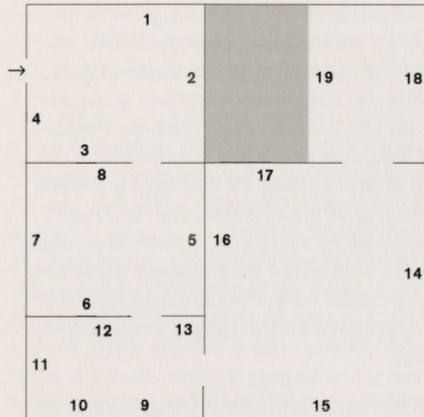


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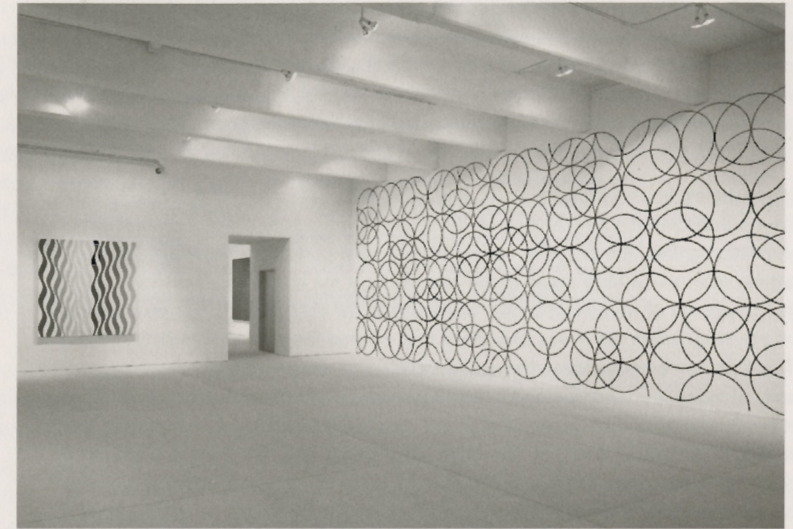


1. **Samarra**, 1984
oil on linen
80 x 68 inches
Private Collection, London
2. **Song of Orpheus 5**, 1978
acrylic on linen
77 x 102 1/4 inches
Courtesy Pace Wildenstein, New York
3. **Après Midi**, 1981
oil on linen
91 x 77 3/4 inches
Private Collection, London
4. **Andante 1**, 1980
acrylic on linen
72 x 66 1/2 inches
Private Collection, London
5. **Paeon**, 1973
acrylic on canvas
114 x 113 inches
Collection of National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo
6. **Entice 2**, 1974
acrylic on linen
61 x 54 inches
Collection of Camille Oliver-Hoffmann, Chicago
7. **Orient 4**, 1970
acrylic on canvas
88 x 127 inches
Berardo Collection, Sintra Museum of Modern Art, Lisbon
8. **Cataract 3**, 1967
PVA on canvas
88 1/2 x 87 1/2 inches
Collection of The British Council, London

9. **Movement in Squares**, 1961
tempera on board
48 x 47 1/2 inches
Arts Council Collection, Hayward Gallery, London
10. **White Disks**, 1964
emulsion on board
41 x 39 inches
Private Collection, London
11. **Crest**, 1964
emulsion on board
65 1/2 x 65 1/2 inches (diagonal)
Collection of The British Council, London
12. **Disturbance**, 1964
emulsion on canvas
68 x 68 inches
Courtesy Austin/Desmond Fine Art, London
13. **Pause**, 1964
emulsion on board
45 1/2 x 45 3/4 inches
Private Collection, London
14. **Composition with Circles 2**, 2000
graphite, acrylic paint, and permanent marker
on plaster wall
13 3/4 x 49 1/2 feet
15. **Breathe**, 1966
emulsion on canvas
117 x 82 inches
Collection of Boijmans Van Beuningen Museum, Rotterdam
16. **Veld**, 1971
acrylic on linen
75 1/2 x 154 1/2 inches
Collection of National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
17. **Arrest 2**, 1965
acrylic on linen
76 1/2 x 75 inches
Courtesy Pace Wildenstein, New York
18. **Deny 2**, 1967
emulsion on canvas
85 1/2 x 85 1/2 inches
Collection of Tate Gallery, London
19. **Static 2**, 1966
emulsion on canvas
90 x 90 inches
Courtesy Pace Wildenstein, New York

