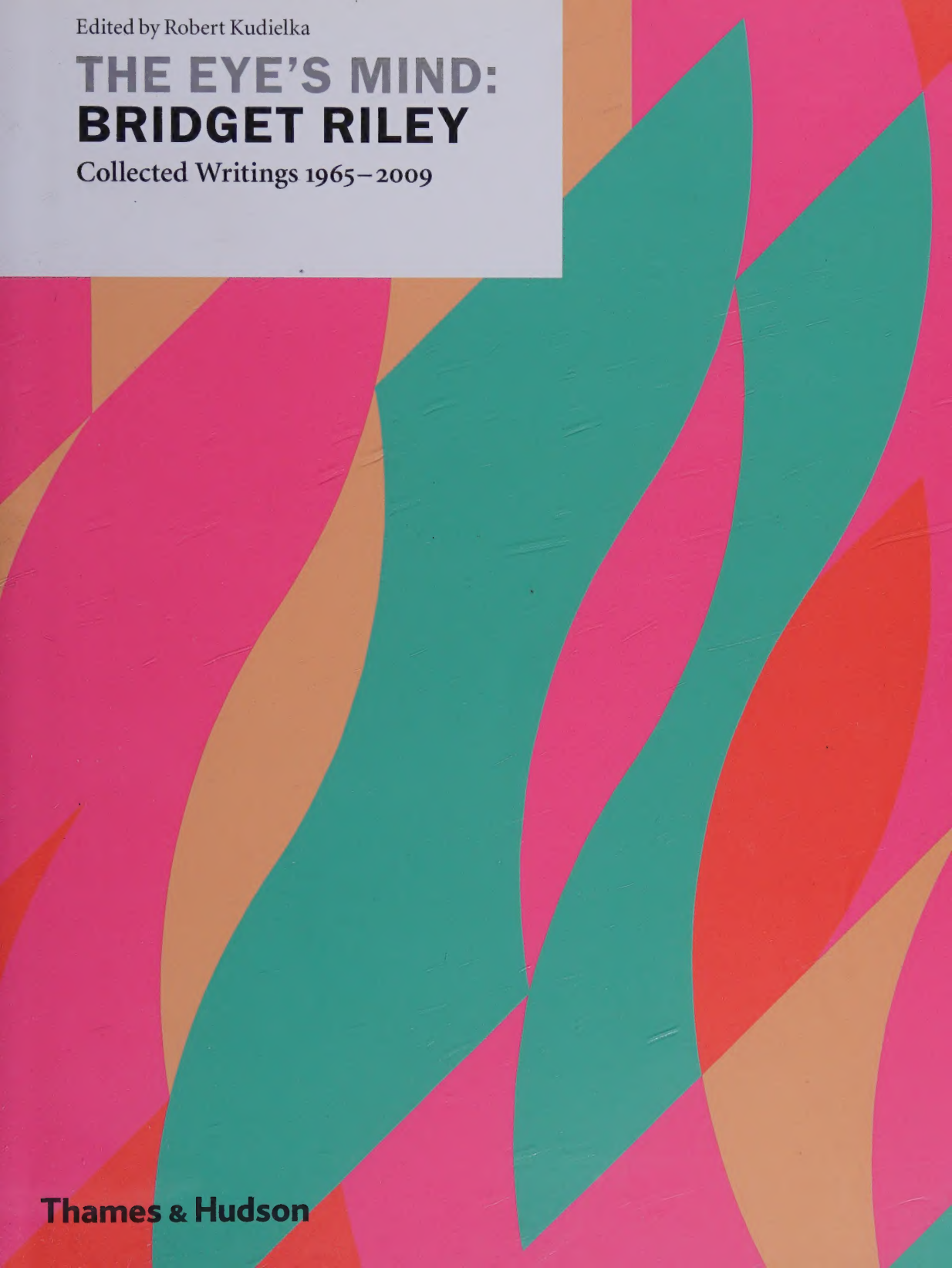
Edited by Robert Kudielka

THE EYE'S MIND: BRIDGET RILEY

Collected Writings 1965–2009



Thames & Hudson



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Foreword

by Bridget Riley

When the idea for this book first arose I wondered how the various pieces of writing would relate. They might have made sense individually – but how would they work together and in a sequence? Originally they were, after all, very disparate pieces, each being written to meet different circumstances. But now that they have been arranged in an order I am surprised and relieved to see that there are connections and correspondences between them.

One thing these essays and conversations have in common is that they have all been written after the event; that is to say, they refer back to things which have already taken place. I don't think that I have ever said or written anything anticipating what I am about to do – not even in terms of hopes and dreams. To do that seems to me to be dangerous. There is an area, and a very sensitive primary area for an artist, which cannot be referred to directly without damage. It's as though the impulse which is about to be expressed should remain unavailable to the logic of the intellect in order to find its true form in whatever field or métier the artist has chosen.

And yet, of course, one wants to help people to understand this sort of activity. Today one cannot simply present a new work and expect it to be immediately understood. Now the world of art is so varied and contentious that the chances of being misinterpreted have increased enormously. So it's important to try and talk about what one does as an artist, bearing in mind that this can only be approximate and offer, at most, a general line of approach.

It is for this reason that I particularly enjoy talking and writing about other artists. There has been some criticism that I am talking indirectly about my own work, but if so, it was not my conscious intention. Artists cannot help, it seems, but project some of their own preoccupations onto the art of the past, and this is more or less true of everybody, even art historians. However, as a painter you see reflections of common practical problems in the art of the past, and although the solutions obviously cannot be the same, it is still reassuring to see that one's own problems are not simply delusions but real, by witness of the fact that other painters have encountered them. It may be arguable as to

whether talking and writing about visual art in this way adds anything to its appreciation. I believe that it does, because if some of the basic factors which go into the making of paintings can be recognised, it helps to make them more accessible – to take the glass off them, as it were.

On a project of this nature there are many people to thank. First of all, those who have interviewed me. It is never easy to enter into another creative mind. The interviewer has not merely to record what the artist says, but to make it clear precisely what is meant by what is said. I am very grateful to those who have made this sort of empathetic and intellectual effort. I would also like to thank the people who have asked me to write or talk on particular occasions, and who have in this way encouraged me to further explore certain interests and hunches which might otherwise have simply flickered through my mind and lain fallow.

