

NICOLA HARRIS



Photograph by Ricardo Dunjwa

The Power of Protest Art: The radical prints of Nicola Harris

Tara Hall

Nicola Harris (b.1995) is a Cape Town-based interdisciplinary artist from the Garden Route, who is currently focused on printmaking. They are drawn to printmaking's easily replicable potential for spreading political messages, aiming to use their craft to expand upon thematic concerns of violence, societal apathy, and protest. In the series of prints produced during the ASAI printmaking workshop at UCT (2024), Harris comments on the genocide in Gaza, and the political insensitivity surrounding the way it is spoken about and viewed. "It's important, I think, to not just reflect the times, but to have an opinion about them," Harris posits. Their works expand upon the haunting imagery of violence relating to the genocide, which is so easily accessible on social media, as well as societal disillusionments, and the nuances of protests and awareness.

As an emerging artist, Harris has participated in several group shows, most recently The Common Presents' *Embodied Homes* (2024) and Blue Light Underground's *Blue Market I* (2024). They have also created a linocut print that was used as the poster for *We Planted the Sage*, a solidarity fundraiser and film screening for Palestine. Drawing on their inspirations from Vietnamese agitprop and South African resistance art, their poster is a bold, stamp-like call to action. The stark nature of linocut prints reflected the vivid political imagery Harris seeks to produce, influenced both by their desire to use their work to make a positive socio-political impact, as well as their academic background.

With a bachelor's degree specialising in film production from the University of Cape Town, Harris's academic and professional career in film set art departments has greatly influenced their approach to the visual artmaking process. "[Working in the art department] is very much about what's in the frame, all the dressing and costumes..." explains Harris, "so thinking about shapes and textures are very important to me."

Harris was initially introduced to printmaking by a university friend, who taught them how to make linocuts. "I really liked [linocut prints] because I have tended towards craft making and small, reproducible stuff that can be sold at a low price on the market," they elaborate, explaining their affinity towards crafts and small-scale production of artworks as being in line with the artworks they would see being made and sold at craft markets or fairs growing up. Harris continued to hone their printmaking skills through the medium of linocut.



Nicola Harris, *Danse Macabre*, 2024. Lithographic print on paper, 47 x 30.5 cm, edition of 4.

Creating easily reproducible works is a cornerstone of Harris's artistic practice, as they see their role as an artist not just to make their viewers contemplate their subject matter more deeply, but also to use their art as a means of 'showing up' and contributing their presence to protests. "I'm not really a public speaker, but I can do this...I think my role [as an artist] is to show up myself and be there," says Harris. In addition to 'showing up', Harris uses the funds from the sales of their work to donate to causes. Through printmaking, Harris finds a way to not only create art but to facilitate action and contribute to making positive change.

Harris's aesthetic references include agitprop and mid-20th century propaganda posters, drawing from the use of simplistic imagery and symbols to communicate a political point. "It's got a clear message, got a stance," says Harris. This is a quality that they aim to replicate within their own practise – having a clear, easily understandable political stance.

In addition to this, they also cite artists such as Goya and Munch as stylistic inspirations. While differing significantly from the style of art in agitprop, across Harris' range of creative references, there is a constant. Whether the case of the abject violence or horror presented in the works of Goya and Munch, or agitprop's potentially inflammatory nature, Harris's influences do not shy away from graphic depictions of subject matter to present their themes and message.

"The world is so violent and painful, and there's so much carnage happening all the time... I just don't know how else to really process it, other than to be quite explicit about how I feel on the page," Harris elaborates.

In the three lithographic prints produced for the ASAI workshop, Goya's influence is particularly evident. In their first print, delicate tendrils of smoke peel from a hole in the chest of a burning corpse, transforming into stylised, crow-like birds. The imagery is beautifully realised, but dramatic, and deeply disturbing, not dissimilar to Goya's *Saturn Devouring His Son* (1823). Harris's reference, which they found from a video posted to social media, is an image of a Palestinian man murdered in the Gazan genocide. His chest had been penetrated by a smoke bomb, and those around him were powerless as smoke poured from the deceased's wounds.