Cover Photo: Bill Jacobson

Bridget Riley
Reconnaissance
September 21, 2000–June 17, 2001



Dia center for the arts
548 west 22nd street new york

Bridget Riley Reconnaissance

"In my earlier paintings, I wanted the space between the picture plane and the spectator to be active. It was in that space, paradoxically, the painting 'took place,'" Bridget Riley summarized with characteristic incisive clarity. "Then, little by little, and, to some extent deliberately, I made it go the other way, opening up an interior space, as it were, so that there was a layered, shallow depth. It is important that the painting can be inhabited, so that the mind's eye, or the eye's mind, can move about it credibly."¹

Deeply revealing in its crystalline acuity, this terse statement made at a critical juncture in 1988, the endpoint of a momentous series of works, springs to mind when first entering her exhibition at Dia. The Egyptian series, as they have come to be familiarly known, developed after a visit Riley made to the Nile Valley in the winter of 1979–1980. Other, related groupings of works can be identified across the course of what is now almost a forty-year-long career, but it was this group that created the pivotal change of direction, the fundamental reorientation in her aesthetic. Appropriating a palette drawn from memory of those five hues codified in over three thousand years of use by early Egyptian artists—red, blue, turquoise, green, and ochre—plus black and white, these paintings are composed in long parallel stripes.² Because stripes have very little body and are mostly "edges," and because the interaction between colors is most intense when they border each other, they offer the possibility of maximal chromatic luminosity. To reinforce this effect, Riley now replaced acrylic paints with oils, taking advantage of their more saturated and brilliant hues; by aligning the bands vertically, she created a visual experience perceived as a horizontal spread of radiant colored light.

Orchestrated as a stately sequence of groups of stripes that incrementally build a relatively shallow pictorial space, *Après Midi* (1981) was among the first in this series. White stripes introduce a gentle release from the taut armature of their black counterparts; this punctuation establishes a rhythm and pacing in relation to which the chords of paired complementary colors sculpt an ever shifting, luminous, unstable space. As she explored the potential of this repertoire of elements, Riley, in typical fashion, gradually made a number of crucial changes within the deliberately restricted lexicon. First, black was eliminated in favor of green and, then, as seen in *Samarra* (1984), lavender replaced white. Within this carefully calibrated set of limitations, Riley discovered an extraordinary wealth of possibilities, not merely in refining colored light but, more significantly, in parsing spatial relations—that is, devising plastic space through a freely improvised putting together of bands exhibiting distinctive and contrasting chromatic characters—which could have continued to occupy her for years to come. Nonetheless, she made a decisive move, foregoing the more secure route to give reign to a need to move the viewer's eye around a painting in multiple directions and along divergent axes, earlier manifested in such works as *Static 2* (1966) and *Deny 2* (1967), both installed here in the final room of the exhibition. Revealingly, it was to be several years before a new vocabulary and palette would emerge from which equally confident and challenging paintings could be constructed. In those, as in the subsequent and most recent body of work, her abiding preoccupation has remained the creation of this plastic pictorial space by means of color relations.

