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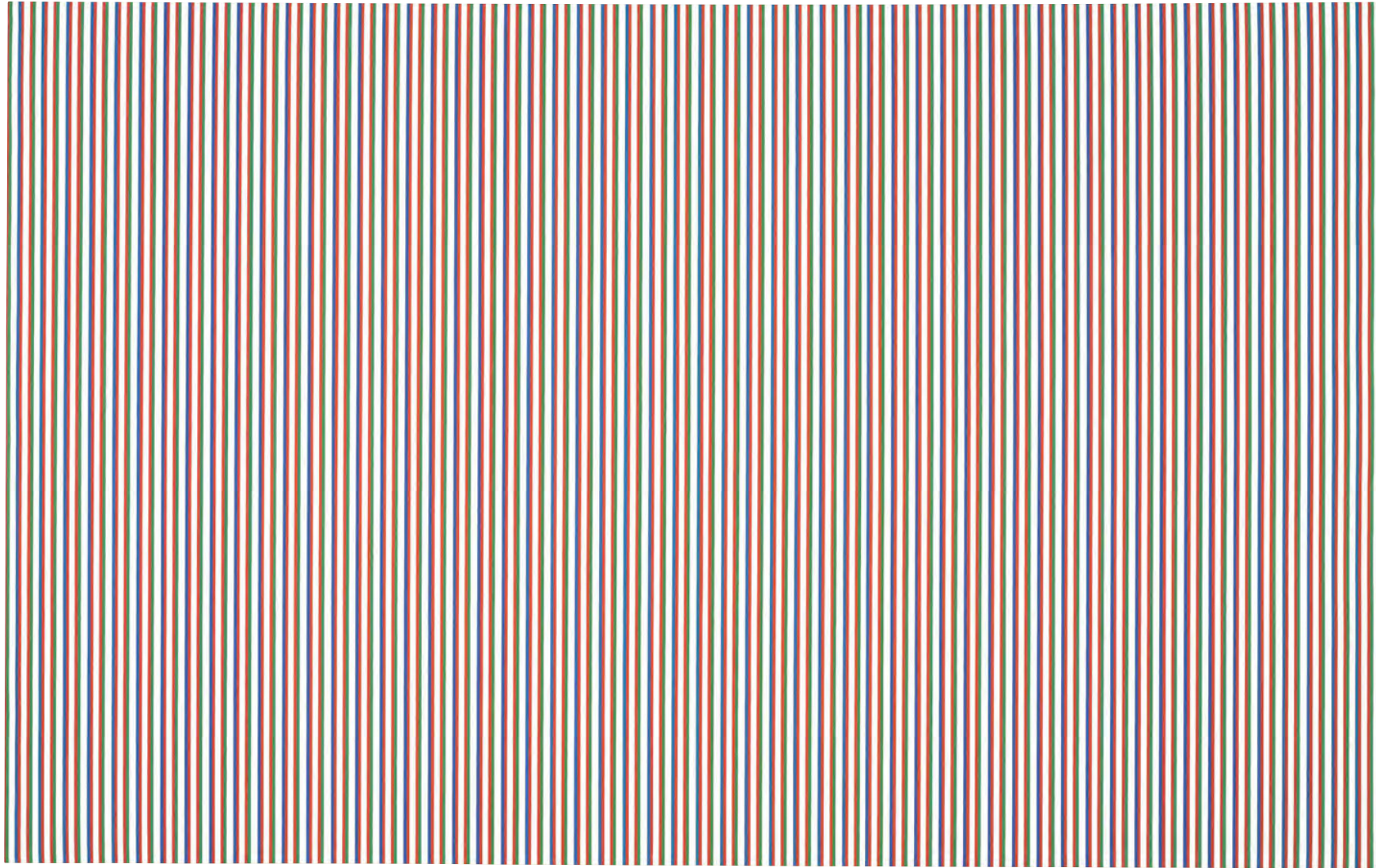
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Bracewell, Michael: Seeing Bridget Riley

