

In the blinking of an eye

Set to imagine the woman who could conceive and carry out these paintings, we might well picture to ourselves a barrel-bodied paragon of determination, a tenacious and fifty-ish she-gorilla given to judo and the solution in secret of championship-level chess problems.¹

It is almost impossible to look at Bridget Riley's striped works, especially the black and white paintings made in the Sixties, without blinking one's eyes or looking away, preferably to seek out a dark object or murky carpet rather than a blank white wall because the blank white wall becomes a projection screen for the retinal afterimages produced by her paintings. In works such as *Blaze I* (1962), *Climax* (1963), *Current*, (1964) and *Descending* (1965) the optical effects are so severe, so numerous, and so unrelenting that viewing them causes me to experience waves of nausea. The optical effects in my own works, and I suspect, in the works of most contemporary artists that create disturbing sensations of illusory movement are tame in comparison. In these works of Riley one not only perceives incessant movement but one also 'sees' bright colours that are not actually painted on the surface of the canvas. Such disturbing prismatic or halation effects result from combining strong contrast, interrupted or kinked sequences of stripes or tightly configured curved stripes.

The indefatigable Bridget Riley was represented by another set of her ingenuous black and white eye-irritants of which Crest is a perfect example. It's now all too clear that she can go on changing the pattern of her heaving and twitching geometry until she's a very old lady, but probably her only chance of developing as a painter is to drop her 'cruel' formula, which obviously gives her some sort of neurotic pleasure, and take a longer look at the black and white work of Vasarely. Otherwise, she'll have to be written off as an eccentric.²

¹ John Russell in Bryan Robertson, John Russell and Snowdon, *Private View*, London, 1965, p 209, cited in F. Follin, *Embodied Visions. Bridget Riley, Op Art And The Sixties*, Thames & Hudson, 2004, p 195.

² Robert Melville, 'The new generation', *Architectural Review*, June 1964b, p 448, cited in F. Follin, *Op Cit.* p 195.

Do the snide gender references of John Russell and Robert Melville imply an antipathy to a woman producing ‘hard’ geometric ‘difficult’ paintings: a woman who, Melville insists, should learn from the work of a man (Vasarely) if she wishes to develop as an artist?

Russell’s insinuation that Riley’s art is ‘aggressive’ (one must imagine it to have been made by a judo practicing, fifty-ish she-gorilla) was, I suspect, intended as critical parody. No doubt he was aware that Riley was an attractive, young, woman. At the time, however, it is evident some critics disapproved of women making confronting or visually-assaulting works. Issues of gender, vital to any historical account of the period, that seem to account, at least in part, for the negative reception of Riley’s art have received little attention by writers or arts commentators, then or since. Riley’s art was controversial, but the controversy did not focus overtly on the unlikelihood of such modern looking, aggressive art being made by a woman. Instead,

Contemporary reviews and published comments about Riley’s Op art emphasized the intensity of the physical effects produced by these paintings, which have encouraged the view that responses to these works are unmediated by thought processes and, therefore, have no intellectual basis.³

Accusations that Riley’s work was based on mathematical calculation and scientific theorising related to studies on perception intimated that it lacked expressive content. Vasarely’s claim that Op art represented a merging of art and science is not a claim Riley makes for *her* work.

Rather, she argues against the view that her works might be based on any scientific conception related to the study of optical illusions or investigations of visual perception. That her work was made at the time when such studies (undertaken since the Forties) were of public interest is, she believes, purely coincidental. She has often stated that her process is an intuitive one. Certainly, she involves herself in empirical compositional and colour research but this is also based on her personal exploration of the effects she wishes her works to generate.

³ F. Follin, *Op Cit.* p 11.

At the time she insisted that:

*No matter what I do it will always be subjective, and so to develop as much objectivity as I can, is simply counterbalancing this inevitable presence of myself in the work. De-personalisation is, I think, a bogus hue and cry.*⁴

This denial may partly explain why the high esteem in which Vasarely's Op work was held was not transferable to Riley's Op work.