A great deal of hard work has gone into the practical side of publishing this book. Karsten Schubert has tirelessly steered it through many difficulties and hazards. I would like to thank Doro Globus, Marit Münzberg and Amanda Sim for their work on the extended second edition of this book. I am extremely grateful to Thames and Hudson for their continued enthusiasm for and support of this project. Thanks are also due to De Montfort University, the Serpentine Gallery and Leigh Markopoulos, for all their help in producing the first edition of this book.

Above all, my deepest debt is to Robert Kudielka who selected and edited this collection. Over the years he has encouraged and supported my endeavours in this field and it is no exaggeration to say that without him, many of the pieces would either not have come into existence at all or else have perished along the way.

Introduction

by Robert Kudielka

Artists' writings have different functions and meanings. In the past many have been private and confidential, but some of them, like Delacroix's *Journals* or Van Gogh's *Letters*, have proved to be primary sources not only for the work of their authors but for the understanding of art in general. It is not until the advent of Modern art that a whole literature of documents emerged that was specifically written for publication. Signac's pamphlet *De Delacroix au Néo-Impressionnisme* (1899) is an early example of an artist trying to explain his work through a historical perspective. In the art of the 20th-century this tendency seems to have been reversed in favour of a programmatic approach. The Futurists and the early Abstract artists, such as Kandinsky, Malevich and Mondrian, have located the basis of their hopes and aspirations in the future.

Bridget Riley's writings do not fall into either of these categories. All texts assembled in this book were intended for publication and, with one exception, have already been printed. And yet they do not follow the familiar historical pattern. When referring to the great artists of the past Riley talks in terms of correspondences and the practicalities of painting, rather than of genealogy; and although she is a rigorous Abstract painter, with a highly speculative mind that delights in such propositions as, for example, Mondrian's concept of the 'universal' and the 'particular', the language of the manifesto is alien to her. Instead of aspiring to a creative Utopia, as the protagonists of Abstract art did, her work and reasoning is based on an acceptance of the fact that art by itself cannot repair its missing social link. 'The *absence* of a shared vocabulary is', as she said in 1992, 'by virtue of its absence, the only common basis that exists.'[1] Consequently her writings pursue a rather different purpose. They try to help people to relate, in this sort of vacuum, to both her own work and that of other artists, and to the considerations that govern them.

In this way Riley's approach may be likened to that of Matisse who, having said that 'he who wants to dedicate himself to painting should start by cutting out his tongue'[2], nevertheless produced a most remarkable body of writing, realising that this activity had become part of his professional obligation. There are certain valid issues preceding judgment and interpretation that only the artist can disclose in order to avoid

confusion and misunderstanding; and these issues, of course, do not remain the same all the time. Like Matisse, Riley in her writings relates precisely to the particular occasion, and feels free to modify her response if the development of her work demands it. So the reader of these texts will find her in different roles and guises, defying misconceptions and dissolving barriers, exciting with her own enthusiasm and sometimes, through her explanations to others, discovering something for herself.

This tendency towards dialogue is reflected in the form of Riley's writings. Almost half of the pieces, covering a period of more than forty years, are interviews and conversations; and this is only a small part of the exchanges with critics, writers and journalists in which she engaged during this time. For obvious reasons only those interviews have been selected which she has checked before publication in order to confirm and clarify her views. As in her painting Riley believes that true authenticity is an artistic achievement – not the outcome of chance or instant reaction. Sometimes the written version is based on transcripts of tape-recordings, on other occasions the text has been established by assembling her answers to written questions (as in David Thompson's record of her views on 'The Artist and Society'); and the long conversations we have conducted together, particularly that on 'The Colour Connection', have been written through exchanging arguments and points of view face to face, as it were, across a table. Riley's pleasure and tenacity in finding the precise response to a specific question, carefully avoiding habit and cliché, are unusual among visual artists. But this capacity no longer seems so surprising when one reads what she has to say about her work in the studio: 'My final paintings are the intimate dialogue between my total being and the visual agents which constitute the medium' (p.101). The structure of dialogue is also at the root of her practice as a painter.

Such an approach was quite unorthodox when Riley began to make her black and white paintings in the early 1960s. But with time and the growing distance to critical fashions the reception of her work has changed and certain allegations have become oblivious or been replaced by others. When this book was first published ten years ago it seemed to be necessary to explain that Riley's earliest statement 'Perception Is the Medium' (1965) was not only a reaction to the art-political machinations surrounding the exhibition *The Responsive Eye*, but also a retort to Clement Greenberg's positivist conception of the 'medium' in Modernist painting. The second edition now includes the interview 'The Spirit of Enquiry' (2004) in which Riley defends Modernism as such against the

tendency to dispense with its achievements altogether. In a similar way a new accolade of commercial success tends to obscure her reason for working with assistants. Whilst right up to the early 1990s the prevalent esteem for the artist's 'touch' made her working methods barely acceptable to the mandarins of the art world, the almost complete turn of opinion doesn't let her of the hook either. She now has to make clear that it is not the increased demand of the global art market that prompted her 'to lay my own hands aside and ask someone else to paint the work out' ('Conversation with Lynne Cooke', 2005, p.310).

Generally, however, the appreciation of her work in its own terms has increased in the past two decades. The fashionable lament about 'optical dazzle' has receded and the shock of the novelty of her art gave way to the recognition of its links with early French Modern painting of the 19th-century. This growing acceptance is to a large degree due to the steady progress of her work. By gently pushing ahead and timely shifts in orientation she has extended her range and kept her creative powers alive and fresh over a period of fifty years. 'All my work is one thing, as it were, it may appear different but it is essentially the same', she wrote in 1978 ('Into Colour', p.111). Her development can be seen as the formation of an artistic identity that successively has deepened the understanding of the preceding stages. The central section of the book covers this unselfconscious progression. With due delay almost every major step is accounted for. The original edition already contained Riley's reflections on two important re-orientations of her work. In our first 'Conversation' (1972) she discusses the introduction of colour in 1968, trying to show that, despite the obvious change of appearance, her approach was still related to how she had proceeded before. But as her preoccupation with colour grew she came to realise that she had to relinquish the unambiguous basis of the black and white contrast for the very opposite: 'I saw that the basis of colour is its instability.'[3] The interview 'Into Colour' reveals Riley's mixed feelings over the effect of this instability in her curve paintings. She had clearly succeeded in her intention, and yet the resulting over-refinement worried her. It demanded a further fundamental revision of her working methods that she eventually accomplished in the mid-1980s. In 'According to Sensation' (1990) Riley traces her move from a predominantly perceptual approach to one governed by sensation: 'I used to build up *to* sensation, accumulating tension until it released a perceptual experience ... Now I try to take sensation as a guiding line and build, *with* the relationships it demands' (p.138). This new way of building from sensation has continued

to occupy her up to the present moment. But it became profoundly modified by a structural complexity which she introduced at the end of the 1990s.

