



BACKTRACK Kristin Hollis

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KRISTIN HOLLIS
(Stephenson)

Exhibition:
23 June–17 July, 2026

PG gallery192

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Right: *7 Years on a cliff near Brighton, 2025* (detail)
Cover: *Wheele, 2026*, Indian ink and red pen on paper; 183 × 128mm
Back cover: *(Lake Maracaibo) Bolívar Wept/Bolívar Lloró, 2025* (detail)



Backtracking with Kristin Hollis

Sally Blundell

I've been thinking about family, where I've been. A lot of women about my age get into writing. For me, I had to do something pictorial. It's a coming out in a funny sort of way.

– interview with the artist, 15 April, 2026

The past isn't a foreign country. It is a familiar topography made strange through memory and perspective; an unstable terrain through which the artist – or writer – scours the ground of the past for potent signs and recollections. At times, that topography fades into complete obscurity; at others it leers up in vivid hyper-reality. Mostly however, it is a frayed edge, a half-remembered path, a missing face, an inexplicable image, a forgotten question – a broken track comprising gaps, rewritings and erasings.

In traversing this personal history, the contemporary artist excavates not the tight borders of a foreign country but a fragmented record of experiences, learnings and imaginings based on the shaky foundations of memory and narrative – the twin structures, wrote US writer and academic Paul Eakin, of identity.

Two years after presenting *Track*, a series of works circling the before, during and after of the shock of a damaged aorta, Ōtautahi artist Kristin Hollis embarks on a performative navigation of ancestral and personal history. It is a restive story of invasion, diaspora and migration, using brush, pencil, charcoal and oil stick to collate an identity from memory, experience, place and, most of all, things: longboat, oil rig, vine, corset, lacrosse stick, monkey; the persistent tendril of a common perennial. These she laces together with a circuitous thread of long haul luggage. Wheeled suitcase, trunk, backpack – the portable repositories of a traveller's expectations built from the abbreviated needs of the present.

*Pictish, Brythonic, Celtic, Norman, Anglo Saxon, Viking
... and maybe a touch of Roman* – email 6 May, 2026

They travelled in timber longships plugged with moss and animal hair, skilled voyagers, craftsmen and farmers, bent on missions of raiding or settling. Kristin Hollis knew the stories of her mother's family, stories of old stone and trampled lands on the contested borderlands between England and Scotland. But a DNA test swung the needle of her ancestry back, way back, to those Norwegian, Danish, Finnish and Swedish Vikings ploughing across the churning grey of the North Sea to Scotland, Ireland and down through Anglo-Saxon England from the late 8th to 11th centuries.

Hollis asserts this history in a large loose canvas dominated by the elaborately carved and painted head of her dragon, the prow of a Viking longship designed to intimidate enemies and ward off supernatural spirits. Her patterned *dreki* howls silently into an oceanic wind with blank-eyed ferocity, forging into an ancient world represented here by the motifs of the Picts, the mysterious 'painted people' from northern England and Scotland, and the Celts with their finely carved and drawn knots, circles, spiralling triskeles and decorative high crosses of Insular art, here amassing around the unseeing prow like chants or storm clouds against the intruders.

On two further canvases, she charts her mother's heritage, going back to the Border Reivers, the English and Scottish raiders who fought on the battle-scarred Anglo-Scottish border from the 14th to the 17th centuries. They were feuding clans and families, skilled horsemen and fighters from across the social spectrum, from labourers and farmers to peers of the realm, driven to cattle rustling, arson, kidnapping and pillaging as a matter of survival. It was a desperate life: a short moonlit ride to plunder a farm, a military operation with gangs of armed men, an army of mercenaries, their loyalty always only to kin. Following the death of Elizabeth I in 1603, the newly crowned James I – formerly James VI, King of Scotland – set out to rid the border of Reivers through an unrelenting programme of executions and exile.

Their legacy remains in the stone towers dotting the landscape,



Border Diaspora, 2025, acrylic, charcoal and pencil on canvas, 1365 x 995mm

in words such as 'bereave' and 'blackmail', and ballads, including 'The Reiver's Wedding' by nineteenth-century poet and novelist Sir Walter Scott, himself descended from the notorious raider Walter Scott, known as Auld Wat.

