BRACEWELL, MICHAEL: SEEING BRIDGET RILEY

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BLAU INTERNATIONAL

"SEEING IS BELIEVING" – BRIDGET RILEY

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The original postmodernist
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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.
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 reconstitute, forming shimmering wave patterns and sudden, viscous columns of rapidly shuttering 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 spur and play with the viewer's gaze. Its movement changes, fragments, multiplies, and then regroups; the painting is filled with what appears to be a luminous essence 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 version, the vertical elements 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 which 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, an intense 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 shifting, dancing, compelling art. All about discovery 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 30 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 occular 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 arduous inquiry aims to achieve the seamless and fluent transmutation 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 not simply invisible but “present nowhere” within the universe they create or remove in their work. For the case of Bridget Riley’s arduous 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 1962, under conditions that were altogether different from those with which it was in the 1950s, in the context of the entire situation and with it, of object-hood. A logical consequence of this, taken as a matter of course, is that the artist, who is essentially the creator of her finished paintings, using assistants instead. [As of this time,] Riley herself has not painted one of her finished paintings for forty 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 terrain to rest. But the canvas can rest wherever the gaze seeks to. 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.

This experience might be underpinned, intellectually, by an art-historical knowledge of the work’s creative etymology, so to speak—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 Wise 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 artistic making since her first works were exhibited in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Movement in Squares (1964) 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 realignment of the squares, in conjunction with their alternation of black and white, creates the sense of two gently curving—as in a riverbed—very close in their curving search for an actual line of contact is endlessly frustrated. The squares appear to simultaneously articulate a horizontal shift and a vertical gradient, as the painting’s edges and corners seem both compressed here and there. The work’s perceptive certainty is dismantled by the ocular processes set in motion by the composition of the work. Ultimately, Movement in Squares acquires 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 corresponding sacrifice: in order to make the artistic gains some element must also be lost. In Burn—which relates in its use of small triangular shapes to Matisse (1963) and Still (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 semicircular V-shape. Solitude and sharpness appear to become diaphanous: a poetic tonal mist, out of which emerges an ever-shifting 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 they simply draw the viewer into the gathering current of their swirling motions.Riley’s black-and-white paintings of the early to mid-1960s became instantly Seen by some to articulate the populism of a super-cool, space-age psychedelica—a swinging reclamation of Arthur Rimbaud’s “dérèglement de tous les sens”—the deli cate, meticulous processes through which these works had evolved were threatened by the currents and rhythms of fashion. Although the artist acknowledged in an early interview in Art News in 1967 that her paintings had “some affinity with happenings where the disturbance precipitated in latent in the sociological and psychological situation,” Riley’s artistic inquiry was, as it remains, to try reconstructing 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 not 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 of unconscious reservoir from which images are drawn, a kind of matrix into which the artist’s thoughts are subsumed in preparatory work. It is this reservoir that is the stuff of which the painting is made, and is the reservoir that the viewer brings to the work as they look at it. 

It’s all about looking and seeing, and the distance between those two activities.
RAJASTHAN (WALL PAINTING), 2012
Graphite and acrylic paint on plaster wall, 229 × 421 cm
Further reading in BLAU International, Winter 2019 / 2020, No. 1