The second edition includes eight more pieces, five of which have been added to the central section 'Development as Painter'. The three new conversations at the end deal with the changed appearance of her recent work: the reduced range of colours, the increase in scale, the formal vocabulary that no longer consists of geometric elements, and a dynamism that challenges the confinements of the picture plane. A new sense of drawing seems to conflict with a statement that she made right at the beginning of her colour work: 'Form and colour seem to be fundamentally incompatible – they destroy each other' (p.104). But the contradiction is not a real one. In 'Work' (2009) Riley reveals how far she has moved away from employing discrete formal elements: Instead of working with a selected set of units, she now uses the formal potential provided by the superimposition of a vertical, a diagonal and a curvilinear grid. The various segments formed by the intersections of these three structures allow for a wide range of '*drawing with colour*'. Stressing an important aspect of her whole development this most recent text has been placed at the top of the section to prepare the reader for the highly developed territory that lies ahead.

The circular movement of discovering roots by bringing new conceptions to fruition has become more and more pronounced in Riley's latest work. At the very time when she embarked on the adventure of leaving the support of the canvas and drawing directly on the wall, with her *Compositions with Circles* (1998–2008) and the first *Wall Painting* (2007), detailed recollections of her early drawing lessons began to surface in her writings and exchanges, as both the tribute 'Seurat as Mentor' (2007) and the 'Conversation with Lynne Cooke' show. Moreover, the remembrance of these exercises inevitably invoked the key role that 'looking' played in the formation of her wish to become a painter. 'Long before I ever saw a major painting, felt the need to share an experience, knew the excitement of invention or painted my first water colour, I had been fortunate enough to discover what 'looking' can be', she had written in 1984 in the 'Pleasures of Sight' (p.32), her poetic account of her childhood in Cornwall. Far from being stimulated by some precocious artistic ambition, Riley's art is rooted in a vivid, unsentimental vision of nature and the urgency 'to do something about being alive, rather like a bird feels the need to sing' (p.160). Although there is nothing to be added to the few biographical

reminiscences, which are assembled in the first part of the book, it may not be too extreme to assume that her excursions into an environmental form of painting are perhaps fostered by the fact that her sensibility is not confined to the easel.

This primacy of 'looking', which she rigorously turned into a prime condition of her art, was initially the biggest obstacle to serious recognition of her work. The unusual demands she made on our sense of sight seemed to sever all bonds with the art of the past. Despite her unconventional start with Seurat's Divisionism Riley was rated by many critics and fellow artists as being somewhat 'out of court'. But that approach 'from the opposite side' which she recommends in 'Work' (p.59) for overcoming seemingly insuperable barriers did in the end prove itself successful. Having been an avid and thorough visitor of museums and exhibitions through most of her career Riley at the beginning of the 1980s began, with the change of her working methods, to engage in an intense dialogue with the art of the past. It started with a kind of reconsideration of the role that nature played in classical Modern French painting and soon led to a profound involvement with European colour painting, in particular with the great Venetian tradition. By the end of the decade the reversal was complete. From an artist who for a long time was suspected as an offender in the realm of true art, Riley had turned into an eloquent advocate of the continuity of pictorial problems, arguing the case with considerable authority in 'Painting Now' (1996).

Three new pieces have been added to the last section 'On Art and Other Artists' which is dedicated mainly to Riley's view of the art of the past. Apart from the exhibition review 'Cézanne in Provence' (2006), which she turns into a thorough analysis of the relationship between the challenge of the *motif* and the development of Cézanne's working method, the main asset is 'Colour for the Painter' (1995), her most extensive essay, that originated in a lecture at Darwin College, Cambridge. It had been excluded in the first edition in favour of the conversation 'The Colour Connection' (1989) that engages in a similar way of viewing and describing great works of the past. But with hindsight the essay seems to be an ideal supplement and extension to the previous conversation because it helps to clear misunderstandings that still worry the artist. Her relationship to the art of the past is neither historical nor in a naïve manner self-assertive: Riley regards the paintings she is talking about not as past in the sense that they are 'over and done with', but as different, present though removed from contemporary concerns. In this view some of them – 'the

best', as she repeatedly says – are exemplary because the artist has tackled and personally resolved pictorial problems such as colour, tone, space etc. that are perennial and, in fact, objectively unsolvable. In short, Riley's attitude is 'critical and appreciative rather than historical', as she explains in 'Supposed to be Abstract' (p.166): she feels free to omit what doesn't 'speak' to her [4] – and has no inhibition to praise what she regards as great achievements. This access has two advantages: The reader may benefit from having a fresh look at paintings that perhaps have been languishing too long in the captivity of historians; and the artist herself enjoys the specifically modern privilege of relating freely to the immense heritage of the human imagination – not only in the European tradition. The 'Conversation with Lynne Cooke', which touches upon this prospect, has been put at the end of the new edition because it is a delightful summary of all the major topics raised in the three sections of the book.

July 2009

1 Bridget Riley, *Dialogues on Art. With Neil Mac Gregor, E. H. Gombrich, Michael Craig-Martin, Andrew Graham-Dixon and Bryan Robertson*, ed. R. Kudielka, London, [2]2003, p.29.

2 Jack D. Flam, *Matisse on Art*, London, 1973, pp.105 and 111.

3 *Dialogues on Art*, [2]2003, p.60.

4 See her comment on C. D. Friedrich, *loc.cit.*, p.26 f.

1 : AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL



Personal Interview

by Nikki Henriques [1988]

How has being a woman affected your life as an artist?

