

JANE HARRIS

For some years Jane Harris has made paintings and drawings that depict the shape of an ellipse with fluted edges. These works are constructed from many uniform brush marks in a way that disturbs the spatial reading of the painting. Sometimes the ellipses appear to be hovering on the surface of the canvas, but as the light changes it can also be experienced as an aperture.

RF: You currently have a very precise, considered area of enquiry. How did that come about?

JH: I started my BA at Camberwell College of Art (now part of University of the Arts, London), did a year there and didn't get on very well. You were slotted into areas of interest and I was in a very traditional, academic area; still life, life drawing/painting, based on the 'Euston Road' school of observational painting associated with the artist and art educator William Coldstream. Looking back it was useful because it was very rigorous and disciplined but at the time I felt it wasn't really where I wanted to be. I transferred to Brighton and finished my BA there and then I went to the Slade for my postgraduate. Going to the Slade School of Art [London University] was a little bit like going to Camberwell, and I came across Coldstream again. At that time I was making large-scale, abstract, formal works, using a combination of geometry and more painterly aspects. I was working within a tradition of painting and I wanted to be part of that. After the Slade I got a scholarship to travel to Japan to look at formal gardens. From that point the work became very specifically about the relationship between structure and ornamentation. The work that I made after my visit to Japan was to do with particular aspects of the containment of nature. I visited royal gardens and private gardens that had been made public from the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and some more modern ones. They all work within certain rules. I learnt that there are two main types of gardens, which fascinated me; the walking around type and the sitting down type. In one you sit statically and contemplate and in the other you are guided around in a specific way, coming across viewing points. That's something that really connected to my work; you can sit in front of it and you can walk around it. I wanted those two things to combine, to gel.

RF: Did the visit have an immediate impact on your work?

JH: Yes. I took loads of photographs and made work whilst I was there, drawings and watercolour for information. I then got interested in formal gardens in the West, looking at differences and similarities, and spent a year in Paris where I had another scholarship to look at French classical gardens. A couple of years after that I went to Goldsmiths College [London University].

RF: Did you come up against thinking there that you hadn't encountered at the Slade? A questioning of authority?

JH: Absolutely, all the time. In fact, I wrote my essay on the 'anxiety of influence'.

RF: But you kept painting. Did you feel you had to make an argument for it?

JH: No, that wasn't an issue. I think there is a misapprehension that Goldsmiths doesn't support painting. Nobody questioned whether one should paint or not, the questions were within painting; 'What are you trying to define?' 'How does it relate to the other things that are around it?'

RF: In the seventies and eighties some feminist critics suggested painting, because of its history, wasn't a suitable medium for women artists. Did you ever feel you had to respond to that attitude?

JH: No, I never have. I do think that my work is very female but I've never tried to incorporate feminist issues in the work. The issue about whether as a woman one can paint has never bothered me. I suppose it's because I have a deep-rooted passion for painting. Another area I'm interested in is architecture. The fact that most architects are men wouldn't stop me wanting to make a building or design a garden.

RF: There are certain rules in your work. When did they come about?

JH: They came about during my time at Goldsmiths and they have been re-defined slightly, ever refined. I got the place at Goldsmiths because of some drawing of real objects. I covered paper with black charcoal and then rubbed them out so one got a white absence with a detailed edge of whatever I'd chosen to draw. You couldn't really tell what it was, apart from the intricacies of the edge. I then started making paintings that did a similar thing, getting involved in the detail of edging; what that did or didn't tell us. I had questions about whether decoration is an embellishment, something you add on or whether it's intrinsic to the character of something. I made a painting that I needed to make an ellipse for. I wanted it to be like a mirror shape, very baroque, so I had to find out how to make an ellipse. I read about what to do and the equation I had to make. I read that it had two focal points and that struck me as being very interesting, because it has the possibility of being both two dimensional and three dimensional at the same time.

RF: Did you like entering into that geometric world?

JH: Yes - it's something that goes back to my childhood. I have always liked geometry, making patterns and filling them in. I liked the idea that the work is about something external and something internal. It's to do with perception but there is a structure underlying it that has rules.

RF: Your work seems to go straight to the abstract/representational divide. How do you describe it?

JH: That has always been a problem. I'm usually slotted into the abstract category and I've railed against that for quite some time. The problem is that there isn't really a term for it.

RF: One of the things I admire is the way the paintings are so concise. They have so few elements, yet when you start thinking about them they raise all types of problems - the abstract /representation dilemma being one of them. Two dimensional /three dimensional, object/material, object/surface, it all starts unpacking.

JH: That's what I hope to achieve. The rules are always the same, the limitations I give myself but within that the potential seems endless, the possibilities for variation.

RF: I imagine you allowing yourself certain freedoms and then retracting from others. How do you judge the leeway you give yourself?

JH: I'm quite a strict person but I also think the paintings are witty. I'll set myself these limitations and I could say for years, 'well I can't do that, that's not within my rules'. Then something unexpected happens and I think, 'I can do that now, why have I said no to it for three years?'.

RF: Geoffrey Worsdale, writing about your drawing, pointed to the inability of the two ellipses to 'function as a plausible, singular and unified composition'. I feel you almost want to look at one with one eye and one with the other!

