

Joni Spigler in conversation with Jane Harris
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C L O S E



JONI SPIGLER IN CONVERSA- TION WITH JANE HARRIS

What's so fantastic about painting is that something – whether it is a form or a mark or an area in a painting – can do more than one thing at once. It can be that brush mark straight on the canvas that you see as a brush mark, but it can also be a depiction. It can be a quality of light. It has that flexibility or that variability that I think is just wonderful, and I'm still in love with the way painting can do that.

Joni Spigler: You've been working with the form of the ellipse for what, twenty-five years now?

Jane Harris: Oh yes, more like thirty. Well, twenty-seven or twenty-eight...

JS: In something I read you mention that the key figures for you are painters like Cézanne, Seurat, Morandi, and Piero della Francesca. When I read that it suddenly became very clear to me, the frame that you put your work in, in terms of maybe geometry... because I think elsewhere you explained about the ellipse that it's this fascinating shape or form, because – at one and the same time – it's just this oval shape on the surface, in and of itself, but it can also be read as a circle in perspective...

JH: ...In perspective. Exactly. It's

playing, it's doing those two things simultaneously. It flips between being one thing and another, and for me that's like a perfect form – an idealised form – and I suppose that's what's so fantastic about painting; it's that something – whether it is a form or a mark or an area in a painting – can do more than one thing at once. It can be that brush mark straight on the canvas that you see as a brush mark, but it can also be a depiction. It can be a quality of light. It has that flexibility or that variability that I think is just wonderful, and I'm still in love with the way painting can do that.

JS: There's this Cézanne painting, and I can't quite remember what it's called but it has Mont Sainte-Victoire in the background, and also the aqueduct...

JH: Yes, yes, I know it.

JS: And there's a tree kind of in the foreground, and there's this foliage near the aqueduct in the background, and then there's just this moment in the painting where a green foliage-y shape can either belong to the tree in the foreground, as a branch, or to this other greenery in the far distance...

JH: Yes, it is exactly that...

JS: Yeah, it flips back and forth... There's this art historian, I think Richard Shiff, who calls what is happening here 'catachresis' which is a kind of metaphor... I think it is the idea that a thing can take on an extra meaning, or stand in for things that we don't have words for... but he applies it to these passages in pictures where a mark can invoke two things at once. I kind of feel like the bush / tree branch in the Cézanne, doing what it's doing, is doing the same thing forms are doing in your paintings... coming forward as these fantastic surface manifestations, or picture plane things, but then they do have the receding, retreating aspects.

JH: I come back to Cézanne so much because of exactly that... I'm thinking of another picture that he did of Mont Sainte-Victoire, because he did so many

of them, but there's another that I'm familiar with where he's got the... I don't know whether it's the same blue up in the sky as down in a part of the foreground, but they definitely look as if they are the same, and also they are the same size of mark, in the sky and the foreground. And again that is incredibly relevant to what I'm doing. I think that something that I'm trying to do in my work is to have that element that you're not quite sure where things are in space – or they do all these things simultaneously, like they're on the surface, they're behind the surface, and then they come out towards you, but they don't do that in an extreme way, not that optical thing of something jumping out at you and leaving an after-image. Forms can appear to come towards you, but stay back at the same time. And without going into any kind of psychoanalytical reading, I am aware of this, and it was something said to me a long time ago – maybe fifteen, twenty years ago – another artist looked at my work and they said 'the thing about your works for me Jane, is that they're reaching out to you, but at the same time, pulling back from you'. I think that happens in all of my work. There's that feeling of wanting to grab your attention, inviting you to come closer, but at the same time, not wanting you to get too close. That does sound a bit too psychoanalytical! [laughter] I haven't set out to make paintings like that, but that's what seems to happen because of the way that I'm using the forms and the paint and the edging and because they're generally quite frontal.

JS: Oh the edging... How long have you been following the contour?

JH: From the beginning.

JS: It makes me think of your experience with the Japanese gardens, I imagine the raking around the stones...

JH: That's right, and also, as I see with those raked gardens, there is the element of human endeavour, and also human touch and sensitivity. They're very much about how we can still do things with the

human hand and body as opposed to mechanically, or digitally, or virtually. So it's about how extreme and rigorous you can be in one way, while at the same time knowing that it's never going to be as perfect as you might want it to be.

JS: But if they ever were perfect, the fascination would collapse.

JH: Yes, I think so.

