

## Figures

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C L O S E

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Galerie Bessières presents British artist Jane Harris "Figures"

As her solo show opens in the historic Maison Levanneur in the French capital's Chatou district, Jane Harris discusses the influences shaping her creative panorama.

By Alexia Green, October 2020

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*"I do not see my work as purely abstract. As well as my concerns with the perception of colour and light, the formal, geometric configurations are a vehicle for a profound emotional response."* - Jane Harris



Jane Harris - Stroll (diptych) 2020, Oil on linen, 82x204cm

The Parisian commune of Chatou in the department of Yvelines has long been associated with the artistic avant-garde. Its famed Île des Impressionistes nestled between the banks of the Seine was the setting for Renoir's 1880 *Luncheon of the Boating Party* depicting the artist's favoured drinking hole at the Maison Fournaise. Gustave Caillebotte keenly painted landscapes from the water's edge and Guy de Maupassant described the sparkling river and the quiet and purer air in his 1881 short story *A Country Excursion*.

A few metres away from where Renoir's party ate and drank on that luminous summer's afternoon is the *Maison Levanneur*, an 18th century building brimming with art historical connections. Formerly a fisherman's house, then a hotel and restaurant, it nurtured Fauvism when the great French painters Vlaminck and Derain used it as their studio. For twenty years it hosted the CNEAI, one of France's national centres for contemporary art.

Today, the building is home to a contemporary art space founded by Norma and Daniel Bessières. The gallery they established in 2018 is an inviting proposition for artists, art enthusiasts and collectors, giving prominence to established international artists who may not have shown in France before, as well as a platform for promising young French talent.

The space is currently hosting a solo exhibition by British artist Jane Harris. The show which opened on 4th October presents over thirty large and midscale works in oil on canvas, wood and aluminium as well as recent watercolours on paper, a number of which have been produced by the artist during the recent lockdown.

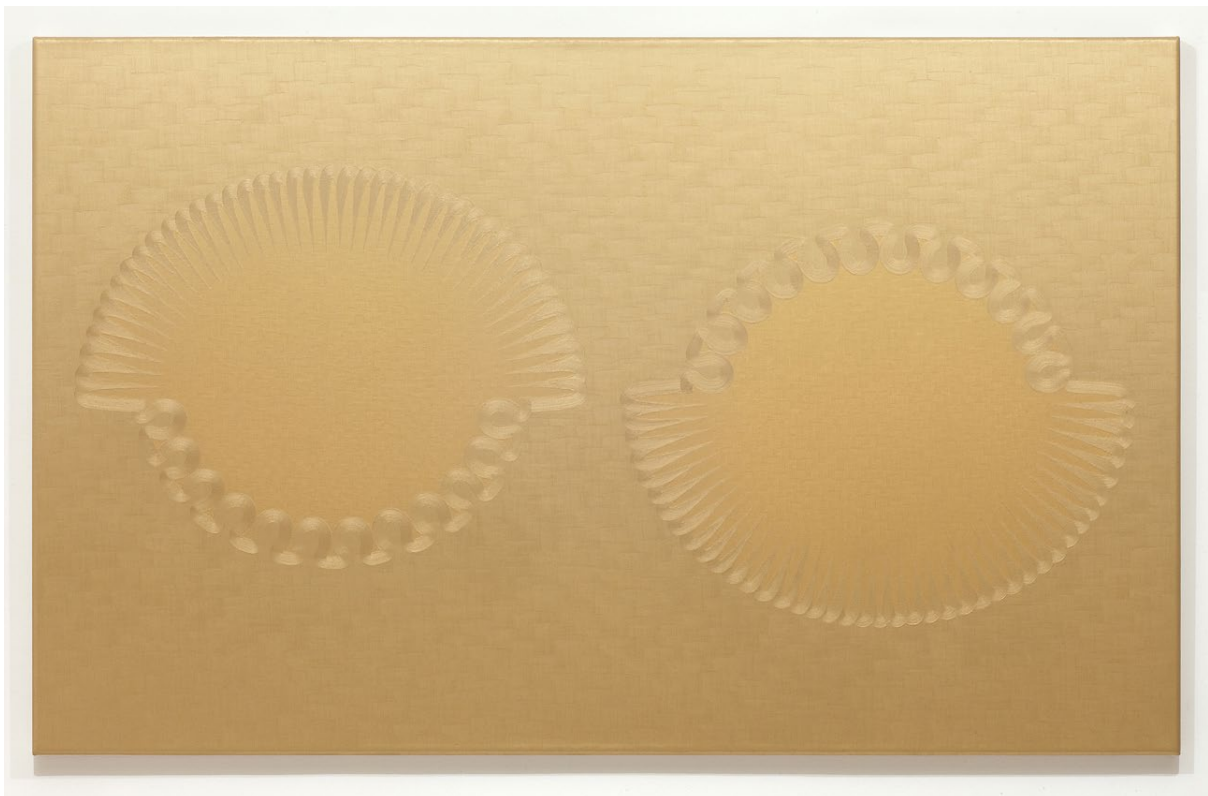
Originally from Dorset, England, Harris trained at the Slade School of Art and then Goldsmiths (she co-ran the college's MA programme for several years). The collaboration with Galerie Bessières, she says, came about by coincidence. Harris was painting from her London studio as well as teaching when she won a French government scholarship.

