

Roberta Harris - UP

Roberta Harris' impulse toward primitivism was documented by art historian Carol Neuberger in a 2005 exhibition essay. To slip through that door opened by Neuberger seems like a comfortable way to approach an extensive body of work dating from 1985 to the present.

Neuberger's viewing experience must have been extra thrilling, coming as it did a year after MOMA's exhibition on primitivism, to which her essay refers. Titled *Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinities of the Tribal and the Modern*, that seminal show broadened the world's understanding of primitive art's impact on early modernist masters such as Picasso.

A short digression on Picasso is warranted for the light it sheds on Harris's (born 1943) work. Picasso once stated he knew "why he was a painter" the day he saw African sculpture in the Palais du Trocadero. Those haunting forms revealed to him that art could be more than an object for viewing. Art could channel the unconscious mind. According to Picasso, early encounters with African sculpture opened him up to perceiving art as a meditative tool, which led him to paint the magnificent *Les Demoiselles*.

In 1937 critic John D. Graham wrote that Picasso "understood that individual and collective wisdom of past generations was stored in the unconscious and art is the means of getting in touch with it." Graham believed Picasso's paintings have similar ease of access to the unconscious as primitive art. "Picasso delved into the deepest recesses of the unconscious, where lies a full record of all past racial wisdom." (We can thank Professor Jack Flam and Miriam Deutch for cataloging relevant commentary on primitivism.)

With Picasso in mind, note Harris' recounting of an early 70s student experience:

"I intellectually let go of all the 'criteria' I learned for making art and went on a journey of experimentation. I began to collect sticks. I filled my studio with sticks, painted sticks, wound them through canvas and fabric, drew and carved sticks, created installations, filled sketchbooks with "stick" ideas. A friend took me to the Museum of American Indian Art. In there my mouth dropped open! I was astonished to see the same images I made in my studio. I had just learned, first hand, about the 'collective consciousness.' I had read about it, but what a difference to see it. There must be forms, shapes, images, patterns, ideas that we carry with us as part of the human species, since the beginning of time.

In the museum were shamans' bundles containing 'medicine sticks.' These were used to psychically connect to all that was sacred. These forms were believed to hold a life force and were used for prophecy. So life and death, rain or wind, sickness and health, war and peace, all was seen in the sticks. Knowing there is a life force residing in all forms meant more to my education than any formula or technique. I named my sticks 'magic sticks.' Since 1972 magic sticks have been a major motif in my sculpture, paintings, works on paper, and furniture design. They are powerful metaphors."

We can now better understand a work such as the three dimensional wall hanging *Magic Sticks Heart No. 6* (2002) in which wood was sawed and sanded into cylindrical shapes, glued and painted. To Harris, this elegant construction is more than materials and process, it holds metaphysical import. Which is the reason stick iconography finds its way into most of Harris' art. Enlarged in size, sticks crown the elongated stone torso of *Daphne* (1998), a mouth dropping Venus

figure. Steel sticks in “Bird” (2000) curve into planetary orbits holding moons. The large canvas *Shaman’s Field* (2005) unveils sticks as drippy striations barely visible in red paint. Often sticks manifest as Twombly-like calligraphic markings.

The Women’s Museum invited Harris to respond artistically to the theme “Up,” which is “about “hope,” said Harris. Harris’ entire career has been conversant with hope. She believes there is a universal knowledge that can be trusted, that working intuitively to access it, and striving for excellence with the thing at hand, will guarantee a positive outcome. She voices this through artistic language. Given such content, each artwork is similar to a prayer. “Throughout my career,” Harris wrote, “I have been inspired to create images that move the viewer up, physically, emotionally and spiritually.”

Stare at the nude *Daphne* for a while and you experience a visceral reaction. This goddess figure motif, symbolic of life force and regeneration, forges through Harris’ art, replicated in abundant variety. Some goddesses are hybrid creatures, an example being the black demon dancing below wind-blown Haitian mythological figures in *Blown Across the Ocean* (1990). Where the goddess is a classically styled nude with a topless dancer’s curves, Harris is making a naughty romp into sexuality. There are also pop-cultural versions of the goddess, butt-swinging Betty Grable for instance, as well as abstract, totemic wall hangings constructed with goddess bulges.

