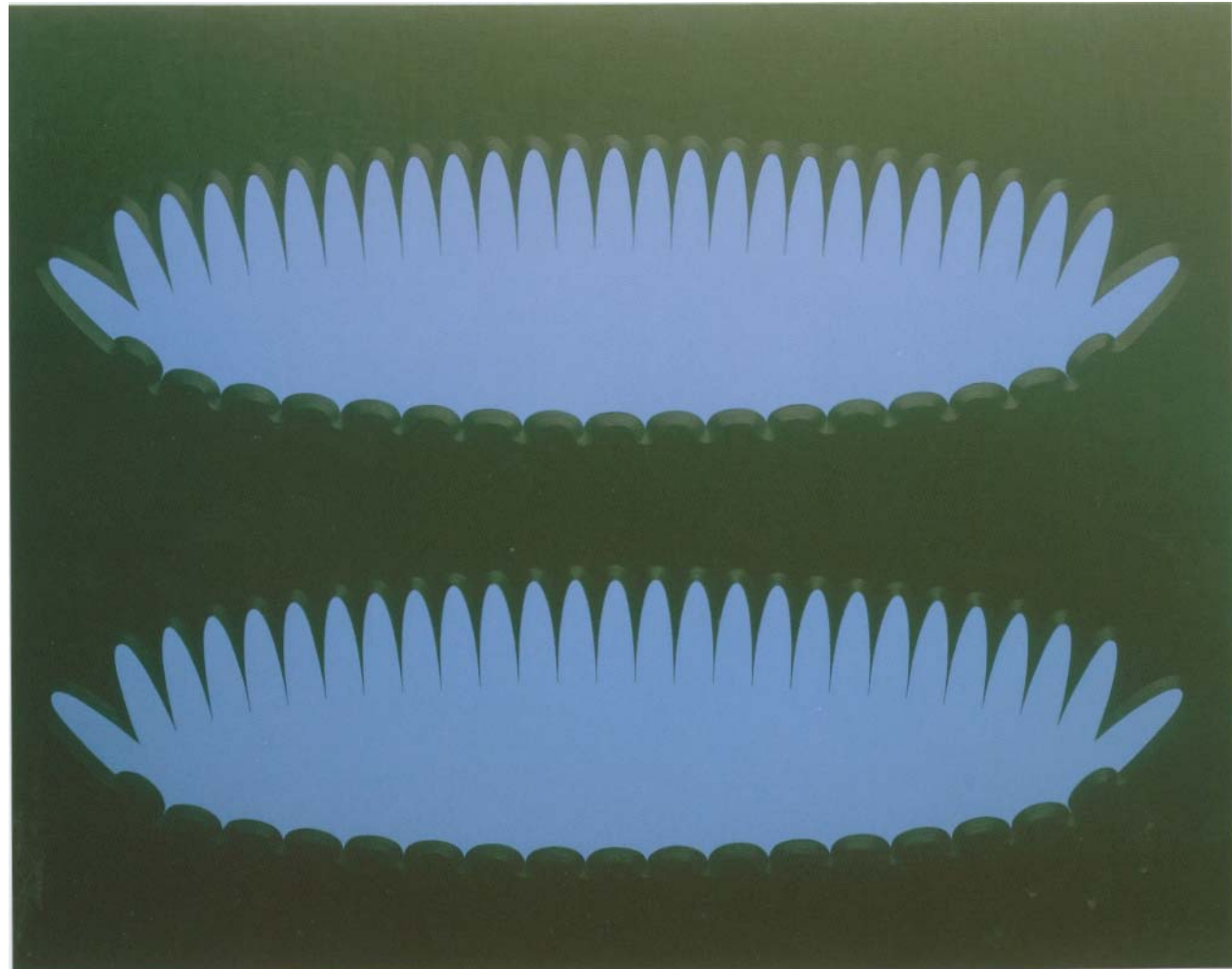


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*Pine* 1999  
Oil on canvas, 193 x 244 cms

