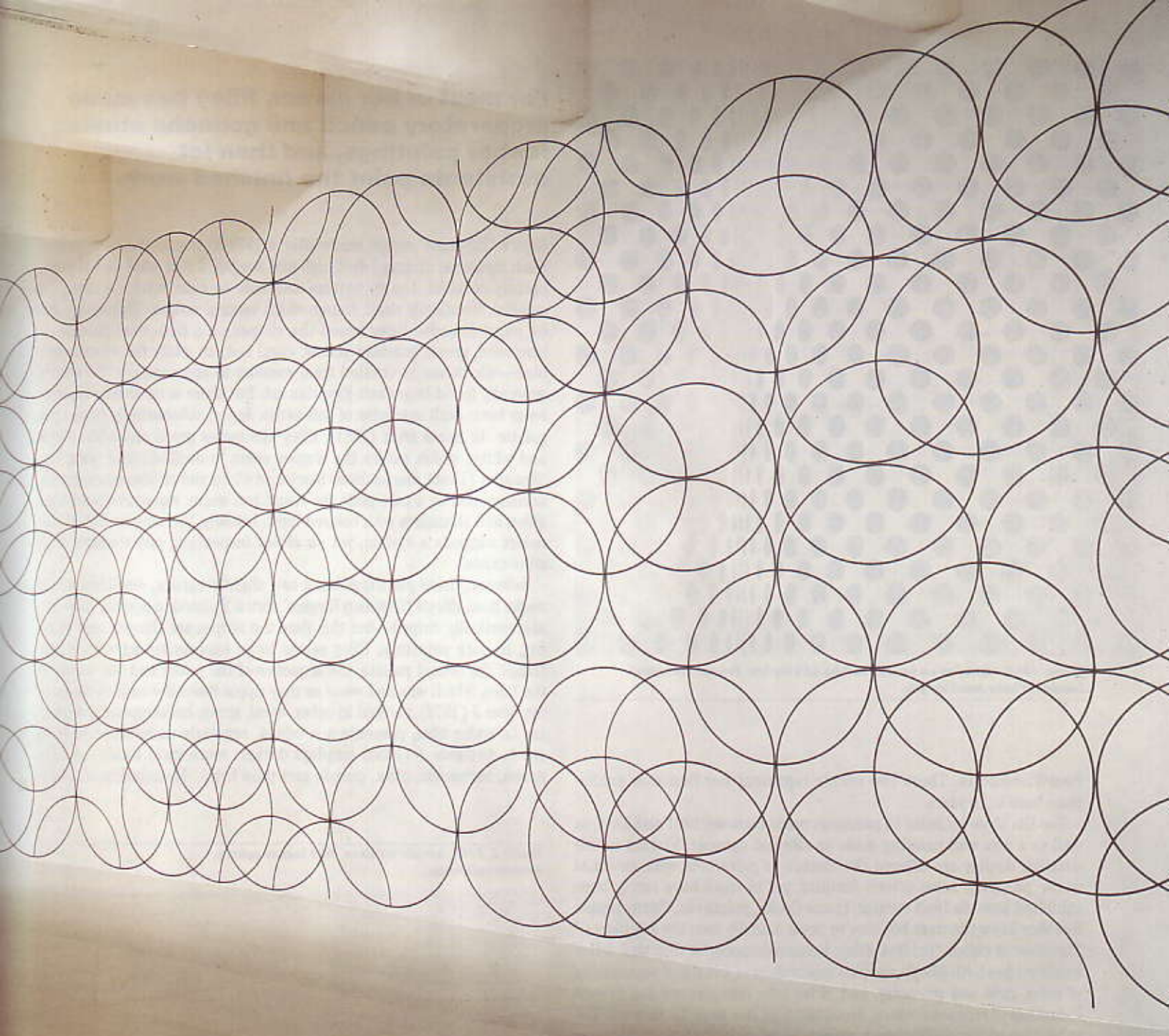
Bridget Riley: The Pleasure of Pure Seeing

One happy side effect of the ongoing boom in work by young British artists has been the renewed attention given to more senior figures. In recent years, painters such as Patrick Caulfield and the late Patrick Heron, often overlooked outside the U.K., have been given survey shows and retrospectives in Britain and elsewhere that are helping to recast them as more central figures [see *A.i.A.*, June and Nov. '99].

The reversals of fortune suffered by the painter Bridget Riley have been perhaps the most dramatic of all. As the unwitting avatar of 1960s Op art, as her eye-catching brand of geometric abstraction came to be dubbed, her early work was widely disseminated through everything from textile designs to head-shop posters. The paintings themselves, which, early on, were invariably black and white, came laced with a range of dizzying visual optical effects that seemed to leap out three-dimensionally at the viewer. Riley's work was jazzy, vivid, easy to appreciate and easy to reproduce. Before long it also began to seem so