Riley's work was also 'trivialised' and 'debased' through the adoption of Op art patterns by designers of women's fashions and household goods shortly after Riley's works were first exhibited. Riley herself was upset by the commercialization of her work. Women's fashions and household goods were considered to be in the domain of 'the feminine' and popular press and art world fascination with, and focus on, this aspect of Riley's art leads me to wonder why the broader critical implications of such a focus have been ignored.

Melville's suggestion that Riley is not only 'cruel' and 'neurotic' but derives pleasure from these 'eccentricities' that will eventually lead to her demise as an artist need not be taken seriously, (time has proven his observations inaccurate) however, dialogues on 'pain' and 'pleasure' continue in relation to Riley's work. I have already indicated that Riley's paintings caused me to feel nausea.

Riley disagrees that her paintings cause pain or visual discomfort, they are, for her, pleasurable: 'No – no pain! It gives me pleasure...'⁵ There is some truth to this, of course. I believe most viewers do experience a strange pleasure, a perverse satisfaction, in perceiving oscillating movement and the apparition of non-existing colours. Riley's paintings encourage each individual viewer to 'play' with the optical effects they generate. For instance, one can try and make them go away, try to *not* see them, or try to focus so intently that colours become brighter or dissolve through

⁴ 'In Conversation with Maurice de Sausmarez [1967]' in R. Kudielka, (ed), *The Mind's Eye: Bridget Riley Collected Writings 1965-1999*, Thames & Hudson, London, 1999, p 61.

⁵ Bridget Riley in dialogue with David Sylvester, 1967, cited in R. Shiff 'Bridget Riley: The Edge of Animation', in P. Moorhouse, (ed) *Bridget Riley*, Tate Publishing, 2003, p 81.

optical fusion. There is pleasure in the game and pleasure in the personalised nature of the dialogue between object and viewer.

Follin suggests that the equivalents to the optical tricks to be discovered in Riley's paintings can be found at a carnival or funfair in the form of distorting mirrors.⁶ Laughter is induced by seeing one's own body transformed into the grotesque, misshapen images that such mirrors reflect. The nature of the distortion can be altered by movement of the body. Such a game is fun, it is pleasurable: but the reflected images themselves are visually disturbing.

The active involvement of a spectator, whether it be in front of one of Riley's optical works or a distorting mirror, raises issues of theatricality.

I feel that my paintings have some affinity with happenings where the disturbance precipitated is latent in the sociological and psychological situation. I want the disturbance or 'event' to arise naturally, in visual terms out of the inherent energies and characteristics of the elements which I use. I also want it to have a quality of inevitability. There should, that is to say, be something akin to a sense of recognition within the work, so that the spectator experiences at one and the same time something known and something unknown. I identify with this 'event'.⁷

Part of the theatricality of Riley's work concerns the length of time required to experience it. This aspect is a conceptual alternative to the visual instantaneity preferred by most modernist painters (Stella, for example), an instantaneity that denies the theatrical.

Additionally, Riley's black and white Op art paintings were, during a time of experimentation with mind-altering drugs, assumed to be representations (or endorsements) of the effects of psychotropic drugs (drugs that affect the mind through physiological effects on the body, in particular the central nervous system). Riley was not flattered by these associations and complained that:

⁶ F. Follin, *Op Cit.* pp 161-163.

⁷ B. Riley, 'Perception is the medium', *Art News*, October 1965, p 33.

*...even the word perception, which had hitherto had such a precise meaning both in the development of painting and in its criticism, suddenly became, thanks to the popularity of Aldous Huxley's The Doors of Perception, linked with the drug culture of the sixties.*⁸

The type of 'hallucinatory effects' produced by Riley's works were featured and popularised by other forms of art and design during Sixties.

*The 'visual distortions and enhancement of colour which resulted from drug use, especially marijuana and LSD, were seminal for psychedelic art in the late sixties. Poster artists in particular attempted to reproduce the 'mind-bending' effects of drugs in their works.*⁹

The psychedelic graphic style of poster art associated with the music industry, performing arts and posters advertising political protests had a precedent in the decorative embellishments of Art Nouveau and Jugendstil at the turn of the century and in the more contemporary adaptations of stripes, dots and sinuous lines in the works of Alphonse Mucha, Aubrey Beardsley and Toorop, amongst others.