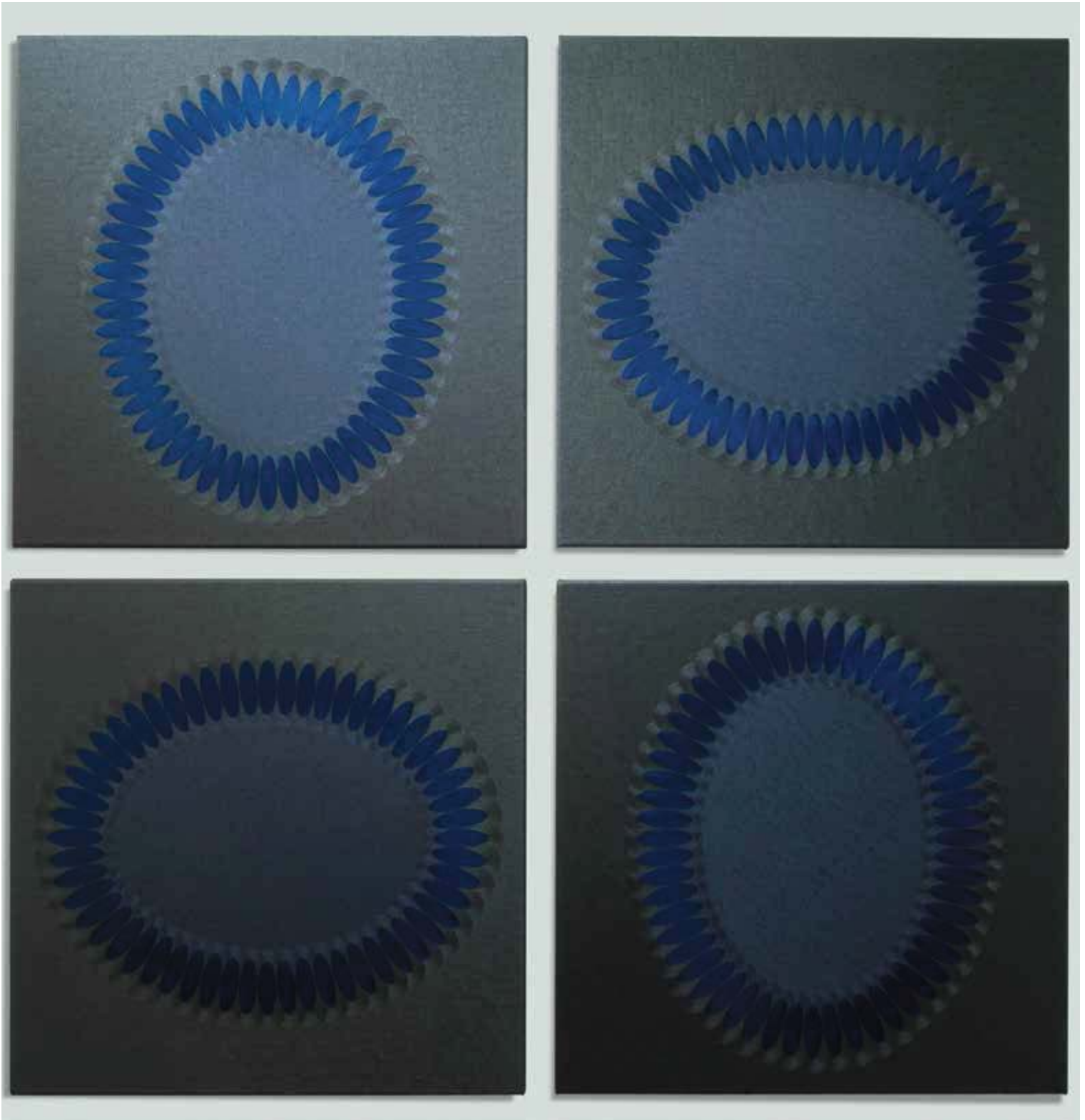
JS: It's because at some level, as a viewer faced with something so technically precise, you are at an unconscious level looking for the accident or the mistake, just because a part of your mind is aware of the human touch, and you end up amazed at how much territory you can cover never seeing any glitch.

JH: That I see in the raked gardens as well, just in the fact that every day, a human being is raking that sand. But I really wouldn't want at all to go with the idea – which some people try to put on my process – that I have to get into some sort of Zen condition to do it.