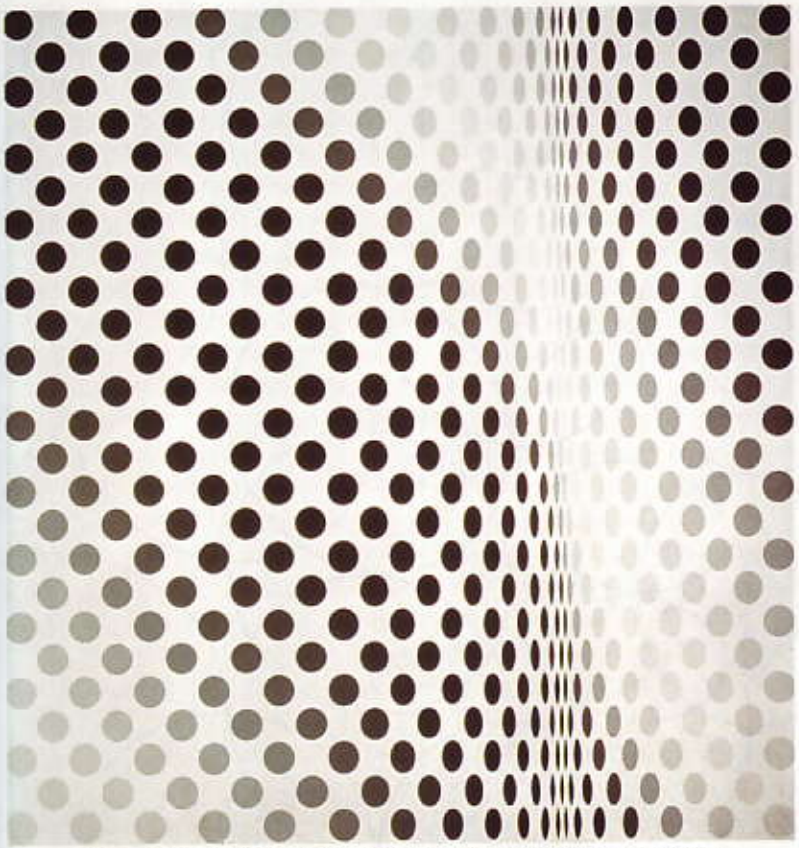
The Dia Center's current survey of Riley's works from 1961 to 1984—which was supplemented last fall by a New York gallery show of recent paintings and early drawings—lets U.S. viewers reconnect with an influential British painter whose work has been frequently reproduced but rarely shown in this country.

BY CAROL KINO

popular that it was, for some, easy to dismiss as a kooky, overly fashionable offshoot of Pop.

But lately, with interest in optically oriented abstraction on the rise, Riley's work—past and present alike—has come to seem newly relevant. In 1999, she had a well-received survey at London's Serpentine Gallery, which showcased her early paintings. Last spring, when the Tate Modern opened, she was one of the artists in a predominantly mixed, thematic hanging to have an entire gallery devoted to her work. And this season, Riley finally has made a major return to New York with a small, well-selected retrospective at the Dia Center for the Arts (on view through June 17) and a show last fall at

View of Bridget Riley's Arrest 2 *(left), 1965, acrylic on linen, 76⅞ by 74¼ inches, and* Compositions with Circles 2 *(right), 2000, graphite, acrylic paint and permanent marker on wall, 13′3″ by 49½ feet, with* Dewy II, *1967 (in background); at Dia Center for the Arts, New York. Photo Bill Jacobson. Courtesy Dia.*



Pause, *1964, emulsion on board, 45¾ by 45½ inches. Private collection, London. Photo courtesy Dia.*

For most of her career, Riley has made preparatory pencil and gouache studies for her paintings, and then let assistants paint the finished work.

PaceWildenstein. These two events represent her first solo exhibitions here in 10 years.

The Dia show includes 18 paintings made between 1961 and 1984, as well as a new wall painting made on-site last summer. Visitors to this dazzling display are offered the chance to reconnect with an artist whose paintings seem utterly familiar, yet in truth have rarely been exhibited here. As Dia's curator, Lynne Cooke, points out, "Many people feel they know the work but they've never actually seen the key pieces." The show is called "Bridget Riley: Reconnaissance," a title that felicitously evokes both Riley's rigorous exploration of the visual possibilities of color, light and geometry, and, if we take into account the French definition of *reconnaissance*, recognition of her work by viewers. The exhibition at PaceWildenstein presented oil paintings made between 1982 and 2000, a small selection of screenprints from roughly the same year, and some fascinating early gouache and pencil studies, many of which were used to make the 1960s paintings at Dia.

