

Jane Harris

“I am drawn towards minimalism as an ideal but I’m equally seduced by the rococo incidents that keep occurring in life”

JANE HARRIS travelled in Japan and France to research the classical gardens which lie behind her characteristic use of elliptical forms. She is best known for apparently simple yet intensely detailed and quietly insistent oil paintings, which are designed to change with the angle of view. Her watercolours and drawings are similarly luminous. In 2006, she resigned from her role as senior lecturer at Goldsmiths College to move to south-west France with her family and concentrate fully on her career as an artist. *INTERVIEW: Paul Carey-Kent*

Have you ever had a nickname?

Yes, some friends call me Bomber. And in France Harris is pronounced ‘Arreess’, which sounds quite nice.

Barry Schwabsky coined the term “rococo minimalism” for your work: does that make sense to you?

I like it as a mental image of what would be considered historically as two irreconcilable positions occupying the same space. My paintings are a culmination of many pairs of opposites interacting – while at first glance they may appear static in their symmetrical arrangements, it is this multiplicity of crossovers that makes for the rococo dynamic.

And you like both rococo and minimalism?

Yes. In recent years rococo seems to have carried with it thoughts of kitsch and exaggerated ornamentation, with frills, scalloped forms, curved lines and asymmetry. There has been a certain snobbery surrounding the reductive aesthetic of minimalism. It has become synonymous with high art and good taste, being neutral, spare, ordered, matter-of-fact, and industrial in its associations. On the one hand I am drawn towards minimalism as an ideal but I’m equally seduced by the rococo incidents that keep occurring in life.

How did you arrive at the ellipse as your basic form?

My research into classical gardens formed the basis for all of my work for some years and during this time I needed to produce elliptical shapes which might have been seen as fountains, pools, parterres and other garden features. I then discovered for myself how beautiful and flexible the elliptical form is.

Is your painting process labour-intensive?

Yes. In order to create a surface which will allow the external light to bounce off it in a particular way, each painting is built up in between three to five layers, depending on the consistency of the paint. Each section, be it the internal forms or the space around

these forms, has to be painted in one sitting as the surface has to be painted wet into wet. This can take anything up to sixteen hours, and I couldn’t leave an area overnight and come back to it, as you would always see where the break was made.

Your oil paintings have tended to use only two colours. Why not use more?

When I started the ellipse paintings there was only one form on one ground and so there was no need for more than two colours. When I started to use two forms which were identical in shape it still seemed relevant to only use two, as I was concerned with ideas about which was the original shape and which was its copy, how we relate to a form and its double and whether those double forms are side by side or one on top of the other.

But you have recently shifted slightly?

Yes, I have allowed myself to shift the colour between one form and another. This may be a shift in hue or tone or sometimes both, and may be brought about or enhanced by the direction of the brushmark. These shifts are all concerned with making the viewer move around the painting and look at it from different perspectives.

What led to your recent use of metallic colours?

I liked the idea of using colours which one might associate historically with the grandeur of religious paintings and the luminosity of icons, but which are also contemporary in their sources and could be associated with modern day industry (particularly car paints), fashion and decor. Titles for such paintings often enhance these double associations: Holy Smoke, Divine, Cloud Nine, Glory Day, Shine On.

Is it an aim of yours to make what might seem ornamental part of the form?

I think that’s exactly what I do. Ornament is not an add-on for me: it is integral to the character of something or someone. These

repetitions of form are not meant to be decorative but more a vehicle for the painting’s individual character and complexity.

What do you gain from using twinned shapes in your paintings and drawings?

I want there to be simultaneously a sense of fascination and unease in the face of this double image, rather like looking at identical twins. The double forms have allowed me more sense of play, with possibilities of mirroring, inverting, and repeating, while being on the one hand satisfying and on the other disorientating and disconcerting for the viewer.

You also make watercolours, though they have been exhibited less often...

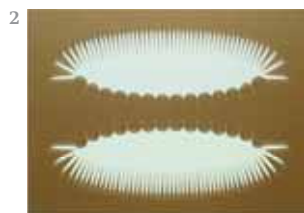
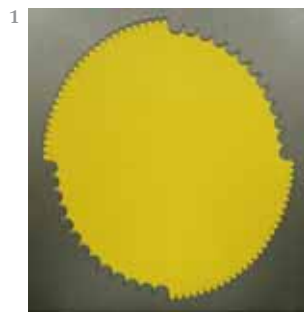
I have been making watercolours for as long as I have been making oil paintings, but they have never been shown together. The watercolours are not edged in the same way and so in one sense retain their pure form. Their dynamic incidents are within the form itself and through patterns of repeat ellipses butting up against each other or overlapping. I make pools of colour which, when dry – because the paper is not stretched – form areas that are more densely saturated than others. Because I mix my colours they can also separate as they dry, so forming unforeseen patinas, like oil on water or eroding metal.

What work are you making now?

This year I have started some drawings, which in their structure are closer to the watercolours than the oils. This has been an interesting and exciting development for me and I’ve yet to see whether there is a place for this shift within my oil painting.

Finally, if you could live with any work of art ever made, what would it be?

