

Transforming Geometry and Ornament - On the Paintings of Jane Harris

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I think that above everything else a painting should be an ornament – Maurice Denis 1893 [1]

I The Discomfiture of Ornament

The beginnings of abstract art, as Ernst Gombrich has demonstrated, are indebted to a sustained debate on ornament and decoration, but once enthroned, it speedily disavowed these roots. The reason lay in the traditional view of ornament as appended form. No matter how multiform and daring its vocabulary, it was always beholden to an order with its own defining criteria. Ornament covering an architectonic structure would conceal or accentuate it, but it always retained its nature as an embellishing detail or secondary feature. With regard to the organisation of traditional painting, the applicative function was obvious. Ornament was free to unfold even in a frame, but the frame was not necessarily linked to one and the same picture. It could be exchanged from owner to owner.

Philip Otto Runge may well have been the first modern artist to reevaluate the subordinate function of the picture frame by ornamentally structuring the picture itself and integrating the frame. When Georges Seurat began to divide his representations into a system of dotted colours, he came up with a highly original version of ornamental image-making, and it is no accident that we find non-representational, marginal zones, reverberating like an echo of the composed scene. Although they

grow out of the depths of the picture and thus still act as appendages, they seem to prefigure abstract painting whose subject matter was to become ornamentation itself.

In the meantime, Wassily Kandinsky introduced a mode of abstraction that returned a verdict on anything ornamental and decorative: form, according to Kandinsky, must grow out of inner necessity [2]. He thereby took the same direction previously proclaimed by Adolf Loos in his famous essay on ornament and crime [3]. With the advance of radical simplicity and purity of form, ornament inevitably sank into obsolescence. Loos even considered it a form of degeneration, a pathological outgrowth, hostile to civilisation. It took decades for ornament to be released from its banishment. Given the reductionism prescribed for American painting by Clement Greenberg, and the self-imposed pathos of spirituality among European exponents of l'art informel, any attempt to pursue the line of beauty was sheer sacrilege.

Not every art movement felt obliged to subscribe to the ideal of purification. Matisse charted a path that incorporated ornament as a self-evident factor in painting, and in his late period under the influence of jazz, Mondrian ultimately challenged his own phantasmagoria of severity which had penetrated every aspect even of his daily life. In England it was Bridget Riley, who exploited this freedom to give ornament a constitutive role in painting, in consequence of which her imagery was initially maltreated as patterns for fabrics and window displays.

II Geometry as a Playing Field

Jane Harris' paintings are based on three strict decisions that apply to her entire oeuvre, First, the ellipse is the basic form of her paintings; secondly, she uses only two colours per painting (though these may be mixed): one for the interior of the ellipse, the other for the surroundings; and thirdly she applies a minimum of five coats of paint gradually building up the desired tone, whereby these layers are substantive participants in the phenomenon of the painting.

These criteria have little in common with the reductionism that issued from Greenberg's teachings and culminated in what was known as radical painting. On the contrary, Harris' paintings yield an unexpected richness of pictorial variation precisely because the artist restricts herself to these basic parameters. This applies

first and foremost to the ellipse itself. As a geometric shape with two focal points, it is largely undetermined; it can on one hand bulge into a near circle and on the other taper into the thinnest of two-dimensional figures. Countless possibilities lie between these two extremes. The shape is also embodied by the archetypal figure of the mandorla. In medieval illumination, it figures as the aureole of light surrounding a holy person, frequently the figure of Christ, and in representations of the Ascension, for instance, it symbolises divine protection [4]. Undoubtedly the almond shape also refers to the vagina as the symbol of origin, and has, as such, retained its erotic implications to the present day in the formal vocabulary of advertising and design. Not that we are asked to associate Harris' work with the symbolic meanings of elliptical forms. Viewers may decide for themselves; but in some cases, as we shall see, the artist herself will invest a work with erotic meaning.

On the other hand she also uses the ellipse horizontally, as well as doubling, tripling and quadrupling the shape within a pictorial field. In addition, the edges almost always deviate from strictly geometric representation, for they are independent ornamental motifs, semi-elliptical in shape, that wreath the main figure. All kinds of arcs are possible here, even drop-like shapes that seem to be detaching themselves from their host. The curves may also become so complex that they acquire a resemblance to rocaille e.g. *Ripple*, (1999). The geometry can therefore be read more in the sense of a proposal than as a fixed criterion of order.

