

Bridget Riley: Perceptual Abstraction

Bridget Riley (1931-) came to fame in the early 1960s with her striking black-and-white abstract paintings, which were included in an important exhibition organized by the Museum of Modern Art in New York, entitled *The Responsive Eye* (1965-66). After her first success, she moved on to colored abstract paintings and prints that infuse the viewer with a sense of movement.

Beginnings

Riley studied art at Goldsmith's College and the Royal College of Art, but found no clear inspiration until she attended a summer school organized by Harry Thubron and Maurice de Sausmarez in 1959. She became intrigued by the pointillism of Georges Seurat, and made a careful copy of his 1887 painting *Le Pont de Courbevoie* in order to understand the relations between the colors (Spicer, 2015):



Maurice de Sausmarez

De Sausmarez, a charismatic teacher of art and design, was particularly intrigued by the way in which force and motion could be portrayed graphically. His teachings were presented in his 1964 book *Basic Design: The Dynamics of Visual Form*. In his introduction to the book (p 16) he summarizes the goal of his teaching:

to examine the rudimentary forces brought into being through graphic marks, dimensional relationships, juxtaposed colours, etc, leaving to the individual's talent and temperament the terms in which he expresses himself. It is the counterpart to mastering the elementary signs of a language, formation and relationship to create coherences,

but, by comparison, the primary forces operating in the act of looking provide us with prodigious subtlety and variety. Furthermore visual coherence is more related to our neural and psycho-physiological being than to our processes of intellection. It is for this reason that we cannot describe or define this coherence, we can only acknowledge it when it is experienced through feeling. Optical forces are continuously operative, forces of attraction and repulsion, of expansion and contraction according to the situation of shapes and colours presented to our eyes. As we have already noted, sight is more than the mere optical stimulation of the retina by haphazard light rays, which the mind concurrently organizes into spatial units. It is virtually impossible to perceive units isolated from and unaffected by the context in which they appear. Relationship is inescapable and this makes the act of looking a dynamic experience.

In 1959 he and Riley began an affair, travelling together to Portugal and later to Italy. In Italy they attended an exhibition of Italian Futurism at the Venice Biennale. The following is a painting by Giacomo Balla: *Abstract: Speed + Sound* (1913):



In his biography of her early life, Moorhouse (2019, pp 200-201) describes how Riley came to her ideas about dynamism in black and white in Venice in 1960

Taking a respite from the day's summer heat, the two stopped at a café and lingered at their table. Idling in this way, Bridget was greatly taken by the tessellated pattern of black-and-white floor tiles that lay around them. With its abutting squares the rigid geometry of the design caught her eye and she surveyed the arrangement with a half-conscious pleasure. Then, as sometimes happens, without warning the sky quickly became overcast and a torrential downpour ensued. With growing fascination, she watched as the exposed floor pattern was fractured by the beating rain. Consumed by spreading pools of water, the chequerboard design gradually dissolved, the lines and squares dancing in chaotic movement. Transfixed, she observed a firm structure as it became convulsed and then finally transformed into its

opposite: a pliable, plastic surface that undulated and writhed. Within minutes the mirage had run its course. The sky cleared and, with the return of intense sunlight, the ground dried and the linear structure reappeared. Insignificant in itself, the spectacle had existed only briefly. Yet at some deeper level this optical event made a lasting impression.

Ruth Padel

The poet Ruth Padel described Riley's experiences in Venice in 1960 in a long poem entitled *Butterfly Landing on a Painting by Bridget Riley*. The poem, published in *Voodoo Shop* (2002, pp 43-51), was triggered by a large swallowtail butterfly alighting near her: an "unfolded scrap of animate origami." The butterfly evoked memories of her recently deceased father, who had been an amateur lepidopterist. Its black and white stipes also brought to mind the early paintings of Bridget Riley. She imagined Riley and de Saumarez in Venice in 1960 in a section of the poem entitled *Rain*. The text of the poem is followed by its recitation by the poet.

A sudden squall of rain in the piazza. It's 1960.
Venice.

 The dark girl, knocking back Camparis with
her lover
(Old enough to be her dad; the centre of everything
she is),

 Has won a prize. She's twenty-nine, all go,
And flirting with Hard Edge
 Abstractionism. He thinks she's difficult,
and young.

They're splitting up. She doesn't know.

Together, they've explored the Futurists.

