

Shadow Worlds: The Monotypes of Brent Harris and Susan Wald



Monotype is a relatively rare medium that has been valued by its practitioners for its immediacy and experimental possibilities. Unlike other printmaking techniques, such as etching or woodcut, monotype is less tethered to traditions of form or subject. The first monotypes were created in the 17th century by Giovanni Battista Castiglione. In 1645 in his search to create light and dark effects – in particular illumination of nocturnal scenes – Castiglione drew with a pointed tool on a smooth surface (such as a copper plate) covered in printing ink and then impressed the design onto a sheet of dampened paper. In this way, he discovered he could create a dramatic white design on a black ground. The yield, as the name suggests, is essentially one richly dark impression. If a second sheet is pulled from the plate its appearance is entirely different to the first: it is silvery grey with hints of the composition just evident on its surface.

A. —	B. —	C. —	D. —	E. —
Edgar Degas, <i>A party in the waiting room</i> , c.1879–80, monotype, printed in black ink, 11.8 x 16.2 cm (plate). Collection: National Gallery of Australia. Purchased 1980.	Susan Wald, <i>The Exile Trilogy</i> , <i>Levad 16</i> , 2013, ink on Arches paper, 29.5 x 21.5 cm. Courtesy of the artist.	Susan Wald, <i>The Exile Trilogy</i> , <i>Levad 22</i> , 2014, ink on Hahnemuhle paper, 69 x 49 cm. Courtesy of the artist.	Brent Harris, <i>The Fall no. 8</i> , 2012, monotype printed in black ink, 31.2 x 23.5 cm (plate). Collection: National Gallery of Victoria. Courtesy of the artist.	Brent Harris, <i>the other side no. 5</i> , 2016, monotype printed in black ink, coloured pencil, oil and gouache over second impression, 31.2 x 23.5 cm (plate). Private collection, Melbourne. Courtesy of the artist.

The experimental possibilities of monotype have been explored by two Melbourne-based artists, Susan Wald and Brent Harris, who both came to the medium after discovering the revelatory prints of 19th century French artist Edgar Degas. Like Degas, Wald and Harris maintain a painting and printmaking practice, developing an approach to their subject matter across both mediums. They use the process of solving conceptual and technical problems in each as a departure point for work in the other. Wald began making monotypes in the late 1980s and early 1990s, while studying at Victoria College, Prahran, after seeing Degas' monotypes reproduced in a book. Harris was inspired to make his first monotypes in 2011 after seeing the artist's prints in a major exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.¹

Degas' virtuosity in monotype is particularly important to Wald and Harris, serving as an example of what can be achieved with essentially very limited means. Over the course of a decade from the mid-1870s, and then again in a short burst from the early 1890s, Degas created more than 300 monotypes.² One of the most striking characteristics of his monotypes is the variety and richness of his mark making, which in turn creates a great spectrum of tonal effects. At close range Degas' monotypes look on the brink of abstraction, yet viewed at arm's length the compositions coalesce into a legible whole. Degas often depicted figures in tight interiors, at close quarters, illuminated by artificial light, at a café, concert hall or theatre.

Like Degas, Wald sought out the stage as a subject for her art. Between 1991 and 1994 she spent six weeks drawing rehearsals of plays staged at the Anthill Theatre, Melbourne, including Jean Pierre Mignon's direction of Beckett's *End Game*, and in 1992 Barrie Kosky's production of Gilgul's *The Exile Trilogy*.³ These experiences had a profound influence on her work and have become one of the major subjects of her creative output. Wald notes: 'He [Degas] uses the ballet as a vehicle. My wish is not to paint ballet or illustrate theatre, but to condense it down to the essence of the experience, and when possible to use metaphor to provoke the imagination.'⁴ Like Degas' attraction to the ballet, Wald's interest in the theatre is about the metaphoric space of the stage. Her subject is human nature, and she approaches its painful limits through the representation of the human body in the moment of performance.

Observational drawing is at the root of Wald's process: she begins by rapidly sketching actors at rehearsal. The monotypes evolve from sketchbook drawings and photographs, the finished works imaginative responses to the intense experience of the plays. Working on inked copper and Perspex plates, she uses a rag, paintbrushes, toothbrushes, cotton tips and sharp implements to draw and scratch her images into the ink. Figures stand or sit with minimal props in the charged space of the theatre. The monotype allows her to translate the psychological revelation of the theatre into the symbolic language of light and dark.