Harris recalls being blown away the day she encountered a prehistoric Venus in the Musee del’Homme. “I started crying, so powerful, it exuded unbelievable energy. I wanted that energy in my sculpture and paintings, my totemic works, wanted to use Venus figures as female forms.” Ironically that important artifact is housed at the site of the old Palais du Trocadero, where Picasso encountered primitive art.

Birds are another key element of Harris’ repertoire. They allude to healing and regeneration, and in some cultures, prophecy, visions, and spiritual enlightenment. The above mentioned sculptural *Bird* was executed into monumental size for a public venue. *Bird With Amenities* (1997) features Miro like moon and star. Protrusions on *Lew Lew* (1998) are comically perverse. *Apple Sky* (2008), a bird themed two-dimensional work, has delicious texture made from the meticulous application of paper bird patterning into layers of paint.

Harris is struck by ancient Egyptian depictions of birds in hieroglyphs and temple carvings. Egyptians used the bird to represent “Ka.” Translated “spirit,” Ka arrived at birth and lived on after death, and stood for the creative and sustaining power of life. Her many works depicting birds in flight embody the notion of a life force.

Rarely does Harris get artistically political or preachy, but the recent slaughter of Burmese monks in Myanmar inspired *The Dove Project 2* (2008). “I thought, what if a dove, which stands for peace, could be delivered in luggage to the White House and other venues of world power, and the dove flew out, and then there was peace.” To deal artistically with the world’s atrocities, she fashioned handles, as well as locks and keys, on plexiglass “suitcases” designed to carry doves.

Harris’ iconographic language includes geometric designs. Circles alliterate sun’s rejuvenating force in the collaged *Love Me Like You Fly* (2004). The circle painting *Journey* (1988) chronicles the reach for higher knowledge, a journey to other realms or through the inner. But there can’t be a more potent geometric form for this artist than the rectangle. Harris studied Etruscan, Greek,

Roman, Chinese and Mayan checkerboard art patterning. Many cultures employ a visual correlation of checks, the stair step, to iterate higher realms and enlightenment. Using paint, drawing and collage she integrates rectangular patterning. On canvas she lays down a grid, to serve as invisible ground for subsequently applied imagery. Even if invisible, grid patterning is important for its subliminal force. "I put it out there so it can work for the person looking at it." According to Harris, checkerboard stair step imagery supports the exhibition theme. "You step up to a higher power, up to joy, up to fulfillment."

To seek spiritual clarification from squares and rectangles echoes Mondrian, whose work she viewed at MOMA. The psychic connection to rectangles, though, predates the student era. Her parents crafted rectangular shapes, her Polish born father created glass installations, and her mother was a mosaic artist. It all infiltrated the sensibilities of the young child spending time in their workshop.

Harris' student time in New York - she studied at Parsons School of Design, Hunter College, and was granted a Whitney Museum Fellowship - informs her art. Exposure to museum masterworks made significant impact. Along with Picasso and Mondrian, she studied Jean Arp. Dubuffet left an impression. "He used natural forms, butterflies, leaves, always primitive. He used sand and dirt, and scraped paint, made rough markings, used repetition in collage and sculpture." DeKooning's frenzied brush strokes revealed his love of manipulating paint. "He makes you feel the romance of mark making, caresses the brush." In the oil paintings *Nine Rectangles* (1994) and *Arrowsmith* (1995), Harris seems similarly seduced. Decadent pink tones conjure DeKooning.

Being at the Whitney had Harris strategically perched to absorb the work of others. She learned from Agnes Martin, who had risen in the art world after showing grid paintings at Betty Parson's Gallery in 1961. "What a wise lady, brilliant, her work is meditative, peaceful, about seeking peace and calm. I admire its complex simplicity." Louise Nevelson's sawed up fragments and found objects were influential. "She was a glorious woman, all about dedication to her craft. She was bold and audacious!" Cy Twombly's exhibition taught her subtlety. "They were delicate. At the Whitney his paintings seemed to cast a pink glow, it felt like walking through air."

Through gallery and studio visits, Harris learned more. Frank Stella was a major influence. So was the be-laurelled Rauschenberg, from whom she learned to continually innovate. "Vision! You do something and then move to something else!" Lucas Samaras' creepy works signified perfecting a task. Joan Snyder, "be gutsy," Pat Steir, "grids, and less is more."

Artistic influence is clearly a component. So are knowledge and life experiences, such as travel, transition, loss. Characterize this art as purposeful. Each work is a meditation. Its execution is a type of ritualistic act.

By Virginia Billeaud Anderson