

PAINTINGS AND PREPARATORY WORK 1961 - 2004

Bridget Riley

24 MARCH - 26 JUNE 2005


CITY GALLERY WELLINGTON

EXHIBITION NOTES
ON SELECTED WORKS

'No painter, dead or
alive, has ever made us
more aware of our eyes
than Bridget Riley.'

Robert Melville

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 **ERNST & YOUNG**

Movement in Squares (1961)

Gallery 1

By the late 1950s Riley had become dissatisfied with conventional approaches to landscape painting because, she said, they failed to capture the shimmering quality of nature: 'I couldn't get near what I wanted through seeing, recognizing and recreating, so I stood the problem on its head. I started studying squares, rectangles, triangles and the sensations they give rise to.' She considers 1960 the first year of her truly independent work.

Bridget Riley likens her abstract paintings to life drawings in that they balance areas of tension and relaxation, expansion and contraction. If much contemporary abstract painting stresses the two-dimensional surface of the painting, Riley's work consists of modulations and orchestrations of space.

Tremor (1962)

Gallery 1

While Riley uses formal grid-like structures within her paintings, she talks of the need to create 'little ruptures' that make a work come alive. Particularly in the early stages of composition, Riley says a painting can seem too smooth—'I have to move things out of sequence to make it more *animate*'. In *Tremor*, the introduction of a curved edge to many of the triangles creates a shifting movement like wind through a field of long grass.

Bridget Riley wrote in 1965: 'The basis of my paintings is this: that in each of them a particular situation is stated. Certain elements within that situation remain constant. Others precipitate the destruction of themselves by themselves. Recurrently, as a result of the cyclic movement of repose, disturbance and repose, the original situation is re-stated.'

Static 3 (1966)

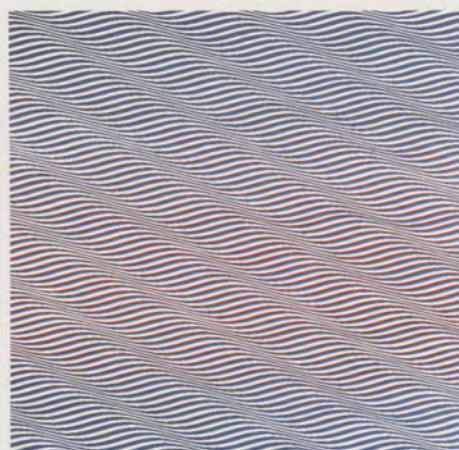
Gallery 1

In 1966, Riley painted a number of works entitled 'Static', 'in the sense of a field of static electricity', she said. 'It is visual prickles. But I don't find that a painful physical thing. It's a quality: as velvet is smooth, so this is a sparkling texture—visually.' Riley has described her early black and white paintings as 'beautifully aggressive'. She elaborates: 'Contrast is the clash of cymbals, the exclamation mark, the strongest possible means... I felt very much at the time like making an extreme statement, of something violent, something that definitely did disturb'.

Cataract 3 (1967)

Gallery 1

Moving beyond the exclusive use of black, white and grey, by 1967 Riley was incorporating colour into her work. While the undulating lines at the top and bottom of *Cataract 3* are coloured neutral grey, towards the centre of the canvas turquoise and vermilion are introduced. The undulating lines are evocative of the movement of water and wind—Riley has written that 'colour inevitably leads you to the world outside'.



'I've never at any point thought of myself as a particularly abstract painter—I can see that with the forms and colours I use I could obviously be considered so, but in the way that I move these things about I have never felt like that. I have always thought of myself as a painter.'

Rise 1 (1968)

Gallery 1

Here Riley subtly alters the ordering of the colours within each three-colour band to create a sense of space and of movement up the canvas. She likens the effect to 'the still surface of a lake where you can discern a current or disturbance just beneath the surface'.

This work demonstrates, Riley says, how colour-energy is released by instability. 'Each colour has to be balanced so that the slightest influence from a neighbouring colour will throw it off that very balance.'

Cantus Firmus (1972-73)

Gallery 2

With their repetitions, rhythms and patterns, Riley's paintings recall thematic developments in the music of J. S. Bach. The title of this work references music specifically: a cantus firmus is a melody in which a number of contrapuntal parts are added.