Hollis presents this history through two canvases, layered horizontally like archaeological strata. The top canvas of *The Reiver's Wedding* is painted with compositional grids and the tartans of clan-nish identity, emerging out of a band of red redolent of the blood-soaked soils of the borderlands. In the lower canvas, Hollis presents images of pageantry, monarchy and mortality: Elizabeth I, the Virgin Queen, corsetted and collared; a skull, a headstone, a bell, a symbolic hourglass – funerary pieces from the time of the border conflicts drawn in graphic detail like the worn engravings of ancient headstones.

It is a personal story but, like the fading ripples of a stone thrown in water, it has resonance today in the broad dispersion of Scandinavian DNA as British peoples migrated to the colonies of the new world; and in the banishment of those warring Reivers out beyond the edges of kingdom.

Did the anteater eat the kitten? – email 6 May, 2026

They travelled the Atlantic in a small Norwegian whaler. Behind them, a war-damaged Britain. Before them, the clotted air of Venezuela, the world's top oil exporter, its crude oil vital to the reconstruction of post-war western Europe.

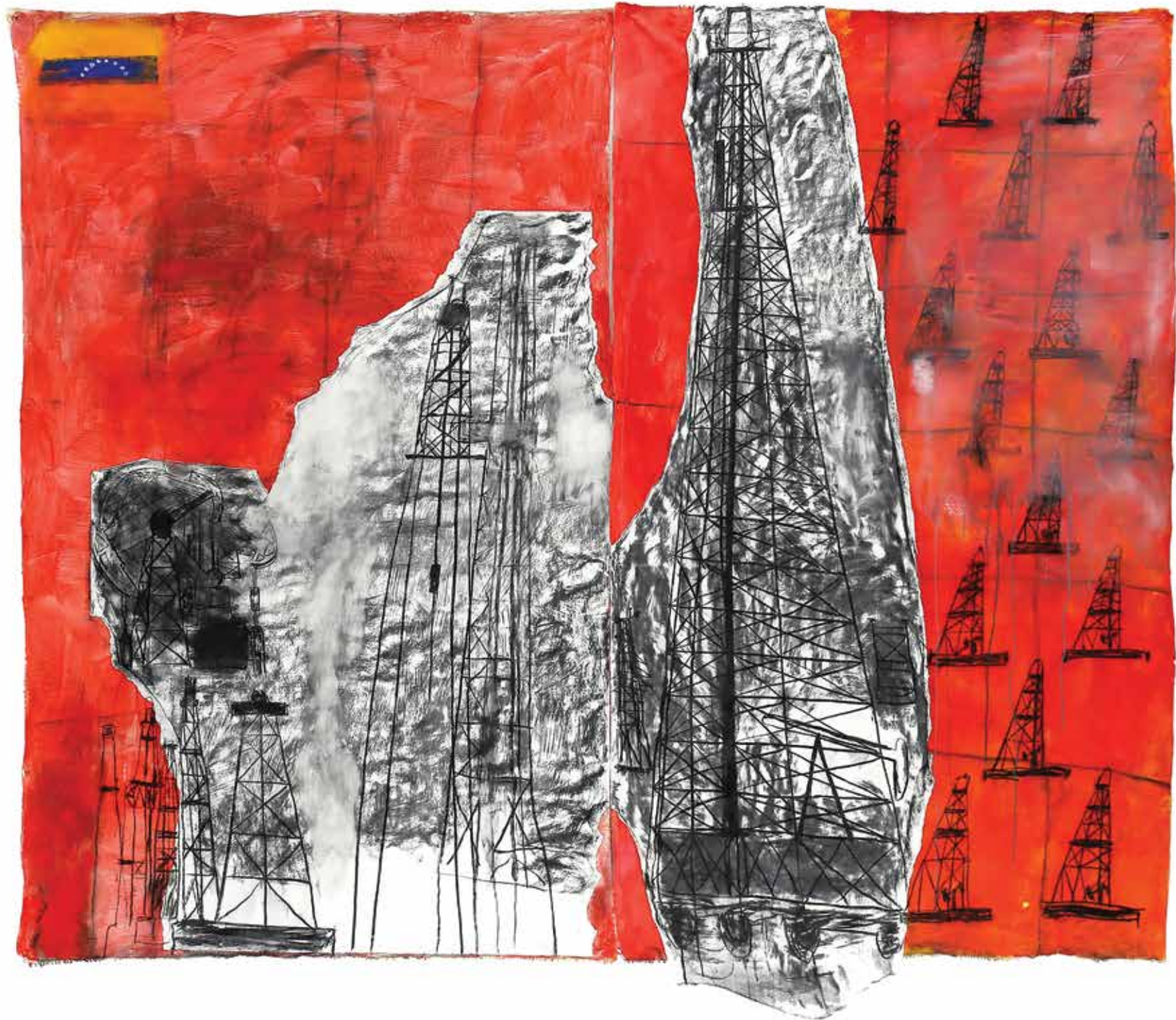
Hollis was three – 'three-and-a-half' – when they moved to South America. Her father, who had worked for Shell before World War II, had been asked to return to the company to work in Nigeria or northern Venezuela. He chose the latter, a place of stifling heat, burning gas and steamy jungle.