I don't think I've ever thought of myself as a *woman* painter. It has never been in my mind that I am different from other painters. It is in the mind of people who deal with my work. Some do see it as very 'feminine' – whatever that may mean – but I don't think it has ever been an issue for me. I remember Nigel Gosling, art critic of the *Observer*, reviewing an exhibition of mine some years ago at the Hayward Gallery, London. He said, 'If I had to track down a feminine footprint here, I would point to a certain unforced patience, that quality which can add the thousandth stitch to the nine-hundred-and-ninety-ninth without a tremor of triumph.'[1] I thought that was a surprising little tribute.

Who has inspired you?

My mother certainly. She had an enormous influence on me. It's difficult to know how best to convey a sense of her, but people loved being with her. She was always able to give a sense of pleasure to any kind of occasion or event. She was loyal, strong, loving and yet totally flexible in her outlook, often changing her priorities. There was never any sentimental hanging on to previous positions; she was always fresh-minded, always amusing. My friends became her friends and when she died one of these friends said that she had a radiance which was a warmth and comfort to everybody. She was a gift simply being alive. It was an enormous stroke of luck to have somebody like that as one's mother.

What did you learn from her?

During the War my father was a Japanese prisoner of war on the Siamese railway. In three years we had only three postcards from him. We had very little money; we lived in a cottage in Cornwall that was a paradise for children but must have been a nightmare for my mother. There were few amenities: no bath; we got water from a brook; the roof leaked; we had tarpaulins over our beds. It should have been a miserable time, but

it wasn't. We had wonderful times there. There were fears, certainly. My father worried that my mother was untrained. If he did not come back, how would she have kept us? How would we have lived?

My mother took us for walks on the cliffs. She was always pointing out colours: in the sea; the sparkle of dew; changes of colour when the dew was brushed away. If she arranged anything on the table like a bowl of fruit (we only saw two bananas in the village the whole time we were there!) she would point out the colours. 'Look, it's almost got a blue on it.' She wasn't a painter, she was a 'looker'. The pleasure that one could get from looking was part of her personality.

She was very well read. She read to us in the evening. When I was ten or eleven we would have a hip bath in the winter, in front of the fire, once a week. At other times we'd have a lick and a promise. My mother would read something from the classics, we would say our prayers together and go to bed. That gave me a taste for reading. As soon as I could I bought a torch and continued to read under the bedclothes.

We lived there for the five years of the War and left to go back to our own house in Boston, Lincolnshire, in my early teens.

When did you think you might become a painter?



Lincolnshire Landscape
1959

I always wanted to paint. I had an aunt who spent the War with us. She had been an artist but did not paint or draw anymore. I always thought that rather strange. I drew the way that all children do. I loved it. It didn't occur to me for a long time what being an artist really involved. I pushed that idea away. Drawing and painting was another matter; I didn't think that meant being an artist. I didn't really face the full implications of my decision to become a painter until I left my first art school, at the age of twenty-one. By then my father had returned and we had left Cornwall. We were faced with the emotional trauma of adjusting to a total stranger. I had been my mother's companion and had had a lot of her attention. I became withdrawn and immersed myself in drawing and painting. I was sent home from school for a term for being overexcitable.

My father thought my education had gone to pot. It was probably true; the War had completely disrupted it. He realised that I was fairly illiterate and should go to a better school.

I went with my younger sister to a splendid academic school – Cheltenham Ladies' College. The headmistress was a great support to children of prisoners of war but was disconcerted and unhappy when she saw that she would have to put me in the lowest class. In terms of my age I should have been half-way up the school. I told her not to worry, I would work out my own timetable. She was very relieved and let me go ahead. I came up with art every day: art on Monday morning, art on Tuesday afternoon, art on Wednesday morning and art on Thursday afternoon …

Cheltenham had a wonderful art wing. I had never seen such a palace. I was allowed to study there most of the time, but there was also a particularly good course called Citizenship. This involved reading newspapers, visiting prisons (though not in the lady bountiful manner), factories, law courts and included a great many other things. Citizenship was supposed to be a one-year course but because it was the only thing I could do I repeated it for three!

My parents were extremely worried when I wanted to leave and go to art school. They didn't believe in opposing their children's ambitions, but they were worried for different reasons. My father thought it was unlikely I would meet there the sort of person who would make me happy. My mother, more accurately, felt it would be a tremendously hard and lonely life. They didn't gainsay me, but they were anxious. Eventually it was agreed that I might do commercial art in order to earn a living.

At Goldsmiths' School of Art I met a marvellous teacher who taught me drawing. His name was Sam Rabin. In those days you still



Girl Reading
(Tonal Study)
1957–58

were taught drawing. I was there when the class began and when it ended. For three years I drew day and night. Without realising it I absorbed, through the techniques of life drawing, many important things such as pictorial organisation, structure and the stripping away of the visual image to see what's beneath. For example, when I had started to draw, Sam Rabin would come up and say, 'What's the model doing, sitting or standing? Is your drawing standing?' He taught me to order my work, to develop it in methodical stages, to see a thing as a whole, not in parts. He stressed the importance of the relationships between things; how everything matters; what to expect of yourself; how to make an advance and consolidate it; then make another advance – and not to expect advance after advance; how to raise the level of work slowly. That was gold – and something I have kept with me.

Sam Rabin was a key person. He used to take me to the print and drawing room in the British Museum where you can study and hold in your hands masterpieces by artists like Rembrandt, Raphael and Ingres. He taught me for three years.

Then I went to the Royal College of Art. I wanted to find someone else like that, but there was no one. I floundered there, and in a way

I knew I would, because I had come up against a young artist's worst problem – what to paint and how to paint it. You live every day with the gravity of the problem, surrounded with that experience of uncertainty.

