

Start at home

Surreal Subconscious Creatures



‘My work proceeds in these strange bursts – something totally unexpected will come to the surface... I may follow this, hold onto it or scrub it out and move on.’

- Brent Harris, ‘Peaks’, 2015

About the artist

Growing up in New Zealand, Brent Harris’ high school art teacher ‘made art feel like it was the most natural thing for any human being to do’. Some of his fondest childhood memories are of swimming in the powerful Manawatu River. ‘We just floated around,’ he remembers, ‘it was probably quite dangerous.’ Now Harris plumbs the murky waters of his own imagination to develop flowing, dreamlike paintings and prints. He migrated to Australia in 1981, and now lives in Melbourne with his partner Andrew Browne.

About the work

Harris’ early paintings were totally abstract, without figures or representation at all. Feeling that something was missing, he experimented with automatic drawing, letting forms ‘bubble up’ from his subconscious mind. One day an odd little elephant face appeared on the page. Harris called this an ‘Appalling Moment’ because the creature was so unexpected and silly. He decided to embrace representation, letting himself find figures amongst the abstraction. This painting comes from a series of surreal, blobby faces, inspired by that first little elephant.

Presented by



Materials you need

- lined notepaper
- coloured paper in 2 colours
- a biro
- a black texta
- coloured textas
- scissors and a glue stick

Take it further

What can you see in Brent Harris' painting? Make a list of all the words you think of when you look at this picture. Then do the same with your own drawing.

Now turn your picture upside down and look at it again. What do you see now? Make another list, then ask a friend or family member to do the same. How different are your lists?

Create your own surreal subconscious creatures

- 1 Automatic drawing is a kind of doodling, or drawing without thinking too much. It was developed by the Surrealists to help bring images and ideas up from the subconscious mind.
- 2 Start with a piece of lined paper and a biro. These are good for doodling because they aren't fancy. Put the pen to paper and just start drawing. You can make fast scribbles, loopy lines or slow swoopy shapes. Keep moving your hand around without planning anything, until the page feels full.
- 3 Take a second piece of paper and start again. This time start your drawing from a different corner of the page, or from the middle. Repeat, filling as many pages as you want. Then choose the one you like the most.
- 4 Look at your drawing. What shapes and forms can you see? Find a large, strange shape - one with some bumps and corners. Outline this shape with a black texta.
- 5 Cut out your shape and glue it onto coloured paper. Outline any marks that look like eyes, a nose or a mouth - or create a face by cutting and gluing shapes from your second colour of paper. What name would you give this creature?

Brent Harris' work is featured in the 2020 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art: *Monster Theatres*. *Appalling Moment (wig)* is part of our online Collection: <https://bit.ly/3eHuO3r>

We would love to see your work! Ask your parent or carer to post a photo on Instagram and tag the Art Gallery of South Australia. Or you can email your photo to us at public.programs@artgallery.sa.gov.au

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