*"In 1985, I went to France to study French formal gardens. I rented a room in the Chatou district."*

Years later, hearing about the gallery's opening, Harris contacted the founders.

*"There was no contemporary art in the area at the time I was staying there. You had to go into central Paris" remembers Harris. "I wrote to the gallery to tell them about my link with the area because it was such a great thing to see something like this emerging."*

She met the Bessières and has enjoyed the partnership since, the serendipitous nature of the encounter being something that she clearly appreciates.



Jane Harris – Midas Magic, 2011, Oil on canvas, 127x203cm

For the past thirty years, Harris has explored the ellipse as a recurring motif in her work, painting its form into colour-rich compositions. Rather than acting as an obvious means of abstraction, it is, she says, a vehicle for creating a deeper, emotional impact.

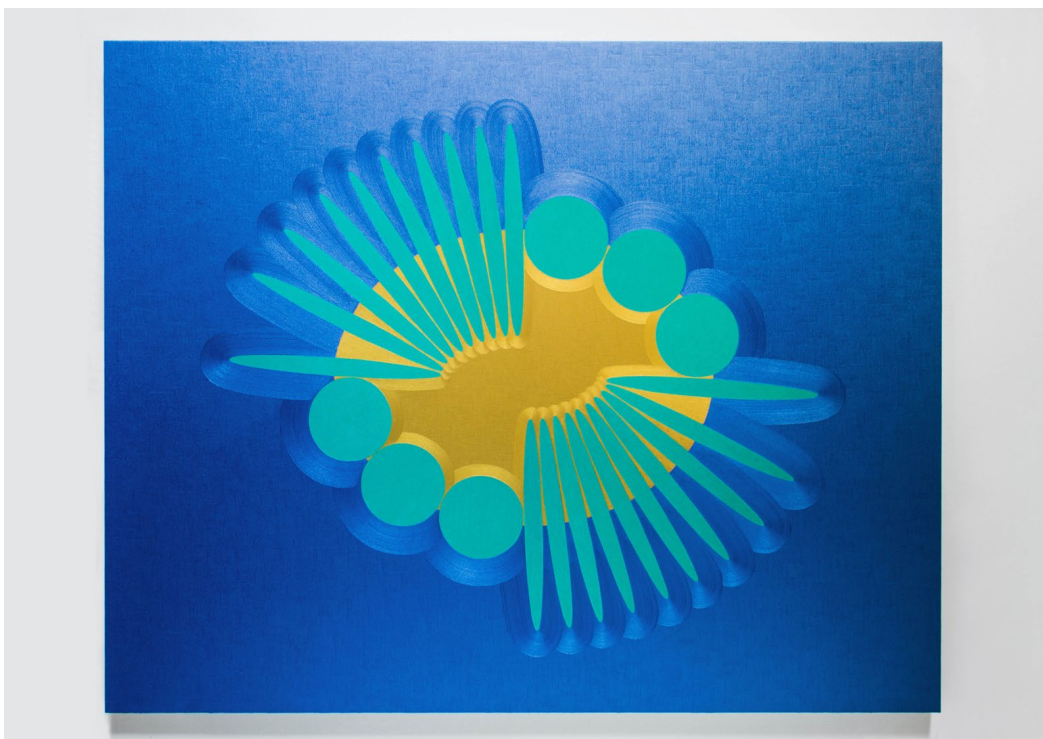
*"The ellipse is a geometric figure that does not have a single centre but two focal points. It therefore contains an infinite permutation potential. Also, it can be simultaneously understood as a flat shape on the surface of the painting or as a perspective circle, creating the illusion of depth in painting or drawing. It is a figure that I find very elegant, both restful and dynamic. Its use allowed me to play with the ambiguities of these two states, between surface and depth."*