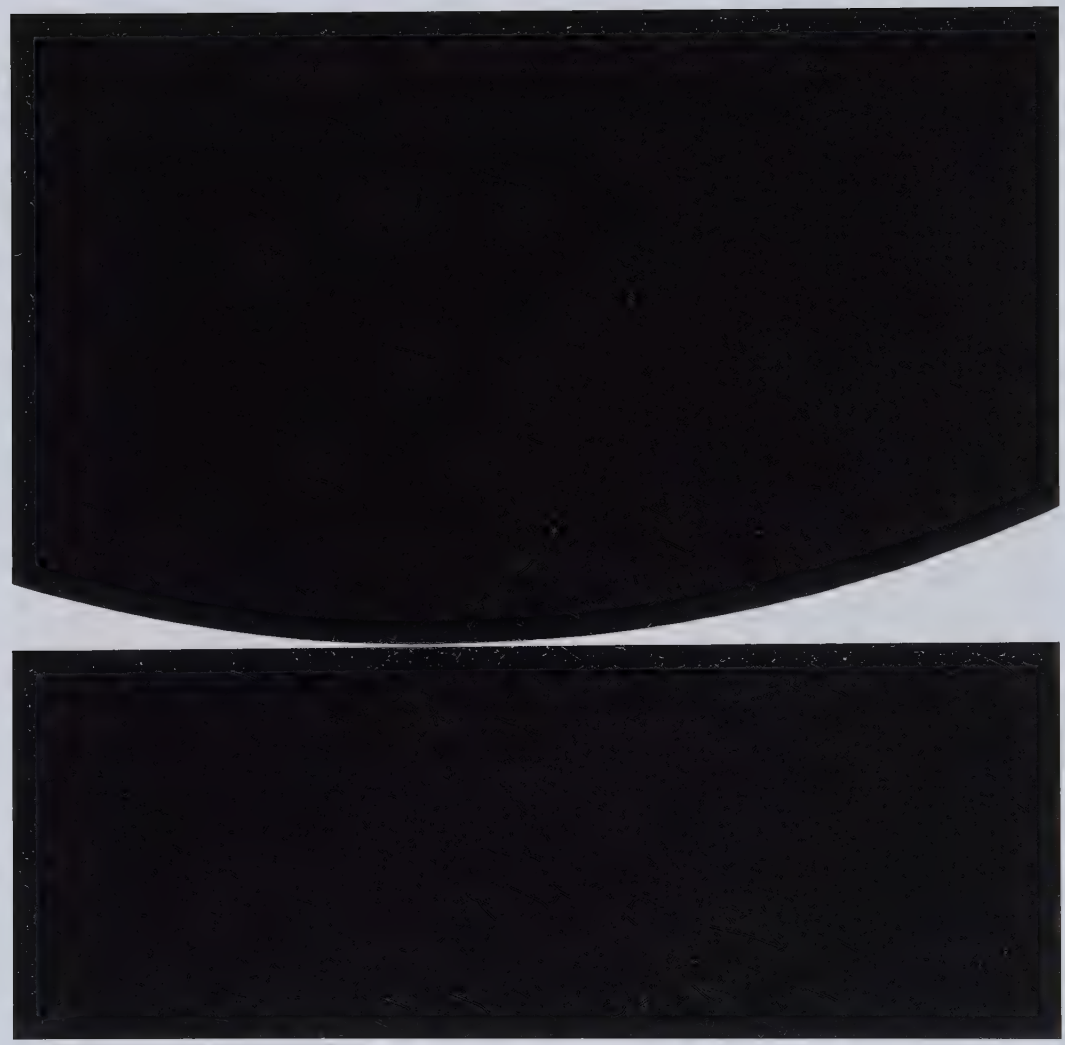
The example of Cézanne makes it plain that you must be workmanlike in what you do. You can't simply go for being an artist as such. You must wait to find something which excites you, fires your imagination, your desire, creates a real longing to do that one thing. If you can centre on that you can make a beginning. You don't worry where you are going because you are moving. Desire is the key. It comes and goes. It's rhythmic. You languish when you have a problem; you become bored. Boredom is a tremendous indicator. Your energy goes; it caves in on you; you can't do anything. That's very frightening but you must listen because you are being told that whatever it is you are doing it is not quite right. It may only need a small adjustment or it may need more drastic treatment.

There are a bewildering number of directions you can take, but if it's not right it doesn't *feel* right. You are much further forward than it might seem, even if it takes you all morning to decide not to do something simply because it doesn't feel right. That's true for me, at least.

In some ways having no formal academic education has been a great asset. Most artists realise that you cannot do what has been done before. You must do something that meets your own criteria and you have to form those criteria. I often find my way in daydreams and then I start to work. You have a gigantic freedom as you re-awake, so to speak. It never occurred to me that I could earn my living as an artist. Nor that I would be anything other than a figurative painter, painting people, external reality and what you literally see around you.

I began to meet people, to travel, and gradually I became aware what had happened in art from the 19th-century onwards; what amazing things had been done and how much has been achieved. These are things you find out after art school. I became fascinated, I was fired – but I didn't know what form it was going to take.

I was twenty-eight years old at this time. I was having an extremely immature affair with a very sophisticated man who was older than me.[2] I was difficult and hard to handle, doing things he just couldn't be bothered with. He decided to end the affair. I was angry and hurt. I thought: 'I'm not going to discuss anything with you. I can't communicate verbally with you, so what's the point in trying? But I'll paint you a message so loud and clear you'll know exactly how I feel.' It was about that time that I began to paint my black and white paintings.



Kiss 1961

When I gave up painting external reality I realised I was giving up a vast pleasure and from now on it was not going to be just pleasurable. No more following a form with the pencil, that would have to go. It was a sacrifice – but you go on making sacrifices. I could have continued painting black and white paintings but I eroded them by introducing grey, the quality of that which lay between. I knew that I was destroying a previous position. You can't maintain an extreme position by preserving it. To do so would mean turning it into the very opposite.

Do you feel lonely or alone at times?

Yes, I do. Being an artist is lonely. My personal life is not at all exciting now. It was the reverse at one time, and I found that it was bad for my work. Many painters find this is so. You can see from other artists' lives that those who take risks in their personal lives seldom take them in their work, and that those who have taken risks in their work have often had uneventful personal lives. It seems to be one or the other, not both. If your work is going well you are comforted, nourished and protected by it. It's difficult when it's going badly.

Does other people's criticism matter?

Less and less, but I can still be hurt when someone misses the point or misunderstands my work, because I want people to enjoy my paintings, I want to give them that elation and freedom. I want them to feel as I do, or can sometimes, to have this particular joy.

Nowadays I do a certain amount of lecturing. My aim is to make people feel alive. When there are good questions at the end of a lecture, then this gives me a feeling of excitement and pleasure.

Of what are you most proud? Yourself?

I don't feel proud of myself. That's the truth. I feel excited, and proud, when I can fire people – it's like hearing a beautiful piece of music.

And what about failure?

