

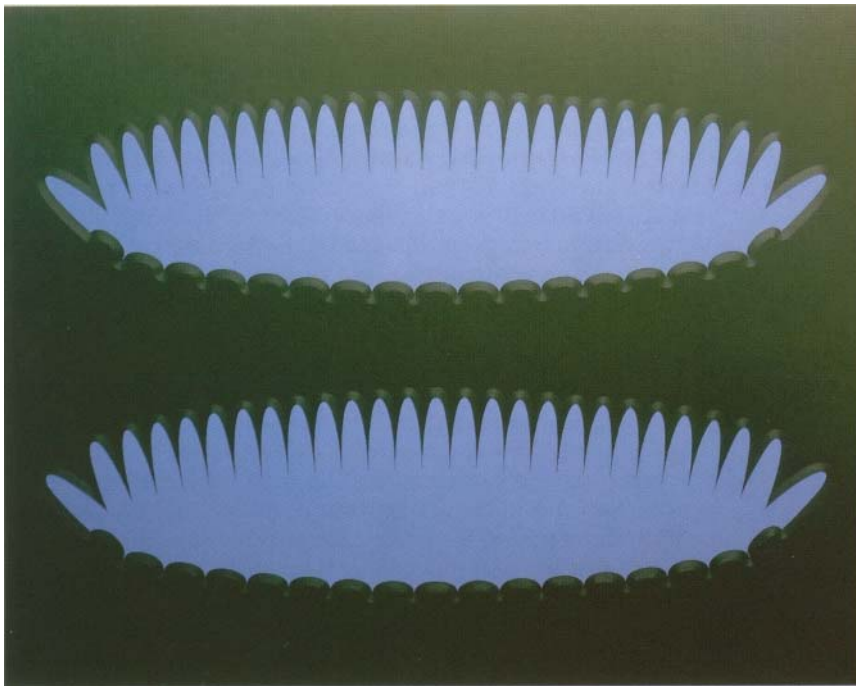
# Playing It Pure

Jane Harris and Jeremy Moon - two abstract painters

Like novels without the letter 'e' and poems written by mathematical formulae, Jane Harris's almost kinkily ascetic paintings are about the fertile pleasures of constraint. Harris typically restricts herself to painting fringed ellipses, using only two colours per painting. Around the ellipses are ciliated, splash-like edges composed of sharp crimps, like classic Coke bottle caps, or blunter tongue-like forms, which can alternate in reciprocal blocks of varying ratio. It could all be a bit sterile (like the products of a popular graphic toy I had as a child, the 'Spirograph', which overlapped endless regular arcs with a complexity that was ultimately rather depressing), but in practice Harris's luxuriantly uptight work is more than satisfying.

direction in very regular vertical or horizontal brushwork, which is repetitive to the point where, in *Croshe*, the long brown ovoid is built by plaiting the brushstrokes, so that it stands out by its separate texture against a field of almost the same colour. The figure and plain ground of *Rumba Bumba* are enhanced, almost created, by the directional brushstrokes with which the two nearly identical shades of brown oil paint have been pushed around on the surface. The browns are raw umber and burnt umber, and the neatly perfect wit of the title lends the whole thing a kind of confectionery anality.

Harris's paintings often seem to have the transcendental impulse of religious art, with the pale blue on pale grey of



Jane Harris, *Pine*, 1999, oil on canvas, 193 x 244 cm

Harris's paintings are not so much 'abstract' as inscrutable, like pictures of unknown objects from some other order of existence. But however purist their mathematical generation may have been, the demon of analogy dances around in front of them offering visual connotations from the real world, sometimes helped by titles such as *Skirt. Bloody Mary* (2000) carries a charge of almost Pop excitement, created by its large scale and the retinally intoxicating op-art zing of its resonant red on blue. This intoxication is helped along by the dizzying effect of the discontinuous perimeter, which the eye tends to roll around on without finding anywhere to settle. And simultaneously it suggests a bloody splat, or even a hole, in a field of Virgin Mary blue.

The much calmer and more meditative canvas *Pine* (1998-9) has a strongly illusory and biomorphic appearance, its two ellipses looking like circular forms seen at a low angle. They look, in fact, remarkably like a pair of fleshy waterlily leaves floating on a surface, until - being brighter in figure than ground - suddenly you see them as lit holes or crater tops.

An apparent tone variation is often created by a third

*Bliss*, or a title like *Alter Piece* [sic], which is, of course, as much about optical alterity as anything else - but it co-exists with something more sensuous, akin to the erotics of the notorious *Silk Cut* advert. On the one hand these paintings are perfectionist and otherworldly - Platonic, Cartesian, anorexic or what have you - and on the other they are earthly luxurious, and given to discreet double entendres and hermeneutic come-ons. The crown-edged figure/ground ambiguities can be like icon halos, or orifices, mounted on the surface or leading through it, as in the waterlily/craters of *Pine* or the central black hole of *Cul noir* (not in this show, but in the prior catalogue which accompanies it), the title of which is explained - slightly disingenuously - to be a breed of pig and a type of pottery.

