

## A Kind of Equivalence

The paintings of Bridget Riley

By Jennifer Higgin

‘It is the first merit of a painting to be a feast for the eyes.’

Eugène Delacroix’s journal (1863)

‘The more art is controlled, limited, worked over, the more it is free.’

Igor Stravinsky *Poetics of Music* (1947)

In 1960, Bridget Riley was on holiday in Tuscany. On one particularly hot day, she was driving through the hills with a friend. They arrived at an enormous plane; thunder clouds were rolling in and the earth seemed to dissolve and sparkle in the heat. She quickly sketched the scene and made notes of its particularities. Back in England, she painted *Pink Landscape* (1960), a square, pointillist work which hovers on the edge of abstraction; colours drift upwards from an iridescent, pale-yellow baseline, to a sky formed from delirious clouds of violet, blue and pink dots which are momentarily interrupted by the suggestion of trees rendered in staccato green. The painting was not simply a response to her experience in Italy; it was also something of a homage to the 19<sup>th</sup>-century French artist Georges Seurat, whose explorations of the elusive, magical qualities of colour and harmony Riley once described as ‘a promise to the future’<sup>1</sup>. She was particularly in thrall to his work *The Bridge at Courbevoie* (1886-87); her study of it from 1959 still hangs in her studio. However, although *Pink Landscape* was, she says, ‘quite competent’, ultimately, she felt it to be ‘a most useful failure’<sup>2</sup>. While the painting did, to some extent, represent what she had seen, it did not come close to capturing what Riley describes as ‘the shimmer and the sensation’ she had experienced that hot summer day. Thinking, too, about a visit on the same trip she had made to two futurist exhibitions in Venice and Milan and to the cave paintings at Lascaux (which she calls ‘a kind of very vivid cubism’), she realised that she had, until that point, been pursuing ‘the wrong goal’ in her attempts at verisimilitude. She had been relying too much on ‘what was called, in those days, facility’. She explained: ‘I could quite easily do things, but I could see that those artists who had rested on that, that was not the point either.’ Her

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<sup>1</sup> Bridget Riley on Seurat’s *Bathers at Asnières* <https://tinyurl.com/ya5qc3q9>

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise noted, quotes are from author’s conversation with Bridget Riley in her London studio, October 2018

disappointment with the work made clear to her that an accurate representation of a landscape requires more than a description of its physical attributes; it needs what she terms ‘a kind of equivalence’. Instead of using painting to represent something that already existed, she recognised that she had to find out what it could do that it hadn’t done before. The result was a breakthrough that was to shape her subsequent picture-making: the shockingly visceral *Movement in Squares* (1961). Its 12 austere rows of alternating black and white squares are somehow more than the sum of its parts: they swell and diminish, retreat and advance – the whole is more evocative of the sea than a chess board. Your mind tells you that this surface is flat and therefore must be stable, but your eyes – your body – tell another tale. The painting’s blunt, vertiginous radicalism lies in the wild clarity with which it makes its point: that looking is not always the straightforward activity we assume it to be. As Riley once (beautifully) declared: ‘Vision can be arrested, tripped up or pulled back in order to float free again. It encounters reflections, echoes and fugitive flickers which when traced evaporate.’<sup>3</sup>

Despite its centrality to modernism, Riley speaks of abstract painting which ‘reaches back into the recesses of the mind.’ For millennia, geometric abstraction has been employed for decorative, symbolic or avant-garde purposes, yet, she wrote:

‘When I started, around 1960, forms such as triangles, squares, circles, rhomboids etc were no longer burdened by the heavy load of associations and symbolic overtones which they had carried in the 1920s and ’30s as Constructivist motifs. They were simple forms without any pretensions, in a condition for working with.’<sup>4</sup>

For Riley, geometry is an adaptable scaffold to hang a painting on. However, it could also be said that her deep exploration of perception has resulted in a visual language that is, at its heart, ambiguous: at once abstract, allusive, old and new. (In an interview with David Sylvester in 1967, he asked her what looking at her paintings was comparable to. She replied: ‘Running ... early morning ... cold water ... fresh things, slightly astringent ... things like this ... certain acid sort of smells.’<sup>5</sup> ) Repetition and reduction are employed in order to study how we see things – and, of course, no two people will ever agree on precisely what is in front of them. (She has written that ‘repetition, contrast, calculated reversal and counterpoint

