

Jane Harris

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C L O S E

*"We have taken such a very serpentine course ; and the wood itself must be half a mile long in a straight line, for we have never seen the end of it yet, since we left the first great path."*

(Mary Crawford dans Jane Austen, Mansfield Park, 1814)

Encountering the paintings of Jane Harris can be compared to viewing a landscape. The sinuous painted ellipses echo the meanderings of pathways; the reflections, changing according to the brushmarks and metallic pigments, invoke the scintillation of light on water or the continually evolving cloud formations in the sky. The slow journey of one's eyes over the surface of the canvas, the movement of one's body through the exhibition space, and the variations of light, both natural and artificial, constantly transform how the work appears. This mental and physical experience also recalls the cerebral and emotional projections within grand narratives of journeys. In the novels of Jane Austen, a primary influence of this English artist, there is a close connection between the movements of the body within the landscape and the fluctuations of the mind, where each long journey crystallises a transformation of both the physical and mental state of the characters, marking a crucial stage in the narration.

Was it the desire to reinterpret the intensity of this experience or the abundance of the grand 'English garden'(1) that led Jane Harris to choose to work with ideas relating to the garden very early in her career? After completing her studies at the Slade School of Art in London, from which she graduated with a Higher Diploma in Fine Art in 1981, the young artist obtained a travelling grant to study the gardens of Japan in 1982, followed by a scholarship from 1985 to 1986 to study French classical gardens. However the England she grew up in(2) was much more pop than romantic, defined by the Beatles, Richard Hamilton and David Hockney. At the same time the 'greats' of Modern British art, such as Ben Nicholson, Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth, were still prominent figures. These two generations provide a dual aesthetic influence, one of formal reduction operating between geometric and biomorphic forms, and another, more contemporary, with a fondness for quirky humour and an idiosyncratic use of colour.

After her stay in Japan, Jane Harris painted a series of watercolour, acrylic and oil landscapes. Shakkei (study 1) and Shakkei (study 2) of 1983 reference the concept of borrowed scenery (shakkei) where the effective size of a garden is enlarged by concealing its borders and by the construction of view points and counterpoints, including the incorporation of elements of the surrounding landscape such as a mountain range. As Lucile Encrevé writes, Jane Harris is above all sensitive to the double motif(3) created by the echoing of forms found in distant landscapes within the designs of the gardens(4) . Flattening the picture plane, the artist paints these duplicated principal motifs using delicate touches of colour in parallel lines corresponding to the raked sand or gravel. The juxtaposition of the brushmarks resonates the patient forming and maintenance of a Japanese garden, creating an evident link between the work of the painter and the gardener. East West Garden, a transitional work painted the following year, shows a move towards representing the garden through layout and volume, the former associated with Japanese gardens and the second more often with French style formal gardens(5) . Jane Harris painted several more landscapes in 1987, notably Canal and Chouloire(6) , reminiscent of the landscapes of Sonia Delaunay(7) and Paul Klee. These works draw to a close a first stage, which one can almost describe as "pre" Jane Harris such that it is marked by a certain logic of representation that the artist has

chosen to set aside – without totally renouncing the importance of this in her present work(8) .

In 1989, in her 30s, Jane Harris decided to return to her studies, obtaining a Master of Arts in 1991 at Goldsmiths College in London. In 1990, desirous to find a new, more abstract style, she began researching edges, limits, frontiers, and the idea of within and without, figure and ground, ornamental pattern and geometry and the reflections of light on brushstrokes(9) . She painted in oil a radically new series of works, soberly entitled Painting n° 1, Painting n° 2,...Each painting is a variation on the same method of construction: a central motif in monochrome, with scrolling borders, on a background of another colour. The delicately crafted brushmarks are visible, oriented to capture light at different angles. A first impression of axial symmetry is an illusion; the irregularity and complexity of the curved outlines recall instead the mathematical motifs of fractals, and the scholarly play of asymmetry in ornamental compositions such as those found in Roccoco or Art Nouveau. Some of the motifs are almost rectangular, others more elliptical; these differences gradually disappearing in the works that follow.

From this time the ellipse became the dominant form in the artist's work. The word 'ellipse' has a double sense; firstly, that of a mathematical form corresponding to the intersection of a plane with a cone. There is at the same time, in this journey between a volume and a plane, a reminder of reality and its representation in two dimensions. Similarly the choice of an ellipse points towards Harris' interest in the genre of still life within the history of art, such as the representation of round platters in perspective in 17th century Dutch still lives, the simplified geometry of Cezanne's apples and, more recently, the irregular ellipses of Ellsworth Kelly. Minimal, abstract and very large, Kelly draws his shapes from studies of nature: refined silhouettes of leaves, flowers and apples. Etymologically, an ellipse is also representative of an absence, an imperfection, a deficiency – a type of failing. Jane Harris reclaims the freedom that is lost when forms are too regular, too severe, too regimented, from a minimalism that is too orthodox. She admits to being attracted to things that don't quite work, are not wholly predetermined and surprising – preferring in this way, circuitous routes and complex asymmetries.