All of the issues touched on above involve aspects of corporeality. Like Follin, I believe that understanding the '...importance of the body – of the artist and spectator as corporeal entities, not merely perceiving intellects...'¹⁰ is essential in appreciating the interconnected relationship between the physical and aesthetic experiences which is at the core of Riley's art.

Describing Riley's paintings can be laborious. Summation and generalisation do not come easily, if at all. The title Static 2 fortuitously offers a play between static as an adjective for still and static as a noun for crackle or

⁸ Quoted in Michael Bracewell, 'A plea for painting' *Guardian Weekend* (supplement), 15 March 1997,

p 18, cited in F. Follin, *Op Cit.* p 64.

⁹ M. Desmond & C. Dixon, *1968* (exhibition catalogue), National Gallery of Australia & Thames & Hudson, 1968, p 29.

¹⁰ F. Follin, *Op Cit.* p 17.

*vibration. Riley's art itself plays areas of relative stability and 'repose' against others of intense optical activity, what she calls a 'disturbance'. But her art has little to do with manipulating concepts, and her best critics have tended to find their own application of conceptual terminology inadequate.*¹¹

There is much to be written about Riley's art and I have, so far, merely skimmed the surface. Some observations that are of particular interest to my own art practice do require some discussion, even if such observations can only represent a small fraction of what might be written and what has been written by others.

In her post-Sixties works Riley achieves sensational illusory optical effects through colour usage. In works such as *Clepsydra* (1976), *Reef 2* (1977) and *Aurulum* (1978) these are achieved using soft, pastel colours and regulated curvilinear patterns. The optical effects generated by these works are a little easier on the eye than her black and white striped works, but only marginally so. One can only experience the violent optical vibrations generated by her work if one views, not reproductions of her paintings, but the actual work. In reproduction the optical effects are diminished and the regulated systems used in the work's construction are given more prominence than exists in reality.

Most of the published literature on Riley's works focuses on the perceptual phenomena generated by her paintings. Interpreters, commentators, and even Riley herself in her various published texts, devote considerable space to analysing the way she uses colour to generate apparent movement and light reflection. Engagement with structural analysis is generally avoided. The fact that she uses simultaneous contrast (the tendency of two adjacent colours to modify the other in the direction of its own complementary), successive contrast (the tendency of a colour to produce a complementary after-image when seen against white) and mixed contrast (the tendency of a colour to produce a complementary after-image which mixes with the colour of the ground against which it is seen) is observed and discussed in reference to particular paintings. The stripe's function as a structuring element is given little

¹¹ R. Shiff, *Op Cit.* p 85.

serious attention in writings on Riley's work, except to observe that Riley uses the stripe because colour interaction occurs long the edge where two colours meet. The vertical stripe, (and even more so the curvilinear stripe) intensify colour's elusive qualities by providing a maximum length of edge for colour interaction to occur and this enables Riley to effectively experiment with the unstable elements of colour. Her use of the stripe in periodic structures, and in a variety of interrupted systems is overlooked, probably because such descriptions can be tedious and labourious. Such attention to colour effects and lack of attention to structure I believe contributes to the mysterious aura and the poetic resonances that now surround descriptions of her works. Barrett clinically observes that there is no structure that Riley uses that cannot be readily understood. Books that describe the features of Op art elaborate on all of the systems that Riley uses in her paintings.¹²

Of interest to me is that Riley uses colour because of its elusive qualities and its capacity to create illusions of movement and spatial ambiguity. Such use enhances the challenges to perception already provided by repetitive sequences of black and white stripes.

I saw that the basis of colour is its instability. Instead of searching for a firm foundation, I realised I had one in the very opposite. That was solid ground again, so to speak, and by accepting this paradox I could begin to work with the fleeting, the elusive, with those things which disappear when you actually apply your attention hard and fast – and so a whole new area of activity, of perception opened up for me.¹³

For Riley colour is associated with her personal experiences. Landscape and nature have always been an important influence in the development of her use of colour.