The pencil-on-paper works in the present show disclose Harris's formal *modus operandi* in even more ascetic and almost diagrammatic form. While the paintings tend to have connotational titles, the drawings are titled by their reciprocal equations: 3:21, for example, has 21 sharp points fringing each side, and three blunter tongues at each end, alternating

eyelash spikiness with barrage-balloon bluntness. 22:36, restful in its repetition, is so evenly pencilled that its surface seems to have been silvered over with graphite. Others are lighter, the texture of the paper coming through to give them a napped surface. The drawings, even more than the paintings, remind us that these works are not abstracted from the real world but generated outside it in their own mathematical realm. Strict rules have become a generative principle that operates safely outside the dilemmas of subject matter and the impurities of the contingent world. Both drawings and paintings arrest and pleasurably delay the eye, while their oblique inscrutability remains elliptic in more ways than one.

An impulse towards a slightly playful purity is also a driving force in Jeremy Moon's paintings, along with a half-suppressed but still inescapable relationship with the world of connotation and analogy. Between 1962 and his death in 1973 following a motorcycle accident, Moon painted large, bright, geometrical, abstract canvases of great simplicity and ingenuity, each one designed in a compositional attempt to crystallise some irreducibly 'right' effect on the canvas. *Hoop La* (1965) sets five blue circles in motion across the upper half of a red ground, three of them cut by the edge of the canvas, with an implication of a larger circle and a suggestion of an arc that a juggler might have set in motion. *Japan* (1971) bears

Moon is not an artist who could say 'I do not seek, I find'. Very experimental and very planned, these works are palpably sought in a way that is almost striving. Moon would - while watching television or listening to modern jazz - plan his works in crayon miniatures, rejecting more designs than ever reached the painting stage, while at the same time doodling 'cars, motorbikes and extreme female footwear'.

The quest for innovation and novelty sometimes led Moon to use what might be described as gimmicks: *Untitled No. 12* (1973) stacks what look like four coloured rectangles on top of each other without fully overlapping them. This illusion is assisted by a jaggedly shaped canvas, as it is in other works such as *Golden Section* (1968), which seems to fold a preexisting grid over on itself. At its less novel, Moon's painting can be strongly akin to applied art, particularly modern fabric design. *Untitled No. 3* (1972) recalls a stripey city shirt (although the white vertical lines on a pink canvas are, in fact, broad pink lines on a white ground - but so what?) A few days before seeing this exhibition I talked to a man in a secondhand bookshop whose truly spectacular tie was a pretty close preview of Moon's *Untitled No. 7* (1970), its luminous squares of colour warmly and delicately arranged in a thick grid recalling stained glass. Play with grid and ground is particularly successful in *Ice Palace* (1970), where the effect of a green

Jeremy A loon, *Untitled No. -*, 1970, acrylic on canvas, 153 x 188 cm

a less obvious relation to its title, with five black horizontals and seven orange verticals on a cream ground. Although Moon's work seems to reject the calculated and fiddly quality of full-blown Op, the black horizontals of *Japan* seem cut or recessed, with - to my boggling eye at least - a complementary optical suggestion of a quilted bulging in the cream squares.

Moon's painting has a sideways relation to aspects of Pop, Op and Minimalism, and his work can sometimes feel a bit like Pop's higher-minded sibling. Teatime seems to have been allowed into the gallery with *Battenburg* (1968), its brown, pink and green squares divided by a yellow grid, while even the jet-bomberish arrow shape of *Yellow Flight* (1967) is less evocative than its colours: a grey and yellow striping suggestive of hazard warnings, jump suits and aircraft carrier flight decks. For all its notional purity, the scale and dynamism of a work like *Yellow Flight* still has an affinity with a Pop world of targets, road signs and giant badges: all the things that Keith Vaughan hated so much about the art of the period ('toffee wrappers, liquorice allsorts and ton-up motor bikes') are not so much absent from Moon's work as sublimated into it.

grid on a black ground is produced by black triangles on a green ground, the trick being less interesting than the visual satisfaction produced by the regularity and the cool, almost 'luminous watch' shade of green.

First glance thoughts of a strongly period look to Moon's art are soon replaced by a real retinal pleasure and an admiration for Moon's ingenuity and judgement in composition. 'Exuberant', 'carefree', 'fresh', 'freewheeling' (adjectives courtesy of catalogue): no doubt Moon's bright acrylic art is all of these things, but it might also be seen as a touch obsessional, lightened up by the affective qualities of the colours chosen and the sometimes playful tiling. The voluntary restrictions of the grid form and a certain carefulness of effect give Moon's paintings less grandiosity and existential heroics than some of the things that were going on in American abstraction. Moon is revealed here, perhaps, to be an unexpectedly English artist, but none the worse for that.

'Jane Harris: New Paintings and Drawings', until 25 March, Southampton Art Gallery. 'Jeremy Moon: A Retrospective', until 7 April, Harris Museum & Art Gallery, Preston.

