

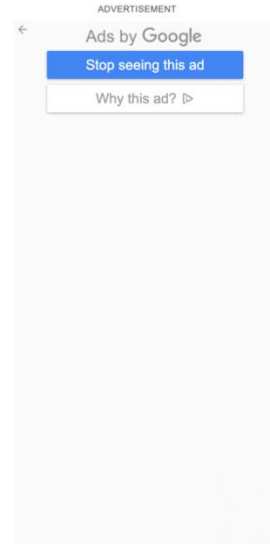


TORONTO | News

This Ontario artist is changing Canadian ideals of beauty using hyper-realistic paintings



Two works of Peter Harris' can be seen above. (Peter Harris/peterharris.ca)



Abby O'Brien
CTV News Toronto Multi-Platform Writer
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To Peter Harris, the heart of Canadian beauty extends past mountain ranges, rugged coasts, and sprawling prairies – when asked to define the quintessential Canadian landscape, his mind's eye veers away from familiar regions like Lake Louise or Peggy's Cove.

Instead, [the Ontario-born oil painter](#) draws inspiration from urban settings others may deem mundane or fail to notice altogether.

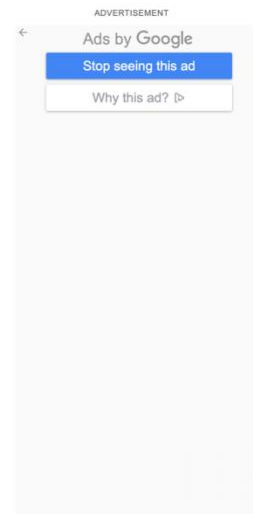
"I'm an urban person," Harris told CTV News Toronto from a temporary studio in Spain Friday. "I love the city. That's what gets me excited."

His art reflects that sentiment – his hyper-realistic paintings depict TTC stations, dimly-lit parking lots, gas pumps, local restaurants, and just about anything a city-dweller may encounter on a daily commute. Very rarely do the finished products feature any natural lighting, with car headlights, neon signs, or fluorescent overheads guiding the viewer's eye.

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"The challenge is to take something really banal, like an escalator in a subway station, and make it into an interesting painting," Harris said.





Escalator to Line 1, 24 x 32", oil on canvas, 2022, by Peter Harris (peterharris.ca)

The art of painting landscapes was passed on to Harris during childhood visits with his grandmother.

"She would set up the dining room table with her watercolor paints and pastels, and I would sit down after school and work on little mountain landscapes – not that we could see any mountains, but we worked from photos in books," he explained.

Today, he still sees those early sessions reflected in his work.

"I think [the hyper-realistic urban style] actually does relate back to those early mountain landscapes in a way."



Night Vision 10:45, oil on canvas, 30 x 60", 2006, by Peter Harris (peterharris.ca)

Within his art, Harris works to challenge viewers' ideas of Canada's beauty and how it's represented. Stretching as far back as the 19th century, artists like [Anne Savage](#), [Emily Carr](#), and [the Group of Seven and Tom Thomson](#) have long dominated that realm with detailed landscapes showcasing forests, rivers, glaciers, and more.

Harris takes a different approach.

"I've been thinking about what exactly is the quintessential landscape representing Canada," he said. "Most people live in cities, [...] and so I just started thinking more and more about what a 'real' Canadian landscape is."

"For me, it's the city, the streets, even suburban parking lots. That's what I see on a daily basis, and so I really wanted to paint things that I saw in my daily life, but that also represent a different way of viewing the Canadian landscape."

One of the paintings Harris holds closest to his heart is of a long-standing culinary institution in Toronto – Okonomi House, a small Japanese restaurant tucked away on Charles St. in the heart of downtown.

"It's just like this strange little glowing beacon amongst all these high rises – It draws you in, it's just so evocative."



Okonomi House 8pm, oil on canvas, 26 x 36", 2021, by Peter Harris (peterharris.ca)

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He's also particularly interested in liminal spaces.

"A lot of my work lives in these sort of strange transitional spaces that we find ourselves in, like the subway station, an elevator, or an escalator -- a space that you occupy for 30 seconds," he said. "Spaces like these represent an aspect of impermanence in these landscapes we're traveling through all the time, but never really stopped to pause and meditate on."

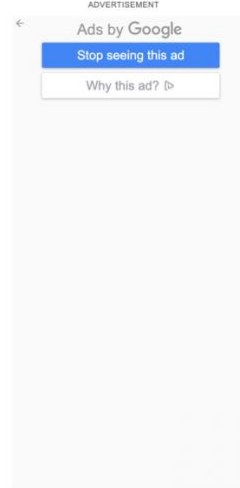


Level 3 (icebergs), 24 x 34, 2017, by Peter Harris (peterharris.ca)

In Harris' most recent work of the Dufferin TTC station, he inserted a Lawren Harris painting where an advertisement would normally be found -- a juxtaposition between many Canadian's daily surroundings and the landscapes Canada chooses to advertise to the world.

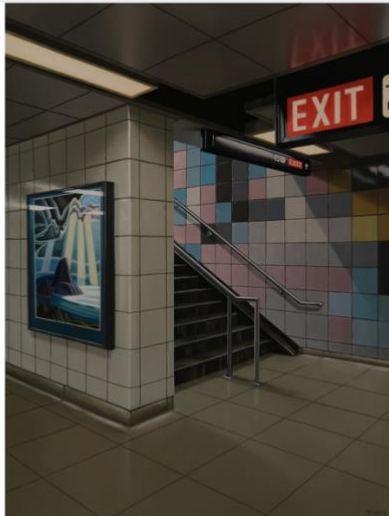
"Again, I wanted that idea of these two different Canadian landscapes -- one being Lawren's version of it and then this really modern version of Canada, my version, which is Dufferin station with its architecture, and the tiles, and a bit of grime in there," he explained.

"It's kind of ironic because here's the station -- my version of Canada -- and there's what we outwardly advertise [Canada to be]."



 **peter d harris**
@peterharrisart · Follow

Exit with Lake Superior, 24 x 18", oil on canvas, 2023
Always wondering if Canadians who weren't steeped in the Group of 7 mythology relate to their version of Canada as rugged, untamed wilderness, when so many, like me, live in urban surroundings. @miragodard gallery



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Harris travelled to Spain, after more than two years of the pandemic, as a way to reset and "find new inspiration." He says he plans to spend the next couple of months learning new techniques and working on new projects abroad.

Despite the change of scenery, Harris says his art will still centre all things urban.

"I really don't know what direction [my upcoming projects] will go in, but I can assure you that it'll be more urban landscapes, subway cars, and things like that."

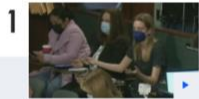
Harris' paintings can be viewed at the [Mira Godard Gallery](#), at 22 Hazelton Ave. in Toronto.



Streetcar 11:15 pm, oil on canvas, 20 x 36", 2010, by Peter Harris (peterharris.ca)

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