 They tried to visit Gino Severini,

Futurism's founder, but he won't be seen, he's
 Ill. Now she's drawing on the table, arguing.
'Shapes that flow
 Through space destroy the world as you and I
Perceive it.' But her voice is shrill.

He's playing teacher, lecturing on
 The inner life of colour. She's saying, too
Loud and wrong, somehow,
 That losing certainty of line could change
Things for a painter, rearrange him, set him free
 (She still says 'he'), 'or whisk
Him off to places he never dreamed he'd see.'

You can hear how young – you want to fold her in
 Your arms, make her slow down –
But you love the flinging out: the risk.
 More Camparis. He forgives
The arguing for now; until they're home.
 What she's really up to
Is watching how rain turns

All this Renaissance paving – midnight geometry
 Of star and parallelogram, black granite set
rnilkstone from the cold Carrara ridge –
 To a swirl of snake-skin
Runnels. Chaos physics.

 In herself, only half-aware, she's marvelling
How a thing that seemed so certain

Can in a flash, a moment, fall to bits. She's no idea
 This will change the way we see.
Rain stops – the flagstones dry – that pristine,
seven-

 Point clarity comes back. But her eyes have
taken in
How pattern, safe curtain
 Of the given world, can buckle, go

Molten on you, disappear.

Afterwards, she'll see it everywhere, a witchy spell
 On pell-mell dying leaves
Or zebra crossings over Russell Square,
 And sloping glass of a Ford Popular's rear
window
Where it slippingly reflects
 The dark-pale-dark of bedrooms in Imperial
Hotel.
It'll stay with her, unnoticed, when he's left.

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/padel_rain_complete.mp3

The next section of Padel's poem is entitled *Kiss*:

He's gone. She can't believe it, can't go on.
She's going to give up painting. So she paints
Her final canvas, total-turn-off
 Black. One long
 Obsidian goodbye.
A charcoal-burner's Smirnoff,
The mirror of Loch Ness
Reflecting the monster back to its own eye.

But something's wrong. Those mad
Black-body particles don't sing
Her story of despair, the steel and
 Garnet spindle
 Of the storm.

This black has everything its own sweet way,
Where's the I'd-like-to-kill-you
Conflict? Try once more, but this time add

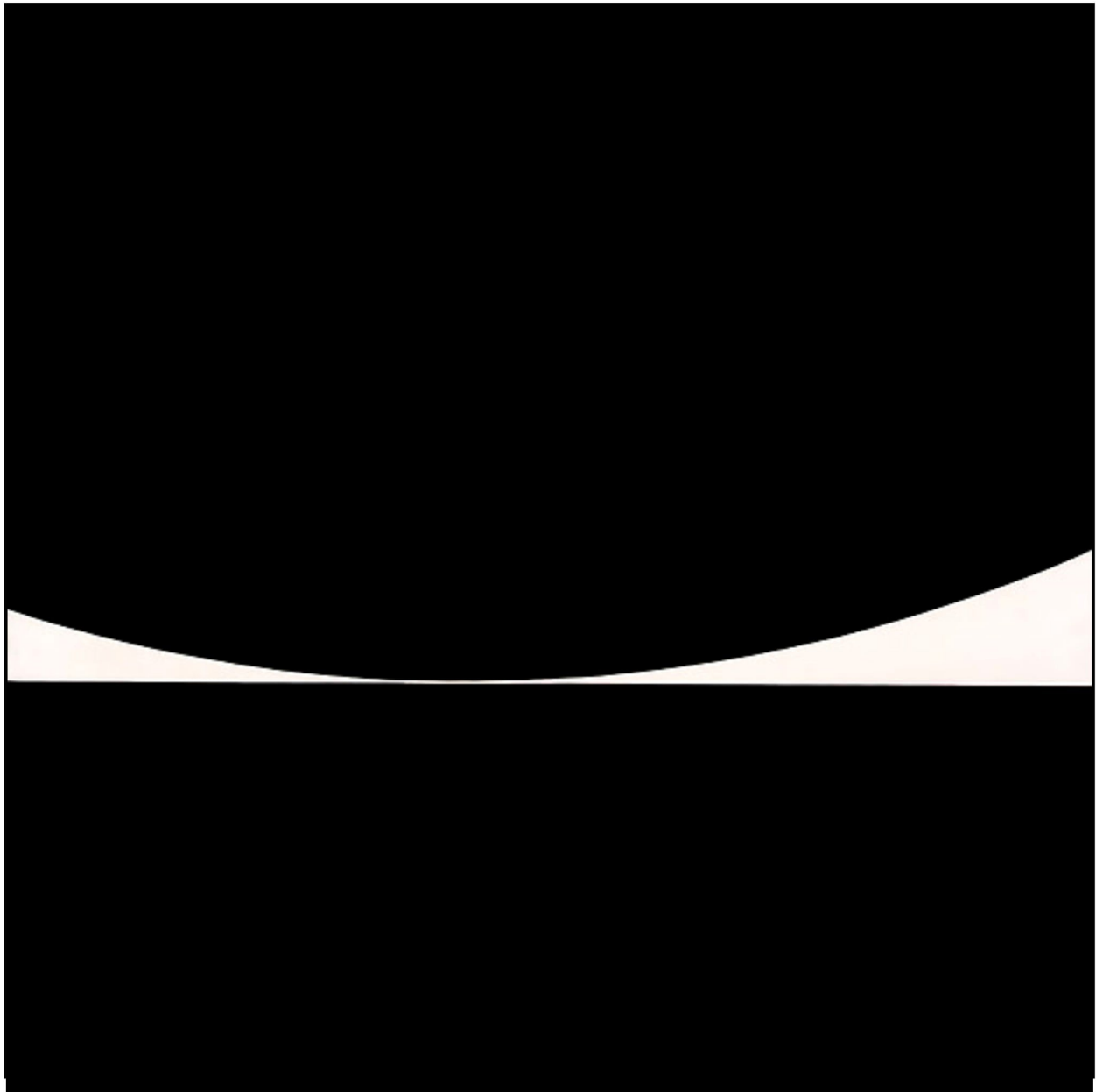
A curve to all that straight. And opposition –
White. She paints black first. A grindstone belly