*"My paintings have always dealt with the contradictory states of isolation and interdependence, with aspects of proximity and distance, presence and absence..."*

Harris refers repeatedly to this duality of states, evident in the work of the Sienese painters whom she cites as a significant influence.

*"Duccio is a master in creating spatial ambiguity, in the architectural structure he sets up where there is no single point of perspective. The organisational complexity he creates enables the viewer's imagination to run wilder."*

Referring to the Renaissance painter's Annunciation, one of three 14th century panels housed in London's National Gallery she explains how *"he plays with the juxtaposition of opposing states. Where the Archangel Gabriel looks up on the left, situated in an exterior space, the Virgin Mary looks down from the right from the interior of a building. The interrelationship arising from the position of their bodies creates a psychological tension. Uniting the two figures in the overall composition is the pink wall that Duccio constructs in the background, but a dividing invisible screen is ever-present."*



Jane Harris – Aloof, 2020, Oil on aluminium, 80x100cm

This notion of polarity is something that Harris examined during a trip to Japan in 1982 when she was awarded a travelling scholarship to study Japanese traditional gardens.

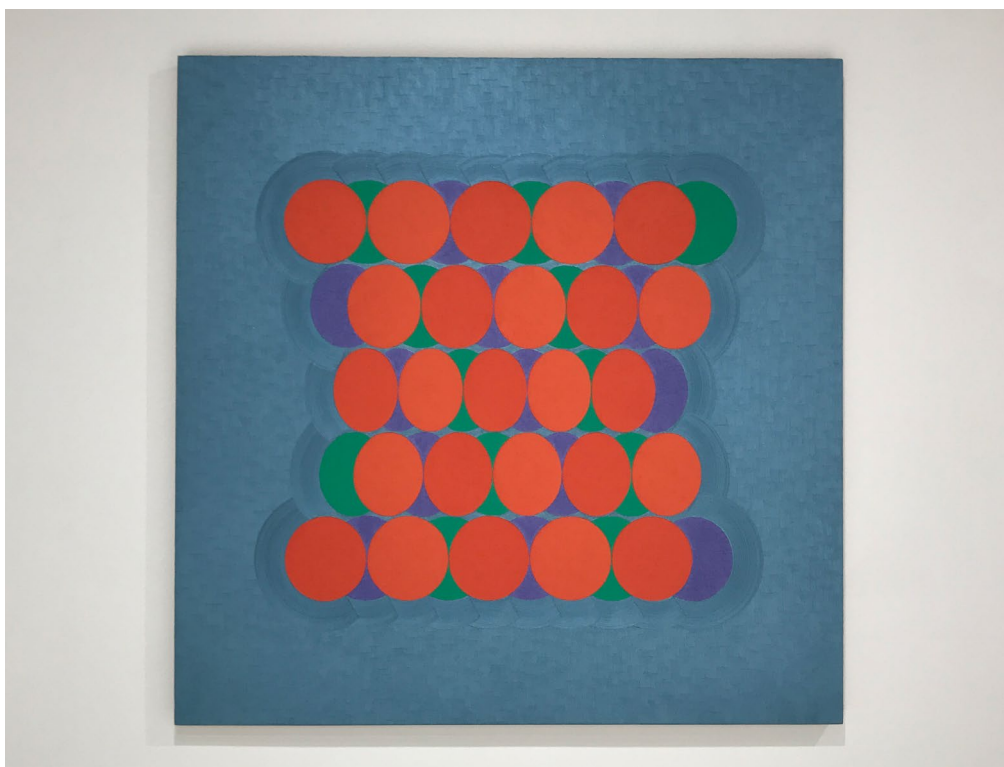
*"The Japanese principle of 'borrowed scenery' or 'shakkei' fascinates me. It is a way of incorporating something from a distant landscape or view using objects like a stone or a rock in the foreground to echo a mountain for example. It creates spatial change in a composition, and with that comes a sense of uncertainty. In the Ryoan-ji Zen Buddhist Temple in Kyoto is a dry rock garden in the Karesansui style designed with fifteen rocks in varying sizes each surrounded by a ring of moss. They appear like islands in a sea of gravel. The monks visit the garden as a daily ritual to rake lines into the ground. It's a meditative gesture where they only deviate from the straight lines as they trace the contour of each rock."*