Similar moves, albeit less momentous ones, mark the course of Riley's oeuvre. Prior to the Egyptian series, she had worked on a group of paintings that were equally refined in their

close-toned palette but more visually complex in composition, in that long, slow, narrow curves of varying thinness twisted around and over each other in a delicate lyrical flow. Comparing these subtle works with Riley's first forays into color proves illuminating, as may be seen by walking from *Andante 1* (1980), also hung in the first gallery, to *Cataract 3* (1967), located in the second, in which a neutral grey wavelike stripe gradually separates into its warmer and cooler tones until, toward the center of the field, they become a pair of turquoise and red parallel bands. This exploration of color grew out of a need to develop the range of warm and cold greys found in paintings of the sixties, such as *Arrest 2* (1965), which, in turn, had evolved from works based on a spectrum of tonal greys, exemplified here in *Pause* (1964); these had emerged from certain seminal works based on a sharply defined black and white contrast. (Placed at the core of this show, *Movement in Squares* [1961] and *Crest* [1964] with their dynamic movement—repose, disequilibrium, repose—are signature statements in this idiom.³)

Finding herself confronted with pure color during the evolution of the Cataract paintings, Riley seized the gauntlet. The pictures that shortly followed were composed from a deliberately limited palette of three hues—frequently, red, blue, and green—plus white. In clarifying the range of complex visual dynamics yielded by these vibrantly scintillating relationships, Riley found that she needed to restrict the form to slender vertical stripes and, at the same time, work on a larger format so that a painting would be initially encountered as a single holistic entity whose parts and internal relations would only gradually reveal themselves on extended viewing, as in *Paeon* (1973). The pleasures of sight—which she regards as integral for perception to function as a medium—generated in this extraordinarily fresh, exhilarating diffusion of disembodied colored light mutate thereafter into more unexpected and elusive luminous effects, for example, as found in *Orient 4* (1970), hung opposite, composed from a cyclical movement of a trio of interrelated tertiary hues interspersed with white.

As already intimated in this unfolding narrative (a tour that moves back in time in order to circle around the present), Riley approaches her practice in a highly rigorous fashion, taking as her point of departure an inventory of pictorial elements including line, shape, tone, hue, or composition—that is "the basis of vision rather than its appearance"—in order to investigate and develop their potential relationships. At once systematic and yet never predetermined, these explorations are stringently pursued so that the results are always singular, specific, and particular to that individual instance. Consequently, she has always eschewed optical systems based on physiological or psychological theories of vision. That Paul Klee's seminal text *The Thinking Eye*⁴ should have been formative on her aesthetic comes as no surprise, nor that Mondrian should be for her among the greatest pioneers of modernist art. Indeed she likens his place within its history to that of Giotto vis-à-vis Renaissance painting, implying in addition that abstraction is at the beginning of a trajectory whose lineaments are as yet barely defined. While much has been written about a so-called science of color, what Riley discovered, as did the great colorists before her whom she reveres (Veronese, Delacroix, and Seurat, among others), was that color has no systematic, knowable foundation but can only be handled by means of experience, intensive analysis, and patient research and inquiry. Her preoccupation over the past fifteen years with

constructing a chromatically structured plastic space has made Cézanne a key mentor, whereas, formerly, Impressionist and Neo-Impressionist precedents proved influential for her conjuring of luminous optical space.

Riley deems her place and her practice as therefore belonging securely within a long and continuous pictorial tradition: her knowledge of and commitment to that heritage have grown increasingly deep and enduring. At the same time, her understanding of the task confronting the painter today is one that links her closely to her peers, such as Richard Serra or, on occasion, Bruce Nauman. In the late 1950s, when just out of art school, her first encounter with the work of Jackson Pollock proved revelatory.⁵ Dating from the beginning of the sixties, such signature early works as *Movement in Squares* and *Crest* attest to his impact on her thinking, namely, on the need she felt to study spatial relations created optically through a boldly pared palette and vocabulary, and to make clarity of purpose and statement a goal. Forsaking subjective handling in the guise of an expressive, personalized brushwork would, she resolved, provide her with the means to engage closely with the rich legacy Pollock had bequeathed. Executed by assistants, each painting would henceforth burgeon from studies of pictorial relationships out of which, at a certain moment, a particular visual memory or a phenomenal sensation is recognized: once it has emerged, it may then be pursued via a painstaking process involving elaborate and detailed sketches, as well as full-scale cartoons, into a finished statement.