Harris' choice of the ellipse is also related to her wish to activate the entire pictorial surface. Because the ellipse has two focal points, we are prevented from fixing our gaze on a certain spot, and the artist's treatment of the edges locks into this feature of the elliptical shape. Her project is especially conspicuous in cases where the arcs change direction in one and the same ellipse. In *Rumba Bumba* (1999) the right side of the main shape is lined with near circular ellipses while the left is penetrated by a row of elongated ones. The resulting configuration subverts the clear relationship of figure and ground. While the protuberances on the right seem to rest on the pictorial ground, the longish ornamentation on the left covers part of the ellipse. The reading of figure and ground thus depends on where we focus our gaze. The artist has deconstructed the categorical definition of ornament

as figure on ground: not only does the ellipse decorate the ground of the picture; the ground also embellishes the ellipse.

The complexity of the relationship is compounded by the closeness in colour values – different shades of umber – within and outside the geometric shape. Depending on the light, parts of the outside will seem darker than the inside and vice versa, and the sense of space will change as well. The paint and the light generate ceaselessly changing relations between dark and light, flatness and depth. We are confronted with a highly sophisticated form of what the German-American artist Hans Hofmann called the push-and-pull effect: the eye is pulled into the depths only to be pushed back up to the surface again, while at the same time experiencing constant changes in the colour values as well. The witty wordplay in the title *Rumba Bumba* (raw umber and burnt umber) draws our attention to this effect.

III The Iridescent Picture Surface

By now there is no mistaking the divergence between the works of Harris and those of the geometric abstraction that celebrated its resurrection in the eighties [5]. Geometry for Harris is a kind of matriarchal figure to whose guidance she appears to submit, while in truth undermining it. And in her disobedience, Harris is indebted to an artist least likely to be ranked among the geometric abstractionists: Rene Magritte. Remember how Magritte punched an expanse of sky full of holes, totally upsetting the illusion; how he thrust the deepest space of his picture to the surface through a seemingly unmotivated, irrational protuberance. Interestingly enough, it was Josef Albers, who pursued a purified form of this play of spatial illusion in his *Structural Constellations* (1953-1958).

Harris exploits similar means of leading perception astray and generating uncertainty about what we see, beginning first and foremost with the ellipse. Even in some of the paintings where she comes close to her ideal geometric shape, as in *Croshe* (1999), we are seduced into a two-way reading: of an ellipse and of a circle depicted at an angle in the space of the picture. But when, as in *Crump* (1999), movement affects the ornamental zone to the right through the change in dimension of each successive curve, a spatiality is generated that makes one think of the virtual spaces painted into Baroque ceilings [6]. This interpretation is instantly undermined

again by the evenly shaped rhythm of the ornament on the left edge of the ellipse, which enforces a flat reading.

I have already briefly mentioned another decisive factor involved in provoking such reactions; the application of the paint. From picture to picture, from inner form to outer form, Harris uses brushes of different widths. She applies her paint in short, regular intervals, generating within one formal continuum an even pattern that acquires added relief and/or uniformity with each new layer of paint. When she uses a different colour, Harris also changes the direction of her brushstroke.

If we take a frontal look at *Ish* (1997), we see the inside of the ornamental ellipse as a greenish-blue umber tone that is very close to black. There the brushstroke fades into the paint while the use of an even vertical gesture in the remainder of the painting makes the area outside the ellipse look dark violet. However, this impression is reversed when we approach the painting at an angle. The colouring of the ellipse now seems to be light blue-green, and its interior shows a vertical stroke. The mutation of phenomena, with many subtle intermediary stages depending on variations in the lighting, further destabilises the definition of the geometric shape within the space of the picture plane. Once again we find that the ellipse not only decorates the ground, but that the ground also decorates the ellipse. The ground has been activated as an independent form, an effect that is of course heightened by the counter-movement of the marginal ornamentation.

Where Harris uses a broader brush for the inside of an ellipse than for its surroundings, it appears to be more isolated. While the narrow stroke tends to be oriented more towards the picture surface, the broader stroke generates a kind of glazed relief, whose hills and dales are reversed depending on the light and the viewers angle of vision. *Full of Suspense* (1996/2000) offers a striking demonstration of this phenomenon. It is almost impossible for the viewer to distinguish dips and raised areas. The appearance of the colour literally lifts off from the paint as substance and forms an optical plane that keeps changing its position. No matter how material and tangible our impression of the paint may be, it eludes fixation, which also makes it so difficult to define the colours of the painting. This uncertainty is also indicated in the title, whose allusion to Hitchcock is no accident. It is amazing

that we are faced with an abstract picture rather than the figurative scene implied in the title, Harris' paintings teach us to discover secrets even where nothing seems to be hidden.

