For Jane
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CLOSE

The German natural philosopher Jakob Böhme (1575-1624) saw the ellipse as a theoretical model. Böhme, who wrote on theology, mysticism and the natural sciences, and was to greatly influence the later German Romantic thinkers, recognised in the ellipse, and the oval, a form that could unite two conflicting poles or forces. It could, in other words, in a single space or with a single line, bring together opposite positions. If there was complete equilibrium or balance between such forces, the oval would contract into a perfect circle. If there was increased tension the oval would become more pronounced, and taut. Although for Böhme such speculation was focused on the dualism that he saw governing all of creation, his theory was influential to many thinkers and artists. The Dada artist Hans Arp (1886-1966) for example, who read Böhme's texts, was drawn to the idea of conflicting forces being held in tension by the ellipse and created many works that used the oval as a quixotic form and symbol of optimism.

The British painter Jane Harris (1956-2022) has also based her work on both the formal qualities of the oval, and like Böhme and Arp had recognised its conceptual agility. All of Harris's paintings are built through a set of strict parameters. She used the form of the oval, or more specifically the ellipse, in all its many variations, and in the multiple ways in which it could be combined, as the prime building block in her compositions. She also used the brush stroke—or rather what she referred to as the brush mark—as another compositional component. And then she used colour, particular and exact, often mixing into her paint reflective and iridescent metallic pigments. In a painting by Harris, such as Quartet (2011-19), each of these components can be seen to combine and interacts with the others, so as to create a unified whole. But that whole is not necessarily stable, and the painting is certainly not static.

Quartet depicts—if that is the right word—four ellipses, two blue and two a silvery grey. They are held in a rich golden colour, with the edge of each ellipse scalloped with a running sequence of other smaller ellipses, creating a decorative frill around the larger oval. In Quartet this decorative device—built with ellipses, of ellipses, and on ellipses—is very regular and uniform. In other works, Harris used schemes of starkly differently proportioned ellipses, to enfold her larger form.

Although the four large ellipses in Quartet are balanced, and symmetrically arranged, the painting or indeed any painting by Harris, is mischievous as it plays out—and holds—tensions between different ideas and positions on its surface. One perceptual tension that Harris focused on in her work, and which animated all her paintings and drawings, is that of the relationship between what one might call the figure, and ground, in the composition. At one moment the main oval forms seem to float above a golden ground, at another moment they are like pools in a formal garden, and sink below the ground's surface. This shifting quality of where the painting's surface is, and how the formal arrangement of elements is placed on it, has been achieved by Harris through her sculpted use of brush marks. With great acuity, Harris has built up with multiple lush layers of oil paint, the outlined edge of each oval, and the surface of each form within. These brush marks, that satisfyingly trace round shapes, or fill in areas with subtly repeating patterning, retain the indentation of the bristles that formed them. In doing so they are in relief, and catch and reflect

the ambient light that illuminates the painting. As the light changes—or as the viewer moves—the painting's surface, and the figure-ground relationships seem to alter. They can shift dramatically. What might at first seem light, becomes dark. What seems near, becomes far. What seems to be the shade of one colour, switches to another. At one moment one element in the painting can seem to move in front of another, and then it recedes. These phenomena not only animate the surface of the painting, but it makes one very aware of one's own presence in front of it. As one moves one's head or shifts one's stance the painting changes—it responds.

Harris's dexterous brush marks communicate another important quality within her paintings, that they are made by hand. With careful looking one can see the concentration in how she traces around each of her ovals. It is beautiful, focused and unswerving. If you look harder, one can see how brush marks are laid on top of similar brush marks to build up the intensity of their material qualities, and the luminosity of their colour. This hand-made aspect of Harris's paintings communicates not only the presence of the maker, but a temporal aspect in her work, as time is held within each mark. As a viewer one sees the hand of another person, and their concentrated use of time.

As a young painter, and when still based in London before her move to rural France, Harris received two travel scholarships to study the schematic layout of gardens in initially Japan, and then Paris. Although perhaps not immediately apparent, her interest in both the Zen gardens of Kyoto, and seventeenth century French formal gardens, seems to resonate with her use of ovals in the paintings she made as a mature artist. In Kyoto she studied and drew the kare sansui or 'dry gardens', such as the rectangular walled garden of Ryoan-ji, with its expanse of raked gravel, and fifteen irregularly sized stones. Each stone is positioned in such a way that one can never see all of the stones together from a single viewpoint. The highly meditative practice, carried out by the Zen Buddhist monks as they rake the gravel into curved and repeating tracks around these differently sized boulders, seems to resonate with Harris's own process of tracing her brush, loaded with paint, around her oval forms. Ryoan-ji is a very formal garden, that was designed in the 1480s—much like a painting—to be viewed as an image from some seats on an adjacent veranda. It is an image to be contemplated, rather than landscape to be walked across or inhabited.
The French formal gardens that Harris studied, such as those at Versailles or Chantilly, also embody theoretical and philosophical positions. The iconography of these gardens, with their vast lawns, fountains, lakes and walkways, are designed around courtly allegories, that draw on Roman antiquity and solar symbolism. One aspect of this is how water can act like a mirror, the mirror being both an object and a concept that was a mainstay during the Baroque period with its taste for illusion. Often these pools of water are circular, and in Chantilly as there are no sculptures or fountains in their centre, they appear as one approaches them on foot as smooth, or rippled ellipses of glass-like water. Harris has talked about these pools being the geneses for her own ovals, and certainly the reflective and animated appearance of their water's surface correlates with qualities she imbued in the way she handled and applied paint.

