

Interview between Ben Gooding and Jane Harris for Saturation Point  
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1. I'd like to start by asking you about the geometric structures you devise which underpin the actual painting. These are incredibly elegant elliptical forms often repeated or mirrored with subtle alterations. Could you talk a bit about your process in terms of how you arrive at these forms; I'm particularly interested in the nature of the edges and the illusionistic effects of perspective.

I came upon using the ellipse as my prevalent form almost by chance 27 years ago. I was at the time making works which were based more on observation and wanted to draw an image of a fountain pool. I had to make this circular pool in perspective, hence the need for making an ellipse. Rather than doing this freehand, which was my usual practice at the time, I decided to find out how to make a geometrically correct ellipse. Producing this became a bit of an epiphany as I was struck by how exciting it was to make a shape that could be seen both as a flat shape and a shape in perspective simultaneously. This discovery concurred perfectly with my continuing desire to make paintings and drawings which are constantly shifting or hovering between one state and another. In having two focal points the ellipse can be very long and thin at one extreme and a circle at the other (where the two focal points coincide). Thus the variations in between are infinite. The introduction of the edging with recurring chains of semi-ellipses, then more recently full ellipses, allowed me to play with a number of so called oppositional relationships such as figure/ground, inside/outside, near/far. But I have also introduced repetitions, mirroring and shifts in scale around the edges of the major forms. which interrupt the flow, pace and rhythm and alter the dynamic, thus creating properties of time as well as space within the works.

2. I find this illusory quality of the ellipse fascinating. This experience of at once seeing a flat surface *and* a recessive depth seems to engender modernist traditions of abstraction, especially concerning flatness of surface, while also paying homage to more classical sensibilities regarding perspective and the attempt to imbue the object with the impression of spacial depth.

The paintings seem to oscillate playfully between the two paradigms. I wonder if you could expand on the traditions you consider the work to be bounded by and how your formative education grounded your approach to painting?

You also speak about how, even now, the work relates back to a childhood activity of colouring in geometrical shapes that you would draw out, which I find wonderfully compelling. Its interesting how, despite the intellectual rigours of an art education, you return somehow to the pure aesthetic pleasures that a child becomes playfully absorbed in.

Well I've had a lot of art education! And looking back I would say that each stage was instrumental in extending the possibilities for me as a painter,

although some of the experiences at the time were ones to react against. My foundation course at Bournemouth School of Art in the mid 1970s was based broadly along Bauhaus lines and covered many basic techniques, processes and disciplines, mainly based on observation and perception. For me the most stimulating and relevant were the colour mixing (both physical and optical) exercises and perspectival drawing. One of my older brothers is a painter and he introduced me to the work of Paul Klee and Josef Albers who have been a long lasting influence.

In my first year of BA at Camberwell School of Art my most abiding memories was of being asked to make a plasticine 3D model of Piero della Francesca's 'Nativity' from the National Gallery. This was REALLY hard for me as I am not a natural sculptor and have difficulty perceiving things 'in the round', but it was a fantastic challenge. It gave me a much deeper insight into Piero's mathematical and geometric precision. His controlled placement of figures and structures in space to create a sense of harmony, serenity and symbolic meaning, without being obvious, was a revelation to me at the time. Such elements in his work remain very important to me, along with his exquisitely restrained use of colour and his controlled method of painting.

During this time I also discovered the work of Patrick Caulfield and was particularly drawn to his elegant and witty way of combining different ways of representation in one painting, but without the painting as a whole feeling disrupted.

Two other artists who had an impact on my development, and to whom I return frequently, are Morandi and Cézanne. In particular I look to Morandi for the way light interferes with form, drawing attention to some edges and diminishing others. With Cézanne it's the way in which any one single brushmark can 'sit' on the surface and represent depth and form simultaneously. I'm also always intrigued by the structure of their still-life paintings and the placement of objects within these. In their very different ways they each create a sort of unfathomable precariousness and disquiet which undermines the balance and harmony.

Of course I could name many other 20th century artists who have been important (Agnes Martin, Bridget Riley, Ellsworth Kelly). And recently I have returned to looking at early renaissance paintings. I love their ingenious ways of representing and structuring the movement of earthly and heavenly figures in architectural spaces, denoting the passage of time, in a sort of strip-cartoon way, and there are areas of extraordinary pattern-making within these structures.

Being absorbed is key to the whole process of painting for me. Why do it

otherwise ?! Both acts of drawing out my chosen geometric shapes and colouring them in are equally compelling and allow me to indulge my two favourite and equally important impulses. 'Colouring in' can be seen as a lazy and unthinking process but for me it is a discipline using very specific methods, only successfully achieved through a certain rigour and concentration.

3. Your very particular use of colour is one of the most immediate things one is stuck by when encountering the work. There is often a lustre to the surface which seems to illuminate or activate the space in which these elliptical forms hang. I understand you reached a point in your practice when you started to use metallic pigments in the paint; what led you to this important decision about the materiality of these objects?

