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Alastair Sooke: Article about Bridget Riley

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## Bridget Riley on how nature inspired her Op Art masterpieces: 'Growing up, there was no TV – we looked at the world'



High Sky (1991, detail), a painting by Bridget Riley CREDIT: BRIDGET RILEY 2019

By **Alastair Sooke**, CRITIC AT LARGE

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**A**re you making trouble?" asks Bridget Riley, her blue eyes glittering. I have met the 88-year-old British painter in the large, East End studio where she has worked since the late Eighties (despite living on the other side of London). The occasion is a retrospective of 50 paintings and more than a hundred works on paper, which opens at the Scottish National Gallery in Edinburgh today, the first comprehensive exhibition of Riley's work in Britain since a 2003 show at the Tate. Later this year, it will travel to the Hayward Gallery in London.

From the off, though, it is apparent that this interview will proceed only on Riley's own rigid terms. A courteous but firm alumna of Cheltenham Ladies' College, with the strong-willed, suffer-no-fools intelligence of Miss Marple, she insists that I switch off my voice recorder, and instead take notes by hand. "Just don't hurry," she scolds, as I rush to jot down her remarks. "Somebody making notes thinks as they go."

Whenever my questions deviate from Riley's preferred course, she reprimands me in the manner of a headmistress addressing a scatter-brained pupil. "We're getting too far off the point," she says, when I ask about her experiences as a child in Cornwall during the war.

"You do get it incredibly wrong, I'm getting worried," she later chides, after I respond, evidently inappropriately, to her explanation of why "countries are proud of their artists – on the whole they like to have a credible intellectual life, and so they should! Italy is still to this day rightly proud of what they achieved in the Renaissance." (I blundered by asking if she felt her own countrymen were similarly proud of her.)

But her brittle patience breaks – "Are you making trouble?" – when I ask about *The Responsive Eye*, a group exhibition held in 1965 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York which brought her work to wider recognition. The cover of the catalogue for that show reproduced *Current* – Riley's 1964 painting of undulating black-and-white lines that seem to quiver and pulsate, as though buzzing with 220 volts – and her Op Art images were soon being plagiarised by graphic and fashion designers on both sides of the Atlantic. According to her former partner, the German art historian Robert Kudielka, Riley returned to London worrying that it would be another 20 years before anyone would take her work seriously again.



Bridget Riley's *Blaze I* (1962) features in a new exhibition at the Royal Scottish Academy CREDIT: BRIDGET RILEY 2019

"That's long ago, I've written about it," she says, impatiently. "You must get this right. You would be mistaken if you thought I was a victim in any way. Or that I was one of those artists who complained about being misunderstood. I haven't. People's reaction is their reaction."

Still, for all Riley's asperity, I can't help enjoying our encounter.

"Robert Hughes – you may have heard of him?" she asks at one point, referring to the Australian art critic and author of *The Shock of the New*, while standing, as she does throughout our conversation, on the other side of a large white table. Yes, Miss, I have!

You see, it's invigorating to be in Riley's company – on your mettle, adrenalin pumping through the bloodstream – as she quotes Proust and Stravinsky, before reeling off a mini-lecture about Georges Seurat's systematic use of colour. When eventually I plead that I've run out of space in my notebook, and consequently feel it would be helpful to start recording the conversation, she smiles, graciously, but does not relent. "I'd better get you some more paper."

However, while Riley speaks eloquently about sophisticated ideas and other artists, she refuses to be forthcoming about her own emotions or personal life. Tellingly, when she mentions a recent exhibition at David Zwirner's London gallery, she notes that the almost 8,500 visitors it attracted "didn't come to see me. They came to see my work. And I was pleased about that. Thrilled, in fact." Several paintings related to the works in that sell-out show – featuring coloured discs of muted purple, orange and green floating against white – surround us in the studio, propped against the whitewashed walls and protected by dust sheets.



Bridget Riley in her London studio last month CREDIT: RII SCHROEDER

Of course, given the nature of her art, Riley's reticence may come as no surprise. Rigorously planned (she often makes meticulous preparatory studies on graph-paper), her seemingly impassive, impersonal paintings lack any trace of her hand. At the same time, their disruptive, optical "events", triggered by all those vibrating patterns and lines, simultaneously evoke emotional turbulence and uncertain mental states.

