

Jane Harris

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of Space

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C L O S E

In the middle of bustling modern Kyoto, the *Ryoan-ji*, Zen Buddhist Temple is an oasis of calm and peace. At its heart is the Karesansui, or dry rock garden, which has provided a space for meditation since the late fifteenth century. The *Ryoan-ji* was the first purely abstract Zen garden in Japan, consisting of nothing more than fifteen differently sized rocks sitting on small patches of moss, surrounded by white gravel. Every day since its construction monks have carefully raked the gravel into long, disciplined lines, only deviating from their straight path when they come to the edge of a patch of moss. At that point they carefully deviate from their path to create a series of concentric ellipses that ripple back out into the empty space as if the rock is a pebble that has been thrown into a pond or an island surrounded by a ring of breaking surf.

In 1982 Jane Harris spent two months in Japan studying these Zen gardens, an experience which has shaped many of her ongoing concerns. When we look at the exquisitely raked sand in these gardens we are not seeing mere patterns, but the trace of a body moving through space, interacting with that space and responding to the objects it contains. We are contemplating time and the intense physical discipline needed to drag a rake across gravel, creating perfectly straight lines whose furrows suggest the invisible movement of the space around us: the flow of air and the passage of light and sound. Like the rocks, we are islands in an atomic ocean, standing amongst the particle waves in a sea of matter, surrounded by concentric ripples echoing back out into space.

In the *Rhian-ji* garden the rocks are separated from the gravel by a ring of moss, whereas Harris wants her paintings to show no division between solid matter and empty space. Inspired by the way that Vincent Van Gogh's dynamic brushstrokes brought unity to his picture surface and ignored traditional boundaries between form and space, Harris also uses hundreds of precise, visible brush strokes to bring a sense of unity across the different elements of her paintings.

Using the bristles of her brush, Harris painstakingly rakes particles of pigment, leaving marks that not only help to build the painting's space but contribute to its sense of material presence. These precisely controlled movements are more than muscle memories, they demand physical awareness in their application. Each mark is an act of heightened concentration, a moment of touch recording an instant in time, a distinct, individual entity that will build into the whole.

As one mark leads to the next, which leads to the next, which leads to the next, they send an almost imperceptible ripple of visual movement across the surface. In the centre, the brush strokes become more expansive, sweeping in loops and luscious curves around the edges of her forms, providing them with shadows and subtle highlights, which add to their sense of figurative presence. From a distance the individual marks disappear, and the surface seems flat and anonymous; up close, the faint trace of ridge and furrow texture where the brush has been drawn across it introduces moments of real three-dimensional depth.

Harris is constantly exploring the border between perception and reality, playing with questions of what is surface and depth, solid and intangible, positive and negative. She feints and teases, seeking the unexpected so she can play games with our mind. The physicality of a white watercolour paper turns into an empty space and then becomes a solid white form. The play of light across their surface transforms what appear to be shadows into highlights and highlights into shadows.

The ellipses at the centre of her paintings seem to twist and turn, push and squeeze, interrupt and obscure. They rock and spin, hover and merge: green over grey over turquoise over blue over red over white. Sometimes it seems as if we're seeing them head on, sometimes at an angle; they come towards us and they fall away. They crowd around deep pools of color as if thirsty for light, transformed into exotic blossoms that hover in space. And yet when we look at them closely the illusions fall away, as the brush-marks pull us back to the surface and their tangible substance. At that point there is no depth or distance, just these marks and the moment of movement they contain.

We find dualities of space throughout Harris's paintings, reflecting her interest in how different types of space can co-exist. In the National Gallery, London there is a small panel of the Annunciation by Duccio which has always intrigued her. Gabriel stands in the open reaching out to Mary who stands recoiling in interior space. They are different: one inside, one outside, their gestures echoing, yet as he reaches forward she leans back; he looks up, she looks down. But they are also intimately connected by the pink wall that runs behind them and by the air that lies as a bridge between them, uniting them in the intense emotional drama of the moment.

Harris sees a duality of space whenever she looks out of her studio window in France and gazes at the clouds: clouds she can pass through, floating in a sky she can travel through; two gaseous realms that are co-existent and essentially the same and yet apparently different. The same duality can be found in her oil paintings, where spaces opened up by the interaction of color exist alongside those created by the movement of her brush, and where straight brushmarks encounter the force of long curving ones, repelling and dividing, delineating different spaces yet essentially the same. Likewise, in her watercolors, we find space suggested by the emptiness of paper opening up next to that revealed through limpid pools of paint.

Harris grew up by the sea in Swanage, Dorset on the south coast of England. Standing in the sea as a child she found herself in an alien yet familiar environment. When she looked down into the water, it was like walking in the gloaming at dusk, demanding the heightened awareness of peripheral vision as light filtered through water filtered through salt filtered through sand danced upon her retina, transforming the spaces above and below the waves into a unity of light-filled darting substance. Then when she swam, as her hands, arms, legs and feet cut through the water, she could feel its substance on her skin. Now her arms move in straight lines and curves across a prepared panel. As she feels space unfold beneath her brush she reveals its substance through a mark made in time and paint.