

# WISTFUL THINKING

Henrietta Harris is attracting international attention for her dreamy watercolour portraits and ballpoint sketches. *Henry Oliver* meets the shy Auckland artist who says she taught herself to draw and paint only after leaving art school.

It's been a media talking point for the last five years or so that adolescence is lasting longer and longer. Rising rents are forcing people to stay living with their parents longer. Increasingly, an unstable job market is making tertiary education a necessity for the most menial employment. Enrolment in post-graduate education is higher than ever, filled with people putting off the 'real world' for just a couple more years. People are getting married later and having children later. In the UK, child psychology guidelines have officially extended the end of late-adolescence from age 18 to 25.

Auckland artist Henrietta Harris, 31, takes this extended adolescence as her central subject. Working predominantly in watercolour or black ballpoint pen, she draws and paints the faces of wistfully beautiful men and women in their early-to-mid twenties; their gazes averted, their psychological unease balanced by the hopefulness of their remaining youth. Her boys all have impossibly floppy, wavy hair, plump lips and wide eyes. Her girls have long, shiny locks, tucked behind an ear or tied up in a bun. Their eyes are often closed.

She says she doesn't know what she looks for in a subject, she just knows it when she sees it. "I like his expression, because he looks kind of terrified," she says, pointing to a work in progress. Her subjects tend to be friends, or friends of friends, usually from photographs she takes of them to draw from later. "I've done some life drawing," she says, "but it's just easier to do it from photo. I can take my time."

Harris looks like one of her portraits. Reticent, with a quiet force of determination. She has a round face. Her shiny, blonde hair (one side tucked behind her ear) is suitable for one of her pen drawings. Scrolling through her Instagram account, photographs of her merge into her paintings and drawings (except she wears glasses, and her subjects never do).

Her studio, in an early 20th-century building in inner-city Auckland, is a smallish, white-walled room, shared with a designer

and sculptor. She's there five days a week, keeping office hours, walking to work and home again from her flat in Grey Lynn. Her desk is tidy. There are large translucent drawers of pens and paints, a printer for enlarging sketches to be painted or drawn at full-size, a light box for tracing, and well organised portfolios, with work sorted into the portraits of her fine art practice, and the labels, illustrations and commercial drawings that help pay the rent. Carefully fastened to the wall are paintings in various stages of production – a line drawing, a dense sketch, watercolors waiting for another layer of paint, an inkjet print-out of a photo someone's emailed her for a commission.

In the last year or so, her pictures have become increasingly popular around the world. When the local office of Universal Music gave Sam Smith a portrait she'd painted of him, he liked it so much, he asked her to meet up with him next time she's in New York. Jonah

Hill tried to buy one of her paintings, but it had sold already. Unwittingly becoming part of an online art scene, she has over 16,000 Instagram followers, who like her pictures in their thousands, leaving comments such as, "Your work is beyond amazinggg", "This make me want to cry. I love it" and emojis of smiley faces with heart-shaped eyes. "It's cool, but it's also a bit weird," she tells me in her soft, shy tone. "Some artists encourage it way more and interact with people way more and I try to be a bit more..." her thought trails off. "I'm shy."

She gets a lot of emails from teenagers, particularly from the UK, asking what her inspiration is, and how they can be as successful as she is. "It's really nice," she says, "but all I do is work and eat and go to the gym and go to sleep. My life isn't cool, but it's nice for people to think it is." The day before we talked, a girl on Instagram posted a drawing of hair, tagging Harris and adding "please love me". Harris liked it, which brought the post, "Oh my god, she liked it!"

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Photographs: Lawrence Smith

Henrietta Harris in her Auckland studio.  
Opposite: Her works *Visible Light #1* (left)  
and *Four Stars*



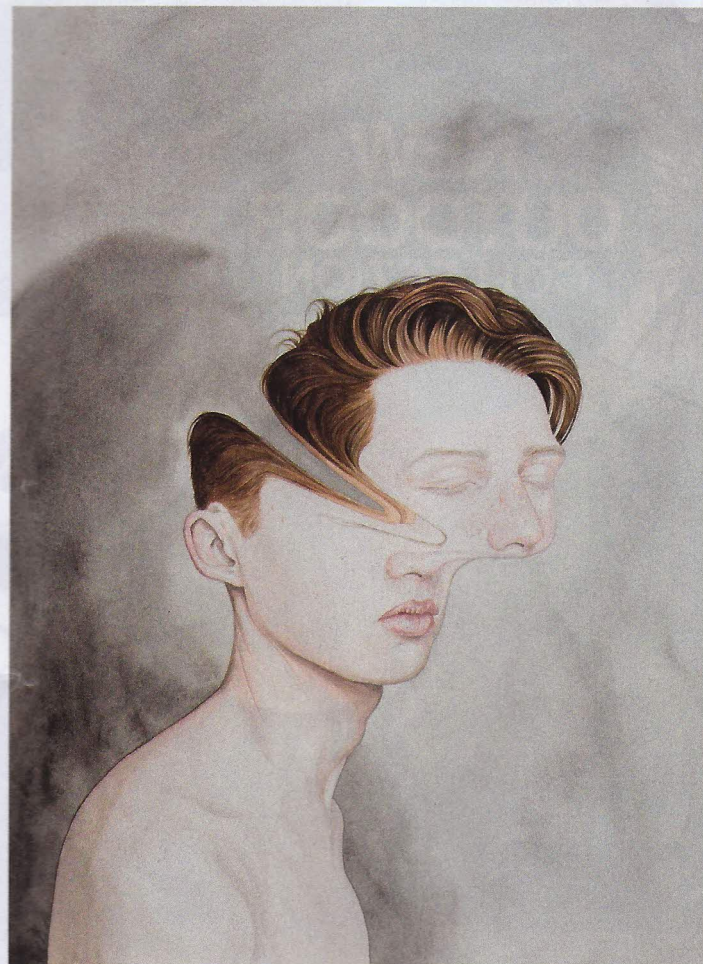
## It's simple, but hallucinatory. You know it's wrong, but you don't immediately know why.