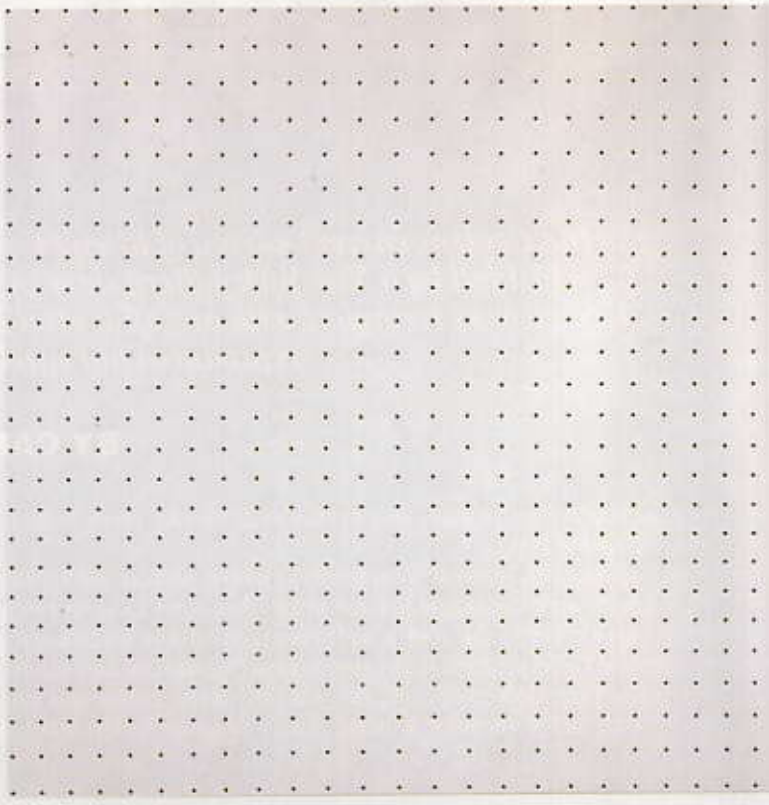
Dia's retrospective is structured in more or less reverse chronological order. It starts with work from the early 1980s, when Riley was making large oil paintings on canvas using colored lines, and segues back to the smaller, more austere work of the early 1960s, painted in tempera or emulsion on board, wherein she used geometric forms and restricted herself to black and white.

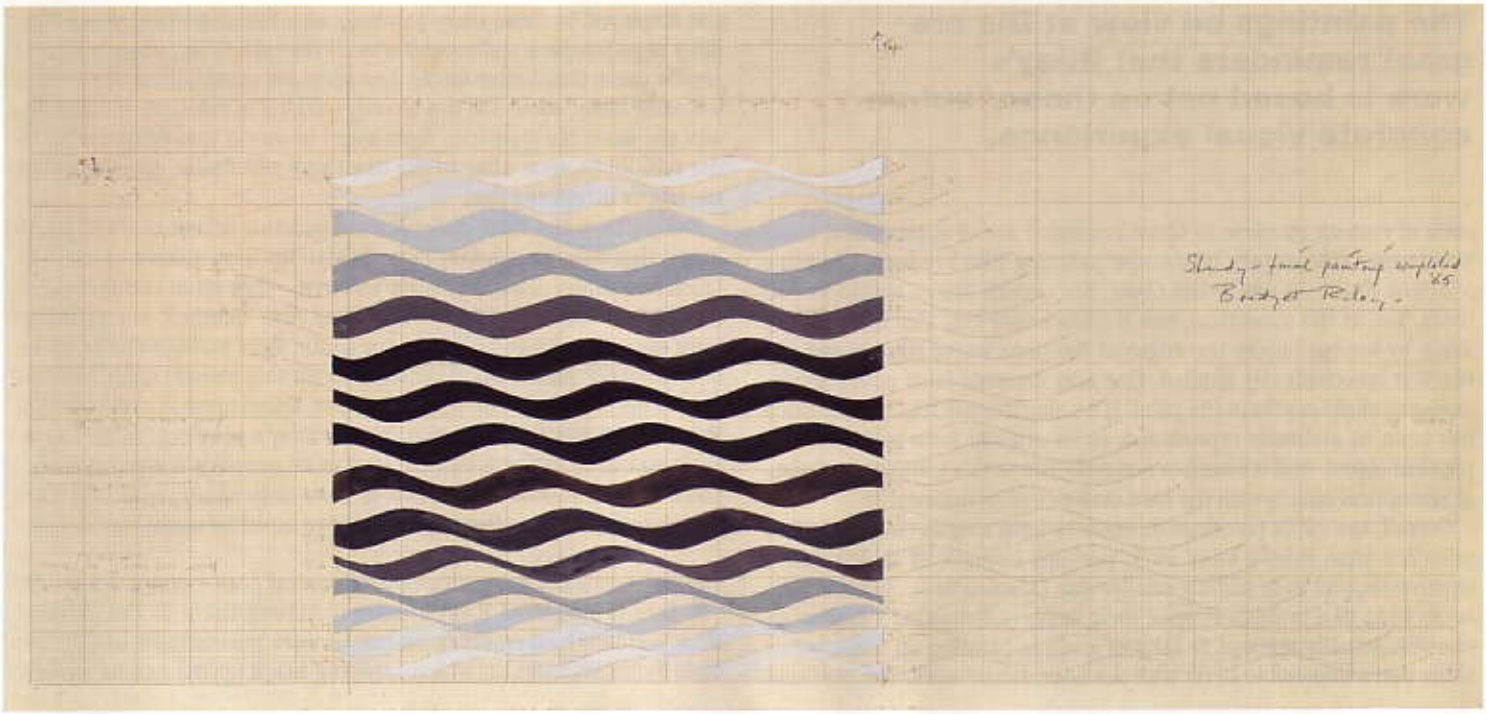
Typically, Riley makes her paintings in series, in which she carefully experiments with the effects that slight adjustments to one element or property may have upon the rest. And in a sense, as both these shows demonstrate, each of her series is itself a variation on the larger explorations—initially of forms and movements, and later of colors—that Riley has pursued throughout her career.