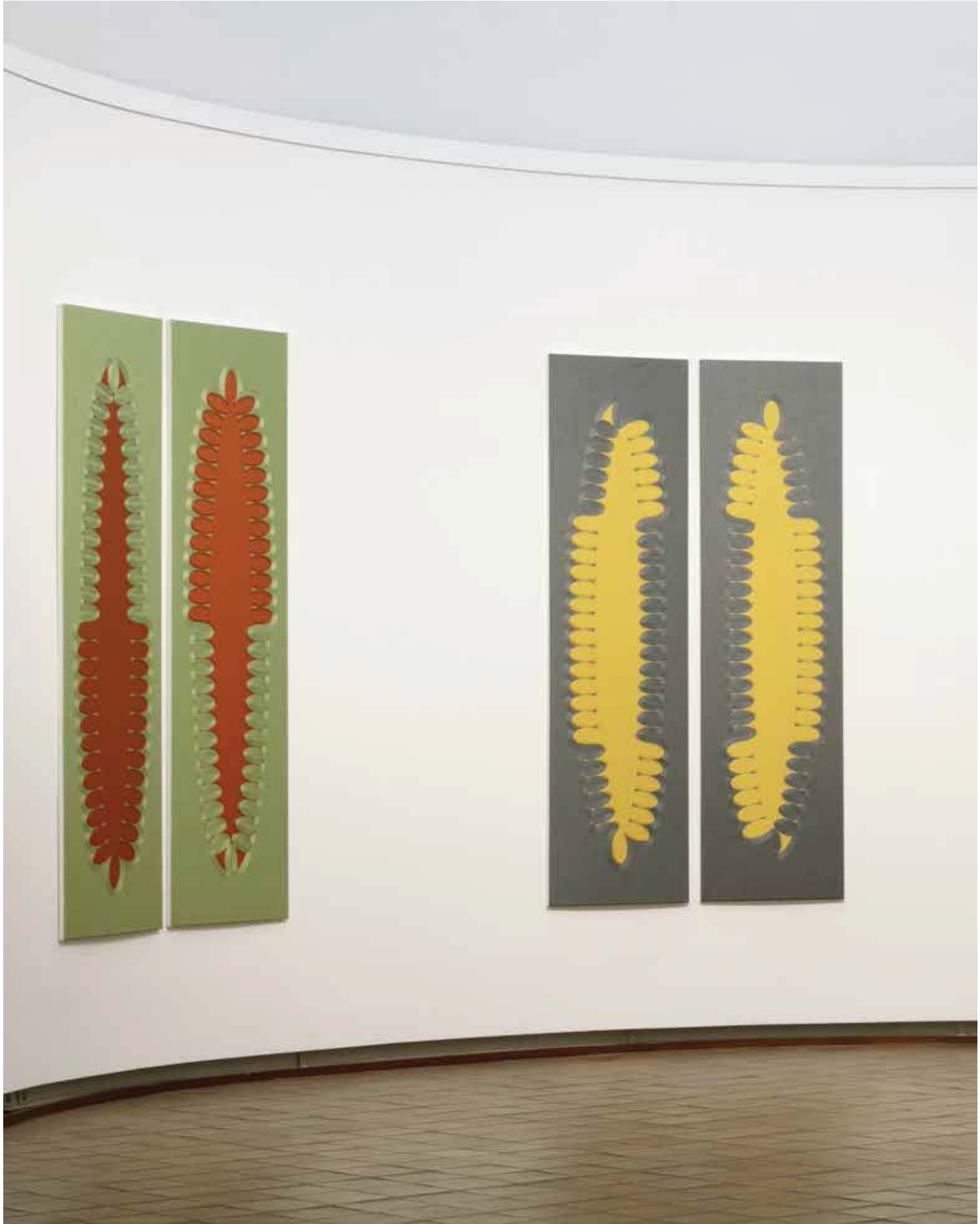
JS: Something else that I wanted to ask about is how you decide which colours to use. I think you said that your choices can come from anywhere: looking out your window; seeing two books together on a shelf; seeing your trousers draped on a chair...

JH: With colour, I don't try to have a systematic approach at all. For me, colour is the thing that is out there in the world and the thing that we... we just are surrounded by it. So my work is sort of like a distilled form of some sort of abstraction. I want to emphasize that actually – I keep going back to being a human being. I want there to be an aspect of the work that is very much there in the world... it's about what I've observed. Because I had a very classical training – of observational drawing – and for me, that's the element that colour adds to the work. There's an observational element there. I'm aware that the colours are part of some *thing*, whether it be a leaf or a sky or a telephone or whatever it be, but that's

C L O S E



Velvet in Orbit (quadrptych)
2014
Oil on canvas
120 x 120 cm



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Previous page:
Familials: Devil's Advocate; Consigliere; Confidante; Sidekick
 2014
 Oil on canvas
 Group: 260 cm x 560 cm

Restless Dreaming
 2017
 Oil on wood
 40 x 40 cm

slightly peripheral to me in a way. I'm much more observant of how the colour of one thing might interact with another.