What interested Harris were the recurrent elliptical patterns and lines created from the act of raking, and how perspective implies a complex cerebral phenomenon.

*"In these abstract zen gardens, I observed how the foreground shifted into the background, how light became shadow, coming and going, how positive became negative and vice versa."*

It is these shifting conditions that Harris seeks to achieve in her own paintings. Using a template initially, she designs considered arrangements incorporating the ellipse as the central component in varying dimensions.

Applying oil paint in deliberate, allover brushstrokes (often in only two or three colours) her accomplished handling of the pigment produces tactile surfaces which pulsate as light hits the canvas. Their lustre is accentuated by the use of metallic paint. Two large monochrome works on canvas, *Midas Magic* and *The Fugitives* glimmer in gold and silver, the effect is mesmerising.



Jane Harris – Evening Calls, 2020, Oil on wood, 80x80cm



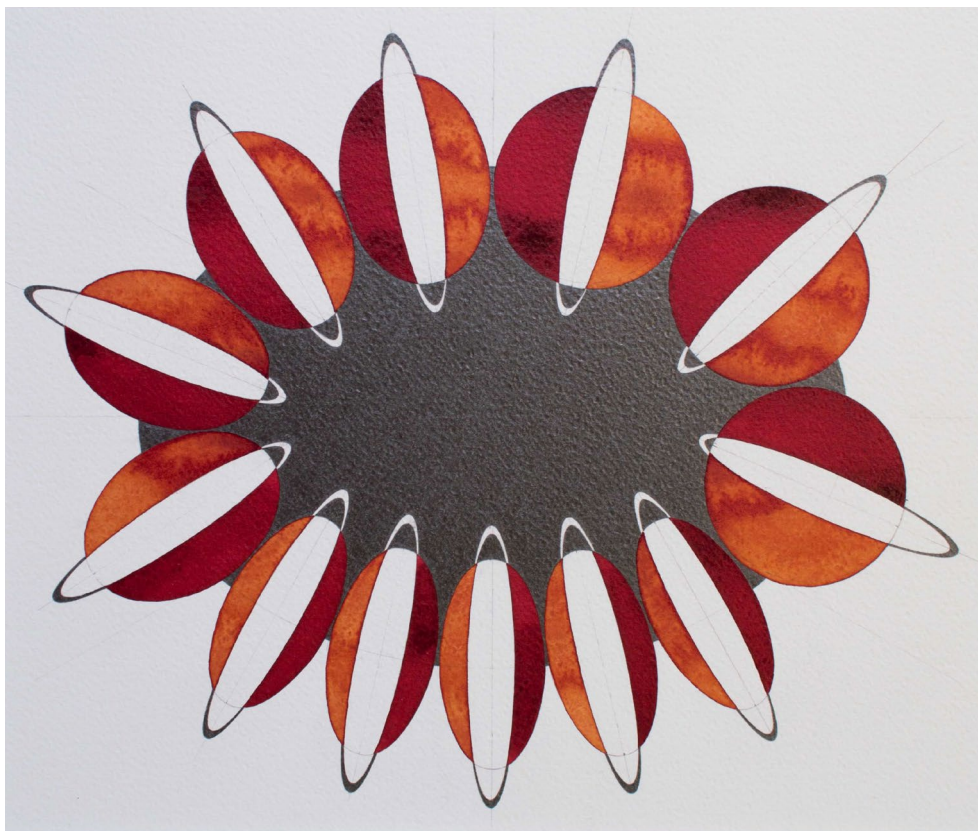
Since 2006, Harris has lived and worked in the south-west of France with her husband, the artist Jiri Kratochvil. Her work is held in collections across the world and she has exhibited extensively in galleries from Los Angeles to Auckland, and in institutions such as the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art on the US East Coast. A show at Jack Shainman Gallery in New York in 2001 and a 2006 solo show at the Aldrich Museum led to residencies at the Josef and Anni Albers Foundation. Harris was invited twice to the prestigious residential studios located two hours northeast of New York City in Bethany, Connecticut.