JH: I had a painting in the John Moores [juried painting biennial in Liverpool] called *Coming on big* that had four ellipses, that is the most I have done. I do lots of drawings to work out which ones I want to make into a painting. The four ellipses were receding in size but the decoration around them was increasing in size so, overall, the size was exactly the same. It was a complex thing to do, but it was a very successful painting. I knew immediately I'd done it that it was good, which doesn't happen all the time. Afterwards I did a painting with three and then one with two. The two ellipse paintings seemed to me to be really interesting because of what you just said. They are ostensibly the same, one is repeated, but they occupy different spaces on the canvas, so however one much one tries to look at them as the same, they never are.

RF: It was interesting that you described the paintings as referencing ornate mirrors. I see them as blank mirrors; referring you back to your (absent) self - quite a terrifying experience. It seems as though you are implicating the viewer, making them reflect on looking in a physical way.

JH: Yes, that's exactly what I want to do. The viewer has to negotiate the responses you've talked about as well as the shifting around the work. It happens whether there's one form or two, but with two, if you are looking obliquely at the work, one form is going to appear slightly bigger than the other. There's a certain sort of discomfort with what you are looking at because you can't quite bring them back together to occupy the same plane. There is an optical and physical relationship that for some people is quite disturbing.

RF: You must feel very ambivalent about having your work reproduced, it looks so different in different lights and spaces.

JH: It's always a problem. At least when people see the real thing they get a lot more rather than less. It means your audience has to be quite persistent.

RF: I remember listening to two successful artists in New York talking about how some artists make work for reproduction, work that looks sexy and shiny when scaled down in reproduction. Of course, others don't. Sigmar Polke's 'metaphysical' paintings are different in different climates, they're hard to reproduce faithfully.

JH: Yes, he's a good example. I remember seeing works by him painted on both sides of perspex or glass so you got a completely different image from either side; they were moving all the time.

RF: This seems to go against the notion of commodity, yet your paintings are beautiful objects.

JH: Yes, that's another thing I've had to come to terms with - that it's all right to make beautiful work. Just the other day I came across a Gillian Ayres quote - Howard Hodgkin had said 'you mustn't make work that is just about beauty' and she had said 'why not?'

RF: Pleasure is important?

JH: Yes, certainly - they do need to be seductive.

RF: You've talked in interviews about your work's relationship to the visual world. Why does your work need to have a relationship to what you see?

JH: I think it goes back to these opposing forces that are within me and therefore within the work and that goes right back to the early student work. I've always had these two desires. One is the abstract, formal or geometric and the other is work from observation. I like work that's keenly observed and I wanted to marry those two interests for myself. I like looking at things. Often, if I'm stuck, I'll go out for a walk and whether I'm out locally or in the centre of London, something might strike me that's a key moment. The observation is often about colour, which generally comes from just seeing two colours.

RF: So you hold that as a memory and use them with your next painting?

JH: Yes, but it might not be the next one; it's like a memory bank of colours or I might write it down to remind myself. It's a moment of being outside oneself. My work is all about the relationship between one thing and another and the edge between them. I need to have some 'stuff' coming in, because one's imagination can be limited, it can become very circular. It could be something big like the sun against the sky or it could be minute, like the corner of a room. I like the fact you don't know where it's going to come from.

RF: Going back to that word decoration - at a symposium recently the artist Vanessa Jackson said that she didn't see decoration as an 'add on' but rather as something 'intrinsic' as in a Corinthian column. The term 'decorative' is often used pejoratively. Although in some ways your paintings are quite austere, there is this decorative aspect to them; the fluted edges, the brushmark patterns.

JH: There are many paradoxes in the work. The decoration is not just any old decoration, everything that goes round the ellipse is another ellipse. There is a sense of rules coming into play. For me the edging is more to do with giving a personality or character to the form to set them apart. On the one hand it is an embellishment of the edge (I prefer the term ornamentation to decoration) but it's there for an intrinsic purpose, it's not an afterthought. Everything in the painting is there simultaneously. From a purely pragmatic point of view I had to find a way of giving myself more edge to play with as I wanted to work with a certain amount of detail. These areas of positive and negative or presence and absence start to create strange discrepancies of scale. For example, in this painting [*Pine*, 1999] the blue looks as if it's in front but at the top it looks as if it's behind, so it gives it an extra dimension. I do lots of drawings and then I scale up versions of the drawings before going to canvas.

RF: The same size as the painting?

JH: Yes, it's like a cartoon. I've got familiar enough with that whole process to know that once it has gone to canvas, it's starting to do the things I like it to do. But sometimes the colours go very badly wrong.

RF: You have different layers of colours underneath?

JH: Yes, very rarely totally different because I start with the general idea and then I have to tune it up over the layers.

RF: Is it tempting to leave a little edge as a trace of these layers?

JH: There's a lot of temptation on the way but for me that would be decorative if I left those little edges that look lovely. I can't do that, however tempting that may be.

RF: The last thing I want to ask you about is the titling of your work. It seems to me that reading the title will start all kinds of associations. The titles seem provocative, they're a challenge to the viewer's interpretation and they can make you laugh.

JH: Rather like the colours being taken from the real world, I do a similar thing with titles, so I'm always writing down words that come to mind or come up on the radio. Titling is something I like to play with, even when there isn't a painting around. The titles, such as *Buff*, *Flip*, *Deuce* or *Come Come*, *Sky Dive*, *Holy Smoke*, might come from something I've heard or read or they might come from particular paintings, the manufacturer's name for the paint often seems appropriate. I like using onomatopoeia in

the titles - language is not only about sense. There are some titles that I'm really pleased with and others are more forgettable.

RF: But the playfulness in them is important?

JH: Yes, the titles are really important to the work. I haven't ever not titled. It's really interesting to me how words operate in relation to the visual. It's another pleasure.