In the following years, Jane Harris ceaselessly continued to elaborate multiple variations around a system of construction, sometimes in the minutest detail. This work, slow and delicate, recalls the almost monastic work of Aurelie Nemours, painting her monochromes of many small brushstrokes, juxtaposed like the wings of a butterfly. But the pictorial asceticism to which Jane Harris aspires is in reality closer to that of Francisco de Zurbaran or of Giorgio Morandi. Refusing to be labelled as 'abstract', this English artist has developed a range of forms which she considers to be at the same time far from and close to reality. The simplified volumes and magnifications of Zurbaran, the primarily physical objects of Morandi (one also thinks of Cezanne's apples), recall how much, for these artists, subjects and the real are first and foremost pretexts for painting. Jane Harris shares with them a similar appetite, rigorous and playful, for reducing colour to basic combinations, subtle and harmonious, and with attention to light. Ten years later, at the beginning of the 21st century, Jane Harris introduced a new direction in her paintings in the form of metallic pigments(10) , intensifying the luminous reflectivity of the works(11) .

At the same time it is also important to remember the importance of humour in Jane Harris' work, revealed in the titles. For example in the work Holy Smoke (2005), two horizontal white ellipses with precise edges are placed on a gold coloured ground. "Holy smoke!", referencing the familiar expression of surprise; it is also the title of a 1998 film by Jane Campion, where the heroine, a young woman (whom one wrongly believes to be an innocent victim), played by Kate Winslet, is influenced by a religious sect. Translated as "sacred smoke" or "burning incense", Holy Smoke could also be

read as (an almost comedic) repetition of a smoke signal or the elaborate smoke rings of a peace pipe.

If these interpretations appear at odds with the sophistication of the works and their technical perfection, they correspond with the wit of the artist. They demonstrate the artist's appreciation of beautiful things, but also the acknowledgement that such intense fascination (almost enchantment) carries with it a certain absurdity of being too openly seductive. Through her works, Jane Harris attempts to evoke these two categorisations at the same time, inviting us to take part in what she terms a mental and physical "flip", a type of coming and going into and out of the works, in the contemplation of their extraordinary beauty, and in the mental construction of their escapism. Experiencing the paintings in real life is a necessity, prompting the process of observing the shifts of scale that occur, by viewing from far and near, on the fabric of the canvas. The film *Jane Harris. Surface to Edge; Painting Light* produced by Pollen<sup>(12)</sup> and co produced by Nino Laisné and Elisabeth Schneider, transposes this experience. Jane Harris' clear voice, her words carefully chosen, accompanies film footage of the precise gestures of the artist in her studio, with still images of the works (seen in entirety and also in close up to show the reflective textures). Another story is narrated to us, which invites our eyes and feelings to follow a parallel path, similarly bathed with light.

Camille de Singly, 4th August 2014 On behalf of Pollen

1. Which also became models for *Mansfield Park* by Jane Austen
2. She was born in the county of Dorset in the UK in 1956
3. A work completed the previous year, *Japan Door Motif* already revealed an interest in motifs and their use in abstract painting.
4. Lucille Encrevé, "The Surface of a Spring?? (or the paintings of Jane Harris)", *Documents d'artiste Aquitaine*, 2013 (<http://www.dda-aquitane.org>).
5. Surprising and contrary to forms of representation privileging a traditional plan view as favoured in the gardens of Le Nôtre and his followers
6. A form of play on words where "chou" and "Loire" pay homage to the cottage gardens of the Château de Villandry.
7. For example the commission for a huge mural painting for the Palais des Chemins de Fer at the World Exhibition in Paris in 1937
8. Works completed before 1990 are not shown on her website (<http://www.janeharris.net/>), but the artist has given permission for them to appear on the records of "Documents d'Artistes Aquitaine".
9. "I would say it was about finding ways to distil all the various aspects of my interest in borders, edges and boundaries; ornamentation and design of formal gardens; plan and elevation; geometry; figure and ground; inside and outside; plus an increasing desire to find a personal and specific way to use brushmarks to make surfaces that change in relation to light." (Jane Harris, mail to the author on 30th June 2014).
10. See Fandango 2001
11. This use of pigments incorporating iron and aluminium oxides and titanium dioxide coated mica, creates a liaison between decorative and fine art. Gold or silver mouldings found in Rocaille work, the reflective metal wallpapers of Hector Guimard, the vases of Emile Gallé augmented with metallic foils. But the artist above all claims herself to be influenced by the Aluminium Paintings of Frank Stella, not least by the minimalism and the geometry of his constructions which have led her to a similar level of abstraction.