 inches





**Between Curnoe and Bush**  
2024  
oil on canvas  
28 x 34 inches



**Doors onto Icebergs**  
2024  
oil on canvas  
26 x 20 inches



**Level 4 (with Paterson Ewen)**  
2024  
oil on canvas  
28 x 42 inches





**Subway onto Venus**  
2024  
oil on canvas  
30 x 20 inches



**Waiting with In the Mountains**  
2024  
oil on canvas  
24 x 18 inches





**Elevator onto Casson**  
2023  
oil on canvas  
28 x 22 inches





**Elevator with Harris**  
2023  
oil on canvas  
28 x 22 inches



**Metro with Lake and Mountains**  
2023  
oil on canvas  
28 x 22 inches





**Waiting with Lemieux**  
2022  
oil on canvas  
26 x 34 inches





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Waiting with Lemieux 2022  
oil on canvas 26 x 34 inches

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