I have always had a somewhat reductive approach to the use of colour in my paintings. With the development of my ellipse paintings this became more focussed as I only needed to use two colours in any one painting. But the tonal and chromatic relationships became paramount. In addition I introduced the continuous brush marks that surround the edge of the form and which create, through their relationship to light, a sort of bas-relief to the painting. This makes for a more complex and less reconcilable figure/ground relationship and encourages the viewer to play a more physically active role in viewing the paintings.

From quite early on I started to include metallic colours as part of my palette and noticed how much more play with light I could achieve. At a certain point, around the year 2006 I think, I started to add metallic colours in varying degrees to every mix I made and have continued to do this until very recently. I see this lustrous effect as being both seductive and disconcerting as it draws you into the painting but then disallows you from having only one point of viewing the painting, both literally and figuratively.

In the last year I have reintroduced some unmixed colours without metallics to certain paintings. But this is just a continuation of my own research into the qualities of reflection and absorption of light I want to draw attention to.

4. The illuminative quality this metallic pigment gives the surface can be visually arresting! At one moment it is reflective and so seems to have a solidity and impenetrability, as if the surface is made of something substantial, but to move by degrees around the work this shifts into a more en-shadowed tone and appears void-like, expansive and ethereal.

The differentiating factor often seems to be the directional flow of the brush marks which, like a butterfly wing, makes the light behave in beguiling ways. This seems to mirror the way in which the elliptical forms themselves have a duplicity of perception. This positive/negative polarity seems to underpin much of your work.

Yes this is all true. When I started to make paintings using variations of the elliptical form with repetitions of small semi-ellipses around their edge I became aware of how the placement and scale of these forms within the dimensions of the canvas set up a number of oppositional elements – figure/ground, near/far, large/small, light/dark, sharp/soft, concealed/revealed, open/closed etc. The multiplicity and interaction of these contrasts, coupled with the scale and direction of the brushmarks, creates a complexity within what seems at first glance a relatively simple form in space.

This complexity was further enhanced by the introduction of metallic paints and a more precise recognition on my part of how a different intensity, direction and type of light can alter the way the painting looks to dramatic effect. This is of course further emphasised by where we stand in relation to the canvas. Positive and negative areas becomes more ambiguous or contingent on our bodily position.

5. I also understand you build up the paintings using several layers of colour. I was interested to know if there was a similarity to the way in which guilders work whereby they will use a black, red or green ground underneath the gold as it has such a low tinting strength. Presumably there will also be some textural quality discernible from the preceding brush work?

I build the paintings up in several layers, usually four, including a base colour using earth reds, greens or ochres. This was initially to provide a mid-tone opaque base from which to work. The following layers are always made up of paints without any additives or thinners, so relatively opaque and dense, but never impasto. As I started to use metallic colours more regularly I perceived that these colours were affected by these earth ground colours in a very subtle way and looked more into the way guilders use such underlying colours.

All my paintings, whether large or small in format, are made up of methodically applied, regular brush marks, and underlying layers certainly are subtly discernible. This gives the paintings a textural quality and also confuses somewhat our perception of where exactly is the painting's surface, another aspect of my wish to disrupt our sense of certainty.

6. In many of your paintings however, you use strikingly brilliant opaque colours which, as you say, do not have a metallic content and so absorb light in a dense, flat manner. This creates an almost “portal” like effect, as if one could step through into a deeper space beyond the immediate

surface of the foreground. Could you talk a bit about how you make decisions regarding your use of colour? The way a particular colour sits alongside another seems to exert an enormous effect on the sense of space and depth contained within the picture plane.

My initial choice of colours usually comes from seeing two colours next to, or in close proximity to, each other somewhere. This juxtaposition can be from any source – inside, outside, the urban or natural environment - such as two cars passing in the street, two books on a shelf, the sky seen through branches... Thus my colours are mostly taken from the physical world around me rather than from images. As I am writing this, I am on a train and a passenger in front of me is reading a newspaper of lemon yellow colour with grey print and he is wearing an orange/scarlet scarf. Strong sunlight is hitting the scarf, whereas the newspaper is in shade, so its also the contrast in tone and saturation that is important. Such combinations jump out at me so that I am not concerned with what they belong to but how they stimulate me as colours.

I keep a sort of mental library of these colour combinations. In the realisation of a painting my process can work both ways. Sometimes I decide first on the form or forms I am going to use and then draw on this bank of colours to decide which ones to use. Or conversely I know I want to use two (more recently three) colours together and I think of the appropriate elliptical form for this. I want to stress at this point that much of what I do in relation to colour is actually intuitive, or trial and error, so although there is a great deal of planning at the drawing stages, the colours are assessed and re-tuned at each layer in a sort of dialogue I have with the painting, and I make many discoveries for myself along the way.

I want to create depth and space which is ambiguous and intangible while also accentuating the physical and surface qualities of the painting, so the decisions I make about the hue, tone, saturation, absorption and reflection of each colour are paramount in attaining this ambiguity.

7. One device you use very often in your compositions is the repetition of an identical geometric shape. These will be centred perfectly within the picture plane and acts almost as a diptych... What is the attraction to this particular format?