Maybe the one painting I would love to live with would be Betty, the portrait by Gerhard Richter of his daughter. The few times I have seen it exhibited in the flesh it has literally taken my breath away. ☺

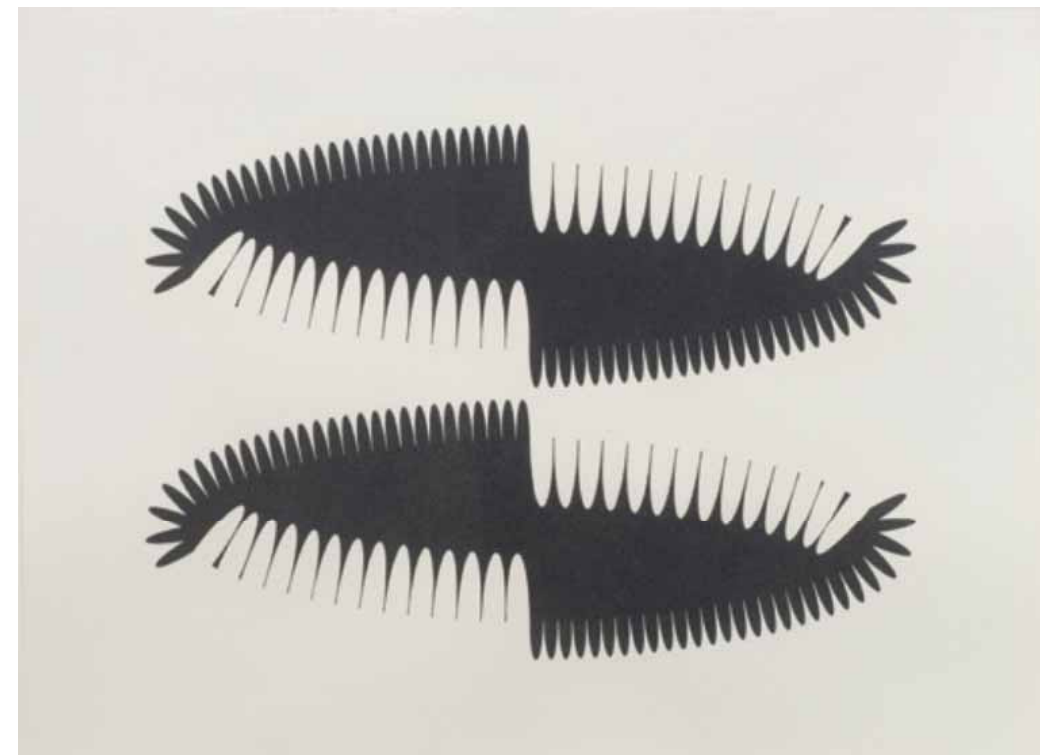
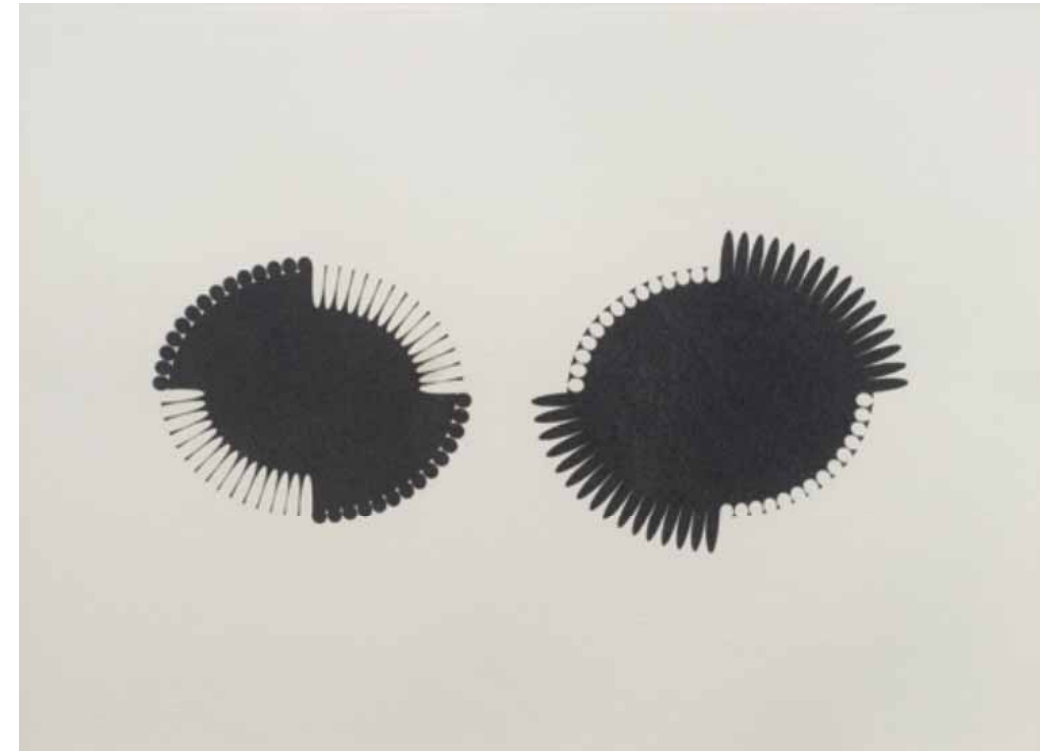


- 1 **Strange Attractor 2** (2003)
oil on canvas, 198 x 183cm
- 2 **Thrill** (2006)
oil on canvas, 112 x 152cm
- 3 **Glory Day** (2006)
oil on canvas, 193 x 213cm



Born: 1956, Dorset, UK Studied: Goldsmiths College, London; Slade School of Art, London; Brighton Polytechnic
Lives and works: France Represented: Hales Gallery, London; Galerie Hollenbach, Stuttgart, Germany

Images courtesy of Hales Gallery, London. 16:15 and 14:28 courtesy of Two Rooms, New Zealand, photo by Jennifer French



Top 16:15 (2007), pencil on Fabriano paper, 57 x 76cm

Bottom 14:28 (2007), pencil on Fabriano paper, 57 x 76cm



Colour Interlude 16-15-3 (2007), watercolour on Fabriano paper, 56 x 76cm



Colour Interlude 13-12-2 (2007), watercolour on Fabriano paper, 56 x 76cm