Riley has never intended to capture or recall natural effects through light, colour, a sense of movement or the spatiality of her paintings; this would be illusionism. The analogies she perceives between art and nature have more to

¹² See C. Barrett, *Op Art*, Studio Vista, London 1970.

¹³ R. Kudielka, (ed) *Bridget Riley: Dialogues on Art*, Zwemmer, London, 1995 p 56

*do with the relative strength and character of their effects, whether or not one labels them illusions. There are illusions and confusions in nature, just as in art...*¹⁴

Riley's colours are not mimetic of light or landscape atmospheres in the way Monet's paintings are. '...I don't paint light. I present a colour situation which releases light as you look at it'.¹⁵

Like Davis, Riley's work is sometimes discussed in musical terms. 'A work such as *Luxor* 1982... suggests analogies with music in the way that certain formal elements are drawn into relationships which are variously stated, contrasted with other faster and slower passages, transformed and recapitulated.'¹⁶ Such readings are made possible by the sequentially structured, vertical stripes in some of her works, yet the colours in this work (red, blue, yellow, turquoise, green, black and white) were inspired by her visit to Egypt in 1979-80 and reflect her memory of the colours she saw there.

What was most interesting for me in the recent exhibition, *Bridget Riley: Paintings and drawings 1961-2004* held at the MCA in Sydney, was the room devoted to her coloured and black and white studies on paper. Viewing these preparatory works confirmed my view that Riley is, and has always been, an obsessive planner. It was impressive to see the extent to which she experimented with colour in relationship to quantity, contrast and placement. These works reveal the struggle which is deliberately obliterated in her finished works

Ironically, some of Richard Melville's predictions for Riley have proven to be most insightful. Riley has indeed gone on to change 'the pattern of her heaving and twitching geometry' by carefully manipulating forms such as stripes (as twists, curves, wedges, braids). Riley has become the eccentric 'old lady' that Melville

¹⁴ R. Schiff, Op Cit. p 84

¹⁵ R Kudielka, (ed), 'In Conversation with Robert Kudielka,' *The Eye's Mind: Bridget Riley, Collected Writings, 1965-99*, Thames & Hudson, 1999, p 85

¹⁶ P. Moorhouse, Op Cit. p 22.

suggested, but not in the manner he intended. Rather, she has become the ‘grande dame’ of Op art whose art is, nonetheless, as energetic, confounding and intriguing as ever. Obviously there was no need for Riley to ‘take a longer look at the black and white works of Vasarely’. Riley’s works are now considered icons of optical art. Vasarely’s work is now mostly considered to be too illustrative for most artist’s taste. She, more sensibly, looked to an artistic lineage well founded on the conventions of painting. Riley cites, amongst others, Paul Cézanne, Georges Seurat, Giacomo Balla, Paul Klee, Claude Monet and Henri Matisse as being of major importance to her understanding and use of colour and form. And, of course, Piet Mondrian’s contribution cannot be underestimated.

JH You have recently been a visiting professor at the de Montfort University in Leicester and you asked students there to copy a Mondrian.

BR There were several reasons, really. When I began to teach I had just co-organized (with Sean Rainbird at the Tate Gallery), an exhibition tracing Mondrian’s development ‘From Naturalism to Abstraction’, which was a fascinating task. Checkerboard with light colours (1919, Gemeentemuseum, The Hague) is the painting I asked students to copy. It came after Mondrian’s Pier and Ocean studies made from his memory of wading by the sea at night, seeing the sparkle of the stars above and their reflections in the dark sea. He treated this same sensation in a number of different ways and I wanted the students to see these differences and to understand that such an experience can be expressed in a variety of ways, even by the same artist. Another reason was to make clear that making a copy is not simply mechanical but a positive way of assimilating someone else’s thinking...¹⁷

Extract from Wilma Tabacco’s PhD exegesis, *Reading Between the Lines*,

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¹⁷ Bridget Riley in conversation with Jenny Harper, April 2004, *Bridget Riley Paintings and drawings 1961-2004*, (exhibition catalogue), Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, 2005, Ridinghouse, London, 2004 pp 95-96 .