The first room at Dia offers two large rectangular oil paintings from Riley's "Egyptian" series, made after a 1979-80 trip to the Nile Valley. Each measures around 7 feet high and roughly 6 feet wide and is completely covered, top to bottom and side to side, with an array of colorful, identically sized, thumb-width vertical stripes. The series got its name because Riley based the stripes on a five-color palette—turquoise, green, mustard yellow, coral red, an oddly flat cornflower blue—which she re-created from memory to approximate the colors generally found in ancient Egyptian art. But there is no simple equivalency here: both examples of this series depart substantially from that palette. In *Après Midi* (1981), Riley eliminates green and adds black and white, which makes the stripes seem to oscillate and jump. In *Samarra* (1984), she jettisons black and white and reintroduces green, accompanied by a pale pink: the result is a warm, expansive field that glows and shimmers with colored light. Initially, the alternation of the colors suggests a system, yet on closer inspection, one realizes that none exists.

Between these paintings hang two slightly earlier, similarly sized works from Riley's "Orphean Elegies" series. Painted in acrylic, they are also vertically striped—but this time the stripes are thinner and curving. In both paintings, Riley seems to be experimenting with three things: the overall palette, the sequence of the colors and the width of the lines, which wax and wane as they ripple down the canvas. *Song of Orpheus 5* (1978), painted in ocher, coral, green, heliotrope and a grayish lavender blue, presents a subdued, regularly undulating field of color. *Andante 1* (1980) employs darker, more vivid tones—acidic green, turquoise, pink, purple and pale brick. Modulating in color

Static 2, *1966, acrylic on linen, 90½ inches square. Private collection.*





Study from the "Arrest" series, 1965, gouache on paper, 13¼ by 28 inches. Private collection.

almost imperceptibly, like trance music, the waves incorporate the cooler colors more assertively as they ripple toward the lower right corner.

The next room holds four paintings from the late 1960s and early 1970s, when Riley had begun to introduce color into her work. All feature stripes and lines of some sort: yet these are somewhat broader and bolder than the ones we have just seen; the patterning seems more regular, the palette is more restricted and there's a heavy use of ivory and white. In *Paean* (1973), for instance, wide white bands alternate with shirt-ticking-type stripes of red, blue and green. Perhaps it's the friction of these colors, rhythmically punctuated by white, that makes this painting appear to pulse and dilate.

Studying *Cataract 3*, painted in 1967, one begins to understand more precisely how Riley arrived at using color. Here, dark sine waves, alternating with white ones, travel horizontally across the canvas. From a distance, the dark waves at the painting's top appear gray, yet, five waves down they switch to a pair of grays—a cool one and a warm one, twinned together. Gradually, these grays become hotter and cooler, brightening until they resolve fully into bright turquoise and red just below the painting's center. The process is then reversed, so that the coloration recedes and the waves modulate back to gray three waves from the bottom of the canvas. The effect is that of a wave of color suddenly flooding into the center of the painting. At the same time, the regular undulations of the waves produce a series of strong diagonals, which makes the painting's surface itself seem to undulate.

Though it's odd to journey backward through an artist's career, in Riley's case it's quite useful, for by the time one reaches the heart of the show—the black-and-white paintings of the early 1960s, whose illusionistic effects first made her famous—one's eyes have become partly acclimatized to their buzzy effects, so that it's easier to look at them. And because one arrives at these familiar paintings after regarding some of Riley's later, less well known work, one is also more disposed to view them freshly, as the innovative and thoughtful abstract paintings they truly are.

The first of the early 1960s paintings one sees, looming through the doorway, is the well-known *Movement in Squares* (1961), which appeared in Riley's first London show. Square in format, like most of the paintings from that time, it presents a black-and-white checkerboard that gradually seems to curve until it folds in on itself, then pops back out again, as if it had been bent around two poles and sucked into a vertical crevasse (imagine a checked tablecloth disappearing into a hand-wringer). From afar, the effect is hallucinogenic, oddly presaging the psychedelic times that were to come. But up close, one realizes the artist creates the curving effect by starting with that old Suprematist building block, the square. Starting from the painting's left edge, rows of squares gradually narrow to lines as they reach a vanishing point that's slightly to the right of center, then widen back out again to rectangles.

Pause (1964) achieves a similar curving-to-a-fold effect using black circles against a white ground. Here, the image is complicated by a hazy gray shadow, crossing diagonally against the fold; this makes it hard to say whether the curves on either side are popping out from the painting's surface or carving back behind it. In this case, Riley creates the spatial warp by narrowing the circles to ovals to ellipses. To make the wave, she gradually modulates the black to a neutral gray. (This is one of the first instances in which she began to digress from pure black versus pure white.)

These paintings, made with tempera or emulsion on board, are as hard to look at as to describe. Their flat, graphic surfaces exert a visual buzz that doesn't falter even as one approaches. *Crest* (1964), a diamond-shaped painting, is the most optically intense piece here. Gently curving vertical lines suddenly veer left, then right, producing two dramatic ripples just below its center. The resulting oscillation sends up its own bright flashes of color—I saw yellow and red. For me, the buzz also became synesthetic, as though I had stepped into white noise.

Today, it's fashionable to compare Riley's approach to color and light with that of the Impressionists, or with Seurat, whose pointillist technique she used in some of her very early, little-known representational paintings (none of which is included here). Yet curiously, the experi-

The paintings on view at Dia are great reminders that Riley's work is based not on theory but on concrete visual experience.

