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CULTURE



Bridget Riley's 'From Here' (1994) | © BRIDGET RILEY 2018, ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. COURTESY DAVID ZWIRNER, NEW YORK/ LONDON

ART

Bridget Riley: The art world's illusionist

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A very concise review of the Bridget Riley exhibition at the Kawamura Memorial DIC Museum of Art, would be this: Barring those who are prone to motion sickness, go and see it. This applies equally to predisposed art buffs who already know and appreciate her work, and to those who haven't heard of her, for whom wordy adjective-laden praise will possibly do more harm than good.

Reproductions don't come close to experiencing a Bridget Riley painting firsthand; the colors of her works are too carefully chosen and viewing distance is too important. From farther away, Riley's compositions of stripes and abstract curvilinear designs in bright

contrasting colors may seem decorative and graphic. As you move closer the very precise planning and execution of the images becomes more apparent. Rather than being based on intentional vacuity, as Warhol's use of bold color and repetition could be said to do, or attempting to evoke deep emotion, like Mark Rothko's moody color field paintings, Riley's work is more about chipping away at the gap between visual sense and perception. In a 2009 London Review of Books article Riley wrote: "It is as though there is an eye at the end of my pencil, which tries, independently of my personal general-purpose eye, to penetrate a kind of obscuring veil or thickness."

There is an irony in this, since the optical effects of Riley's paintings are their own veil, in which lines or shapes flicker and shift uncontrollably, or sometimes give the impression that a two-dimensional surface has depth. Riley's work is an insistent reminder that vision is always a matter of interpretation. The veil that she seems to want to penetrate is not one of subjective comprehension with a view to reaching concrete reality. Her objective is rather to undermine our belief in concrete reality in order explore the pre-eminence of consciousness.

Get up close to the 1967 painting "Cataract 2" — a large canvas of white, pink and teal lines with a gentle wave-like rhythm, but which also incorporates a dramatic geometric chevron pattern — and you will be engulfed by color, form and energy. Like Jimmy Stewart's character in Hitchcock's "Vertigo" or Matthew McConaughey's astronaut in "Interstellar," you will find yourself tumbling through an alternative space disoriented, unsettled and possibly queasy. If Riley ever started working with projection mapping or virtual reality goggles she would probably open a portal to another dimension by accident.

One of the sections of the Kawamura exhibition is devoted to Riley's stripe paintings. Of all her works these carefully organized juxtapositions of contrasting colored lines have probably been most instrumental to the 87-year-old artist being described by critics as "legendary," "first rank," "revolutionary" and "genius."

Playing on the fact that the perception of a color is altered by whatever color appears next to it, a concept first explored in painting by the post-impressionist Georges Seurat, Riley's stripe paintings are both austere and constantly in flux. A savagely negative opinion of Riley's work, expressed by the British writer Will Self in a 2008 review, is that it's not fine art. "It isn't difficult or harsh — but playful," he wrote. Though Self claimed he meant no disrespect, he brought up two issues that modern and contemporary art sceptics crow about: too much theory and artists not being personally responsible for every aspect of the production of their work.

To re-purpose Bertrand Russel's view on war: The art world doesn't decide who is right or wrong, only who is left.

"Bridget Riley: Paintings from the 1960s to the Present" at the Kawamura Memorial DIC Museum of Art in Sakura, Chiba Prefecture, runs until Aug. 26; ¥1,300. For more information, visit kawamura-museum.dic.co.jp/en (<http://kawamura-museum.dic.co.jp/en>)