## Jane Harris

Simon Wallis: *What place within our culture does painting hold for you?*

**Jane Harris:** It's not a question I have ever felt the need to ask myself. It implies a need to justify painting as an activity but it's absurd to talk about it as one activity as its diversity is immense. In recent years painting as a medium seems to have gone in and out of fashion with increasing regularity but because of its extraordinary ability to reinvent itself it never ceases to be an active force. More important to me is to think about the place I want to occupy within that medium. The bigger and wider cultural issues are for other people to decide - I'm not even sure how one can define 'culture'. I often feel that those wider issues are things that are imposed upon me. Although I accept them I don't think they are part of my impetus for making work. When I first studied art, and I have been painting for nearly twenty years, painting and sculpture were seen as central although there was an emerging third area sometimes known as 'alternative practice'. To paint was for me something just expected and I showed some sort of proficiency at it. When I was studying people were far less questioning about the role of painting. It's only since I did my MA at Goldsmiths at the beginning of the 1990s that the ground has shifted for me personally, as well as generally. Although painting is central to my being and occupies my everyday world as much as taking my son to school or checking my e-mails, I have always been critical of it and questioned what I can do with it. My difficulty and challenge with painting is to make it operate on many levels and in relation to such terms as abstract and representational. That has been a particular area of interest - investigating if these classifications hold any meaning for us

now. Frankly, I think they are just journalistic shorthand for describing how certain paintings look.

*I have often wondered exactly what abstraction is, it's a word I trip over all the time. I'd be interested to know how you'd characterise the activity of abstraction or what abstract art embodies for you.*

I used to get quite indignant when people referred to my paintings as abstract as I never think of them as that. Perhaps you could say they lie somewhere in between the abstract and representational, or in an area outside both. I am more interested in notions of the formal and why that has been a 'dirty word' in recent years. The recurring motif in my painting is the ellipse. Using a geometric form with mathematical qualities is important to me. I am taking something that occurs as the result of a mathematical equation, I am not taking something from the observed world and abstracting it. The ellipse can have a lot of real-world associations but it is its mathematical properties that are beautiful and exciting to me. So, on the one hand there are these pure mathematical properties but on the other there is an understanding that no form is without its associations. It's a matter of deciding what associations you want to draw attention to. I am not interested in the idea that this form within the painting can be read in any way. I think the term abstract is to do with how one's mind works in a sense, how one thinks about the world we live in. I think some people tend to want to find associations and some are happy not to. I have always been more interested in the rather absurd and perhaps impossible notion of a pure abstraction through the artists I have looked at in the past. Mondrian, for instance, has been very influential for me, as has Albers, and there is a realisation within myself that there can be formal means by which one can represent aspects of the world we live in. Such distancing devices create another realm of experience.

*But this imaginative realm arrived at through art is always in dialogue with sensate experience of the real world. Mathematics is an interesting*

case *in point* because *it moves* between *being a highly conceptual space whilst also manifesting itself palpably in nature through structure and process.*

That is the kind of example I would opt for in my painting.

*For me, the experience of painting is so much to do with deciphering and interpreting physical facts, about experience being embodied in materiality, that I have trouble with the idea of a metaphysics connected to painting. But equally I don't want the entire thing to be closed down and simply read at a formal level.*

We can't be separate from the time we are living in and we can't be separate from the time that has gone before us. I come out of an educational experience that promoted a modernist view of painting with all its Greenbergian notions.

*Was that something you took seriously at the time?*

Yes, but I knew I couldn't work within those models.

*Why not?*

At the time I thought I wasn't good enough. I felt I wasn't pure enough and didn't have the right mindset. I felt it was a failing on my part. However my time at Goldsmiths really gave me the opportunity to challenge these ideas. I came to realise that what I'd seen as a failing, that is my inability to move into the totally pure world of modernist thought because I always had to have something observed that kicked the work off, could be turned around to become something personally useful to me and more relevant to the period we are now in.

*So if you had clear notions of purity what would the impure be?*

At that time impurity for me would have been actually looking at things in the world. Observing. So things like noticing the colour of the sky or the edge of a building against another. The idea of taking things in as I walked down the street, or sat on a train, and utilising them in relationship to a formal, mathematical, pure, abstract world was not strict enough. It was seeing that there *could* be a place for hybridisation to allow another area for painting to occupy that enabled me to move forward.

*It's a revealing, and in some ways slightly sad thing, when you talk about suffering under the Greenbergian model. The way that model could make artists feel guilty about reconciling lived experience with their practice was so negative. It's interesting to consider the way you manoeuvred your way out of that.*

That's the serious challenge of my work, how to manoeuvre myself out of that situation where certain things get characterised as negative. But equally I wasn't at all interested in abstracting from nature in a lyrical or expressive way. That was something I couldn't get hold of at all. In looking at art I much prefer to encounter something very keenly observed or perceived and set down in relation to formal structures devised by the artist, for example in the work of Cezanne, Seurat or Morandi or further back Piero della Francesca.