'In this canvas each side is visually pinned flat by equalizing tone and colour, and

a layered space opens up towards the centre,' Riley remarks. 'It's rather like being in a Gothic cathedral where light filters through the throng of the columns and gives the sensation of a space which seems to be both open and closed at the same time.'

Rattle (1973)

Gallery 2

'As I used to choose a particular form in my black and white work as a point of departure,' Bridget Riley stated in 1978, 'I now choose a particular group of colours... I build up a structure which does two different things at the same time: the individual colours change their identity through juxtaposition and by re-relating these juxtapositions the collective colour of the group is changed.' In *Rattle* lines of blue and green create an impression of yellow and purple light.

While Riley's earlier paintings relied on form for their effect, here she explores the possibilities, along with the attendant difficulties, of colour. She describes colour as 'closer to our experience of the real world. Unstable and incalculable, it is also rich and comforting. For a painter it is an ideal vehicle because it can be both a revelation and merely the surface of things.'

Streak 2 (1979)

Gallery 2

'I draw from nature. I work with nature, although in completely new terms,' Riley says. 'For me nature is not landscape, but the dynamism of visual forces—an event rather than an appearance. These forces can only be tackled by treating colour and form as ultimate identities, freeing them from all descriptive or functional roles.'

Big Blue (1981-82)

Gallery 3

In this painting Riley adopted the Egyptian palette of turquoise, red, blue, green, black and white. The work was painted after a sojourn in Egypt during the winter of 1979-80 and was inspired by the colours and forms Riley encountered in the temples and tombs in Valley of the Kings and in the Cairo Museum. 'The colours are purer and more brilliant than any I had used before,' she wrote, and were inspired by the 'life-giving arrangement of colours' the Egyptians had used for over 3000 years.

'The vertical bands form groups and intervals. The painting introduces itself with a strong thrust from the left, opens out into a slower passage and turns around in a gentler echo or recapitulation on the right. Although this somewhat musical

description faithfully accounts for the painting's conception and construction, it does not mean that one necessarily "reads" it successively from left to right. Standing in front of the canvas all is simultaneously present, one relates and re-relates the colours both singly and collectively, the underlying structure being more sensed than observed.'

Tabriz (1984)

Gallery 3

'After my visit to Egypt, I chose long thin vertical stripes, because they have very little body and are mostly "edges". The interaction between colours is most intense when one colour borders on another. The long edges of the stripes maximize this relationship. When placed vertically the colour event is seen as a horizontal spread of coloured light... It's more as though the colour is breathing, giving off a subtly tinted cloud of its own transformed energy. It happens all the time in nature, but it comes into its own in painting: there colour is at its purest.'

From Here (1994)

Gallery 3

Reflecting Riley's growing preoccupation with colour-relationships rather than forms, in *From Here* areas of colour are divided vertically and diagonally to create an interlocking yet dynamic composition. 'I think of space as another plastic agent grounded in colour organization,' she writes. 'Colours can adopt different planes, similar ones or approximately the same, according to the context in which they are placed... a gentle kind of emerging and receding syncopation arises that can pick up pace, sometimes developing into a rhythm.' Riley's interest in the vertical, horizontal and the diagonal as the fundamental components of pictorial composition has been traced to her study of Titian, Poussin and Cézanne.

Lagoon 1 (1997)

Gallery 3

The mid-1990s marked another shift in Riley's practice. 'I had sent myself



back to school to discover about spatial interactions through spatial planes,' Bridget Riley recalls. 'This led to a change. But trying to reintroduce the curve took two years.'

While hard edges and straight lines dominated Riley's art through the 1980s, the curves that characterized much of her work in the early 1960s re-emerged. 'The recent paintings,' as Paul Moorhouse writes: 'now advance toward an extraordinary state of nothingness—no surface, no definite planes, no spaces and, yet, at the same time, *all* of these things...'

Evoë 3 (2003)

Gallery 3

Titled after an ancient chant in praise of Bacchus, the Greek god of wine and intoxication, *Evoë 3* has a flowing dance-like movement reminiscent of the running or dancing figures on an ancient frieze. The colours and cadence also recall the figure paintings of Henri Matisse, which Riley admires.

'Painting without its problems can no longer be painting,' Riley has written. 'It depends upon them for its existence. From the viewpoint of the modern painter the true tradition lies less in a succession of solutions than in recognizing that the problems of picture-making can never be resolved as such. And it is just this that constitutes paintings' continuing vitality.'

