

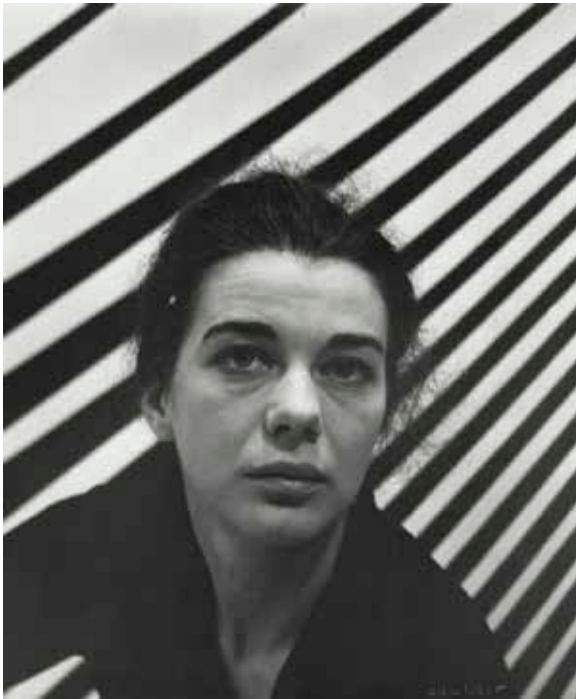
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Cohen, Alina: *Bridget Riley's Paintings Continue to Mesmerize, Six Decades On*

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# Bridget Riley's Paintings Continue to Mesmerize, Six Decades On

Alina Cohen Nov 1, 2019 11:47am



Bridget Riley, 1963. Photo by Ida Kar. © National Portrait Gallery, London.



Bridget Riley *Blue Dominance*, 1977  
ARCHEUS/POST-MODERN

British artist Bridget Riley, who is known for bold, blocky, and striped canvases of brilliant hues and contrasts, got her first taste of international celebrity back in 1965. Curator William Seitz included two of her paintings, *Current* (1964) and *Hesitate* (1964), in his groundbreaking exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, titled “The Responsive Eye.” The eye-popping black-and-white squiggles of Riley’s *Current* adorned the catalogue cover, asserting Riley’s prominent position within the show. The exhibition situated her among an impressive roster of global artists whose artwork reconsidered ideas about perception. The group included American painters ranging from Morris Louis to Agnes Martin, along with Brazilian artist Almir da Silva Mavignier and a Spanish collective called Equipo 57. Along with Mavignier, Riley was considered part of a new wave of “Op artists” who exploited visual principles to make work that seemed to vibrate with new energy. Josef Albers, Salvador Dalí, and the museum-going public all swooned at Riley’s work.

While Op art has gone in and out of style, Riley herself is still working and is beloved on both sides of the pond. London's Hayward Gallery is displaying a major Riley retrospective through January 26th, celebrating over six decades of the artist's bold geometric abstractions. Her hard-edged shapes and brilliant palettes have given way to infinite possibilities on her canvases. Riley's work, which at first appears to be a collection of simple patterns, rewards sustained, careful looking; her work's genius lies in the way her compositions gradually reveal a vital, dynamic interplay of shape and color. Yet Riley's considerations reach far beyond the tricks and treats of optical games, urging viewers to rethink the way they see.



Bridget Riley *Nataraja*, 1993  
Tate

In a 2001 essay titled “The Change of Aspect,” John Elderfield described the experience of looking at a Riley canvas as a series of shocks. First, viewers see her rippling surfaces not as flat objects, but as living, moving things. Then, viewers realize they’re not in control—the paintings are working on them like actors with a “choreographed programme of effects.”

Riley's interests, however, have always resided more in art history and landscape than in illusionism and artificiality. Born in London in 1931, Riley was a disengaged student in all subjects except visual art. She spent her childhood admiring the fields and beaches in Cornwall and Lincolnshire, where she lived throughout World War II.



Bridget Riley in her Warwick Road Studio. Photo by Tony Evans. © Tony Evans/ Timelapse Library Ltd./ Hulton Archive/ Getty Images.

In 1949, Riley gained entrance to Goldsmiths College on the strength of her copy of Jan van Eyck's *Portrait of a Man (Self Portrait?)* (1433). Old Masters offered tutelage at the beginning of her career, as did her drawing courses with Sam Rabin at Goldsmiths: Both taught her how to look more carefully at art and the world around her.