While Riley today remains absorbed with issues stemming from the construction of a plastic pictorial space through chromatic means articulated by drawing, she has nonetheless always been willing to engage with what may seem at first glance tangential problems, if only in order to return refurbished with fresh possibilities. This readiness to respond to a novel set of circumstances has led her several times to undertake public commissions, as well as, most recently, to create two site-specific wall drawings, the first at the Kunsthalle Bern in 1998 and the second for "Reconnaissance" at Dia.⁶ *Composition with Circles 2* (2000) marries the two types of spatial experience found in her work to date: based in a participatory engagement that occurred *between* the picture plane and the spectator, the first was a hallmark of her signature early works; a layered, shallow interiorized depth, the second was foreshadowed in the Egyptian series.

Encountered from the gallery containing her first mature works, directly opposite, the viewer initially scans the monumental field of interlocking and overlapping circles, which seem to move back and forward within the shallow, indeterminate space that constitutes *Composition with Circles 2*. Alighting on a particular arc, segment, or intersection, which serves as an entry point, the eye begins to discern and articulate series of visual connections, rhythms, accents, and incidents counterpointing each other in a dynamic flow, finally structuring a complex and diverse journey around the surface. As these different trajectories are slowly distilled, the spectator comes to apprehend how the whole has been built into a cohesive composition, a virtuosic performance that depends as much on the exercise of an unprecedented ebullient

freedom as on the deployment of control. As such, it is reminiscent of certain key works of Pollock, notably *Number 32* (1950) and *One* (1950). Reentering the gallery from the north, that is, from the room containing *Static 2* and *Deny 2*, the viewer now encounters *Composition with Circles 2* from an oblique angle, in close-up. This entry point reveals a second, quite distinct structure based on rippling linear movements that resemble sine-curves dissolving and reemerging down the length of the wall. But irrespective of whether circular fragments, linear trajectories, or visual flickers generated by the intersection or overlap of two lines, reminiscent of those found at the intertices of Mondrian's mature works, initiate the starting point of the visual journey, this lexicon, with its implicit scaffolding, offers a point of departure for a work based on movement through spaces, conceptual as well as pictorial and actual in character.

In this way, *Composition with Circles 2* vividly inscribes a metaphysics at the core of Riley's aesthetic, one which can perhaps best be elucidated by piecing together key statements the artist has made over the past decade:

In general, my paintings are multifocal. You can't call it unfocused space, but not being fixed to a single focus is very much of our time. It's something that seems to have come about in the last hundred years or so. Focusing isn't just an optical activity, it is also a mental one. I think this lack of a center has something to do with the loss of certainties that Christianity had to offer. There was a time when meanings were focused and reality could be fixed; when that sort of belief disappeared, things became uncertain and open to interpretation. We can no longer hope as the Renaissance did that "man is the measure of all things." (1988)⁷

I think that an artist today has to totally accept this lack, has to start from a "placelessness" virtually as a point of departure. (1995)

Painting is, I think, inevitably an archaic activity and one that depends on spiritual values. One of the big crises in painting—at least a century or two, or maybe three, centuries old—was precipitated by the dropping away of the support of a known spiritual context in which a creative impulse such as painting could find a place. This cannot be replaced by private worlds and reveries. As a painter today you have to work without that essential platform. But if one does not deceive oneself and accepts this lack of certainty, other things may come into play. (1995)

Properly treated, formalism is not an empty thing but a potentially very powerful answer to this spiritual challenge. (1995)

Embodying an existential philosophy of placelessness generated, paradoxically, by site-specificity, *Composition with Circles 2* is a work of extraordinary visual complexity, the coherence and cohesion of whose underlying structure may be readily apprehended without, however, being either wholly comprehended or, indeed, wholly comprehensible.

