

BY TERRI PROVENCAL
PORTRAIT BY KEVIN MARPLE



Marshall Harris in front of *1 of 9* (one from a series of nine individual cat skull drawings), 2012, graphite on Mylar, 30 x 31 in. Opposite: Marshall Harris, *Quid tibia vis videre*, 2012, graphite on Mylar, 30 x 31 in.

Dearly Departed

HUNTING ART PRIZE WINNER MARSHALL HARRIS EXPLORES THE NUANCES OF PASSING IN *DEATH DO US PART*.

The first time I met Marshall Harris in 2011 he was wearing a kilt. While this was already unusual garb for Dallas, what was even more extraordinary was his heavily bearded looming presence at six foot seven, making the kilt especially startling. Harris is a TCU football Hall of Fame inductee and pro football alum, formerly with the Cleveland Browns, and on this day any character in *Braveheart* would have united behind this seemingly heroic warrior and less-likely artist.

My initial encounter with Harris was during the annual *New Texas Talent* show at Craighead Green Gallery. He was among the featured “new” artists. Though a bit intimidating in stature, a bastion of talent he is. His hyperrealistic drawing *Round Up* B.F. Smith & Son Saddlery, circa 1940-1942, exquisitely textural using graphite on Mylar, earned him the 2013 Hunting Art Prize with spoils to the winner at \$50,000.

With a fine arts degree from Texas Christian University (where he currently teaches) and an MFA from University of the Arts in Philadelphia, the Fort Worth native is much more than a saddle artist. But make no mistake, these works are significant, highly sought-after, commissioned, and collected.

I happened upon Harris a year later, sporting a shorn beard, during an opening for cross-pollinated group shows at Circuit 12 Contemporary and Mary Tomás Gallery. This time the artist was clad in overalls, and I would not have recognized him without the kilt were it not for his largesse. Although a saddle was present at Mary Tomás, most of the pieces at both galleries were beyond weighty—the most gripping, *Jesus Christ that must hurt*, depicted a life-sized graphite drawing of one of Christ’s arms and hands during the crucifixion. Chilling, the vivid miniscule hairs on the arm made my own stand on end.

In *Death Do Us Part*, his solo show opening on October 12 at Red Arrow Contemporary, the artist brings a consummate collection of remarkably large



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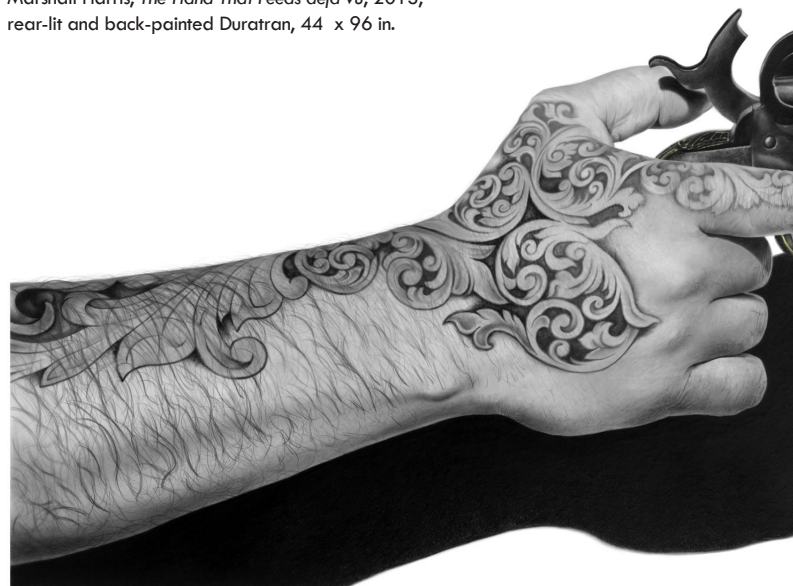
thought-works to the Dragon Street gallery. The centerpiece of *Death Do Us Part, Stripping the Flesh and Bone of this Mortal Coil*, is a 2-D/3-D installation. Viewable from both sides, its components feature a 25-foot-long cloudscape drawing in graphite on Mylar unconventionally hung in the center of the gallery. Suspended above the drawing is an installation of thousands of obituary photographs of the dearly departed.

Ed Stafford, gallerist and founder of Red Arrow Contemporary, snatched up Harris more than a year in advance for the solo show. "I met Marshall nearly 30 years ago. He made a lasting impression, as a pro football player and an artist—he was, and is, a paradox. Just over a year ago I saw *The Hand That Feeds* [a 54 x 108 in. graphite drawing on Mylar featuring a tattooed arm and hand aiming a Texas-style revolver]. It personified Texas and unresolved conflict, it felt beautifully dangerous. I wanted to meet the artist. When I realized this pencil drawing, its large scale, draftsmanship, and unique juxtaposition of a traditional western subject captured in such a fresh and exciting way belonged to a long lost friend, I reached out and asked if a solo show of new works would be possible in a year."

The show features the multimedia artist's distinctive graphite-on-Mylar drawings, photography, cast-resin sculpture, and a video creation comprising an explorative study on the concept of death. And about death, does it really deserve the implied finality of the word? "The term *death* is most often associated with the end of something—life being the obvious example—but when considered in broader terms, it can be redefined as *transition*. The finish of something becomes the start of another. Death marks the transitional point from the arrival at an ending and departure to a beginning," postulates Harris.

Examining the details found in such transitions, Stafford mulls, "His depictions create a timelessness and a quiet drama that is hard to put into words." The artist believes that "death can be the moment when a loved one becomes a departed relative, or a functional item transforms into something uniquely

Marshall Harris, *The Hand That Feeds déjà vu*, 2013, rear-lit and back-painted Duratran, 44 x 96 in.



familiar but no longer what it was. Life causes an instant and unalterable effect on everything around us—as does death.”

Another subject in the exhibit, *9*, also in “post-life,” offers a series of feline skulls providing an exposed view of a tiny subject, baring a look at crevices, cavities, teeth, and the porous nature of bone in ways certainly impossible to reveal in life. Explains Harris, “What remains constant in this show is my exploration, my practice of looking at something very closely and carefully so as to discover its absolute uniqueness—and then consider how that changes with a significant event. In this case, death.”

So, what is he doing with the \$50,000 check? “The Hunting Art prize has allowed me to execute and create some works for this upcoming show that I could never have done without a grant or a social funding effort or a pot of gold falling out of the sky. And all I can do to honor the prize is work like I never won it, do art like I have never imagined or had the time to do, and hope that this miraculous acknowledgement of my efforts will be a good investment in my career as an artist. I can’t afford to squander a penny or a moment that it has afforded me,” Harris offers.

And about that kilt? “I had only been back in Texas for a few months having moved back from the Northeast. I figured that no one knew me down here, and certainly didn’t know my works, so I figured, ‘What the Hell! Kilts it will be.’ My hair and beard were much longer then, so the whole Norseman-Artist thing was working, I thought, until I got the stink-eye from some restaurant patrons I encountered at a nearby bistro after the show. I guess the Highlander invading Highland Park was not amusing to these ladies. I probably won’t be sporting the man-skirt for the *Death Do Us Part* show, but perhaps a sarong isn’t off the wardrobe consideration list? Depends on the weather I suppose,” Harris laughs.

Death Do Us Part continues through November 16 at Red Arrow Contemporary, redarrowcontemporary.com. **P**



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