Harris has always drawn. Growing up in Kumeu, the daughter of a primary school art teacher and an ex-lawyer turned winemaker, she was always encouraged creatively, drawing faces since she was a child (though she drew bunnies then too). In high school, she studied Lucian Freud, then went to art school simply because she didn't know what else to do. "I wasn't very good at art school at all," she says, recalling how she never found her place there, never sure what kind of work she wanted to make. "I would have loved to go to an art school a hundred years ago and learnt lots of drawing theory and colour theory."

Instead, she taught herself the craft of drawing and painting after she graduated by studying paintings and trying to copy them, just as she would have a century ago. She drew in her studio during the day and then in the evening, mindlessly sketched in front of the TV.

Other than learning through hours of practice, she says the biggest lesson was learning patience and perseverance. "I didn't realise how much time you should spend on a painting," she says. "I thought you could just churn it out but it looks so much better if you take your time. I thought I'd learn all of that at art school and I didn't at all."

Harris started gathering attention through her music-related commissions, mostly concert posters and the occasional album cover. A turning point was her poster for Ariel Pink's 2012 New Zealand tour. She first painted him figuratively, as she usually did, but became bored. She'd recently seen a photograph online of a paused television showing a picture of a classical statue, the pause distorting the image right through its centre. She tried to do the same thing to Ariel Pink. In her source photo, Pink is crouched over,



singing into a tightly clutched microphone. His chin-length hair is a mousy brown with bright pink streaks. In Harris' version, she's taken the hair that falls to one side of his eyes and pulled it across his face, distorting the image so his eyes are erased by the warp of his hair and flesh. It's simple, but hallucinatory. You know it's wrong, but you don't immediately know why.

Harris, who affectionately refers to the technique as "melty face", knew she was on to something. She pushed the it further, making the distortions more extreme, adding colours that weren't there as if the faces were bleeding in technicolor, such as in her painting on the cover of Grayson Gilmour's album *Infinite Life!*

"I guess I've always been interested in trying to merge styles together without it looking terrible," she says in self-deprecation. "I was trying to mix abstract and figurative together but doing it in a way that looks polished."

But as the melty faces got more popular, Harris started to move away from the technique. "I've never been one of those artists that can do the same thing a lot – find a style and then churn out paintings," she says. "Once I get really good at something I just feel like I have to try something new." She played around with other distortions – doubling faces, as if an exact replica of her subject's face was hovering just over their real face. That too hasn't lasted long.

In May this year she had her first solo exhibition, 'The Hum', at the Robert Fontaine Gallery in Miami, Florida. The exhibition included

some distorted faces, but the most popular pieces didn't include faces at all. The works that sold the fastest were the portraits without the subjects' most telling features. Instead, Harris simply drew their hair, and, perhaps, their neck and shoulders.

She came to the technique almost by accident. "I'd just sit and watch TV and just draw ears with the hair around it to turn my brain off," she says. "Sometimes I'd draw the hairstyle, but getting the facial features right is the hardest bit, so I'd just leave them out." She started posting these sketches to Instagram and was surprised when these meditative sketches, done in ballpoint pen, attracted more attention than the watercolours she was spending weeks on. "People seem to really like the pen drawings. Everyone uses a pen. I can spend a week working everyday on a big painting, but a quick sketch can get a better response."

In December this year, Robert Fontaine will show twelve large hair drawings at Art Basel Miami, one of the biggest, and richest, art fairs in the United States. The gallery has sold her work there the last two years, but this will be her biggest exhibition yet. "Stuff there just seems to sell like," she clicks her fingers, "really fast. The first year I sent three little paintings and they sold straight away. The second year I sent two big paintings and they sold straight away. It's crazy."

For Harris, more sales mean less illustrating for advertising. "I just want to focus on fine art now," she says. "Just really narrow down what I'm doing. I was doing so much stuff – music, art, advertising. All I want to do now is paint for galleries." ●