



A Look *Inside*

Kenny Harris' newest paintings focus on the interiors of homes and castles in Ireland.

BY JOHN O'HERN



Last summer, Kenny Harris and his wife, Judy Nimtz, rented a cottage on the Sheep's Head peninsula in County Cork, Ireland, intent upon painting the landscape. However, Harris discovered the iconic Bantry House just down the road—a 30,000-square-foot manse on 100 acres overlooking Bantry Bay. Harris left a note for the manager of the house to the effect “Hi. I’m a painter. Will you let me come and paint on-site?” Sophie Shelswell White, whose father had inherited the house in 1978, agreed. The family has occupied the house since the 18th century.

Often, visiting historic houses on tours, he must rely on hastily shot photos that he uses as references back in the studio. At Bantry House, he was able to paint oil sketches, which he is now working into larger compositions.

In *View from Upstairs*, the diffuse light of Bantry Bay enters through the window and animates the window and bed curtains and “turns the form” of the porcelain vessels on the dresser.

His spaces are quiet and empty. “I’ve always been attracted to them,” he says. “Whether grand or mundane, the space itself is charged with human presence—the acute absence of some person. The spaces are about light, space and geometry. I try to stay away from narrative as much as I can. I like painting indirect light and on overcast days when the light doesn’t change. That indirect gray light reveals color and form that compels me to paint. Occasionally, the subject matter trumps the light and is so compelling that I invent the light completely. It’s usually a combination of subject and light and then my psychological

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To the Conservatory, Huntington Castle, oil on canvas on panel, 24 x 20"

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Kenny Harris paints in the Bantry House.



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state of mind when doing it. I want to evoke an intangible feeling. There's a touch of melancholy in that transitional light."

The viewer can sense the feeling of the light in the upstairs bedroom at Bantry and, perhaps sense its smell. The "absence of some person" could be Brigitte, White's mother, who has moved into the estate's gate house and misses the big house's familiar and comforting smells.

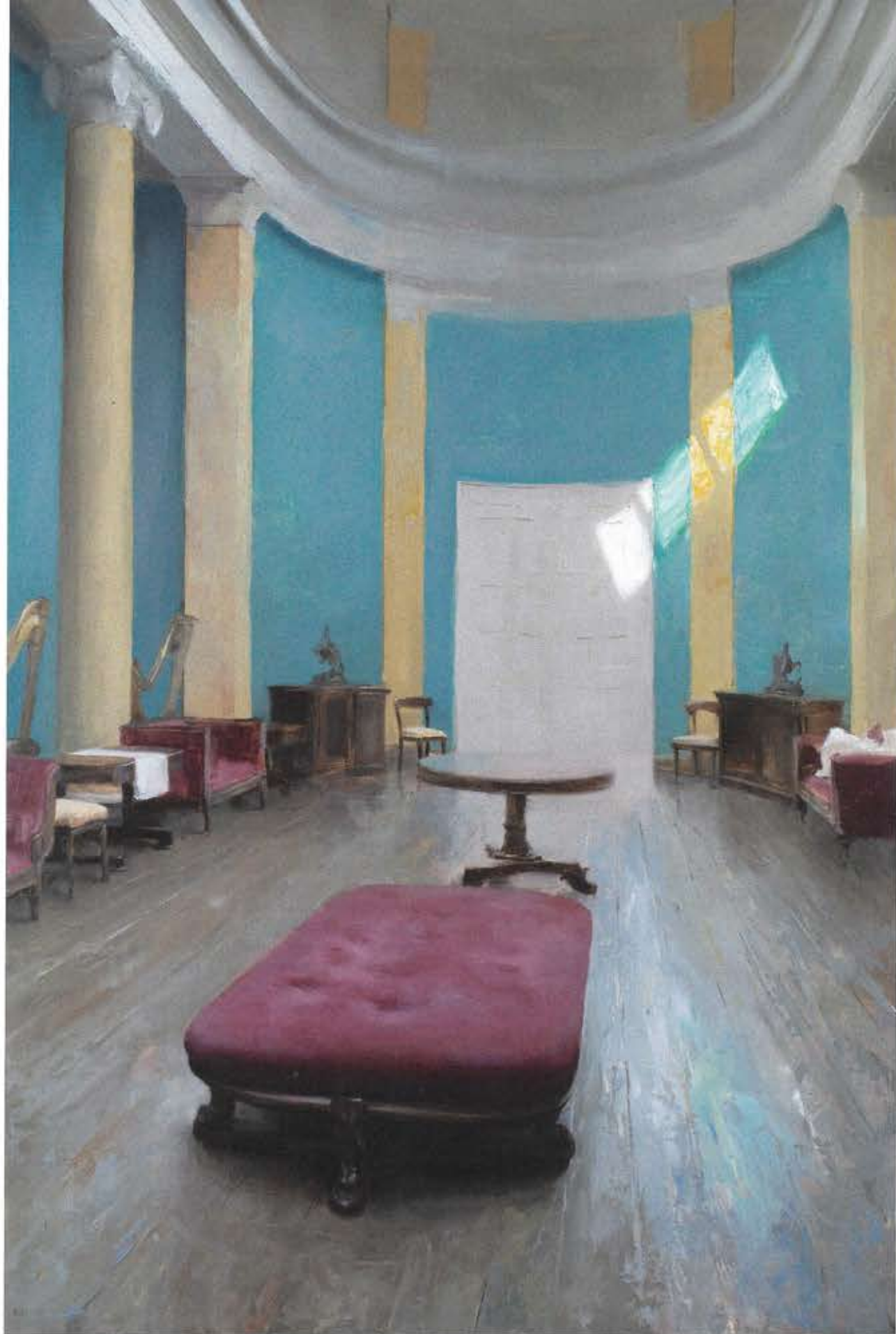
Harris paints in oil using a palette knife and brushes. "Oil is the perfect vehicle for depicting light," he says. "The physicality of the paint can take on the characteristics of the thing painted. Flesh can be smooth and translucent and painting with the palette knife can feel like doing stucco work. I use the brush for form and to create gesture and movement. I use the knife to imply surface. I love the higher contrast from opaque to transparent. I don't paint how things look but how our eyes perceive. I use pure color sparingly, but when I do, it hits with impact.