We all fail. Failure is inevitable, but it's the degree of it that is important. When I don't know what my work is saying, I say so. It's important to

be objective – to say that you don't know, if you don't. If I'm open, people may tell me what they think I was or am doing. I get the most amazing responses that way. Sometimes they can see more clearly what I'm doing than I can see myself. I'm greatly encouraged by what people can see if they try. Seeing is a very complex matter. Trying to be an artist is a serious responsibility. It is the most demanding thing there is.

What do you do for yourself?

I have found people I can talk to. That's very valuable, but I seldom talk about things that really matter. You cannot take away the energy, it's a very internal thing. All artists have part of themselves that they can never share with anyone else.

How do you nourish yourself?

Nature and the museums. I go to Cornwall; I have a garden; I have a little house in France with a big studio and a lot of privacy. I look at paintings. In the spring I went to Paris with a friend with whom I can *really* talk. He lives abroad, but we talk on the phone – we're together that way. He loves paintings as much as I do and we had a real binge: the Louvre, a Matisse exhibition, the Musée d'Orsay, Sainte Chapelle, and the Lion and Unicorn tapestry in the Cluny Museum. That's my food. Listening to music, most of all Mozart, reading slowly and carefully – I love Proust – and getting a little drunk now and then!

Is it difficult keeping the public and private lives separate?

I have had to learn how to cope. You learn that people will help. When you allow it, people come forward to help you. There are roles to play, especially at openings, which are an ordeal for all artists. The sympathy is there for you, very kindly, although no one really listens to what you say on those sorts of occasions. But there's always someone to get you through it somehow if you let them, someone who will hold your glass for you!

What lessons have you learned?

Other artists teach you. There is one thing I would like to say to young artists and it is this: look at the great painters; don't be frightened of

them, they've seen more clearly, experienced more deeply and are more explicit. Weaker artists are confused. Read the best, look at the best. Don't rely on your contemporaries, look at the past.[3]

Delacroix has been an example in many ways but mostly in the spirit which runs through his *Journals*. Best of all you work with love and desire, next with will, and finally, if all else fails, it is bloody obstinacy!

The desire to be a painter may spring from any of several sources. One might be stirred by other paintings seen in an art gallery or a private house – or one may be prompted by a wish for self-expression, a longing to convey something deeply felt. It may come from a need to make an artefact, to build or fabricate, to shape and organise so as to bring a new entity into existence, or even simply from the pleasure of painting itself. All these reasons may play a part but in my case there was an additional one – and that was *sight*.

Long before I ever saw a major painting, felt the need to share an experience, knew the excitement of invention or painted my first watercolour, I had been fortunate enough to discover what 'looking' can be – sometimes in a mere glance one can see more than in the close scrutiny of a thousand details.

I spent my childhood in Cornwall, which of course was an ideal place in which to make such discoveries. Changing seas and skies, a coast- line ranging from the grand to the intimate, bosky woods and secretive valleys; what I experienced there formed the basis of my visual life:

> – Swimming through the oval, saucer-like reflections, dipping and flashing on the sea surface, one traced the colours back to the origins of those reflections. Some came directly from the sky and different coloured clouds, some from the golden greens of the vegetation growing on the cliffs, some from the red-orange of the seaweed on the blues and violets of adjacent rocks, and, all between, the actual hues of the water, according to its various depths and over what it was passing. The entire elusive, unstable, flicking complex subject to the changing qualities of the light itself. On a fine day, for instance, all was bespattered with the glitter of bright sunlight and its tiny pinpoints of virtually black shadow – it was as though one was swimming through a diamond.
>
> – Taking dawn-walks over the cliffs when one's footsteps left a curiously flat heavy green mark in the pearly turquoise of the dew.

– Looking directly into the sun over a foreshore of rocks exposed by the tide – all reduced to a violent black and white contrast, interspersed, here and there, by the glitter of water.
– Delving into the minute grey and yellow world of the lichens, which encrust rocks and stems of trees like the work of the finest gold- and silver-smiths, setting off the sudden green of a patch of moss.
– Dipping a bucket into shadowed water and suddenly seeing a bright blue patch of reflected sky appear in the broken surface.
– Going up and down valleys and around twisting corners there was a constant interchange of horizon lines, cliff-tops and brows of hills – narrow slivers of colour rhythmically weaving and layering, edge against edge. And sometimes, on turning into a completely different aspect of the landscape, which – especially if the sun was behind – one encountered almost as though the new view was a monumental edifice, so flat and dense did the colour seem.
– Gazing at the reflected blue of the sky in a sandy pool which turns from pale yellow through jade to turquoise unexpectedly accommodating a curious compound, a non-colour resembling ashy grey.
– Seeing first the white of foam, the blues of sea and sky through the delicate tracery of a row of bare trees in winter and then seeing the same view uninterrupted. In one context a wide expanse receding towards a distant horizon, in the other a vertical 'cloisonné' of brilliant fragmented colour.
– Walking over the cliffs on a windy day – the rough grass snaking before one as though so many tiny silver pennants were fastened to the earth.
– Noticing how the green of the tamarisk appears more yellow against the blue of the sea than it does against the greys of landscape.
– Watching the narrow dark streaks of ruffled water – violets, blues and many shades of grey – as a sudden squall swept over the sea.

But whatever the occasion might be, the pleasures of sight have one characteristic in common – they take you by surprise. They are sudden, swift and unexpected. If one tries to prolong them, recapture them or bring them

about wilfully their purity and freshness is lost. They are essentially enigmatic and elusive. One can stare at a landscape, for example, which a moment ago seemed vibrant and find it inert and dull – so one cannot say that this lively quality of sight is simply 'out there in nature', or easily available to be commanded as wished. Nor is it a state of mind which, once acquired, can bend the most stubborn und unrewarding aspect of external reality to its own purposes. It is neither the one nor the other but a perfect balance between the two, between the inner and the outer. This balance is a sort of convergence which releases a particular alchemy, momentarily turning the commonplace into the ravishing.