The bifocal geometric shape bows to the polyfocal application of the paint in other works as well. The movement brought about by the colouring is not mimetic but emerges only in the eye of the beholder. The same thing applies to changes in the lighting, the more so when the paintings are illuminated from the side. The genealogy of such pictorial phenomena dates back to Pointillism and undoubtedly made its most aggressive appearance in Op Art. At stake here, and this also applies to Harris, is the lack of congruence between the facticity of the paint and its perception. The painting, as Max Imdahl puts it, becomes a musical score of seeing [7] that must be played by the viewer. In contrast to Op Art, the eye of the beholder is certainly not physiologically taxed by Harris' paintings. Instead, rather like Albers, the artist produces a moderate optical irritation that requires body movement in order to be perceived and is moreover soothed by flashes of perception of the haptic surface texture.

An important contribution to this soothing effect is made by the border zone between the ellipse and the rest of the canvas. As a rule, it is specifically articulated in the form of an unbroken line, marking a third order of texture within the area of the picture. In *Ish*, for instance, the border provides a certain support in the iridescent appearance of the surface, and in *Oh Oh* (1999) it is emphasised with a broad outline that isolates the two ellipses in comic-like fashion. In *Full of Suspense* this zone fluctuates between flatness and depth, thereby infecting the inside of the ellipse as well. Moreover, the smaller the contrast of colour between the inside and the outside of an ellipse, the greater the impact of this intermediate zone – e.g. *Brune Brun* (1993) or *Skirt* (1999). However, the greatest visual irritation is caused by the surface effect when the texture of the ellipse closely resembles, indeed blends in with that of its surroundings, as in *Come Closer* (1996). The treatment of the border zone thus adds another spectrum to the wealth of pictorial detail.

IV Indicative Character, Titles and Association

One might assume that all of these phenomena, brought about by differences in the application of the paint and the geometric shape, are the result of extended research on the fundamental premises of the non-figurative picture and its perception. This would relate the work of Harris to the research undertaken by Josef Albers on colour and form in painting, or if one considers the sculptural shape, to the serial studies of Donald Judd. Both artists began with a rigorously restricted complex of formal decisions. This cool and rational approach to artistic work would indeed seem to play a role in Harris' method.

However, the artist always stresses the fact that colouring in her paintings is a consequence of immediate or remembered impressions drawn from her everyday environment. Her titles bear this out, for they indicate a relation to reality, however subtle it may be. Let us take *Pine* (1999) whose pairing of blue and green in combination with the graceful duplicate form no doubt evokes associations with a landscape. These are, to an extent, additionally influenced by the title, but the yearning contained in the verb to pine motivates still other readings inspired by the elongated ornamental arc of these ellipses. One might speak of what Hans Sedlmayr calls physiognomic qualities or indicative characters (*anschauliche Charaktere*), terms that refer to the intuitively comprehensible expression of forms regardless of whether they are figurative or not. [8] Physiognomic qualities transcend association; they lead to the elemental organisation of the work of art and thus to its form and colour. In consequence, linguistic equivalents generally fall short. We can only vaguely circumscribe how stepping out of a basically closed whole may have something to do with yearning as in the pointed arches of *Pine*, which, seen in reverse, are like barbs piercing the blue shapes. The indicative character is immediately evident, because it is basically pre-linguistic. Now and then such equivalencies of perceptual events may be heard in the sounds articulated by children. Finally, associative allusions and indicative characters can, of course, coincide as in the case of *Pine*, where one might envision an irresistibly blue sky shining between the branches of pine trees. But the moment we explicitly voice this idea, we have again distanced ourselves from the immediate perception of the picture and its physiognomic qualities.

By way of comparison, let us take a look at *Breeze* (1999), a painting formally related to *Pine* and also invested with the potential of scenic associations. All the more clearly do we realise that the vertical placement of the ellipses produces a different physiognomic quality, implied but not claimed by the title *Breeze* (or breezing in).

By working with double meanings that often reference heterogeneous contexts, Jane Harris substantially broadens the readings of her paintings. The indexical openness of the titles is especially conspicuous in those that make use of onomatopoeia, as in *Oh, Oh* (1999), *Ho Hum* (1998), *Mium Mium* (1996) and *La Di Da* (1994). But even then, specific meanings are not ruled out. For instance, a la-di-da person may be echoed in the latter painting through the composition of three similar ellipses, corresponding to the three syllables of the expression, and through physiognomic character as well, in the pretentious, almost affected appearance of the marginal embellishments. Thirdly, the slight axial shift of the ellipse in the middle is not insignificant since it produces movement among the trio reminiscent of the speech bubbles in comics.