JS: In painting, or in anything where you use colour, there is a theory about, you know, cool colours recede and warm colours come at you, and that's not always the case. But in your paintings, one would almost think 'Oh! There's some really canny planning of the colour here', because it cues this activation...

JH: I'm not out there every moment of the day making little colour sketches of what I see [laughs] so it's more about memory of colour, and then when I put those two colours I have responded to together, they might not really work in the scheme of the painting. I'm always tuning up or tuning down paint colours as I put them on... as I put the layers on.

So it's not fixed in that way. I don't just take colours from what I see and think, 'That's going to be a painting'. It's just they have been the trigger I suppose. Been the starting point. But it's just to emphasise that they originate from colours I've seen as opposed to colours I've thought up.

JS: I think your colour combinations are just really... unique.

JH: Well thank you for saying that! [laughs] It's funny you should say that because I was in an exhibition in Paris earlier this year, and the guy who invited me to be in the exhibition, who's a painter, when we were talking to other people he said, 'Well, the thing about Jane's colours is that they're really odd'...

JS: Yes! [laughs]

JH: '...they're really unexpected', and that's odd for me to hear because for me, obviously, those are the colours I use! [laughter] And then somebody came to the studio a few weeks ago and she said exactly the same thing, she said, 'you use such odd, idiosyncratic colours!'

JS: They really are odd. I look at pictures all day every day and... for instance I'm looking at your painting *Quartet* (2011)... I can't really think of anything else with these colours... some really weird combinations, which just makes them work. It's like the colour combinations become yet another puzzle for the viewer to solve... the enigmas pile up: 'How did these colours come to be on this canvas together?' 'Are the forms on the surface or in perspectival space?' 'How does a human being make this thing that displays such virtuoso paint handling?'... And as you say about the ellipse – one's mind is always trying to solve the problem of 'is this a two-dimensional thing? Or are we seeing a form in perspective?' So it's almost as if you're mapping layer upon layer of different conundrums or little traps onto each other.

JH: I would say that that is what I do,



Shadow Play(side)
2009
Oil on canvas
64 x 84 cm



Jane Harris's Studio at
Twilight
2017

Paul Cézanne
Mont Sainte-Victoire and the Viaduct
of the Arc River Valley
1882–1885
Oil on canvas
65 x 82 cm
The Metropolitan Museum of Art



actually, but then in the end I suppose I want the paintings to have a distilled quality – all those things adding up to something that is quite pared down.

JS: They're deceptive; they look simple but then you get caught in the problematic space, like a vampire who has to stop to count the sunflower seeds.

JH: I would say problematic space is the thing... A thing that a number of people have said to me over the years is that there's a certain sort of tension... I don't know if you know the writer Martin Herbert? He's a British writer and critic who wrote an essay about my work in the catalogue for my 2006 show at the Aldrich Museum in the US. He talked about a certain sort of stress level, called *eustress*, that one has with my paintings, which is not like deep stress, but just a gentle underlying and necessary stress, because they don't allow you to resolve them.

JS: Exactly! I was looking for the word 'resolve'! They seem like little engines, machines that don't stop, they don't resolve...

JH: And that's really important to me that they don't resolve, they're always contingent.

JS: That's exactly it! Okay, I guess a final thing we haven't quite touched on is light – because you are using the metallic paints and the light really activates...

JH: Light's a really vital element in my

work in terms of this unresolvedness, or whatever the word is... irresolution of the work. Because of the way that I use the brush mark and because of the way that the surfaces are built up and because of the type of paint I use with the addition of these metallic pigments, the light stops you from quite knowing what this painting is doing – or even what sort of form it is – because you can look at it from different angles and the light will play so differently on it that the colours change – even the form itself changes, because you pick up an edge with the light from one side that you wouldn't pick up from the other... and then, you know, the reverse happens. I'm aware of this at the moment because I'm doing a lot of painting – throughout the day they change – when they're in the studio, when I see them sometimes in the kind of gloomy light of twilight that's my favourite time to see them.

JS: Yes, it's a magical time where the colours – because your pupils are still very wide open because it's dark – the colours do strange magical things.

JH: There's a certain risk in what I do because from certain angles they can look quite ordinary, or the colours don't really look very special, and then, from another angle, or in another light, they look surprisingly stunning.



Joni Spigler
Untitled (space station)
2017
Mixed materials
70 x 50 x 40 cm