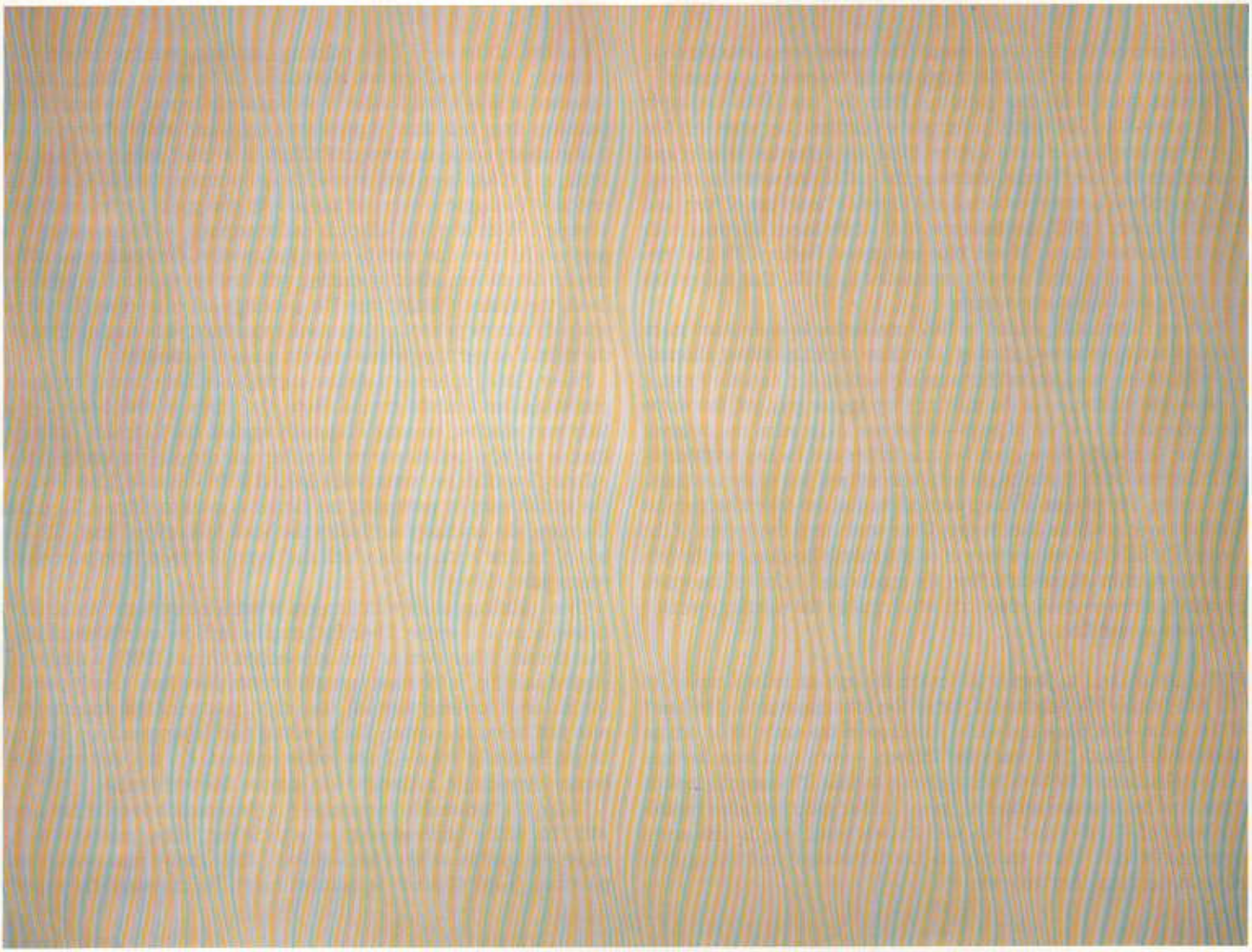
ence of coming up close to *Crest* reminded me of approaching some wondrous 19th-century landscape painting like Frederic Church's *Niagara Falls*. As one nears *Crest*, the overall image sharpens and holds. Yet, at the same time, one is quite aware that this is a painting made by human hands: the edges of the lines waver slightly and the black is inconsistently applied. One also discerns faint pencil guidelines and slight cracks in the paint. It's a shock to see this image, which has been so endlessly reproduced, in its original form as a concrete physical object. And it's hard to reconcile the work's transcendent visual and optical effects with the hard evidence of its materiality.

