

WAVES FROM THE 60s

Bridget Riley at Tate Britain, London

26 June – 28 September 2003

Entry £8.50. Concession £6.00.

Last admission 5.00pm

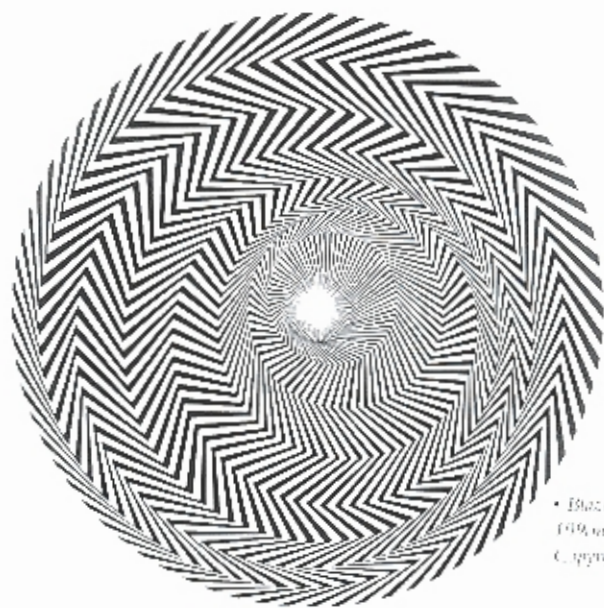
Children under 12 are free

A new boat service 'Tate to Tate' is now available. Tate Britain is from Millbank Pier and runs every forty minutes. It stops at London Eye and takes visitors right to the pier at Tate Modern. Tickets £4.50

One of the real luminaries of the UK Art Scene, septogenarian Bridget Riley is no longer the coquettish Sixties mop-top icon that she was, but she commands greater respect, I suspect, than many of the no-longer-so-fresh YBAs will be in their decrepitude. The discipline and inquisitorial nature of her work has always placed her among the ranks of serious artists. For all that her famous optical trick paintings have become hackneyed through the tedious mimicry of a thousand grammar school art students, they still amaze, when seen in their original form.

And form is what this work is about – how we perceive form through our fallible visual senses: the matrix of colour, dimension, movement, shape. What Riley has done is to deconstruct visual language and then reconstitute it with the joints exposed. A false sense of three dimensionality is created and perceived in many of these works, but the modus operandi 'explained' at the same moment. You can see the lines, the tricks, the alternating shapes and contours that lead the eye into error. Rectilinear boxes mass on a canvas, with large boxes on the left and extreme right. As the eye moves to the centre the boxes are smaller, and painted in a darker hue. This leads me to identify the large shapes as exterior, or frontal, and the smaller darker shapes as recessed – hence the darker colour, or shadow. It is so much part of our language now that these very theoretical works can seem easy. Yet of course they are not easy. They are the originals. Like the other visual illusionist much abused by Athena poster designs, Escher, Riley should not be disregarded simply because of her popularity.

But that is not to deify the Cambrian-born Goldsmiths and RCA graduate. What is clear is that her very early, monochromatic, work had a stark force to it, which one does not find in her recent work where colour is introduced. It has now, indeed, lapsed into the realm of the decorative. The first room has a large wall-based drawing entitled 'Composition with Circles'. It is like the Audi logo thinned down and gone walkabout, yet it works visually. It seems to me to be the only real link between the work of the 1960s and the post-Millennium pieces displayed in the latter part of the show. The age of some



• *Bata 1* 1962. Enamels on board
109cm x 109cm. Private Collection.
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works is visible. Dirt smudges on the sides of some paintings remind you of how well crafted these pieces are. I assumed that these images would be phutspot, but they are hand-made, and pencil lines, marks and trails in the handboard canvases show up under the lighting. Most of the works are signed awkwardly on the side. This adds charm, because it adds a sense of human effort to these seeming-computer-generated pictographs.

There is such movement in the monochromatic 1960s pieces. 'Exposure' [1966] ripples when you walk by with eyes attuned to its wavy surface. 'Shiver' [1964] pulls the eye in and out of focus, making it scuddle wildly over the painting surface. 'Tremor' [1962] is like a hologram, and 'Pause' [1964] has a wonderful sweep of light banking across a chess-board type tiled surface.

When the colour creeps in, it is at first closely wired to the pure form of the black and white works. 'Current' [1964] has filaments of muted green and electric blue which charge the form in an incredible way. 'Dery 2' [1964] is one of the most evidently 'painterly' works, having graduated blue-grey paint as background to a motile of silvery ovals that provide movement. It does not fully convince, but the least worthy piece follows.

From 1967 on, roughly, Riley began to paint in straight banks of stripes. These pieces have little of the charge of the earlier pieces, nor are they conceptually as interesting. 'Apprehend' [1970] does seem relieved and it is difficult to focus upon, but the other caravan wallpaper paintings fail. One senses that Riley was less sure about this work. Grandiose titulary is ever a bad thing in art, harking back to Barnett Newman and other charlatans. Mythological 'theme' is for Timan. It is no longer necessary and like all things unnecessary in art, should be closely treated.

if at all. Riley's 'Song of Orpheus 5' [1978] offers seasick colours and no idea of relationship between the wavy painting and the legend of the man who could move the gods with his music.

Riley can be quite moving, yet the process is more important than the feeling – see the room of preparatory work, the inclusion of which is quite apt. The notes are there for the assistants who actually make Riley's picture for her from the graph paper plotted plans [the mother or one of my friends from St Martin's College of Art was but one of many], and they tell us about scheme and fabrication, if little about motivation. '14 stages slow, full extended movement inclusive', goes one note. 'Tonal organization: warm and cold', reads another.

Riley would seem to be either a technocrat or a neurotic, but either way she is knowing in compositional organization. Most of the works have a single axial point or baseline, and they fit well. Yet she can certainly point – the gouache on paper originals made by Riley on show here are convincing. One sees, in the paper cut-out collages, the most obvious reference point to this work – *Les Muses*, and his dancers.

Sadly, the later work is less interesting. 'Ease' [1987] is like a sideways glance taken of an office block mirroring one of Cézanne's glades, and it, and its partner paintings like 'New Day' [1983], has visual appeal. When this tight diagonal structure is interspersed with Matisse-like curves, as in 'Lagoon I' [1997], nothing is gained. They are figurative, yet not so, and seem muddled in conception. A pity. This is no late flowering à la Matisse; it is a lapse into the [unachieved] decorative. The 'action' of the early pieces has gone, and while they are happy paintings, they disappoint. The show as a whole, however, does not. A must-see.

Cian O'Neill