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Seeing Bridget Riley

by
Michael
Bracewell

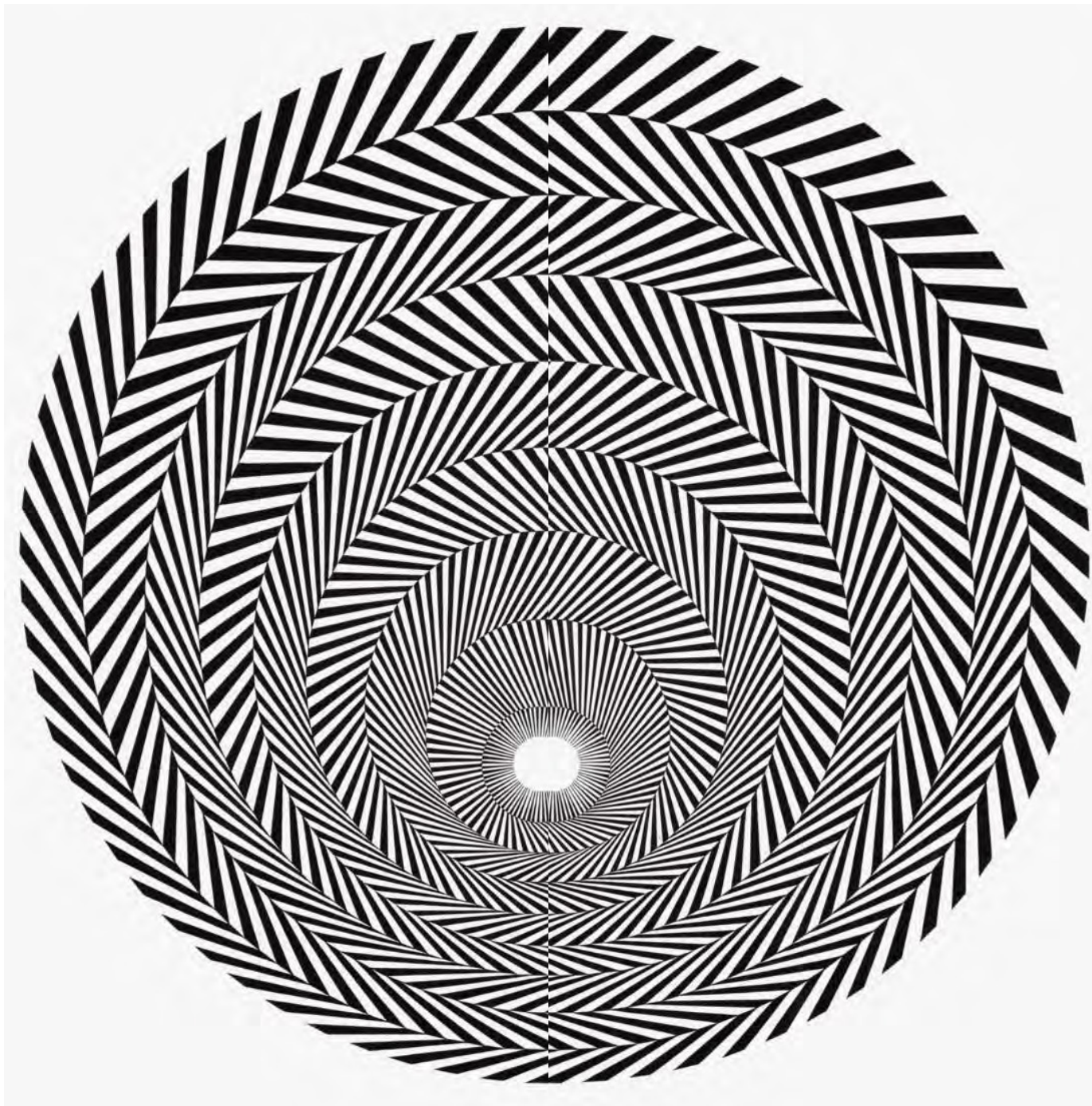


At 88, BRIDGET RILEY is owning her late great moment. With one major retrospective behind her and another on the way, collectors and critics alike are rapt with attention. No longer exclusively associated with the often gimmicky world of Op Art, she is now being hailed

as a worthy successor to the Impressionists—like them, Riley deals in the mystery of human perception.

Here, her long-time confidant *Michael Bracewell* explains how it's the works that do the work and what it means to “really see” Riley

Bridget Riley in front of her painting JUSTINIAN, 1988
Oil on canvas, 165 × 226 cm
First spread: LATE MORNING, 1967–1968
Acrylic emulsion on canvas, 226 × 359 cm



BLAZE 4, 1964
Emulsion on hardboard, 109 × 109 cm

Within the vast oblong of the painting's surface area, a myriad of vertical lines creates a scintillating effect akin to animation. Before the viewer's gaze, these areas of movement begin to drift and reconstellate, forming shimmering wave patterns and suddenly vivacious columns of rapidly shuttling sideways motion. The sensory impact of these impressions, the restless mechanism that has come to life inside the work, first engages and then subsumes the viewer's capacity to reason visually or intellectually. Studied longer, the painting's inner agitation appears to actually spar and play with the viewer's gaze. Its movement dances, fragments, multiplies, and then regroup; the painting is filled with what appears to be a joyous sentience of its own, alert and exuberant with life.