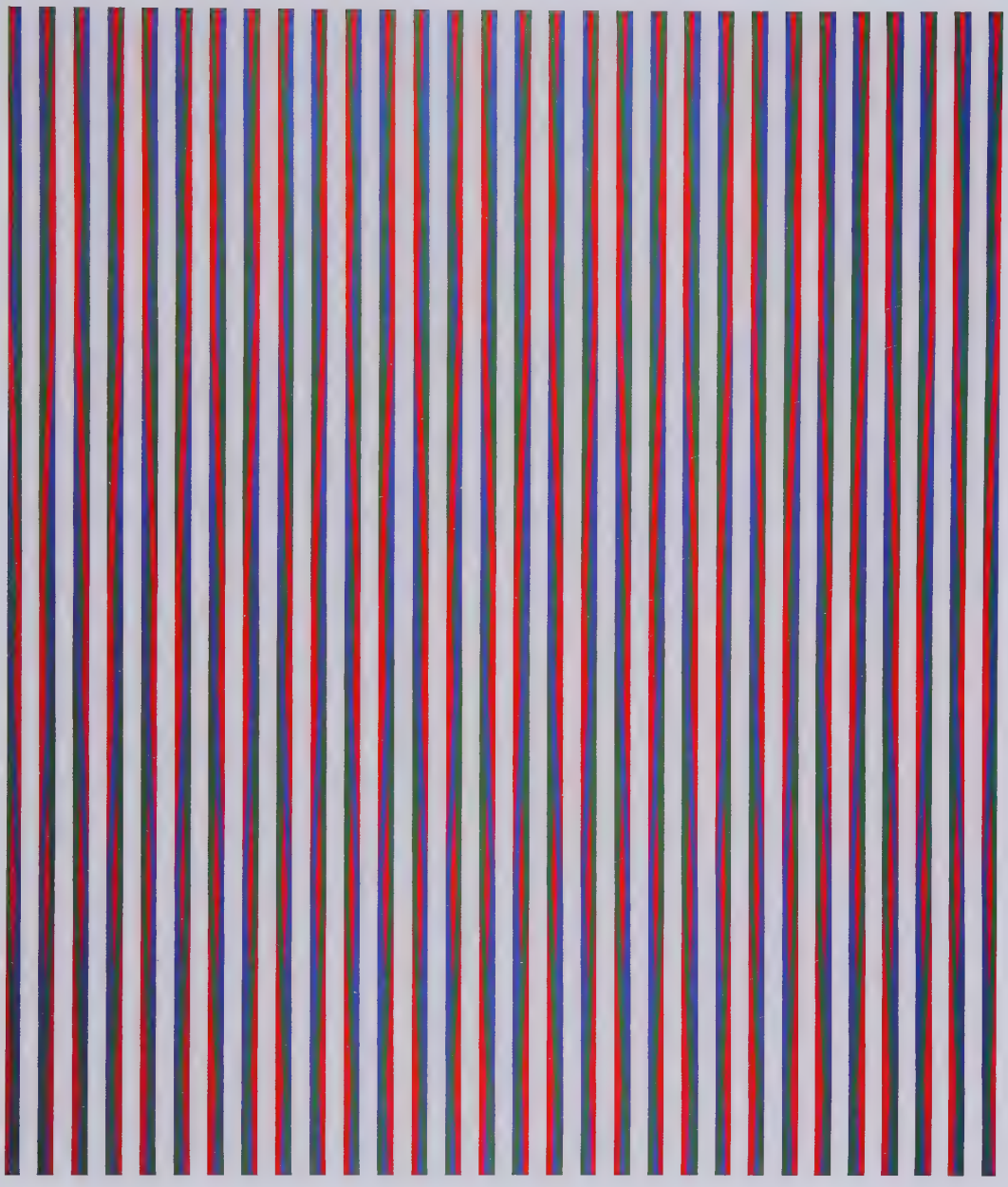
Naturally, as a child one is more open to such experiences. When one gets older these tend to take place less often – that is they seldom appear any longer as pure relevations. But this does not mean that one has come to see things as they really are or any more truthfully. The damage is mostly done by the daily round with its heavy load of pressures and pre-occupations which comes between, like a plate glass window, and through which one can certainly see but through which no vision can penetrate.

It seems to me that as an artist one's work lies here. I realised partly through my own experience and partly through the great masters of Modern art 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, of the bridge which sight throws from our innermost heart to the furthest extension of that which surrounds us.

I discovered that I was painting in order to 'make visible'. On one hand I had to make something which had this essential quality of precipitating itself as 'surprise' and, simultaneously, there was no way of knowing with what one was dealing until it existed; so that in order to see one had to paint and through that activity found what could be seen.

The black and white paintings which I did in the 1960s laid bare this circular process.[1] People found them hard to understand because the elements I used seemed so far removed from the experience they produced. Habitually people expect to recognise in a painting something already known in a literal sense. I wanted to bring about some fresh way of seeing again what had already almost certainly been experienced, but which had been either dismissed or buried by the passage of time; that thrill of pleasure which sight itself reveals.

Colour is the proper means for what I want to do because it is prone to inflections and inductions existing only through relationship; malleable yet tough and resilient. I do not select single colours but rather pairs, triads



Zing 2 1971

or groups of colour which taken together act as generators of what can be seen through or via the painting. By which I mean that the colours are organised on the canvas so that the eye can travel over the surface in a way parallel to the way it moves over nature. It should feel caressed and soothed, experience frictions and ruptures, glide and drift. Vision can be arrested, tripped up or pulled back in order to float free again. It encounters reflections, echoes and fugitive flickers which when traced evaporate. One moment there will be nothing to look at and the next second the canvas suddenly seems to refill, to be crowded with visual events.

More than anything else I want my paintings to exist on their own terms. That is to say they must stealthily engage and disarm you. There the paintings hang, deceptively simple – telling no tales as it were – resisting, in a well-behaved way, all attempts to be questioned, probed or stared at and then, for those with open eyes, serenely disclosing some intimations of the splendours to which pure sight alone has the key.

Student at the Royal College of Art, 1952–55

[1988]

Going to the Royal College seemed to me the next step. I had already been a student at Goldsmiths' College for four years (1949–52), and I wanted to study painting in more depth. Acceptance by the Royal College, aside from being an achievement and an enormous encouragement in itself, meant that one would receive a grant and be able to continue painting for the next three years free from financial worry. The alternative was to start there and then as a practising artist, which I felt I was not ready for, or to take a course in teacher-training which I did not want to do.

I went with high expectations. The first problem was that one hadn't realised that it is very hard to go on being a student unless one is going to be addicted to the art school system as a permanent way of life. I had been very thoroughly taught at Goldsmiths', with disciplined and informed teaching, particularly in the area of drawing. Sam Rabin had taught me fundamental principles: to see the thing as a whole; to be objective about what you do; to order your working method, so that, for example, if the model is standing, the first thing your drawing must do is to give the sense of standing and the distribution of weight, long before you pay any attention to a single aspect.