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<sup>3</sup> Bridget Riley, ‘The Pleasures of Sight’ (1984), in *The Eye’s Mind: Bridget Riley, Collected writings 1965-199*, Ed. Robert Kudielka, Thames & Hudson, London, 1999, p. 33

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, ‘In Conversation with Robert Kudielka’, 1972, p. 82

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, ‘In Conversation with David Sylvester’, 1967, p. 74

also parallel the basis of our emotional structure.’<sup>6</sup>) In ‘Painting Now’ – the essay she wrote in 1996, and after which this exhibition is named – she states that:

‘It is revealing that the most sophisticated inventions in modern paintings have been developed from the simplest of subject matter. That is to say, from traditional iconography and the familiar shapes of geometry. [...] commonplace realities have been transformed into pictorial realities – the paintings then emerge as their own worlds, as being imaginative places in their own right.’<sup>7</sup>

Riley’s pioneering reconfiguration of old forms recalls Soren Kierkegaard writing in his journal in 1843, that while ‘that life must be understood backwards [...] it must be lived forwards.’ The artist recently said that: ‘I don’t think I ever used the word universal in the early days, but I knew that starting from a square was starting from a most familiar form – a very ancient one that could be colourless because of its universality [...] A very crucial thing for me are those beginnings which can support a future and such universals do fit that bill.’ Replace ‘square’ with ‘haywain’ and a parallel could be drawn between Riley’s use of geometry to John Constable’s employment of a familiar motif in rural England. She says: ‘He wanted to paint something typical, so he chose his favourite time – noon on a summer’s day – and then he quite deliberately set out to paint something universal: a haywain.’ She speaks with great affection of 19<sup>th</sup>-century artist’s work, describing him as a painter whose ‘love of nature is so powerful and so evident in everything he does’. Given the differences in their aesthetic, some might be surprised by Riley’s interest in a long-dead landscape painter, but in ‘Painting Now’, the artist makes clear how much the art of the past can teach the contemporary artist and so help fashion, however obliquely, the art of the future:

‘The great paintings are the clearest; they have been made by those who made the greatest effort to overcome confusion and to arrive at clarity. These artists have had to sort things out on a broad and practical level, and it is understanding this sorting out – and what it is that has been sorted out – that is so valuable other painters. Despite differences in artistic temperament, style and period, it is from those great paintings that one can learn about planes, colours, tones, the building of places and the creation of space, about the massing of line and form about pictorial weight and forces, etc. – in short, the whole dictionary of plastic expression, the craft, the *métier* of the painter.’<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, Bridget Riley, ‘Perception is the Medium’, 1965, p. 68

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, Bridget Riley, ‘Painting Now’, 1996, p. 206

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, ‘Painting Now’, 1996, p. 200

Riley writes that the act of painting is the act of translating ‘a text unknown even to yourself’. This demands the ability to ‘learn to listen, because it is through a special kind of listening, a sort of “listening in”, that one learns how to speak.’<sup>9</sup> She makes very clear that in order to understand the language of art, you need to absorb its history. She goes on to elucidate that without understanding the provenance of their language, the artist risks imitating ‘the “look” of art – whether applied with a mop, a brush, a squeegee or a tin with holes in the bottom – and unwittingly uses these techniques as formulae, that is to say, without understanding their original purpose and context’.<sup>10</sup> When methods are used like this, with a kind of brash ignorance, Riley dismisses the outcome as a stultifying scenario in which ‘radicalism is transformed into a fashionable mode of conformism’<sup>11</sup>. The flip-side – a deep engagement with the history of art – must inevitably result in a deepening of one’s own language. Her citing of Eugène Delacroix’s four cardinal principles of colour painting makes it abundantly clear what she herself has learned from him: ‘*L’enchainement* or the mutual dependence of all colours; the importance of the mid-tone; the complimentary structure of colour; and the perceptual induction of colour.’<sup>12</sup>

Riley’s life-long study of the art of the past has resulted in her fascination with one of the oldest forms of image making: wall paintings. (As well as the caves of Lascaux, Riley was deeply affected by the visit she made to see the paintings in Ancient Egyptian tombs, which she remembers as ‘blazing with colour and light’.<sup>13</sup>) Her wall paintings are like time travellers – echoes of the images created by the light of flickering candles in the bowels of the earth millennia ago and yet astonishingly alive to contemporary eyes. Despite their apparent uniformity, the rows of deeply toned orange, purple and green dots in *Cosmos 2* (2017) – each painted with minute differences – are like a joyful hymn to individuality: the more you look, the more you see and the more alive you feel. The shift in the quality of support from canvas to wall can create a mysterious impression of unleashed volume: the sensation that somehow, the elements of the picture are free-floating, borderless. In *Quiver 3 (Wall Painting)* (2014) a repeated pyramid motif of black triangles on a white background seems to have been affected by a high wind; in each block, some of the triangles are partially collapsed. Strong diagonal lines are interrupted by the kind of soft ripples that roll across the surface of a pond when a pebble is skimmed.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, ‘Painting Now’, 1996, p. 211

