

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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