Maracaibo, the centre of Venezuela's oil industry, rippled with tension. The history of white conquistadors, still vivid in minds of the Indigenous peoples; the run of military dictatorships; the poverty; the sickness (her mother nearly died from serum hepatitis); the proximity to dangerous animals (as children, they unwittingly played near rattlesnakes).



Above: *The Reiver's Wedding*, 2025, acrylic and charcoal on loose canvas, 1245 x 1015mm

Overleaf: (*Lake Maracaibo*) *Bolívar Wept/Bolívar Lloró*, 2025, acrylic, oil paint, charcoal, and paper on loose canvas, diptych, 1850 x 2235mm overall





On the gallery wall stalks a giant anteater, an endling, the only extant member of the genus *Myrecophaga*, threatened by habitat destruction, roadkill, hunting, fires and predation. It is a fantastical, solitary creature, growing up to 2.4m with enormous claws to tear open ant nests and termite mounds.

Hollis' anteater crowds the paper, all menacing eye, bent claws, spiralling tongue; its mane-like tail a muscular flurry of colour and line swishing like that of a peacock. It is fierce and cartoonish, something on the edge of memory, reportage and fantasy. 'Has been known to attack humans if startled,' writes Hollis in her pencilled description – was it this lumbering creature, she wonders now, that took the family cat's new kitten?

Other works capture the humidity, the torpor, the breathlessness of this nervous colonial outpost. *Waist Training in the Tropics* features her mother's corset, a lattice of line and stifling mesh, the over-long threads and constricting weave evoking not just the preposterous waist-shaping undergarment required of English women in the tropics but also the chequered wattle and daub of local dwellings, the entangled vine and

leaf of the jungle, the itchiness of dusty plantain, the clammy humidity.

This restive energy bleeds through *Red Howler in Casigua (with Rousseau)*, saturated with the aqueous green of deep jungle. This is not the dappled light of a Scottish woodland but a languorous, diffusive world of spindly branches, distending stems and stilled fauna. A red howler monkey dangles from its tail, head contorted in an unnerving gaze of curiosity. The bulging body of a satiated anaconda falls the length of the canvas; a tigre – a nod to Rousseau's fabricated exoticness – lies as if in midday indolence. It is an oppressive scene, held in heat, flexing in and out of graphic line and pooling paint.

In contrast to this languid scene, the two canvases of Venezuelan oil wells in *(Lake Maracaibo) Bolívar Wept/Bolívar Lloró*, present a hard, hot, burning world devoid of plant or animal. Oil rigs march across the reddened landscape, their stark geometry overlaid on to rough sheets of torn paper. Against the scorched sky, below a small



Above: *Giant South American Anteater*, 2026, acrylic, watercolour, charcoal and pencil on paper; 995 x 1510mm
Left: *Red Howler in Casigua (with Rousseau)*, 2026 (detail) acrylic and oil stick on loose canvas

Venezuelan flag, hovers the face of Simón Bolívar, celebrated Creole Venezuelan who fought successfully for the liberation of five Spanish colonies and reluctantly (hence the 'wept') or insistently – the record varies – took on the role of president of all of Gran Columbia. Again, this history resonates today. Bolívar decreed national ownership of all mines, later dictator General Juan Vicente Gomez opened the country to foreign oil investors, including the Royal Dutch-Shell Oil Company. After entering office in 1999, Hugo Chávez initiated a programme of sweeping nationalisations including state-led oil wealth redistribution. Under the new, US-sanctioned leadership of Delcy Rodríguez, key sectors of the economy, including mining and hydrocarbons, have been reopened to private investment. Bolívar still weeps.

