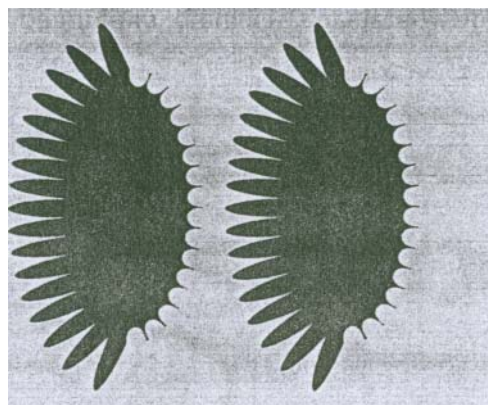# Jane Harris

by Keith Patrick

The work of Jane Harris is characterised by paradox and contradiction. In the first place, any would-be self-importance is undermined by a wilful playfulness, a reference to the absurdity of painting as evidenced here by the constant repetition of the ubiquitous - and meaningless - ellipse. Under sustained analysis, however, these forms yield an infinite series of subtle variations, while their crimped edges frequently imply a shift from the passive to the dynamic: the contained and containing profile of an implosion versus the liberating expansion of an explosion. Thus the initial, almost Oriental, impression of formal balance and harmony is quickly disturbed, knocked out of kilter by a conceptual asymmetry.

Moreover, this asymmetry has an unsettling effect on the pictorial space. What is at first unequivocally full-frontal is pushed into perspective, the ellipse now reading as a circle seen edgewise on a receding plane, or, as is more clearly demonstrated in the drawings, a gaping hole with jagged edges. All of which is in contradistinction to the evenly measured brushstrokes. Their meditative pace belies any suggestion of violence,

and their status as material objects in their own right re-establishes the dominance of the picture plane.

Such painterly games, of course, have their genesis in Cezanne and reach an apotheosis with cubism. Like the oval-framed still lifes of Braque, the many complexities of Harris's paintings demand time, the contradictory readings building together towards a conceptual whole. But then again, the nuances of momentary perception - in particular-the play of ambient light on the delicate patterns left by the brush - are of equal importance. As we shift our position, so the light dissolves and

regroups the image, highlighting a previously unseen edge here, inverting a tonal relationship there.

Only once we are drawn in by this seduction do the constructional complexities begin to reveal themselves, forming a kind of marquetry in which the meeting points of simple passages are interlayered in such a way that their confluence becomes inextricable. There is some comparison here with Therese Oulton's techniques for knitting the paint, and yet the craft-as-feminine reading is notably absent. These forms are androgynous: not sexless exactly, but dispossessed of gender and certainly dispossessed of gender politics.

Also, while these paintings may appear to be about process, they do not easily give up their histories even on close inspection. What appears to be a hint of under-painting - a clue to the work's development - turns out to be a trick of the light or the uneven settling of pigment in the traces left by individual bristles on an opaque surface. And to try unlocking the sequence of strokes that weave the edges of forms together is to descend into an Escher-like paradox without beginning or end.

Predictably, Harris is uninterested in the Barthes-inspired conundrum of the authorless mark which has led many painters of late to depersonalise and overtly expose the making process. For another paradox of Harris's work lies in the relationship between the apparently mechanical repetitiveness of her process and the fluid self-confidence of the individual brushmarks. While these are not finely nuanced as per Greenberg's reading of modernist painting, neither do they fight shy of the maker's touch.

This exhibition brought together twenty recent works in the semi-domestic setting of the Galerie Hollenbach. Despite the imposing architecture of this late-Jugendstil building, and despite the almost frivolous, tongue-incheek decorativeness of Harris's painting, these works proved remarkably robust and self-contained, and quite the equal of their surroundings.

Jane Harris was at the Galerie Hollenbach, Stuttgart, 23 March - 11 May

above *left:*
JANE HARRIS,
Untitled Drawing, 1999,
pencil on paper, 56 x 76 cm.
Photo: Peter White. Courtesy:
the artist

below left:
JANE HARRIS,
Skirt, 1999,
oil on canvas, 183 x 244 cm.
Photo: Peter White.
Courtesy: the artist