In 1982 I was awarded the Boise Travelling Scholarship from the Slade School to spend two months in Japan to look closely at Japanese gardens. This was an extraordinary experience for me which had a profound impact on the development of my work. In one of the Zen dry gardens a small raked sand mound was created which referenced, and echoed, a mountain which could be seen beyond the wall and in the distance. At a certain point the

mound and the mountain could be viewed together, the mountain exactly above the mound, and, because of the rules of perspective, the mountain appeared to be exactly the same size as the mound if seen as if on a two dimensional plane. This struck me as being remarkable and beautiful, both conceptually and visually. It is a phenomenon that I have continued to play with in my use of the double motif. However I sometimes place these two identical, or near identical forms, side by side, rather than one above the other, and sometimes these are inverted either horizontally or vertically or both. These are devices which refer to ideas of the original and the copy, twinning, duplicating, mirroring, oppositional positions etc and invite the viewer to be physically active in their relationship with my paintings.

In 2002 I curated an exhibition at the John Hansard Gallery in Southampton titled 'Once Again' on the theme of the double in art. This was predicated on a painting in Tate Britain called the Cholmondeley Ladies, a painting which has captivated me for years. There seems to be a human fascination with seeing the same, or nearly the same, thing twice, conjuring possible thoughts about double-vision, double-trouble, double-take, déjà-vu, double-entendre. In various ways one form qualifies the other and being side by side, or one on top of the other, they confront us, the viewers, in their alliance, compromising us physically, optically and emotionally in a somewhat uneven three-way relationship.

In recent years I have painted a number of actual diptychs (also triptychs and quadriptychs) which allow me to play more with the direction of the brushmarks and how these affect the tonal relationships of one panel to another. This further enhances the instability and dynamism at odds with the static symmetry, or near symmetry, of the drawn shapes, something I strive for in all my work.

8. It's also interesting to note, in light of your time in Japan, the way in which you surround each geometric form with a continuous pulled brush mark... This is very reminiscent of the way gravel is raked around the rocks and other objects in Japanese dry gardens... Is there something about the manner in which you manipulate the paint in terms of brush work that seeks to be evocative of these Zen actions?

In earlier paintings and watercolours, after my return from Japan, I attempted to represent these raked rock 'mountains' by making images of cone-shaped forms, made up of regular repeated brush marks, placed within surrounding areas of the same type of repeating marks. In this way the cones were embedded within their surroundings and hardly perceptible. When I moved away from this more literal representation I found a more interesting way for myself to refer to this act of raking with its need for

discipline and control. I sought to create a similar visual quality by drawing attention to subtle light and shade contrasts and the simultaneous perception of three-dimensional forms and planes in perspective.

My response to a new idea or visual experience is like a magpie swooping and stealing whatever takes its fancy. If it is something that has longer lasting appeal I will then follow this up with more research into the subject, which is what I did following my initial attraction to the way Zen gardens look. But I've never attempted to get into the mind of their makers. It's more a recognition of an activity which appeals on a personal level and this particular activity impressed me because it is so extreme in its particularity: rigorous, methodical, meticulous, repetitive, hand-crafted with a hand-tool, of a certain pace, restrained in expression.

9. I'd also like to ask you about your recent body of wood cuts... This is a departure from painting, can you talk about why you decided to start experimenting with this process and how they relate to your broader practice?

I've actually only made one wood-cut print, a diptych titled 'Gleamers Silver'. It's only in the past few years that I have been introduced to the possibility of printmaking, which began with an invitation by the Royal Academy to make an embossed screen-print in 2012. I still feel a complete novice and am still trying to discover which process suits my requirements best. With the other mediums that I have used throughout my professional life - oil paint, watercolour and pencil - I have sought to understand what the particular qualities are of each medium that are important and relevant to my practice. So with printmaking I want to find a specificity of this medium which extends my practice, not just provides me with a way to reproduce my painting, watercolour or drawing techniques.

For me, the aspect of printmaking which I am perhaps surprisingly most attracted to is the possibility to create an even, flat surface, clearly defined forms and seductive colour combinations. I'm a huge fan of the screen-prints of Patrick Caulfield and Josef Albers and also various traditional Japanese wood-cuts so these are probably the two methods I will explore further.

10. I understand the design is laser cut into the block? The expedience of this is clear, but as the art of wood cutting is so deeply engrained in Japanese culture, I wondered if the more tactile activity of tooling the block by hand appeals to you? It seems to require a similar level of attentiveness as your other pursuits...

I'm not sure about this, but I have to admit I've never tried. The aspect of

printmaking I have most enjoyed in the few attempts I have made has been working with printmaking professionals. I have found this 'handing over' of certain responsibilities and phases of the process to my collaborators a completely new and somewhat thrilling, if quite scary, experience. I admire printmakers and their level of attentiveness enormously but I don't think I am 'in love' with the process in the same way that I am with handling a paintbrush or a pencil. I guess that's why I chose painting from an early age. I would add however that I have discovered how important it is to be present at each stage of the printmaking process to discuss the fine details.

Also, I was very excited when the idea of the laser cutting was introduced, both for the woodcut and the embossed screen-print. Its precision is exquisite and for me to be able to make use of such a technologically advanced process has been a great and pleasurable surprise, considering my usual traditional materials and processes.