The work in question is *Late Morning*, made by Bridget Riley between 1967 and 1968. It is one of her earlier color paintings, and is comprised of systematically alternating lines of red, white, green, and blue. From the viewer's first encounter with the painting, its composition appears simultaneously complex and simple. *Late Morning* is a large work: the painting confronts the viewer with the visual equivalent of a momentous symphonic chord; and this sense of scale, as becomes immediately apparent, does much to intensify the unyielding rigidity of its compositional and aesthetic machinery. The narrow vertical lines are at once muscular and delicate: what might be termed their internal discipline turns out to be the agent of their liberation. The multilayered rhythm of their order begins to perform its visual effect in a manner very similar to that of the accumulating systems and layers of sound that are created by baroque or serial music—in the compositions of Johann Sebastian Bach or Steve Reich, for example. In their visual virtuosity, the colors and composition of *Late Morning* share the musical capacity to refine independent harmonic drones and overtones from the intricate interplay of densely repeated and slightly varying notes.

I have known Riley since the late 1990s, and toward the end of August this year I went with her to visit her major retrospective exhibition at the Royal Scottish Academy in Edinburgh. A version of the show will transfer to London's Hayward Gallery in the autumn. Now in her late 80s, Riley remains almost tirelessly active, both in her studio and in overseeing all aspects of the presentation (and preservation) of her work.

What delights her most is to see the public engaging with her art—"Really looking!" as she puts it, with infectiously cheerful enthusiasm; and as we made our way around the rooms of the museum, she was recognized, approached, and congratulated by a succession of visitors to the exhibition, old and young. An American student of computer science, a group of German tourists, a man whose intensely visceral experience of the paintings he feels he just has to explain to her, two women who simply want to know how she keeps her color within the lines—to each she unfailingly gives her time and her sincere

thanks. A very private individual, the "public" Bridget Riley has always had fans—thousands of people wanting to look at her dazzling, compelling art. It's all about looking and seeing, and the distance between those two activities.

Initially brought to prominence by the Op Art movement during the first half of the 1960s, Riley's work has been aesthetically and art-historically iconic for almost 50 years. Unlike the work of many Op Art artists, however, Bridget Riley's "enquiries" (a term she favors to describe both her methods and her motivation) have always been less related to the psychology of ocular effect, and more to the evolving artistic relationships between looking, seeing, and representation, as developed from the 19th to the 20th century through Impressionism and abstract art.

In this, Riley is engaged in a career-long process of visual understanding, resolving through successive works a cumulative synthesis of questioning and discovery. In a manner akin to Gustave Flaubert's profound dedication during the middle years of the 19th century to the refinement of literary style—an attitude which for the novelist was part credo, part tireless application to the exhausting demands of craft—Riley's artistic inquiry aims to achieve the seamless and fluent translation of personal experience into the universal language of art. In such an endeavor, to borrow Flaubert's definition: "The artist must be like God in the universe, present everywhere and visible nowhere." Indeed, Flaubert might have hardened his maxim to propose that the artist should be not simply invisible but "present nowhere" within the universe they create in their work. For in the case of Bridget Riley's artistic creed, the creative act is of necessity a process that demands the complete occlusion of the artist's personal presence.

In an essay on Riley's career and working methods, John Elderfield summarized the extent of this demand. Charting the astonishing developments in Riley's art in the early 1960s, he observed: "The breakthrough did not come until 1961, under curious circumstances, but when it came it brought with it an emphatic rejection of materiality and, with it, of objecthood. A logical consequence of this, taken as a matter of course, was to remove her own physical presence from the creation of her finished paintings, using assistants instead. [As of this time, Riley herself has not painted one of her finished paintings for 40 years.] This may seem extreme; but now, as she says, 'perception is the medium, not the canvas and the paint.'"

The viewer can stand before Riley's *Late Morning*, therefore, a little over 40 years since the work's completion, and experience for themselves the artist's radical and bravura achievement. The effect of the work is at once immediate and inscrutable, allowing no single point upon the painting's vertiginous surface where the gaze can rest and take bearings. Rather, as Riley has made a medium of perception, the viewer experiences the finished work as both that which is seen and as an act of seeing.

