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Visual Arts

**Bridget Riley: 'Art in buildings is not about impact, it's
about interest'**

The artist, 92, has just unveiled her first ceiling painting in the British School at Rome

Caroline Roux MAY 18 2023



Bridget Riley is sitting in the vast and vaulted hallway of the British School at Rome, dressed in a white cotton top and loose linen trousers. Her hair is as white as snow, her eyes piercingly bright, and she is talking about colour with the eye of an artist and the mind of a physicist. She seems remarkably pleased to be here and ferociously energetic for a woman who is 92 and now walks with sticks.

Way above our heads is the purpose of the visit. Riley's studio has just completed her first ceiling painting (three assistants worked on specially devised two-tier gantries for three weeks), in the city with probably the most famous ceiling painting in the world. Hers is composed of dramatic stripes of lilac and turquoise, red, blue, white and rich yellow that fill the foyer's two enormous barrel vaults. Tomorrow she's off to see the Sistine Chapel itself, though it's really the Raphael frescoes she wants to see, and she's been examining plans of the Stanza della Segnatura to work out exactly where to view them from, to absorb their every detail.



View of 'Verve' (2023) by Bridget Riley, at the British School in Rome © Jacopo Paglione



Riley (right) and Mark Getty admire 'Verve' © Antonio Masiello/Getty Images

Mark Getty, chair of the British School, which provides research facilities and enviable artists' residencies to applicants from the UK and Commonwealth, invited Riley to make a work here two years ago. The son of John Paul Getty Jr, he was born in Rome in 1960 and has lived a third of his life in the city. "I have a *Quiver* painting by Bridget and it's in my apartment here," he says. "She inspected it yesterday to make sure it's hung properly."

The pair initially settled on a *Discs* painting on the refectory wall — a rhythmic series of coloured dots. "It got as far as a full-scale mock-up in her East End studio," says Getty. "But we had a few issues. It was going to fight with the wooden boxed ceiling, with the handsome beams that run right across." Then Riley alighted on the foyer. With its barrel vaults, it could only be stripes. "It's called 'Verve'," says Riley. That pretty much sums up the punch that its arcs of colours pack.



The British School, Rome © Luana Rigolli/BSR

The British School is a rather grandiose affair, reached up a flamboyant flight of steps, with a facade modelled on St Paul's Cathedral. It was designed by Edwin Lutyens in 1911 as the British pavilion for that year's International Exhibition, perhaps to demonstrate that in this city of the ancients the Brits could do classicism too. The foyer, entered through towering wooden doors, used to feel a vast and gloomy place, with too many bookshelves. Riley's gift to the school has brought it energy and life — its own vibrant sky. (She has also funded a six-month painting residency here since 2016.)

“I believe that art in buildings is not about impact, it’s about interest,” she says. She mentions Matisse’s Rosary Chapel in Vence, over which the French artist took total control, and Monet’s “Waterlilies”, which she first saw on a trip to Paris in the 1950s with her sister Sally, who now sits across the hall, a spry 89. “We went to see what was called ‘the Sistine Chapel of Impressionism’,” says Riley of the Musée de l’Orangerie. “*That* was immersive,” she laughs, referring to the word which I had used about her own work.



Bridget Riley's 'Messengers' (2019), inside the National Gallery in London © National Gallery Photographic Department

Riley is no stranger to creating large works inside buildings. Her wall paintings are many and famous, not least the series of subtly coloured dots (“off-green, off-purple and off-orange — that’s what one clever critic said”) that since 2019 have climbed up the walls of the Annenberg Court in the National Gallery. The very first was created in vinyls and installed in the corridors of the Royal Liverpool hospital in 1983. “I wanted to provide something of the outside inside that place. To provide something human and familiar,” she says. “My mother had been in hospital and I felt quite strongly about the conditions in there.” People, says Riley, associate colour with nature, with the outdoors, with normality. “The sky is blue, but it’s also reds and yellows and whites.”



Riley wall work (1983) at the Royal Liverpool hospital



Another wall work (2014) in St Mary's hospital in London © FXP London

Though it was the retina-fracturing Op Art works in black and white that first brought renown to Riley, colour remains her sustaining force. “Chant 2” (1967) was her first attempt at alternating vertical stripes of blue and red, and eliminating black altogether. The blue encloses the red, then the red encloses the blue, and the eye is transported along the canvas, seduced by a steady pulse of light. As the stripes broaden, so does the pace. “I saw then that the basis of colour is instability,” she once said in an interview with her fellow colourist Michael Craig-Martin. “Instead of searching for a firm foundation, I found one in the very opposite.”

The stripes here are drawn from her “Egyptian” palette — Riley stopped off in Egypt on her way to Tokyo during a long British Council tour in 1979-80 and was astonished by the colours in the tombs of the pharaohs. The foyer is filled with light right up to its seven-metre-high barrel vaults throughout the day; the colours become perceptibly stronger and deeper as the brilliance of the afternoon fades into evening.



‘Verve’, seen from below © Getty Images

Riley resumes her tutorial. “You see the turquoise give way to the blue which is enhanced by the red. There’s one last reminder of turquoise then a very big arc of lilac which is where the interaction happens. Then the blue gives way to the turquoise which has a BOOST” — exclaimed — “towards green because of the presence of yellow. Then across to the other side, the argument is reversed.” My eye traces the hues across the ceiling as she speaks, words of reason that nonetheless describe magic.