And occasionally, almost despite herself, Riley's feelings flash briefly into view, like flesh glimpsed through a chink in her armour. She sounds momentarily wistful while recalling the "very small" cottage by the coast near Padstow in Cornwall where – having been born in London in 1931 – she lived with her mother, younger sister and aunt, while her father, a Yorkshireman who ran a paper business, served in the Second World War. There were "vast shortages", she says – "the paraffin for lighting and heating was delivered once a fortnight" – but the "brilliant" thing was that the war forced her to rely on her imagination for entertainment. Since "there wasn't such a thing as television", she spent time outside, in nature, "walking about and looking at it. It was something to do."

In “The Pleasures of Sight”, an unusually heartfelt essay in *The Eye’s Mind* (1999), a volume of her collected writings to which she often refers, Riley speaks about the “discoveries” she made while in Cornwall, “delving into the minute grey and yellow world of the lichens, which encrust rocks and stems of trees like the work of the finest gold- and silversmiths...” Clearly, this early period was crucial for her developing understanding of landscape and light. She still keeps a place in Cornwall, as well as a studio in Provence – and surprisingly, perhaps, the natural world has been a source of inspiration for much of her abstract work.

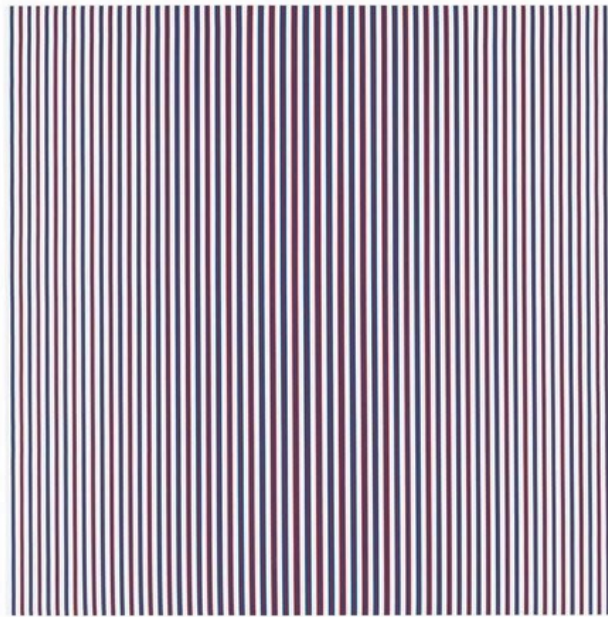


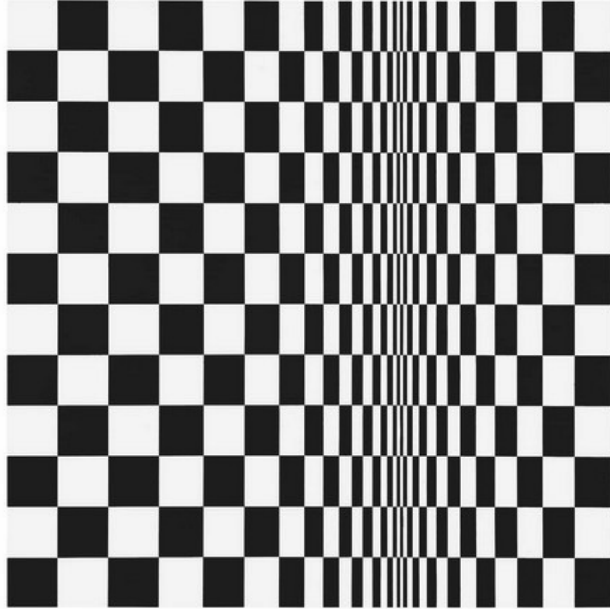
Chart 2 (1967) CREDIT: BRIDGET RILEY 2019

For instance, one of her earliest Op paintings, *Tremor* (1962), composed of a field of fluctuating triangles, was inspired, she has said, by “the leaves on poplar trees – the sensation they gave me when they quiver and tremble in the wind”.