It's a coming out, in a funny story of way – interview 15 April, 2026

She travelled by ocean liner. An 11-year-old schoolgirl leaving the provisional classroom of Venezuela's ex-pat oil community for an elite, historic public (i.e. private) boarding school on a windswept cliff overlooking the sea at Brighton in south England. Winters were cold, summers short, the winds notoriously 'bracing'. Holidays were spent with grandmothers, an aunt or an uncle. Only once did she return to Venezuela, as a 12-year-old, flying alone to South America on a BOAC plane before returning under the distracted care of a young chaperon with her eight-year-old brother.

On two loose canvases, *7 Years on a Cliff near Brighton* presents a tighter, linear, uniformed identity indicative of classroom conformity and Church of England school privilege. The cropped figure of a schoolgirl is anonymous, identified only through her wide gym frock, ankle socks, knobby knees, the loosely woven cat gut of a lacrosse stick. There is a suggested fragility behind these markers of institutional compliance, in the uncertainty of line and absence of landscape.

The smaller canvas, cut to shape, is an edge-to-edge pattern of 'the old school tie', a staggered geometry of school insignia and house colours, of belonging and social standing and traditional allegiance devoid of neck or head or school identity.



Mum's, 2026,
watercolour and Indian ink
on paper, 126 x 177mm

*Did I tell you that for work purposes I am now
Kristin Hollis, again?* – email 6 May, 2026

Newly married, she travelled by ship. Another packed box, another migration, this time bound for New Zealand, the new world of her ancestors.

Two self-portraits are presented in a complex palimpsest of medium, texture and detail; Eakin's structures of memory and narrative here complicated by the progression of time, age, emotional perspective and shifting light, again fluctuating between moments of sudden clarity and swamping darkness.

In *Cranmer Self* a figure resurfaces as if from a dark tunnel of charcoaled memory. Smudged features are punctuated by a piercing eye, a carefully delineated mouth. The torso expands into monochrome abstraction, the shoulders bleed out of definition, artist and subject peer into each other through a glass darkened by time and age. The result is mysterious, haunting, diffident in its material instability.

Blossomly Self similarly elicits semblance from a smudged evocation of time and memory, using texture, form and provisional line in a shifting, modifying navigation of self. The sudden detail of a defined mouth hovers over loosely drawn lips, the jaw is a sketched cross-hatch of line and charcoaled shadow. Dominating the large, floating head,

a tremulous line of drawn flowers creeps into the cloud of white paint like a thought or memory of the ubiquitous alstroemeria: 'They seemed to feature large in the gardens I first encountered when I came to New Zealand,' says Hollis. 'I never knew what to do with them, and the flowers seemed equally puzzled about me.'

Then *The Lulus*, a grid of 12 small mixed media (mainly ink) self-portraits, each measuring 60 x 55mm – the same size used by Rembrandt for many of his small etchings studied by Hollis for her honours dissertation at Reading University and a nod to a grid of similar sized works in her 2005 series *The Cat Farmer's Wife*. The faces in this identity line-up pivot in tone and line, in the tilt of a jaw, the lean of a head, the detail of a mouth. Glimpses, seemingly shutter speed, of a self in transit, in time and in age, stepping from gangplank to wharf in an ongoing progression of being.

Blossomly Self, 2010 (detail)
charcoal, acrylic and ink on paper



KRISTIN HOLLIS

Kristin (Stephenson) Hollis was born in Scotland then lived in Venezuela, The Netherlands and England before settling in New Zealand.

She holds a BA (Honours) in Printmaking, Graphic Communication and Typography from the University of Reading, England and a BFA (Honours, First Class) and MFA (Distinction), both in Painting, from the University of Canterbury, New Zealand.

Kristin Hollis is the winner of several awards including the Cranleigh Barton Drawing Award in 2005.

Her work is held in Christchurch Art Gallery, Te Puna O Waiwhetu, Suter Art Gallery, Nelson, Ara Institute of Canterbury and private collections in the United States, Britain and New Zealand.

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