The titles do not always cover such a wide spectrum. *Bloody Mary* (2000) obviously calls to mind vodka and tomato juice, an association underscored by the combination of rousing colour and the delicate play of marginal forms. On spending more time with this painting, we find that the twice inverted ornamentation conveys an impression of rotation: as if we were under the influence of alcohol.

V Dissociative Modalities of Viewing

In general, the paintings of Harris are invested with considerable tactile qualities. The velvet surfaces not only manage to bundle, refract and bounce off the light; they also succeed in appealing to the viewers sense of touch. Their inimitable effect is, in fact, often due to the interplay between tactile and optical qualities. In extremely subtle terms, this also defines their parallel association with erotic appeal. And indeed there are works whose titles hint at the connection. For instance, when looking at *Come Closer* from the front, the ellipse looks as if it were behind its surroundings, which appear as a glistening, relief structure. But stepping closer and viewing the painting at an angle instead lends plasticity to the interior of the ellipse.

These inversions of perception might be said to match what happens when coming closer to the skin of another person. Erotic stimulation changes the look of the skin, just as modifications in the viewing position change the effect of the painted surface.

In *Cul Noir* (1999), Harris makes no bones about provoking an erotic reading through the correlation of form and colour. Even though the artist herself says that *Cul Noir* is the name of a type of pig (cul noir = black ass) and also of a type of pottery made near Limoges, [9] hardly anyone, and certainly no male viewer, will be able to escape the idea of a vaginal or anal zone of the human body. The association is elicited by the fusion of ornamental shape and colour that fluctuates between wide-apart and willowy grace. On the dividing line between ornamental form and figurative shape, the painting no doubt recalls the far more explicit ornamental eroticism of John Wesley.

As we can see, the titles establish any number of relations to the reality of daily life, ranging from onomatopoeia, language games and metaphors to directly evocative meanings. Harris thereby achieves a degree of complexity, which in turn affects our study of her paintings. The frequently heterogeneous fields of meaning activate modalities of viewing, in which dissociatively superimposed layers offer ever new inspiration to the act of seeing. It is a means of motivating beholders that links into the treatment in her paintings of the phenomena of colour and form.

By now it will have become quite clear that Harris' project must be seen as a rather distant relative of geometric abstraction, and that her works, with all their licence, perplexity and whimsy, actually show a distinct and highly specific affinity with the history of ornament. Geometry, as the other side of her painting, tends to serve as a springboard for the extremely daring pirouettes of Harris' art, leading to a rapprochement between geometric abstraction and ornament as they play their parts in the phenomena of the picture surface. To put it differently: geometry, the obvious factor, proves to be deceptive ground that may erupt at any moment, pulling the viewer into primeval depths. And yet, these depths have a way of turning into surface – the surface of ornament.

Translation: Catherine Schelbert

Footnotes:

[1] Maurice Denis, *Theories*, Paris 1913, quoted in: Ernst H. Gombrich, *The Sense of Order*. Oxford 1979, p. 58.

[2] Wassily Kandinsky, *Über die Formfrage* in: *Der Blaue Reiter*, ed. by W. Kandinsky and F. Marc. Munich, 1912, reprinted in: Wassily Kandinsky, *Essays über Kunst und Künstler*, ed. and with a commentary by M. Bill, Bern, 1955, pp. 17 – 47, here: p. 23.

[3] Adolf Loos, *Ornament und Verbrechen* (1908), in: *Samtliche Schriften*, ed. by Franz Gluck. Vienna, 1962,

[4] Cf. Otto Brendel, *Origin and Meaning of the Mandorla* in: *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* (New York), 6th series, Vol. XXV, pp. 5 – 24.

[5] Her approach to traditional geometric abstraction rather resembles the way in which David Reed or Jonathan Lasker treat traditional gestural abstraction.

[6] The inner arc is de facto only the section of another ellipse with closer focal points.

[7] Max Imdahl, *Probleme der Optical Art: Delaunay – Mondrian Vasarely* in: exh. cat. *Robert Delaunay*, Staatliche Kunsthalle Baden-Baden, 1976, pp. 19 – 35, here: p. 35.

[8] It is an individual, indicative character that distinguishes one work from another..., that gives it a make-up which we are able to elucidate and formulate in words. In its broadest sense, the concept of character applies to all appearance. I can consider a colour in terms of its indicative character (its physiognomy) as much as I can a line, a substance, a landscape or a person. Such indicative characters are encountered everywhere in life. But in art, and only in art, do they become the foundation of

works. Hans Sedlmayr, *Kunst und Wahrheit. Zur Theorie und Methode der Kunstgeschichte*. Mittenwald, 1978, p. 105. [italics by the author, transl. C.S.]

[9] Letter from the artist to the author October 9, 2000.