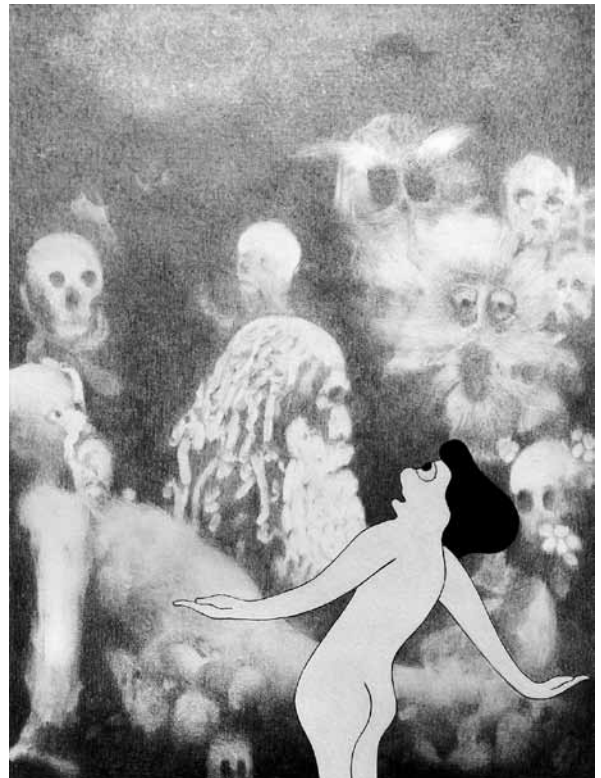
B



C



D



E

The emotional truth of the moment captured is reduced to the barest of essentials: the gesture and posture of each figure, alone or locked in an exchange. Wald uses both the first and ghost impressions in her series *The Exile Trilogy*. In *Levad 16*, she works over the pale ghost impression with brush and ink, adding thick layers of ink with a roller. The scene appears illuminated as though by a strong spotlight.

In 2011, Harris's study of Degas' monotypes in Boston led him to learn the technique from printer Adrian Kellett on his return to Melbourne. He set to work in his studio using a press that was on hand and found that the simplicity and speed of the process encouraged him to experiment with a new freedom. In a burst of energy he created 100 monotypes called *The Fall* and in 2013 a further 20 called *Embark*. Harris's use of religious iconography in his images and as titles – such as *The Fall* – is complex. He does not identify as a believer, yet the Bible provides a matrix for the questions of his art. His concerns – of whether there is meaning in death, or an afterlife; the nature of evil, and human suffering – have been significantly shaped by his coming of age as a gay man during the AIDS epidemic.

In contrast to Wald, Harris's subject matter did not evolve from the outside world. Rather, he uses monotype as a method of unearthing latent imagery from his subconscious. This has been an increased preoccupation since the mid-1990s; however, in recent years Harris has embraced the accidental image as a method of creation, inspired by Dario Gamboni's writings on the role of accident in Italian Renaissance art.⁵ Harris came to see the role of accident – and by extension the absurd – as a defining plank of his methodology. The tone of Harris's *The Fall* combines seriousness and levity, and his inclusion of hooded figures in his composition bring to mind Philip Guston's figurative paintings from the 1970s. Of Guston's paintings, John Kauffmann has recently observed that they combine '... goofiness, anger, slapstick sentimentality and existential pathos ...'⁶ – a description that too grasps the tone of Harris's work.

While creating *The Fall* monotypes Harris was forced to work quickly – before the ink dried – and he found that he was able to access the accidental and absurd in an unforced way. On a perspex plate covered in thick, sticky black ink, Harris used his fingers, the corner of a rag, or a cotton tip to flick, smudge and dab ink off the surface, waiting for recognisable forms to emerge from the darkness. The resultant images depict a crowded space that cannot be read as natural. Strange creatures bubble to the surface from what looks like a shadowy under world, an association confirmed by Harris's title.

The 100 monotypes that make up Harris's *The Fall* are all first, dark impressions; however, in 2016 he found a ghost impression of *The Fall no. 8* in his studio. Inspired by Degas – who worked in pastel over his ghost impressions in the 1890s – Harris transformed the composition with pencil, gouache and oil, adding a new figure in the foreground. The clearly delineated form is rendered in a flat, pop style that hovers over the shadow world, comically alarmed.

Although they employ fundamentally different methodologies in the development of their work, Wald and Harris share a desire to penetrate the intricacies of the monotype process. It is a quest that uniquely matches the malleable character of the medium with the dark subject matter of their art. Like Degas before them, they are drawn to the spontaneity of monotype to grasp an elusive shadow world, which, when found, they trap like a butterfly under glass.

NOTES

1. —
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2. —
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3. —
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5. —
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6. —
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