*"The setting was idyllic. I was living and working in a beautiful, architecturally designed studio in the woods" she recalls. "It was the perfect place to revisit some watercolour works-in-progress with a clear mind. During this time of concentrated focus I also developed works using a combination of watercolour and pencil that I have pursued ever since."*

An example of this from an ongoing series called *Smoke and Mirrors* is currently on view at London's Royal Academy of Arts Summer/Winter Exhibition (she was the winner of the RA's Sunny Dupree Family award for Best Woman Artist in 2012).

The Paris show includes several other watercolour and pencil drawings, some of which are studies for a flag which Harris was commissioned to design for three of France's regional public collections of contemporary art in La Nouvelle Aquitaine.

*"I felt that several of the studies I made for the FRAC project were convincing as works in their own right, and had connections with my wider body of work, hence my reason for wanting to exhibit them now."*



Jane Harris – Flag study no 14 for the three FRAC de La Nouvelle Aquitaine, 2016  
Watercolour and pencil on paper, 54x54cm

Harris continues to be heavily involved in the regional art scene. Her work has recently been part of an exhibition commemorating 10 years of contemporary tapestry at La Cité internationale de la tapisserie in Aubusson. The 2013 piece she produced in collaboration with Atelier Patrick Guillot is held in La Cité's permanent collection. A solo retrospective at the new FRAC Méca building in Bordeaux is planned for 2022.

### Colour interactions and movement between spatial realms

A new diptych entitled *Stroll* is presented for the first time at Galerie Bessières. Opposing elliptical arrangements rest against a sylvan shade of green where, at a glance, the designs mirror left and right. In reality Harris plays with the ellipse as a marker of perspective, designing larger forms on one side to contrast with smaller ones on the other. With the viewer's own interaction, the paintings echo a '*stroll through the woods*' where objects recede into space as the viewer moves through the environment.

*"An important feature of my oil paintings is the invitation to walk around the paintings and see them from different angles in order to see how the light affects the individual colours and their inter-relationship. There are two basic types of Japanese gardens - 'of sitting down type' and 'of walking around type'. These two opposing styles and physical requirements of the viewer are also very pertinent to what I aim to do in my paintings."*

*Playing Cool* is an energetic painting on wood in silver, deep blue and lustrous black where Harris combines three colours whose interactions toy with depth and dimensionality. It brings to mind Roy Lichtenstein's explosion works.

With other names like *Part Worlds*, *Worlds Apart*, *Orbiters*, *Evening Calls* and *Aloof* it's easy to glean a sense of what preoccupies Harris.

*"I often go for evening walks and observe the sunset, the sky, and think about how we are all spinning through the universe. I aim to convey a sense of how we are all alone somehow, in a similar way that the rocks in the Japanese zen gardens are individual objects connected only by the raked lines."*

To experience Harris's paintings is to observe the play of light on colour, where its reflections and vibrations dance on tactile surfaces. As Harris builds up layers of paint with each brushstroke, both straight and short or long and sweeping, her restrained landscapes take us on a journey, the destination of which remains tantalizingly ambiguous.