"I've developed a sort of pictorial language for depicting surface," he continues. "I hope it's interesting to the

3 *Enameled Pitcher*, oil on canvas on board, 12 x 10"

4 *Bantry House Interior*, Cork, oil on panel, 8 x 12"

5 *View From Upstairs*, oil on canvas 24 x 20"



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viewer and that they can connect to the tactile nature of paint."

He has been experimenting with the lost edge in which the edges of objects dissolve into the background. Another painting of the pitcher and basin in the Bantry House bedroom is *Lost Edges* in which the pitcher fades into the basin that, in turn, fades into its reflection on the polished wood of the dresser. The eye invents the edges that the brain knows are there. In *Enamelled Pitcher*, the edge of the pitcher melds into the countertop. He plays down the blue of the shadows to allow the blue of the pitcher's handle to stand out more intensely.

On their way north, the couple visited Lissadell House in Sligo, which was often the retreat of poet, William Butler Yeats. There, Harris had to rely on photographs taken on the tour. Traveling south again, they stayed at Huntington Castle in Carlow, visiting Harry Durdin Robertson and his family. He and Harris had met in Florence where they were studying painting. Ironically, when I visited the wonderfully quirky castle, Robertson was our guide. *To the Conservatory, Huntington Castle* is one of the paintings from his visit.

"In Ireland," he says, "the sky and the land seem closer together. You're closer to the elements. Every road you

drive reveals some kind of marvel. Judy often paints female figures on rocks. I took a lot of reference photos of her among the many ancient standing stones."

Harris explains, "I started out painting loosely. I've become tighter, seeking out more nuances. I felt everything had to be in the same hand. When I saw a portrait by Tiepolo at the National Gallery, I saw that he had two different vocabularies of mark making. The face is refined and the paint is applied more fluidly around it. A painting doesn't have to have the same marks to be cohesive. Sargent took his time to make his paintings appear effortless. Morandi's still lifes look simple but he worked on them for months."

Harris' paintings of Bantry House and other houses in Ireland will be shown in an exhibition at George Billis Gallery in New York, April 21 through May 16. ●

KENNY HARRIS

When: April 21-May 16, 2020

Where: George Billis Gallery, 525 W. 26th Street, Ground Floor, New York, NY 10001

Information: (212) 645-2621, www.georgebillis.com

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The Gallery at Lissadell House, oil on panel, 36 x 24"

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Downstairs Kitchen, Lissadell House, oil on panel, 24 x 16"

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The Blue Room, Bantry House, oil on panel, 36 x 24"