*But I think that's where Mondrian's work becomes an interesting sort of paradigm. Although he is a very pure abstract painter the work is quintessentially urban, it is saturated with the experience of the city. It embodies the experience of a European in a new American city listening to new forms of jazz, living in a grid system. These facets of the paintings are still a revelation for viewers now because they are generous enough to accommodate each person's experience while still firmly directing responses in a sort of meeting of horizons.*

For me, what I get out of Mondrian, and the New York paintings in particular, is that buzz and energy that he obviously experienced within them. But there is still an enormous rigour and control and tightness combined with bursts of energy that I really identify with. I am interested in the playfulness of someone who is obviously also very strict. That's really a personality thing. I am excited by the momentary breakdown of tension or discipline.

*The idea of improvisation fits in nicely here, in as much as there is no good improvisation without a very disciplined grounding. It becomes meaningless.*

I agree, but I also think the charge in Mondrian's New York paintings perhaps comes from this extraordinary combination of his strict theosophical belief and a new-found passion for boogie-woogie. But I think he'd turn in his grave if he saw my paintings - too many curves.

*Your paintings appear to use colour in an almost emblematic way*

This is another example of the desire to bring together two opposing forces within myself into one whole. On the one hand I have this mathematical approach whilst on the other I have this open eyedness for the world around us, and for me, that is where the colour comes in. The colours I choose are always colours I have noticed somewhere, one against another. The colours come from a response to something I have just come across. This isn't because I can't think of any other way of producing colour. I have a very particular reason for doing it in this way - to bring the world of surprises into the work. The sensuality is very important, the work has to be felt and visually arresting. It's asking for people to look at colour relationships. I have a mental library of colour combinations from being out in the world. I engage with two colours when they jump out at me - they occupy a separate space from everything that is around them at the particular moment when they come to me. They are separated from what they occupy - they have left

their material carrier and jump into space and then back again. It's a momentary concentration on that that intrigues me. I am not always tuned into the same colours either.

*As well as the chromatic issues, the paintings bring with them a real sense of the physical presence of the artist because your gestures in making them are so evident.*

It is, of course, very important to see the paintings in reality. I want there to be things that we encounter visually, that have a grandeur, a physical presence that couldn't be had on a TV monitor or cinema screen, for instance. I like the idea that painting can present the possibility of a leap of the imagination and it can go off in all sorts of directions. Other media have very fixed parameters and are surprisingly limited and predictable in how they can present information. They don't have painting's flexibility. The endless possibilities of painting are always remarkable to me. But I never see painting as being in competition with other media. I want people to engage with painting in a way that they couldn't with other things. My paintings, as well as being surfaces, are objects you walk around and look at from different angles. They implicate the body very actively, particularly in the way light inflects them. This sets up another aspect to the work, allowing something very fixed in the painting, in terms of how it is drawn or structured, or embedded, to be simultaneously very changeable and fugitive.

*This is how a painting unravels through time. They are never static objects as we experience them through time and this temporal experience is complex.*

Painting has a possibility to deny a linear temporality, to allow one to go back to things that change, and to relook. It is almost as though time can go backwards or stand still.

*That goes against the cultural paradigm of beginning, middle and end, that is the structure of storytelling. But is the notion of process a consideration in the work?*

I do have a list of rules for myself and the paintings are created within the limitations I prescribe. The process of the application of paint is one of them. The paintings are made up of small units of brush marks to make the whole surface. They are also made up of at least five layers of paint. So in that sense there is a process going on, but it is a means to an end. The means add up to an end that is bigger. But this process leads to a result that is always going to be different. So each painting has its own character. So where does *the painting break out of this prescribed process. What will allow the space to open up for development or difference?*

That's a hard one to answer, and that's where I hope the paintings remain alive. It may occur at different stages in each painting. The rules I set do have a capability for flexibility, for instance, I don't use exactly the same brush on every painting. So somewhere along the line I have to make a decision about the size of the brush. That decision is made through a combination of trial and error and intuition. So there is both a closing down and an opening up of possibilities. Because the paintings are built up in layers it gives me time to adjust, so decisions can take place either at the beginning or further into the painting. This is what gives the paintings their individual characteristics.

