

Artificial Life Forms

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C L O S E

Can there be a rococo minimalism? If so, it can possibly be found in the work of Jane Harris, and perhaps only there—in any case it's not easy to think of any other candidates.

In one sense, Harris's paintings and drawings are distinctly untimely. They have nothing to do, for instance, with the social, political, or diaristic content typical of so much of the art of recent years, whatever its medium. With regard to painting in particular, her work stands apart from the trend toward a renewed predominance of image-based work over nonrepresentation, and of a painterly and exuberant technique over hard-edged and classically restrained modes. Harris recalls instead the more reductive tendencies of the art of the '60s by limiting her palette to just two or occasionally three colors in each painting, by her use of clearly defined and self-contained forms disposed according to a logical structure, and by her workmanlike, undemonstrative approach to paint application.

But in a possibly less obvious way, Harris's work is still very much of its time, which is characterized, as I have written elsewhere, by a propensity for Mannerist variations on the art of the past. Given the wide range of sources that can be involved, the appearance of such art can take widely varying, even seemingly incompatible forms—from Gillian Carnegie's reclamation of outmoded genres of painting such as still life and landscape, to Daria Martin's films incorporating tableaux vivants that recall the poses found in photographs of modernist dance classics like Martha Graham, to Gary Webb's sculptural remix of Anthony Caro with the aesthetic of the contemporary shopping mall—but the principle of allusion and variation remains constant. This is not, as some might believe, an art that disdains originality, but rather one in which originality is conveyed by way of comparison with a known "control"—to borrow a term from the science lab.

Thus, one can imagine a painter of the '60s—a contemporary of Ellsworth Kelly, let's say—using a similar imagery based on ellipses and circles—but of course, in the case of this hypothetical older artist, they would be just that, ellipses and circles, and nothing but. Whereas, while Harris's imagery is clearly, as I said, based on those regular curvilinear forms, you will not actually find a circle or an ellipse in any of her paintings or drawings, at least not in its pure form—no more than you will find, say, Watteau's Gilles naked, without his famous white outfit. Harris's are, one might say, frilled ellipses and scalloped circles, shapes that are never plain and simple but always decked out in some way: frilled, fluted, toothed, notched, serrated, knurled, ruffled, dimpled, ciliated, ornamented. And those additions or ornaments do not merely decorate the underlying shapes—they have become one with them, and in doing so, transformed them.

For all its extreme visual concision, then, Harris's work synthesizes two seemingly contradictory artistic impulses—toward severity and simplicity, and toward multiplicity and ornateness. And as any good dialectician will tell you, a true synthesis does more than merely contain two antithetical aspects in uneasy tension with each other—it creates something new, some third character that subsumes the others in an unexpected way. In this case, I am tempted to call the result of the synthesis organic, as long as my use of the word doesn't lead to a fundamental misunderstanding: Harris's work is not organic in the way that, say, a flower is (and though at times the forms she uses may recall floral

forms, her paintings are hardly an abstract version of Georgia O'Keeffe); but more in the sense that certain kinds of electronic music—or certain kinds of sound within a piece of electronic music—are described by its devotees as organic. This is, strictly speaking, a synthetic organic.

Furthermore, Harris's special synthesis gives her work its typically understated character. This is something that is absolutely foreign to her minimalist forebears—by its very nature, a form in an Ellsworth Kelly painting, in its very simplicity, can neither be overstated nor unstated, but simply stated—and uncommon to any art based primarily on pattern or ornament, where the tendency is always toward expansiveness and abundance (as for instance, in the work of the American “pattern and decoration” artists of the '70s, such as Robert Kushner or Miriam Schapiro). But it turns out that the two tendencies, when combined, act to restrain each other. The real action in one of Harris's paintings is not stated, but rather, hinted at—I am tempted to say, winked at. It is a sort of subtle vibration that subsides when you try to look at it too directly but that you can always catch out of the corner of your eye as you start to look away. It plays hide and seek with you. One has, therefore, the impression of something alert and sensitive yet reticent about them. The paintings are immediate in their appeal to the eye, elusive in their dependence on fugitive perceptual effects, and unhurried about revealing their secrets.

What? Am I personifying, anthropomorphizing the paintings? Well, why not? It seems to me the paintings demand it (and there I go again). Consider Harris's insistence on the oval. An oval, vertically oriented, is the basic schema for a head—as anyone knows who's ever glanced into one of those books on “how to draw.” And the same oval, vertically oriented, is an eye. Or a mouth. And Harris ornamented ovals are more eyelike or mouthlike than any simple oval could be—not because of any specific resemblance (for these really are abstract paintings) but because they imply motion: They open and close. They are animated. It may not be absolutely impossible for a painter to get around the fact that these simple geometrical forms entered art as elementary representational schemata, but it would not be easy, and nothing in Harris's paintings suggests that she is concerned to do so. It used to be said of certain portraits that their eyes followed you across a room. More than that, I could swear that some of Harris's have blinked at me.

I've been speaking, mostly, about paintings. But I should say a word about Harris's drawings, which are more than a sideline. The forms in them are quite similar to those in the paintings; everything I've said so far applies to the artist's work in both media. But their smaller scale and lack of color give the drawings a distinct sense of concentration. Harris's paintings always have a certain lightness to them, a floating quality, which resides more in her colors, often metallic, than in the forms. The drawings are punchier—they come at you with more force. Yet as you look at them they become softer; the velvety sheen of the pencil (whose somewhat reflective quality has something in common with that of the metallic pigments Harris favors) is like a cloud that's settled into the grain of the paper. Each in their own way, Harris's drawings and paintings both share the paradox that, while they insistently call attention to their material facticity on the surface, their animation in the eye gives them life in the imagination.