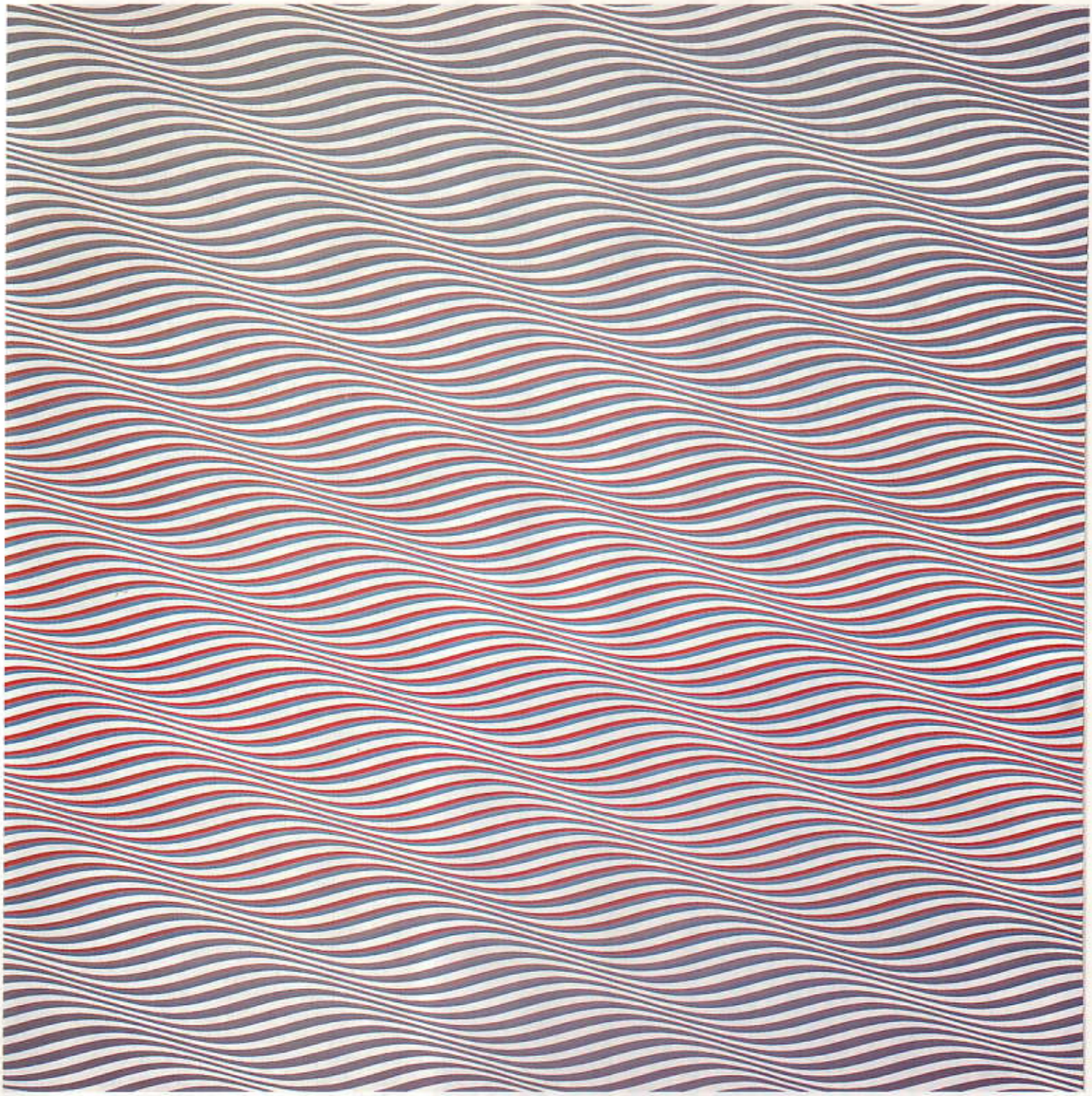
Overall, the 1960s paintings do seem to have a more vividly physical presence than Riley's later work, perhaps because of their relative squareness, and their slightly smaller size (*Movement in Squares* measures 48 by 47½ inches). Despite their innately distancing visual noise, one can actually attempt to take in a whole painting up close, something that's impossible to do with the later, larger work. The mediums she employed in these early paintings also intensify their physicality. Riley used tempera and emulsion until the late 1960s, when a type of acrylic paint that better suited her purposes came on the market. In the early 1980s, when she was already working in color, she switched to oils; she made the transition from board to canvas somewhat earlier, in the mid-1960s, soon after works like *Crest* and *Pause,* to accomodate the work's increasing size.

But perhaps the most difficult and confusing aspect of these paintings is that even though they're made with the most austere means—in black and white, using geometric patterns—they often end up looking fancifully imagistic. In fact, when Riley first emerged, her paintings were often thought to be mimicking traffic signs and eye charts, albeit in a dreamily surrealistic fashion. Though this prosaic quality clearly helped her work to become more popular, it also made it hard to accept as purist geometric abstraction. Yet, as Riley's paintings ratchet up in scale and their surfaces become ever more smoothly and anonymously painted, their effects and variations grow more subtle, as if they were aiming for some more fleeting and fugitive aspect of visual experience.

The remaining two galleries hold several good examples from different stages of Riley's career. Among them is the striking *Breathe* (1966), an emulsion-on-canvas work measuring nearly 10 feet high by 7 feet wide, in which tapering black spikes extend upward

Song of Orpheus 5, ***1978, acrylic on linen, 77 by 102½ inches. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.***





Cataract 3, *1967, emulsion on PVA on canvas, 88½ by 87½ inches. British Council, London.*

against a white ground. As they narrow into needlelike lines, the flare-up of white makes it look as though the upper part of the painting were expanding.

In the show's most recent work, the wall painting *Composition in Circles* (2000), black outlined circles appear to float over and under each other, suggesting a rhythmic pattern as they mass together and drift apart. The circles look as though they were made with a compass directly on the gallery's white wall, and in fact they were, with graphite. They were then inked in with permanent marker, using a template to create a hard edge, then repainted freehand in black acrylic. Yet somehow, this frankly flat field also manages to summon up a three-dimensional impression of sunlight dappled with shadow. Rather than dazzling and dizzying the viewer, *Composition in Circles* seems to move from calm to tension to release—and thinking about it, I realize that the same is true for most of Riley's paintings that incorporate discs and ellipses.