"Many artworks of anger operate through [the mechanism of provoking horror or repulsion] ... They use various means – shocking brutality, violence, visual contrasts..." state Démuth and Démuthová (2024:5). This is in regards to the depiction of an old man tearing apart a child with his teeth in *Saturn Devouring His Son* (1823). The same could be argued for Harris's first print – the visual contrast between the softly curling smoke, the graphic eldritch-like crows, and the abject horror of the murdered man's smouldering corpse serves to discomfit the viewer. Inundated with social media posts regarding the genocide, it is easy to look past explicit photographs or videos. To be drawn to the beauty of Harris's realisation of smoke, only to realise the extreme violence the work illustrates, is deeply unsettling, yet viscerally compelling.



Nicola Harris, *How Do You Bear Witness I*, 2024. Lithographic print on paper, 30 x 19.5 cm, edition of 3.



Nicola Harris, *How Do You Bear Witness II*, 2024. Lithographic print on paper, 30 x 19.5 cm, edition of 3.

“There’s so much with depicting smoke, especially it having such a softness to it, and it just being so ominous at the same time,” comments Harris.

Their next two prints are more subtle, commenting on the way news of the genocide is consumed. However, the dark blacks and shading of the prints, as well as the reoccurring bird, with its large empty white eyes, creates a literal visual contrast, as opposed to the allegorical contrasts on the first print - the contrast between dark and light. Harris’s intense use of dark shading serves to further make this series of prints eerie, and striking. The stark, graphic nature of their prints, especially the use of bold, dark lines and contrasting soft tones, echoes the dramatic urgency of their subject matter.

However, the crow motifs in Harris’s prints, which draw from Celtic mythology, serve as a satirical comment on the superficiality and insensitivity of some memorials. Harris references a Burning Man memorial of victims of the Nova Massacre which trivialised tragedy. “They put up a big sign saying ‘We will dance again’ and it’s a Burning Man, which is just too much... it’s just too many things,” they elaborate as they reflect upon their broader frustrations with hollow gestures in the face of real political struggles.

Protest art is inherently angry — a call to action, a critique against a particular situation or status quo. “Anger can serve as a powerful driver of creativity, fostering innovation and rebellion in art” (Démuth and Démuthová 2024:6), and Harris is undoubtedly angry. Despite maintaining that desolate and heartbreaking imagery should be balanced with a message of resilience and hope, in reference to their lithographic series, they admit, “I’m not feeling so much hope with this [series].” They still aim, however, to inspire protest action, and with that, perhaps hope for an end to the genocide. While their classical inspirations draw upon the raw brutality of war and suffering, Harris’s prints focus on the specific political realities of Gaza, making their work not only a response to violence but also an active call for protest.

Yet, though their prior linocut prints referencing the genocide portray more overt images of resistance, the softer fluidity of lithography lends itself to Harris’s more complex critique.

In learning lithography, Harris found the medium’s unpredictability and intricate process mirrored the complexity of their own political message. They compare the stone to a living entity, with each mark imbued with its history.

“[The facilitators and technicians kept] referring to the stone as if it was a person, using words like ‘it’s a sensitive stone’... it’s like it has a mind of its own,” elaborates Harris, “There’s also the ghost of the previous image, the ghost in the machine, or ghost in the stone... it has a spirit.”

As a creator of potentially polarising political works, Harris is careful to exercise sensitivity and think about their positionality in relation to the atrocities they comment on. However, Harris is adamant not to shy away from strong political messages. Through their prints, they challenge viewers to confront uncomfortable truths, offering no room for complacency.

“I have a responsibility [as an artist] to reflect what I see,” states Harris.

In this way, their practice becomes more than just an aesthetic pursuit – it is a call to action, a means of resistance, and a personal act of solidarity.

Tara V Hall is a multidisciplinary visual artist and an arts writer. She graduated from Stellenbosch University in 2023 with a BA in Visual Arts, and is currently trying – gently but insistently – to carve out a space for herself in the art world.

References

Démuth, Andrej and Slávka Démuthová (2024). “Anger and Ambivalent emotion in art.” *The Proceedings of the International Conference on Advanced Research in Social Studies*, 1(1): 1–8. Harris, N. (2024). Interviews with the author, Cape Town, 4 and 17 December.