notes

1. Bridget Riley, "The Experience of Painting" (1988), in *The Eye's Mind: Bridget Riley. Collected Writings 1965–1999*, ed. Robert Kudielka (London: Thames and Hudson, in association with the Serpentine Gallery, London, and De Montfort University, 1999), p. 122.
2. Typically, both other artworks and experiences encountered in the phenomenal world offer points of departure for Riley. Natural phenomena and sensorial impressions provided the source for a formative and longstanding involvement with the pleasures offered by sight, later reinforced by reading the writings of Stravinsky and Proust, as well as through encounters with a wide range of visual art. "Poetic" titles are employed as prompts or hints galvanizing such sensations.
3. "Form and color seem to be fundamentally incompatible—they destroy each other," Riley contended in 1978. "In my earlier work, when I was developing complex forms, the energies of the medium could only be fully released by simplifying color to a black-and-white constant (with occasional grey sequences). Conversely, color energies need a virtually neutral vehicle if they are to develop uninhibitedly. The repeated stripe seems to meet these conditions," she concluded. "In the same way I had to sacrifice distinctive forms in order to release the energy of color-light," she averred on another occasion, "[so] it was necessary to increase the scale of the event to prevent focused looking." (1978) In her most recent series, some fusion of these contraries is attempted as a more diverse and seemingly idiosyncratic vocabulary of shapes manifests in a strictly limited palette comprised of a few close-toned hues. Previously, in the "zig" series a very wide-ranging palette activated a restricted compositional format, which gradually fractured into diverse composite shapes suspended in what could be discerned as the shards of a cohesive grid.
4. Paul Klee, *The Thinking Eye: The Notebooks of Paul Klee*, ed. Jürg Spiller (New York: G. Wittenborn, 1961).
5. Two shows in particular were critical in bringing Pollock's work to her attention: "Modern Art in the United States," shown at the Tate Gallery, London, in 1956, followed by a retrospective of his painting presented at the Whitechapel Art Gallery two years later.
6. "Reconnaissance," the title chosen for this show, refers to reacquaintance with what was formerly known, as well as to a survey or an overview. Such a perspective informs and frames the structure as well as the composition of this show. Coincidentally, it may also refer to Riley's revisiting of aspects of her earlier work in her most recent undertaking, *Composition with Circles 2* (2000).
7. This and Bridget Riley's remaining three quotes are from, *Bridget Riley: Paintings from the 1960s and 70s* (London: Serpentine Gallery, 1999), p. 15.

Bridget Riley was born in 1931 in London, where she currently lives and works. Educated first at Goldsmiths (1949–1952), then at the Royal College of Art in London (1952–1955), Riley has exhibited widely since her first solo show in 1962. Among numerous group exhibitions, she was included in the 1968 Venice Biennial (where she won the International Prize for painting) and the Venice Biennial in 1986, Documenta IV (1968) and Documenta VI (1977). After traveling retrospective tours in 1970–1971 and 1978–1980, major retrospective shows of Riley's work have been installed most recently at the Abbot Hall Art Gallery, Kendal, Cumbria (1998); the Serpentine Gallery, London (1999); and the Kunstverein in Düsseldorf (1999).

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Bridget Riley: Paintings from the 1960s and 70s. London: Serpentine Gallery, 1999. With texts by Lisa Corrin, Robert Kudielka, and Frances Spalding.

Bridget Riley: Selected Paintings 1961–1999. Ostfildern-Ruit: Cantz, in association with Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen, 1999. With texts by Michael Krajewski, Robert Kudielka, Bridget Riley, Raimund Stecker, and conversations with Ernst H. Gombrich and Michael Craig-Martin.

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Bridget Riley: Dialogues on Art. Ed. Robert Kudielka. London: Zwemmer, 1995. Conversations with Michael Craig-Martin, Andrew Graham Dixon, Ernst H. Gombrich, Neil MacGregor, and Bryan Robertson. Introduction by Richard Shone.

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