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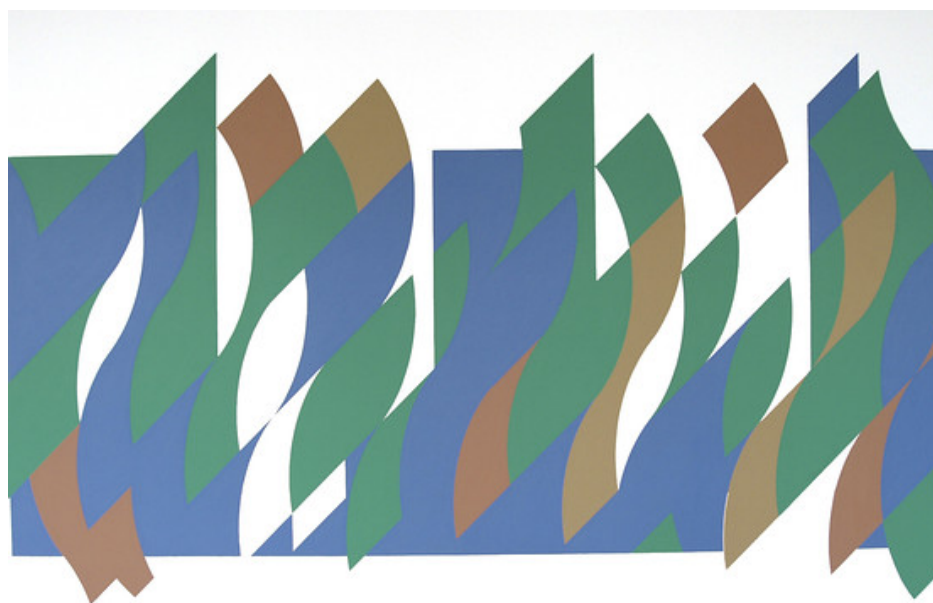
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The Beauty of Geometry

Bridget Riley's paintings reveal the abstract in the classical

By ANDREW MCKIE



Arcadia 1 (Wall Painting 1), 2007 by Bridget Riley.

Bridget Riley 2010

The girls who stayed smart 40 years ago, according to Stephen Sondheim's song "The Ladies Who Lunch," were "rushing to their classes in Optical Art, wishing it would pass." Op-Art may not be the hottest trend in painting now, but it hasn't entirely passed away and, in her 80th year, its best-known and most original

exponent, Bridget Riley, remains very smart indeed.

Her intelligence is apparent in the small show that opened this week at the National Gallery in London, which brings together five paintings from the permanent collection with a selection of Ms. Riley's own work, including two large murals painted directly on to the gallery's walls. These will be painted over when the exhibition ends next May. That is hardly unknown in contemporary galleries—the work of Sol LeWitt being the obvious example—but it is radical at the National, which holds no work produced after 1900. But the purpose of this exhibition is to demonstrate that Ms. Riley's geometric forms do relate to the history of the Western canon, and the cleverness of the case she makes is its most interesting feature.

Of course, Ms. Riley trained in the distant days when art students (even those at her alma mater, Goldsmith's College, later the nursery for British conceptualism) were expected to be able to draw, and to have a familiarity with the work of obscure fuddy-duddies like Raphael and van Eyck. Indeed, the first painting the visitor sees is a perfectly competent copy of the latter's "Man in a Red Turban," which secured Ms. Riley her place at Goldsmith's. And in the execution of the drapery, it is possible to see evidence of her central thesis that the planes, geometry and rules of color composition present in the work of the Old Masters show that abstraction, at some level, has been part of art since long before the purely abstract painting of the 20th century.

The notes that the artist has provided beside the five pictures she has chosen—Mantegna's "Introduction of the Cult of Cybele to Rome" and Raphael's "Saint Catherine of Alexandria," both painted in the first decade of the 16th century, and three studies by the *pointilliste* Seurat for his painting "The Bathers at Asnières"—provide an excellent account of what to notice about their composition. Her explanation of the harmonic envelope in the Raphael, in particular, and the way in which it emphasizes the circular movements of the eye across the canvas, is a fine lesson in how to look.

That, too, is the object of her own work: to concentrate the viewer's attention on looking at pictures. This needs saying in an art gallery more than you might imagine—according to a study conducted at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2001, the median time spent looking at a work of art is 17 seconds. And certainly, on the bench that allows you to look at two paintings on facing walls, the monochrome "Composition with Circles 7" and the sail-like blocks of "Arcadia 1," you become conscious not only of the rhythms and underlying geometry of the work, but of the act of looking.

The circles, as Ms. Riley explained at the press view on Tuesday, are "the one thing that all my work has been about. It's like a composer—he not only gives you things to listen to, but you also begin to hear things which are not actually there." That effect is noticeable in two of her monochrome visual illusions also on show, "Black to White Discs" (1962) and "Arrest 3" (1965), the latter of which hangs opposite Mantegna's painting. But for all Ms. Riley's excellence at noticing pictorial effects, there is really nothing much in common between the optical swirls of her picture and Mantegna's imitation of a bas relief beyond their chromatic range and illusion of depth.

The musical analogy, however, is telling. With her black-and-white pictures, I find myself reminded of nothing so much as the minimalist music of Steve Reich, which depends not only on repeated phrases, but the way in which the ear responds by finding or inventing new patterns and points of emphasis. Apparently Ms. Riley listened to Bach while devising the circles. She has also spoken of the influence of Mondrian's late painting "Broadway Boogie Woogie."

Talking about "Arcadia 1," Colin Wiggins, the exhibition's curator and the gallery's director of education, said that there had been much discussion about whether to fix the descriptive label on the wall itself (they did), since the white of the background breaks into the central rectangle. He drew parallels with Poussin's "Triumph of Pan" (1636), also in the gallery's collection and one of the works Ms. Riley picked for a show she curated there in 1989, and about which she talks very interestingly in a film on view at this show. But the viewer is much more likely to think of "The Dance," Matisse's painting of 1910—the mural, in cerulean blue, leaf green, rose ochre and terracotta, has an almost identical palette. I found it extremely interesting, though, to discover that Ms. Riley worked out this composition with cut-out shapes of paper, since Matisse adopted the same practice in old age. One can trace the development of this particular mural by comparing four studies in gouache on paper, and the similar "Blue (La Réserve)," executed more conventionally in oil on linen, which are also on show.

Ms. Riley, who was once a trustee of the gallery, offers insights into its collection and the approach of artists that are well worth having, and has produced work that is as attractive and intelligent as her analysis. But she does not entirely get away from the central difficulty of a show that presents abstract contemporary work beside that of traditionalist painters. At one point, the National's director, Nicholas Penny, asked Mr. Wiggins rather doubtfully: "Can we call Seurat an Old master?" Since Dr. Penny's speciality is the Renaissance, I imagine he would say no. But Seurat's paintings, though very clearly drawing deliberate attention to the practice of painting, are nonetheless traditional enough to have, for example, a subject other than the surface of the paint.

Ms. Riley's insights are fascinating and useful, coming as they do from an artist analyzing how paintings are constructed, and to what end. I have always liked her own pictures, and the ones in this show are well worth going to see. But to see them beside Raphael is to undermine their effect. Interesting though the structural mechanics are, they begin to look like scaffolding next to a Gothic cathedral.