Works on Paper

Gallery 4

Riley's preparatory studies show the lengthy process that leads to a finished painting. Each work on paper requires calculation and skill, allowing for modifications and reassessments of the final work. Riley has frequently noted that she has not studied optics and her investigations, although methodical and precise, are purely intuition-based, the result of trial and error.

The step-by-step development of Riley's work leads through a final 'cartoon' stage where changes may be made by collage of painted and cut paper. Once Riley resolves an image at cartoon stage, a linen canvas is carefully prepared, taken off its stretcher and laid flat onto a large work table. It is then drawn up and under-painted in acrylic colours before being repainted in oils, the precision of the final painting being a matter of skill; masking tape is never used.

Since 1961 Riley has used assistants at every stage of an artwork's creation. Whilst some of her assistants have worked alongside her for years, the eye,

judgement and responsibility remain the artist's alone.



'More than anything else I want my paintings to exist on their own terms. That is to say they must stealthily engage and disarm you. There the paintings hang, deceptively simple—telling no tales as it were—resisting, in a well-behaved way, all attempts to be questioned, probed or stared at and then, for those with open eyes, serenely disclosing some intimations of the splendours to which pure sight alone has the key.'

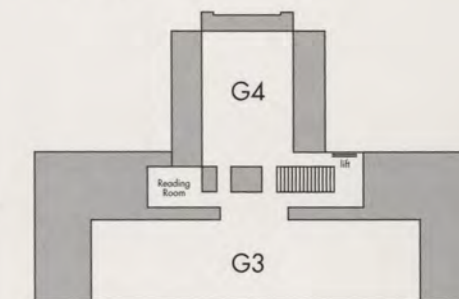
Bridget Riley, 1988

Gallery Plan

Ground Floor



First Floor



Images

Cataract 3 1967, PVA on canvas, 221x222.9cm, Courtesy of the British Council Collection.

Lagoon 1 1997, oil on linen, 147x193cm, Private collection.

Study for *Twist* 1963, pencil on graph paper, 25.2x45.3cm, Collection of the artist.

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'Art has to be expressive of the urgency and failure, love and inadequacy that drive human endeavour.'

Bridget Riley, 1984

Since the early 1960s Bridget Riley has produced a body of work which is one of the most sustained and focused explorations of visual experience of recent times. While her art can be dramatic and at times even disorientating, it is also characterized by a formal rigor and an intuitive balancing of elements.

Born in London in 1931, Bridget Riley spent her childhood years by the sea in Cornwall. She sees her abstract paintings in a direct relationship to the world around her. In a 2004 interview with Jenny Harper, she explained: 'How do you convey the freshness of a walk across the cliffs in the early morning, the blackness of the sea in deep shadow or the shiver of tiny grasses blown by the wind? I wanted to recreate such sensations—and this longing has shaped and still informs my understanding of abstraction.'

Between 1949 and 1955 Riley attended Goldsmiths College and then the Royal College of Art in London. She recalls the life drawing classes from this time as being another integral part of her development: 'Rendering a three-dimensional figure on a two-dimensional surface is a good preface for abstract painting.' Her traditional education taught her to order her thinking, 'to analyse, to see the thing as a whole'.

Bridget Riley's black and white paintings were produced between 1961 and 1966. A selection was included in 'The Responsive Eye' at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 1965, which coincided with a sell-out solo exhibition at the Richard Feigen Gallery. In 1968 she became the first contemporary British painter and the first woman to win the International Prize for painting at the Venice Biennale. Since then her work has been exhibited and celebrated around the globe. A large retrospective at the Tate Britain in 2003 underlined her status as one of the most accomplished living artists.

'Bridget Riley: Paintings and Preparatory Work 1961-2004' features key paintings from throughout the artist's career, stressing the developments as well as the continuities. Riley does not see her development as a painter as a 'straight line' progression—rather, she divides her work into 'families'. Formal concerns re-emerge as the patterns within the works themselves do. She points out that her method is neither scientific nor optical—it is a process of 'trial and error, working by eye'. Accompanying the paintings are preparatory drawings and works on paper which impart a sense of the processes of thought and seeing which lead to the final canvases.