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, ‘Painting Now’, 1996, p. 200

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, ‘Painting Now’, 1996, p. 201

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, ‘Painting Now’, 1996, p. 202

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, ‘A Visit to Egypt and the Decoration for the Royal Liverpool Hospital’, 1984, p. 109

Riley has spoken of ‘the staggering ingenuity of trees’ that grow towards the light. Since a rapt childhood spent on the cliffs of north Cornwall, nature has long been a source of both solace and inspiration to her. (She remembers her mother’s delight in her surroundings on the walks they took together, exclaiming at the colour of the sea, the light sparkling on the branches of a tree; the way different colours behave in a field.) A landscape may look chaotic, but it is not: a plant, of course, can only bloom in ideal – and often controlled – conditions. But it is these very controls that allow a plant to flourish. So it is with Riley’s art. In 1973, she wrote that: ‘I draw from nature, I work with nature, although in completely new terms.’<sup>14</sup> In 1984, she said that she organized colours ‘so that the eye can travel over the surface in a way parallel to the way it moves over nature.’<sup>15</sup> In the same way that each petal of a rose is a variation on a theme, miniscule shifts between line, size, scale, surface, tone and colour can result in something absolutely new and fresh.

Constraint resists the lack of focus that can result from unconstrained freedom. Riley has said that if a painting doesn’t work then what it requires is ‘further restriction, further restraint!’ and that her approach is a way of coping with ‘the horror of freedom which dismays us all!’ She approvingly quotes Igor Stravinsky’s maxim: ‘The more art is controlled, limited, worked over, the more it is free.’ A good example of this is *Late Morning I* (1967); an atmosphere of light, air and pure colour is evoked with starkly economical, pulsating red and green vertical lines (each fractionally different) which combine to create the sensation of yellow tones radiating off the canvas. There is something of the explosion of spring in this painting; a rhythmic blooming of life that reassuringly intimates both order and joy.

A recent triad of large, horizontal paintings, ‘Memories of Horizons’ (2014) is titled after a line in Stéphane Mallarmé’s poem *Funeral Libation (At Gautier’s Tomb)* (1873). The poet asks: ‘What is the world?’ and then answers his own question: ‘memories of horizons’. The delicate differences between each of these paintings – the hypnotic intensity of the thin pink, orange and blue lines humming across the canvas, the renewal of a motif via its repetition, the sense of infinity – all are key here. The title embodies a subtle contradiction: the memory of a horizon implies something that has been experienced but a horizon itself is always out of reach. She says that ‘being surrounded by a horizon’ is, in some ways, an apt description of how we live in the world.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, Bridget Riley, ‘Working with Nature’, 1973, p. 88

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, ‘The Pleasures of Sight’, 1984, p. 33

Riley concludes 'Painting Now' with a stark warning: 'Painting without its problems can no longer be painting. It depends upon them for its existence.'<sup>16</sup> She believes that within this paradox lies the medium's 'continuing vitality'. Complacency around its language will result in its stagnation. She sees a lack of engagement with it as a contemporary reflection of 'the fundamental crisis of work in general in the West' and that what is needed is 'a rethinking of what work means to us and why we value it.'<sup>17</sup> In a world in which mass production is making the mark of the hand increasingly redundant, where funding for art history in schools has been slashed and when the teaching of the technical skills of painting has almost disappeared, painting, somehow, has survived as a marker of both individual expression and the product of an ongoing conversation with what has come before. But it needs a rigorous, critical engagement to keep it relevant. In this respect, Bridget Riley's thrilling, urgent paintings – visual rebuttals to complacency of thinking or looking, which hum and sparkle with life and erudition and which are as deeply engaged with the past as they are the future – are, to my mind, more necessary than ever. She describes her life's project as 'a huge adventure' – and, vitally, it's an ongoing one. She is adamant that there is still so much to be explored. Good painting endures; it adapts. Nothing precludes anything else.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 'Painting Now', p. 210

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 'Painting Now', p. 211