In the final gallery, *Static 2* (1966), painted in emulsion on canvas, presents a grid of tiny black egglike shapes on a white ground. The shapes are regularly spaced, as on a Peg-Board, but their orientation varies. As a result, they seem to rotate, thus creating the sense that

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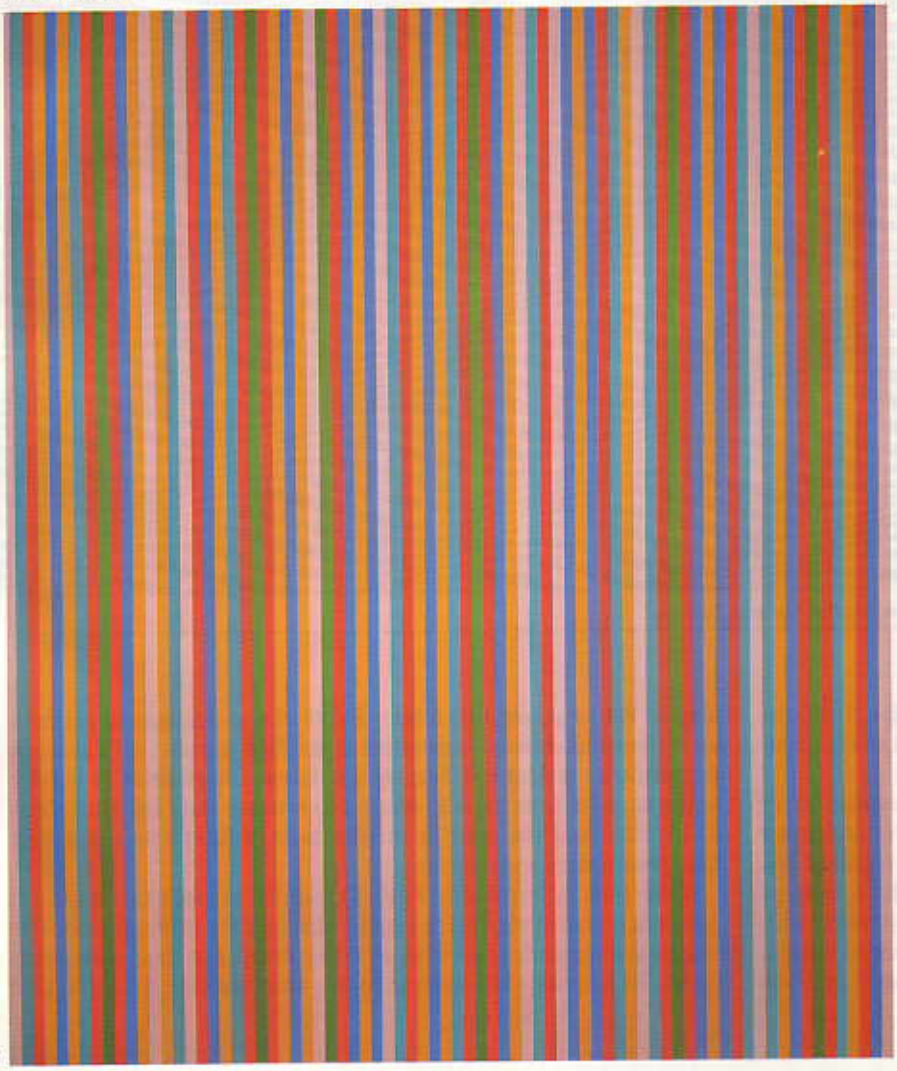
energy is being pushed around the canvas, making the field appear to flicker with light. In *Deny II* (1967), which hangs opposite *Static 2*, Riley uses a grid of larger ovals, this time painted in a pale, steely gray emulsion against a warm, dark gray ground. Though the central oval is vertical, those that surround it gradually rotate toward the horizontal, then back up, then down, making it seem as if a wave is sweeping through the grid. Typically, Riley adds a further layer of complexity: the ovals' tonalities modulate from pale to dark, so that a mist seems to obscure parts of the canvas, allowing a V of light to emerge across the upper two thirds of the painting. Strangely, the most serene areas demonstrate the greatest degree of tonal contrast, where a pale oval is backed by a dark ground. The most agitated are those where both oval and ground are nearly black, so that the close-hued dark and warm shades vibrate.

Paintings like these are great reminders that Riley's work is based not on theory but on concrete visual experience—on "looking," as she has frequently pointed out. In her book of collected writings, *The Eye's Mind* (Thames & Hudson, 1999), Riley says that she was moved to paint *Static 2* after encountering an expanse of shale shimmering on a French mountaintop. Elsewhere in the book she speaks of her childhood exploration of the Cornish coast, an experience that she says "formed the basis of my visual life." If one combines such statements with a prolonged examination of her work, one begins to understand why Riley has recently come to be perceived, in Britain at least, as a particularly English painter, one who demonstrates a naturalist's response to color and light. In the Tate Modern's opening display, her work was included with that of Richard Long and Claude Monet in the "Landscape/Matter/Environment" section. My own understanding of Riley's relation to nature was deepened when one day, after closely examining *Deny II* for a while, I happened to be driving through the Connecticut countryside and was amazed to see the painting's loosely turning, wheeling, shimmering effect brought back to me by a V-shaped flock of birds in flight.