*There seems to be a hierarchy of experiences as the viewer shifts between readings of the paintings, which mirrors the process you have gone through in creating the work.*

I'm not sure about hierarchy - there are just parallel experiences to be gained in any one painting. Although I don't reveal that there have been decisions going on beforehand, it's because of those decisions that I have the final work.

*I enjoy the sense of something being striven for in the work, but also its sense of effortlessness. There is a movement back and forth between an engagement with the surface and how one experiences the colour in the work and a grasping of the elliptical form and the units of which it is constituted. These things are characterised, for me, by a movement between the particular and the general.*

Yes, that is very important and that relationship happens on many levels throughout the painting. It's to do with the particular quality of the brush mark. It's also to do with the particular edge that I have made, how many units of semi-ellipses there are on one side to another, a relationship to colour and the particular positioning of the ellipse. The ellipses are all centralised in effect, but because of the edging and the decision as to where to finish one of the shapes and start another you get a tilt or a sense of asymmetry. These are all very particular decisions, so that the relationship of the particular to the general is always there.

*That seems paradigmatic of the way experience works at its best. Painting seems to bear evidence of the quality of human decision-making in a very sensitive manner*

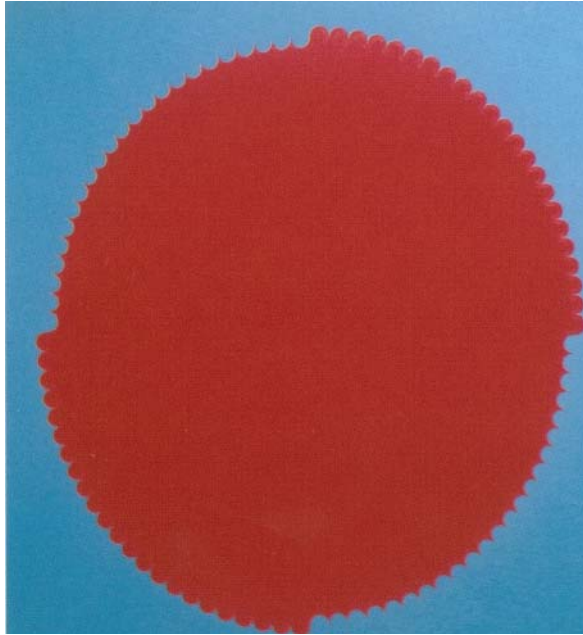
But I don't see painting as something we go to simply to feel calm or to contemplate its sensitivity. I think it is a much more active, or interactive, medium than that. It's endlessly intriguing to think through how painting comes to reinvent itself and multiply its language of invention through history.

*What about the place of drawing in the paintings?*

Drawing is essential. I was once told that my paintings were too diagrammatic. This was another problem I had to solve! I looked at the artists whom I felt didn't have that problem, Rothko for example. But I soon realised that I wanted there to be evidence of the drawing. It came back to wanting to represent, in a rigorous way, an interest in geometry and calculation. It is necessary for my paintings to start with precision and that precision is achieved through the line that is drawn.



*Crump* 1999 (side view)  
Oil on canvas, 228.6 x 193 cms



*Bloody Mary* 2000  
Oil on canvas, 167.6 x 152.4 cms

The drawing allows the painting to exist.

*And that happens on the canvas before the painting?*

Yes, there is a smaller drawing that is scaled up into a larger drawing on paper and then the large drawing is transferred onto the canvas. So each painting has a cartoon.

*/ think your work has a sense of mystery to it and that seems to be an important thing to allow space for within our culture. The work has a sense of holding back and that is something I respond to. There is nothing more tiresome than something that reveals itself all at once.*

I want to retain a sense of secrecy or privacy, a non-transparency and opaqueness, exactly because these things are problematic and awkward for people to negotiate. As well as using the ellipse as a geometrical figure, I am interested in the elliptical quality of communication - a form of communication which is concise but obtuse. The geometry, the process I employ, the layering, the final surface, the spatial ambiguities, the colour combinations are all designed to produce a formality but not to induce purely formal readings of my work.

Jane Harris

Born 1956. Studied Brighton Polytechnic, Slade School of Art, Goldsmiths College. Lives and works in Beckenham, Kent.