Hammering a smaller shape
 Beneath a snake
 Of in-betweening light.
'I feel like this. I hope that you do, too,
Black crater. Screw you. Kiss.'

And sees a voodoo flicker, where two worlds nearly
touch
And miss. That flash, where white
Lets black get close, that dagger of not-quite
contact,
Catspaw panic, quiver on the wheat
 Field before thunder –
 There. That's it.
That's her own self, in paint,
Splitting what she was from what she is.
As if everything that separates, unites.

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/padel_kiss_complete.mp3

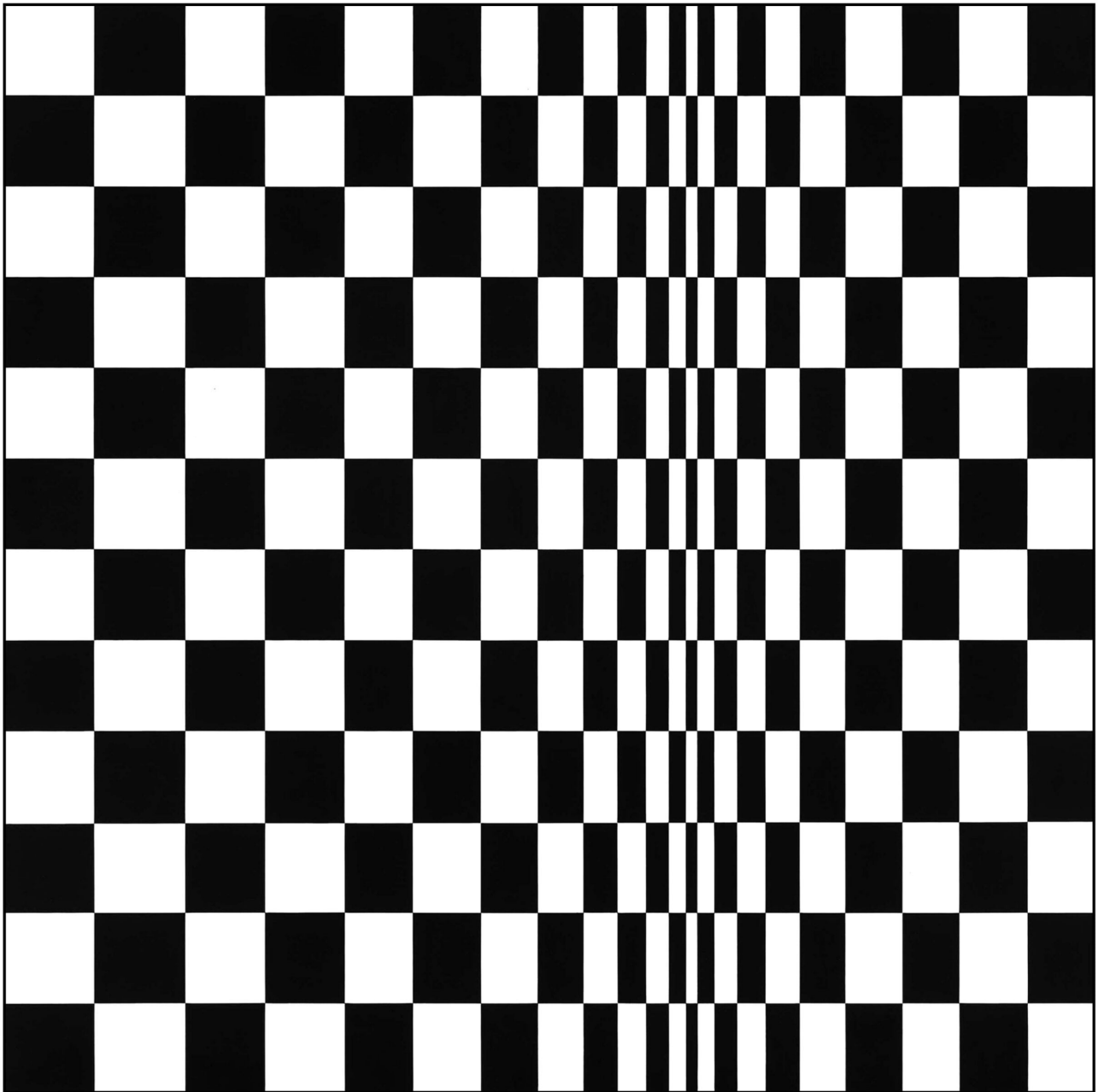
The painting *Kiss* (1961) shows two large black shapes, one straight, one curved, almost coming together. The point of their almost contact is scintillating.