REVUE

Bridget Riley

This experience might be underpinned, intellectually, by an art-historical knowledge of the work's creative etymology, so to speak—of the sequences of thought and inquiry, response and reaction, that brought the artist to this particular point in her work. Riley's studies for her paintings reveal the meticulous precision with which each work evolves out of a succession of minutely plotted technical drawings, often made on finely ruled graph paper. As can be seen, for example, from *Study for 'Blaze'* (1962), these preliminary works and sketches possess a delicacy that makes eloquent the tentative, searching, and repeatedly tested steps by which each work becomes fluent in its own language. From these proceed the sensory and emotional impact of the completed painting itself, and the wholly autonomous manner in which the work absorbs the viewer's engagement into the visceral systems of its aesthetic circuitry. Questioning becomes certainty. In her *Painting Now* lecture, delivered at London's Slade School of Fine Art in the autumn of 1996, Riley quoted from the last journal entry of Eugène Delacroix, written shortly before he died: "It is the first duty of a painting to be a feast for the eyes."

Such an intention seems clearly central to Riley's art, and has perhaps been the mainstay of her art-making since her first works were exhibited in the late 1950s and early 1960s. *Movement in Squares* (1961) is a founding example of the dramatic immediacy with which her art seems both to confront the viewer and maintain its sealed composure. Twelve rows of alternating black and white squares establish a visual language that is based on the most stark and intense contrast. Viewed from left to right, the dimensions of these squares become increasingly narrow toward the right-hand third of the painting, before widening again to gradually resume their square shape. The diminishment and reenlargement of the squares, in conjunction with their alternation of black and white, creates the sense of two gentle curves—as of two cylinders touching—yet the viewer's reflexive search for an actual line of contact is endlessly frustrated. The squares appear to simultaneously articulate a horizontal shift and a vertical trough: that which should be solid becomes vertiginous; perceptive certainty is dismantled by the ocular processes set in motion by the composition of the work. Ultimately, *Movement in Squares* achieves precisely the activity described by its title, that movement being simultaneously horizontal and vertical, linear and curved.

Following on from *Movement in Squares*, the painting *Burn* (1964) demonstrates Riley's deeply held belief that each work should advance and consolidate the artist's progress to date. This developmental process must of necessity demand a concomitant sacrifice: in order to make the artistic gain, some element must also be lost. In *Burn*—which relates in its use of small triangular shapes to *Shift* (1963) and *Shiver* (1964)—, the highly dramatic contrast obtained from the purely

black-and-white paintings is exchanged to pursue gradations of gray—catching up with a development that had commenced in *Black to White Discs* (1962). This allows depth and softness. In *Burn*, the straight edges assume a curvature that appears to grant the central area of the painting a sense of three-dimensional volume. Across the painting's lower half, the fade from black to pale gray creates the semblance of a semi-translucent V-shape. Solidity and sharpness appear to become diaphanous: a poetic tonal mist, out of which emerges a gathering swirl of no-longer triangular but pyramidal shapes. As the viewer studies this effect, attempting to locate the trigger, as it were, of the composition's spectacular and dizzying transformation, they become aware of the work's geometrical complexity. The triangles appear to tilt, yet trying to locate the precise axis of their pivot simply draws the viewer into the gathering current of their swarming motion. Bridget Riley's black-and-white paintings of the early to mid-1960s became iconic instantly. Seen by some to articulate the populism of

It's all about looking and seeing, and the distance between those two activities

a super-cool, space-age psychedelia—a swinging reclamation of Arthur Rimbaud's "dérèglement de tous les sens"—the delicate, meticulous processes through which these works had evolved were threatened by the currents and riptides of fashion. Although the artist acknowledged in an early interview in *Art News* in 1965 that her paintings had "some affinity with happenings where the disturbance precipitated is latent in the sociological and psychological situation," Riley's artistic inquiry was, as it remains, trying to reconfigure through art the sensory and emotional impressions of the human experience.

Speaking with Lynne Cooke in 2005, Bridget Riley offered a precise and illuminating account of her thought processes: "When I'm working, at a certain point I need to feel that something convinces me, that something is good rather than bad. I wonder to myself how I know, why I know, and in what way I can decide that it's good or bad, other than it being a matter of taste. I came to realize that I could and did recognize something in a work, but what was it that I was recognizing? I thought that it must be some kind of reservoir, as it were, that is filled without my being aware of it, a sort



RAJASTHAN (WALL PAINTING), 2012
Graphite and acrylic paint on plaster wall, 229 x 427 cm



Bridget Riley in Berlin, 1970

Further reading in BLAU International, Winter 2019 / 2020, No. 1