In retrospect, it's easy to see the connection between Riley's initial popularity and her intense, early focus on what she terms the everyday, accessible "pleasures of sight." It's also precisely this focus that made her earliest work seem to fly in the face of the abstractionist hegemony of those times, which valued flatness and color. Lately, more and more people outside Britain have come to regard her, quite appropriately, as a serious abstract painter, working in the lineage of Mondrian. Yet her growth as an artist has been marked by a clear-sighted study of many different types of painting. Her writing and lectures are remarkable for their cogent analyses of how movement, color and space function in the work of a surprising range of painters, from Titian and Poussin to Cézanne and Pollock.

Isfahan, *1984, oil on linen, 66¼ by 56¾ inches.*
Private collection.



Today, Riley continues to work as she has done all along, carefully figuring out a painting's structure and color by making preparatory pencil and gouache studies—and, more recently, by cutting and rearranging pieces of painted paper, with which she makes full-scale cartoons. Her assistants paint the finished work, as they have done from very early on. (According to Lynne Cooke, Riley made her first two black-and-white paintings herself but later had them repainted by assistants; she now exhibits only the repainted versions.) This method frees her to focus on the compositional aspects of the painting; it also ensures the clarity of her vision by eliminating potentially distracting issues of touch and gesture.

The results of this approach on her work could be seen at PaceWildenstein, which showed several paintings made during the last decade, as well as some stripe paintings from the early 1980s. Though the newer paintings are somewhat less arresting—less optical—than those that came before, they're still fascinating demonstrations of the underlying consistency of Riley's pursuit.

In the early 1990s, Riley replaced the vertical stripes she'd been using with stacks of colored lozenges. The angled lozenges offset their own vertical stacking by introducing staggered diagonals that seem to press against the confines of Riley's increasingly large and horizontally oriented canvases. One 5-by-7-foot-plus stacked-lozenge painting, *Dark Light* (1991), offers a many-colored field of dark blues and greens spiked with purple, brown, gold, buff yellow and scarlet. At points, the colors escalate to a jazzy brightness that pops and recedes, recalling Stuart Davis or the early works of Ad Reinhardt.

In Attendance, ***1993, oil on linen, 65 by 89¾ inches. Private collection. Photos this article, unless otherwise noted, courtesy PaceWildenstein, New York.***

(Curiously, many of Riley's colors manage to be flat and vibrant at once; they're also hard to name because they are so dependent on their juxtapositions.)

The most recent paintings, which are larger still (one of them, *Parade I*, measures over 7 by 17 feet), are underpinned by diagonal bands composed of large colored segments that belly out into voluptuous arcs and curves. These rhythmically interlocking shapes, which also send contrapuntal undulations down the canvas, tend to be painted in just a few colors: in *Rêve* (1999), Riley uses mustard, pale yellow, cornflower blue and teal green. Because the lyrical contours of the shapes can suggest human torsos or tree leaves, and also because Riley worked out the compositions using cut paper, these recent paintings have been frequently compared to the late work of Matisse. Yet this obvious biomorphism weakens them, for previously the most gripping aspect of Riley's color work has been her ability to suggest visual impressions of the natural world without sliding toward metaphor.

Upstairs at Pace Prints, a selection of screenprints gave further clues to Riley's meticulously experimental approach. *Ra2* and *Silvered* (both 1981) each use 107 vertical stripes of precisely the same colors combined in different ways. One grouping produces a colorful, radiant field and the other, a more silvery impression.

But the most enthralling works in the show were the 14 pencil and gouache studies on paper, which included preparatory drawings for some of the 1960s paintings at Dia. A study for *Crest 3* shows Riley testing reddish and turquoise-tinted grays, shifting between cool and warm several times within a single wave. Two 1966 studies investigate possibilities for the tilting ovals of *Deny II*: one uses cool shapes against a warm ground and the other, the reverse. Often, she works out her forms in pencil on graph paper. In some studies, the different shades of gray gouache are carefully numbered and labeled. Usually, her penciled lines and waves extend across the entire page, while the gouache neatly demarcates a smaller area cropped within it. Regarding these studies, one gets the impression that Riley is tapping into some underlying physical laws, a tiny portion of which she chooses to render concrete each time she makes a painting.

"I realised," Riley writes in *The Eye's Mind*, "that it was not the actual sea, the individual rocks or valleys in themselves which constituted the essence of vision but that they were agents of a greater reality." Elsewhere in the collection, she also says, "The person who succeeds as an artist is not someone with an important subject, a significant or visionary message, but . . . someone who has acquired the habit of working, who knows their métier." It is just such an attitude, Platonic and practical at once, that makes her work reach beyond the stuff of painting, to grapple with the stuff of life. □

"Bridget Riley: Reconnaissance" at the Dia Center for the Arts, New York, opened Sept. 21, 2000, and remains on view through June 17. Riley's show at PaceWildenstein, New York appeared Sept. 22-Oct. 21, 2000.

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