In his Riley biography, *A Very Very Person*(2019), Paul Moorhouse described the risks Riley took in pursuing an art career in the mid-20th century, coming from a comfortable British background. "Being an artist was not only financially precarious but also implied a self-contained existence," wrote Moorhouse. "Such a course seemed parlous for a woman at that time." Riley forged ahead, obsessed with what Moorhouse called "the fundamental question of learning to look." She left Goldsmiths for the Royal College of Art, graduated in 1955, and continued painting as she taught art courses and worked in advertising.



Bridget Riley *Untitled (Fragment 2) (Schubert 5B)*, 1965, Sotheby's



Bridget Riley *Untitled [based on Blaze]*, 1964  
ARCHEUS/POST-MODERN

After a few attempts to make Georges Seurat–inspired Pointillist landscapes, Riley experienced major breakthroughs in 1960 and 1961. She made a series of black-and-white gouaches, followed by *Veil* (1960), which Moorhouse described as Riley’s “first hard-edged black-and-white painting.” These efforts led to *Kiss* (1961), a painting of large black volumes separated horizontally by an uneven, curved, white ramp shape. Finally, Riley “felt that at last she was on the right path,” wrote Moorhouse. The following year, London’s Gallery One gave Riley her first solo show. Her career was off to such a blazing start that the artist began employing studio assistants to keep up with demand for her paintings. While that practice is standard now, it was a bold move for her time.

Over the decades, Riley has continued to innovate, pushing her practice forward while staying loyal to her perceptual interests. She’s developed one of the most recognizable styles—perhaps even a personal brand—in contemporary art: You know a Bridget Riley painting when you see it.



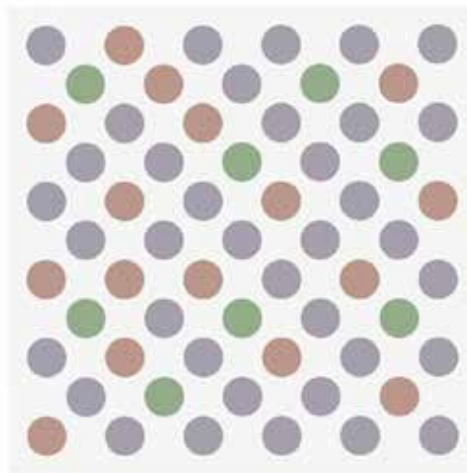
Bridget Riley *Passing By*, 2005  
ARCHEUS/POST-MODERN

Throughout the 1960s, Riley continued to focus on black-and-white Op compositions. Colored stripes soon became a predominant motif. In the 2000 essay “Bridget Riley for Americans,” Dave Hickey called these her “Flavin paintings” because they “flicker and flash” like artist Dan Flavin’s fluorescent tube sculptures. Riley’s 1967–68 canvas *Late Morning* features white stripes demarcated by thinner red lines, which are themselves bracketed by blue and green stripes. The experience of looking at the painting is akin to encountering a radiant glare—like late morning light, perhaps, through the blinds.

In the mid-1980s, Riley introduced parallelograms to her canvases, which slant like sun rays. *Red Place* (1987) features bricks in brilliant hues including rose, salmon, butterscotch, and aquamarine tilting towards the top right corner. The slight differentiation in the brick shapes, with large, single-hued patches in between, leaves the viewer’s eyes dancing while attempting to find a pattern. The next decade brought new iterations on the parallelogram motif. Riley’s blocky shapes adopted curved edges and began slithering across her canvases. One representative painting, *Lagoon 2* (1997), features crescents and half-moons that fit together like puzzle pieces and evoke Henri Matisse’s famous paper cut-outs. Riley had used curves since the 1960s, so the shift united decades of ideas into a logical step forward.



Bridget Riley in her second solo exhibition, 1963.  
Photo by Ida Kar. © National Portrait Gallery,  
London.



Bridget Riley *Measure for Measure 19*, 2017  
Galerie Max Hetzler

Examining Riley's dynamic career is a master class in how to innovate within the strictures of geometric abstraction—and how to weather shifts in popular opinion. Damien Hirst has named Riley as an influence, and in 2012, she became the first woman to receive the prestigious Sikkens Prize.

After the craze surrounding “The Responsive Eye” in 1965, Riley feared that no one would take her seriously for at least 20 years. She didn't need to worry: Avoiding her newfound celebrity, she hunkered down in her studio, and—nearly six decades later—she's carved a singular place in recent art history. As Frances Spalding wrote in a 1999 essay titled “Bridget Riley and the Poetics of Instability,” “One of the most radical moves in the history of post-1945 British art was Bridget Riley's decision to destabilize the image.”

**Alina Cohen is a Staff Writer at Artsy.**