Selected Sources

Robert Kudielka (ed.), *The eye's mind: Bridget Riley collected writings 1965-1999*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1999.

Robert Kudielka (ed.), *Bridget Riley: dialogues on art*, London: Thames and Hudson, 2003.

Paul Moorhouse (ed.), *Bridget Riley*, London: Tate Publishing, 2003.

Further details of Bridget Riley's life and reproductions of all the works in the exhibition are contained in the exhibition catalogue *Bridget Riley, paintings and drawings 1961-2004* (London: Ridinghouse, 2004), available at the Gallery reception desk.

Bridget Riley in Earls Court Studio, black and white photograph, 1964.

Front cover image: *Movement in Squares* 1961, tempera on board, 123.2x121.3cm, Courtesy of the Arts Council Collection, Hayward Gallery, London.

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Accompanying the exhibition 'Bridget Riley: Paintings and Preparatory Work 1961-2004', City Gallery Wellington presents an engaging and stimulating programme of public events. Highlights are detailed below, but for a full list of events and up-to-date information, please ask at the Gallery reception desk, check out the events calendar at www.city-gallery.org.nz or see City Gallery Wellington's ad in the entertainment pages of Saturday's *Dominion Post*.

PUBLIC PROGRAMME HIGHLIGHTS



MONTANA

MONTANA KEYNOTE LECTURE SERIES

BRIDGET RILEY AND BRITISH CONSTRUCTIVISM: Associate Prof. Peter Stupples

Sunday 8 May, 2pm

Peter Stupples, Associate Professor in Art History at Otago University, explores Riley's 'op' work within the context of post-1960s British constructivism.

A FAST RIDE OR A SLOW BURN—Bridget Riley's painting and its impact during the 1960s and today: Zara Stanhope

Sunday 15 May, 2pm

Zara Stanhope, Senior Curator, Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne, discusses Bridget Riley's distinguished career focusing on how Riley has consistently extended the language of painting.

SEEING AND BELIEVING—The reception of Bridget Riley's art: Associate Prof. Jenny Harper

Sunday 22 May, 2pm

One of the world's leading experts on Bridget Riley, Victoria University Associate Professor Jenny Harper examines Riley's life and work, considering how Riley's painting explores the truth of what one can see. Lecture presented in partnership with Victoria Continuing Education.

IN RESPONSE: NEW ZEALAND ARTISTS ON RILEY

NATURE ABSTRACTED: Simon Morris – Sunday 1 May, 2pm

STRIPES OF COLOUR: Darryn George – Sunday 29 May, 2pm

LATE NIGHT SESSIONS

Friday 6 May & Friday 27 May, 8-11pm

Enjoy late night sessions of local electronic music while checking out the exhibition.

WEEKEND EXHIBITION TOURS

Public tours of 'Bridget Riley: Paintings and Preparatory Work 1961-2004' every Saturday and Sunday at 1pm. No bookings required. Meet in the gallery foyer.

VISITOR GROUP AND COMMUNITY EDUCATION TOURS

A great way to get more out of your visit to the Gallery. Bring your social or community group, friends and family (6+ people) to 'Bridget Riley: Paintings and Preparatory Work 1961-2004' and enjoy a 40 minute tour of the exhibition. Bookings essential. Tel: (04) 801 3987


Events free with exhibition admission charge. Admission: \$7 / Concession \$5 / Multi-visit ticket \$14

Bookings essential for the Montana Keynote Lecture Series. Tel: (04) 801 3987 / Email: robyn.walker@wcc.govt.nz

SCHOOLS AND EDUCATION

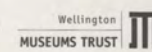
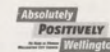
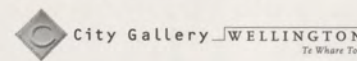
City Gallery Wellington offers an exciting and enriching programme of curriculum-linked exhibition tours and workshops in our on-site classroom for primary and secondary students. Book early to ensure your class doesn't miss out on a free education visit to 'Bridget Riley: Paintings and Preparatory Work 1961-2004'.

Education programme general enquiries and bookings: Tel: (04) 801 3965 / Email: citygalleryeducation@wcc.govt.nz
Māori education programme enquiries and bookings: Tel: (04) 801 3081 / Email: janina.dell@wcc.govt.nz

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City Gallery Wellington is managed by the Wellington Museums Trust with major funding support from the Wellington City Council.

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