

ELLIPTICAL ILLUSIONS

At a time when anything from beds to body parts can become art, it may seem unusual to take up painting and resolutely stick with it. For 20 years, though, Jane Harris has done just that. For the last 10, she's even focused on the same subject - a limited choice of two or three colours and an arrangement of two elliptical shapes.

After leaving the Slade in 1981, Harris spent two months in Japan studying Japanese gardens, and expanded her existing interest in geometric shapes by incorporating elements of formal garden design. A second MA in 1991, when conceptual art was dominant, encouraged her to adopt a more rigorous approach to painting rather than dissuade her from it. It was there that the use of the ellipse (oval) triggered the line of painterly enquiry she's been exploring ever since.

"I first started painting because I knew I was quite good at it," Harris explains, "and I've continued because I've never stopped wanting to paint better. At college I admired abstract painters like Mondrian, Albers and Rothko, but the interest in abstract forms, and eventually the ellipse, came from that childhood love of drawing shapes with a ruler and pencil and filling them in."

Painting elliptical pairs may sound simple, but Harris' delicate attention to design and composition, layering of colour, use of brushmark and choice of title mean the visual effect is anything but. Resonating colour combinations come from memories of colours observed from everyday life. Small directional brushstrokes are built up in layers, so that as your eye moves across the surface, it shimmers as the light bounces off at different angles. The

titles chosen don't just relate to the elliptical shape, but have more than one literal meaning.

Well Well (pictured) has two blue shapes surrounded by red. It could be about surprise, but it could equally be two pools of water. Pine is painted in dark green and two shades of blue. The visual association implies looking through pine trees at the sky. But 'pine' can also mean longing, and one shape is painted below the other - perhaps trying to move towards it. "I'm also interested in the rhythmic relationship of sound to image," Harris adds. "Mium Mium is a painting based on the two colours of cadmium used - Cadmium Green and Cadmium Orange. The title relates to the paint, but its sound relates to the idea of something tasty."

Having had her work seen in three solo and nine group exhibitions last year, Harris is part of the artworld notion that good painting is now very much in vogue.

"The popularity of painting always comes and goes," Harris explains, "but maybe people always go back to it because it's such an endlessly flexible medium, with as much scope for conceptual ideas as any other. The possibilities of paint really are endless."

*Jane Harris' work can be seen in the group show *Mathematique* from Feb 2-Mar 17 at Danielle Arnaud, 123 Kennington Rd, London SE11 (020-77358292). Fri-Sun 2-6pm, free.*

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