Riley's affair with de Sausmarez came to an end, but the two remained friends. De Sausmarez wrote the text for the first monograph on Bridget Riley's work, published in 1970, just after his death. He remarked about the painting *Kiss* (de Sausmarez, 1970, p 16):

the 'blink' or 'flash' in the white area where the two massive, sensuous, black shapes nearly touch, and the fractional 'together and apart' movement of the straight and curved dividing lines.

A second painting from 1961 was entitled *Movement in Squares*:



Optical Art

Riley's paintings are often considered as representative of *Op* or *Optical Art*. *Op Art*

relies for its effect on certain physiological processes in the eye and brain which we are not normally aware of either in ordinary vision or in looking at other works of art.

(Barrett, 1971, p 9)

Typically composed of black-and-white or high contrast colors, the pictures can provide striking sensations of motion, depth, and color. Viktor Vasarely (1906-1997) was one of the early leaders of this field. Some have attributed Op Art effects to visual illusions, although a better term might be simply visual “phenomena” (Wade, 1978), since it is sometimes difficult to determine what is real and what is an illusion. De Saumarez (1970, p 16) commented on Riley’s understanding:

For Bridget Riley there is no such thing as optical illusion since this would imply the censorship of visual experience by factual measurement. Cobalt blue on a white ground is not the same colour as cobalt blue on a black ground despite the fact that in both instances the pigment may have been squeezed from the same tube labelled ‘cobalt blue.’ For Riley *what is visually experienced is the optical reality.*

Riley considers the term “perceptual abstraction” to be the best way of characterizing her art (Riley et al 2022).

Movement

Riley soon began to use curves to present contrasts and motion. The following is *Arrest 2* (1965):



A more complex color experience is found in *Drift 1* (1966):



De Saumarez (1970, p 92) remarked

A cold tone remains constant over the whole area, while from left to right a warm sequence moving at two rates gives rise to warm/cold contrast, gradually changing to light/dark contrast in the central area and moving away again into warm/cold contrast. Diagonal movements at two different speeds power-fully influence the curving bands flowing from top to bottom. The climax of the tonal sequence and the climax of the curve movements are at variance.

Color and Movement

Over the years, Riley began to concentrate more on the relations between colors, in keeping with her initial interest in the paintings of Seurat. The following is *New Day* (1988):



More recently she has attempted to show movement through the shapes of colors, in keeping with the work of the Futurists. Below is *Arcadia 3* (2011):



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Bridget Riley

Conclusion

We can end with some photographs of Riley demonstrating the movement in her painting *After Rajasthan*, taken by Horst Kurschat in 2013 (MacRitchie et al., 2020, p 22-3)



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