

AT THE EDGE OF THINGS

Engrailed, invecked: it would be easier to talk about Jane Harris's painting if we all knew the language of heraldry, and especially the names that heraldry gives to various kinds of edge. In her pictures, the central form is always an oval shape " sometimes two " lying on a plain ground. But the edges of these ovals aren't smooth. They fluctuate. They're the kind of edges you might do if you were drawing a cloud, or a choppy wave, or a bite in a piece of toast " a series of arcs and peaks. And when the arcs bulge convexly, as with a cloud, heraldry calls this edge invecked. When they're scooped concavely, as with a toast bite, the edge is called engrailed.

An ellipse, invecked or engrailed, or a bit of both, is the device that Jane Harris has been using for over 10 years. (She is in her late forties.) It sustains the six beautiful paintings now in her show, *Divine*, at Hales Gallery in east London. But just to name it, or to see reproductions, hardly gives an idea of the variations and intensities that this visual theme affords. It can generate shapes of utterly different character and impact. It produces a wealth of force and feeling. But to give you a sense of its effects, I need to describe some more.

Basic variables. The governing ovals may be round or thin. The concave and convex arcs that go round them may be wide or narrow, deep or shallow. They provide a repertoire of gentle humps, fretty teeth, elongated lobes, near bubbles, fingers, petals, tabs, leaves, tongues, lashes, railings, flames, sunrays, bounces, puffs, twirls.

You get an edge that's serrated, or viscous, or radiant, or spongy, or frilly. You get dramatic changes of tempo and gesture as the arcs go round, a jumpy dance between one side of the ellipse and the other, or absurd incongruities. And these feelings are involved with other kinds of visual business.

For example, there is an ongoing border-negotiation between the complicated oval and its surrounding area. A pressure that goes outwards and inwards along the contour, with a sense of invasion, encroachment, resistance, enclosure, containment, withdrawal, snuggling... There's a continuing uncertainty about whether the oval is a positive or a negative shape, a solid form lying against a background, or a gap that is cut out of it, island or lake, profile or aperture... There's ambiguity in whether this oval is simply a flat oval shape, or rather something circular " a biscuit-cutter, a flying saucer " seen at an oblique angle, introducing a perception of depth and receding space into the picture, and further questions about whether the thing is grounded or up in the air... And there's also ambiguity in whether you see the oval as a static configuration, or as a dynamic event, a splash, an explosion, a flowering or mushrooming, a steady ring of fire...

All of these points are further modified and intensified by the paint, which is not laid, as you may be thinking, in uniform, even fields. The canvas is densely worked, filled, inlaid, meticulously adorned with its paint, the brushstrokes applied like sheets of gold leaf, making a replete and immaculate surface. Each picture has basically two colours, one for the oval and one for the area, colours that may be starkly contrasted, or almost indistinguishable (and if the oval occurs twice, each one will not be quite the same colour). The colours themselves are often metallic, gold and silver paint and tints of russet bronze among saturated yellows and blues, bringing an armoured gleam to the surface, and a shifting reflectivity.

Meanwhile, the disputed border between oval and area is outlined with a single, broad, continuous brushstroke that steers round its ins and outs, its spikes and cusps, hugs this shore like a hairpin-bending hemline, or a stream of cake icing, fortifying, ornamenting.

I'm doing this in some detail to give an idea of the sheer activity and inter-activity in Harris's pictures, because that's where the business is.

Abstract painting has been around for a hundred years, but we still seem to have difficulty believing it. We want to know what is really going on, to have a clue, a key to the mystery, some titbit from the artist's life, some philosophical or religious ideas, a symbolic programme, a hidden imagery that lurks beneath the forms, a sense that something is, after all, being depicted or expressed.

Well, Harris's pictures are very happy to look like all kinds of things.

They are, in a way, an impure kind of abstraction. Their fluctuating oval device can suggest a mandala, a decorated egg, a starburst price-tag, a doily, a thought-bubble. It can resemble sundry bodily orifices, or a flower, a gas-ring, a fountain. In fact, the form was originally developed from images of fountains, for what that fact is worth. Not much, I think. I mean, I'd be delighted to make high-minded remarks about fountains, if that were the answer, but it isn't. There isn't anything that they're all really of or about, deep down. On the contrary, the point about Harris's invecked/engrailed oval is that it is a resourceful pictorial instrument.

From painting to painting, it can suggest a silhouette, a symbol, a sign, a motif " and these associations are only an element in the total performance of each work, and that is where the resourcefulness really shows.

A Harris picture can be cerebral, or carnal, or ethereal. Jig , for example, enacts a tight and witty game with the disparities of its shapes, so extreme you'd hardly guess there was an oval governing them at all. This is the conceptual end of things, where the attention is on patterns and their play and breakdown. But the work can become transfixingly sensational, imbuing its shapes with tangible feeling, a sense of cut and overlap and succulence that you could put your finger on; or again " and at the same time " with a glaring optical outburst, or an

invitation to visual depths, such as you find in Light Resister, blue in blue, with its view through to a sky/water distance.

The tone can turn on a sixpence. Knife-edge violence is trimmed with prettiness. Divine is an unfolding cloud or mouth of teeth, rich white within a field of pale gold. It is grand and evanescent and, indeed, a godly presence, in a burning-bush kind of way.

So the language speaks, and in many voices. Restless-minded as I am, I find it quite hard to come to terms with the way that some artists confine themselves. How can they be content to do basically the same thing, over and over again? It stumps me, at the same time as I can see its rewards.

Harris's painting retains a strictness to the end. Whatever else it does, it has its governing oval forms, its template edges, its symmetries and repetitions. You're always aware that it is playing to rules. It is painting that, when you talk about it, sounds like a painstaking elaboration of a single idea; and when you've finished looking at it, feels like an art with all its stops out.

Jane Harris: Divine, Hales Gallery, Tea Building, 7 Bethnal Green Road, London E1 (020-7033 1938; www.halesgallery.com), to 4 June, Thursday, Friday and Saturday, or by appointment