Mirrors, mirroring and doubling, whether conceptualised through seventeenth century garden design, or ideas of mathematical symmetry are also a running motif through Harris's work. Many, indeed the majority, of her paintings and drawings play with this idea. The Fugitives (2008) presents two huge fluted ellipses on a single canvas, one a near duplication of the other, save for the colour shifts in the marvellous pewter-like greys and silvers in which it is painted. The golden painting Midas Magic (2011) presents a horizontal mirroring of the two main ellipses, which are then mischievously presented next to each other, as opposed to one above the other as one might expect. And in the

great series of tall, thin diptychs that Harris completed in 2014, the Familiars, we see acts of doubling and mirroring between the two individual canvases that comprise each work.

There is also a frame-like quality to Harris ovals. With their scalloped edges, her ellipses can be seen to resemble the decorative borders on antique Venetian mirrors, or those mirror frames made from giltwood, such as in the bewitching Galerie des Glaces at Versailles. The way Harris's paintings play with light, perhaps makes this analogy to an actual mirror more pronounced, and her work certainly possesses those catoptric qualities, such as questioning ideas of truth and perfection, or reality and illusion, that so beguiled the seventeenth century artists and thinkers who built the gardens and halls at Versailles.

The curvatures around Harris's ellipse-like forms may also, through their specific colour or iridescence, be seen to resemble other symbols and objects. Her use of metallic paints and pigments means occasionally they seem to evoke elements within certain Christian art, like the gilded halos in depictions of saints, the almond shaped aureola, mandorla, that surrounds the Virgin Mary, or the way Renaissance painters stylised the feathered wings of angels, seraphims and cherubs. At other times the paintings resonate with a far more down-to-earth sensibility and can evoke the flickering blue flames on an old-style gas hob, or the embossed leather surfaces on Chesterfield club chairs. As paintings they are never one thing.

The artist Henri Matisse (1869-1954) stated that, "The decorative for a work of art is an extremely precious thing. It is an essential quality. It does not detract to say that the paintings of an artist are decorative." Harris, who greatly admired Matisse's canvases, can also be seen to believe in this dictum. However, to return to ideas of the decorative 'after' modernism is a starkly different act to that espoused by the French master. As an artist Jane Harris understood this, and her use of the decorative is informed by a somewhat similar sensibility, to that of the Pattern and Decoration (P&D) artists from the 1970s and early 1980s. For artists such as Robert Zakanitch (b.1935) and Joyce Kozloff (b.1942), to name but two of this loose grouping of Americans, there was an act of subversion in their re-engagement with ideas of decoration. It was used in part as a critique against dominant ideas of 1960s modernist formalism. The decorative was used as a way to question existing hierarchical positions, and to counter an idea of art built on reduction, concepts of purity, certainty and self-reflexivity. The decorative allowed in other voices and positions. There was also a specific confrontation with the gendered history of painting, in certain of the P&D artists' works. In this context Harris's ellipses can be seen to have a correlation with the artist Judy Chicago's late 1960s 'central-core' abstractions. However, for Harris this was a purposefully 'weak' association, and one that she did not push, as the expansiveness of her oval forms were the real means of critique—their ability to hold multiple positions—rather than a past pictorial-feminist methodology that saw painting centred around questions of gender, society and the body. Harris rather, saw her approach to expand the pictorial possibilities of her oval forms, as aligning with the sense of visual enquiry in the work of an artist such as Josef Albers. The carefully orchestrated colour changes in Albers's series of paintings Homage to the Square (1949-1976) can be seen to relate to the visual shifts that she explored in her own work. Harris, in fact, spent time at the Josef and Anni Albers Foundation in Connecticut, researching both artists' working methods and their use of colour, sequence and craftsmanship, as well as expanding her own drawing practice in one of the Foundation's studios.

Harris's drawings, and works on paper, should be understood as a parallel practice to her work on canvas. The drawings are not preliminary studies for the latter, but rather self-contained pieces. They have an experimental purpose, as

Harris tries out new ideas and expands the vocabulary in her work. They use the brightness of clean white paper, and the sheen of carefully and dexterously applied graphite – again as always in elliptical forms - to reflect light, much as her oil painting's brush marks do. Certain works also include watercolour with the graphite, to add one or two further colours to the compositions.

Although indebted to the language of modernism, Harris's paintings should not be simply understood as framed by that historical idiom. Nor should they be seen simply through the early politicised, post-modern critiques of modernism and modernist abstraction. Like Jakob Böhme her ovals hold these two positions in tension. Through their wonderfully formed ellipses, their handmade qualities, and ideas of mirroring, Harris's work focuses our attention on fundamental universal questions - how the world is not static, how it can change, and how it might be seen differently from different vantage points. As such these are artworks that are conceptually beautiful, and far more so than merely formal paintings, as they are analogous to very contemporary concerns.

*Daniel Sturgis, January 2024.*

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[1] All ellipses are ovals, but not all ovals are ellipses. An ellipse always has two lines of symmetry and is therefore balanced, an oval can just have one line of symmetry, meaning it can in certain iterations be more egg shaped. The ovals in Jane Harris's paintings were always true ellipses.

[2] Gunda Luyken 'Arp's Reliefs' in Penelope Curtis (Ed) *arp: relief*, 1995, Leeds: Henry Moore Institute, p.51

[3] see, Allen S. Weiss, *Mirrors of infinity, The French Formal Garden and 17th Century Metaphysics*, 1995, Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press

[4] Henri Matisse 'Interview with (Leon) Degand' in Jack Flam (Ed), *Matisse on Art*, 1978, New York: EP Dutton, p.105

[5] see, Anna Katz (Ed) *With Pleasure: Pattern and Decoration in American Art 1972-1985*, 2020, New Haven and London: Yale University Press