That same year, she produced another classic work – the first of her black-and-white *Blaze* paintings – which was, as she later reveals to me by email, a “response to the dazzling light of Provence and my first glimpse of Les Alpilles, the curvilinear mountains which play such a part in Van Gogh’s paintings.”

Riley’s interest in art had “developed”, she says, by the end of the war. Her motivation came from “within” rather than being inspired by her aunt, who had studied fine art at London’s Goldsmiths, which Riley later attended. The painting she submitted for her entrance examination – a 1947 copy of the National Gallery’s Van Eyck portrait of a man wearing a red turban – can be seen in a room in Edinburgh devoted to her early figurative work, much of which has never been seen in public.

Riley’s mature paintings – such as *Movement in Squares* (1961), which buckles and warps like a distorted chessboard – have such autonomy and self-confidence that it is tempting to assume that she emerged from the Royal College of Art (which she attended after Goldsmiths), in 1955, almost fully formed as an abstract artist. In fact, the opposite was the case.



Movement in Squares (1961) CREDIT: BRIDGET RILEY 2019

“It was a long time, with many ups and downs,” she says, before she discovered her own artistic identity. Which is why, in 1958, “at the end of a long and unsuccessful struggle”, she joined the J Walter Thompson advertising agency as a commercial illustrator.

She chuckles. “It seemed to be something that I could do. I couldn’t make my own work, because I didn’t know what my own work was.”

Riley’s breakthrough came in 1959, when she copied a reproduction of Seurat’s Bridge at Courbevoie (1886-87), which, she says, taught her about “colour and colour organisation”. While working in her first studio in Earl’s Court, she imitated Seurat’s pointillist technique in an important picture of her own, which she has called a “hinge painting”. Pink Landscape (1960), which is on show in Edinburgh, was designed, she says, to evoke the “particular sensation of light and heat” she experienced in Sienna, Italy.



Copy after 'Le Pont de Courbevoie' by Georges Seurat, 1959 CREDIT: BRIDGET RILEY 2019

By then, Riley understood Seurat's "little dots" as discrete "units", which she "equated" with other "simple forms", such as stripes, lines, circles, and squares. Eventually, this led to her first abstract experiments.

Riley's emphasis on her early encounter with Seurat as a kind of origin myth is a warning to those tempted to assume her paintings are merely decorative. To think of her as a sort of poster girl for the Swinging Sixties is to miss the point; her paintings are plugged into the grid of European modern art, which has been electrifying audiences for a century and a half. "Contrary to what one might imagine," Riley tells me, "I am a traditional painter."

This is what people didn't understand, she continues, when they first encountered her black-and-white works in the Sixties. In those days, her paintings were still considered shocking: critics routinely described their retina-assaulting effects as violent and aggressive. "Actually, the aggression was much more in the mind of the beholder," Riley tells me. "When people find something new, it makes them uneasy and worried – but it's the newness which is a shock. If they can overcome that, and allow themselves to be engaged, to dare to look, then the problem eases."

Recently, she has returned to some of her earliest motifs: in 2013, for instance, she started painting again in black and white, following a hiatus of almost half a century, after re-encountering her important early work, Tremor. When I ask her about this, she replies by circling back, appropriately enough, to Seurat: "I think I have always done it: I, as it were, re-engaged in a past – someone else's – in Seurat. And Seurat, in his turn, engaged with Monet. So, there's another phrase for this 're-engagement': a living tradition."

Her hope for the new retrospective, which she describes as "a kind of record of my changing sight", is that it will "show certain lines of thought, and try to follow them through, so people can see, if they want, how my thought has changed over the years with [regards to] a familiar form like a curve, a circle, a spot, a diagonal, and so on. What happens to these when you work with them? That has been my pleasure and excitement and interest in working as I have." She smiles. "And I have found it, as work should be, totally absorbing."

**Bridget Riley is at the Scottish National Gallery, Edinburgh ([nationalgalleries.org](http://nationalgalleries.org)) until Sept 22**