I expected a parallel approach to painting from the College, but of course there are many different ways of teaching. The College philosophy was stated to me by one member of staff as: 'It's going to be very tough outside, so you might as well have it tough in here.' So we were left to work it out for ourselves. We were abandoned, when what we needed (and hoped for) was help *towards* independence rather than having independence thrust down our throats. We could ask questions, but the trouble is that you don't necessarily know when you have a problem and students can be either too proud or too diffident to ask for help. Advanced teaching ought to help a student to discover his or her problems. We were anxious to find out as much as we could but this was ignored – a certain fundamental bargain was not kept. There was an overpowering sense of a vacuum in the College. There were exceptions, of course. Among the tutors, Colin Hayes was a good friend,[1] and the warmth and heart of the school was John Minton whose compassion, sophistication and wit were immensely reassuring. You realised at once that he was aware that the problems he faced were in essence common ones. He was much loved by the students.

We were an immensely varied group. There were some fifty of us, with a wide range of backgrounds, interests and aspirations. That, I am sure, was very significant; and some had served in the War, so there was a wide range of experience and maturity. We were not ambitious in the way students are today. We did not expect attention from the commercial galleries, or to command the interest of a wide public. We didn't think far ahead, and that was excellent. We were, of course, woefully ill-informed. English provincialism stared us in the face. The art history lectures we received ended chronologically after one perilous excursion into Cubism. But we were aware that there was a whole body of experience and achievement in painting based on criteria and motivation which we did not sufficiently know or understand, virtually from Cubism onwards.

Dick Smith was a fellow student, and I remember that he spent his £35 government allowance to go one summer to the USA. When he came back, word of what he had seen was passed around. He was a rare bird, and rather exotic, and he came back from America wearing a pair of sneakers which were much envied. His space in the Royal College studios was large and bare with big canvases, and all of this was completely new to us.

I remember painting next to Frank Auerbach during a three week life-model pose. By the end of the first week only the two of us were left: Frank worked by walking to and fro more than several yards to his easel and back, and the path became a kind of metronome through which the work gradually accrued on his canvas. He beat it into place. I had an offshore position and had my own area of concentration, although I didn't move about so much.

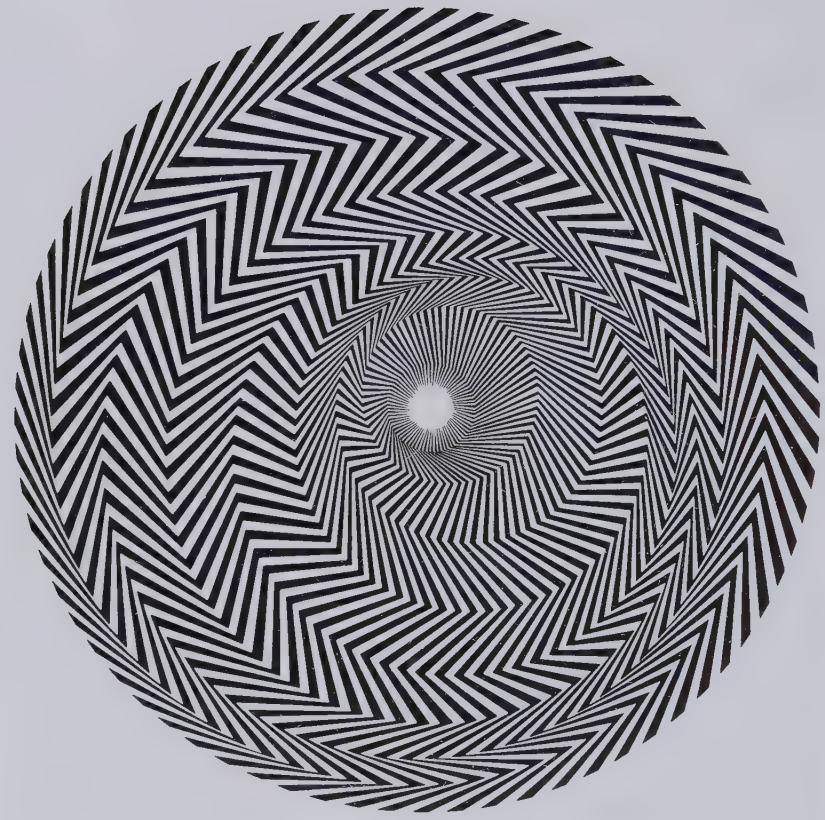
Peter Blake had a corner in one of the studios, but it was something more than a corner. One always had the feeling of an event, in that what one saw there was constantly being added to by tiny, unexpected and yet familiar nuggets. John Bratby was the most self-confident of us all. My abiding memory of him is the arriving in the corridor where we queued for cups of tea with his clothes and glasses properly bespattered with paint. He always jumped the queue and always asked for extra sugar.

Bruce Lacey, who later became part of Spike Milligan's *Goon Show*, took part in the 'Running Jumping & Standing Still' film, in which he wears a raincoat and puts a record on a tree stump und runs around the record (the grooves on the record matching the growth rings on the tree stump) to make it play. It was very exciting and provocative then, and Surrealism had just not been this specific for us. Bruce was indispensable to any party.

There were many others. I was lucky to have people like that as fellow students – they made up for a lot.

Continuing [1991]

The 1960s were a unique point in time. The War and the years of austerity were at last over and as, for many of us, those contained the real and recent memories of our childhood, the sense of relief was considerable. We looked back to an imaginary past long before the War, to a past which exerted a special attraction in much the same way that the War itself could be endured only by colouring with dreams and longings the future that lay beyond it. The 1960s provided a 'present' in which these temporal tensions could be released. The result was an explosion of optimism and confidence, elation and drive which seemed at the time to be completely normal. In terms of Modern art the past was heady indeed. The procession of the Great stretched back for over a hundred years: Baudelaire, Cézanne, Picasso, Proust, Monet, Van Gogh, Stravinsky, Matisse, Klee, Renoir, Mondrian, Rilke, Seurat – to name only a few. Men who not only through their works but also by their courage, integrity and strength of purpose shone like powerful beacons. It was perhaps a bit naïve to try to measure up to such examples but it was also, of course, very exciting. Now the climate seems to have altered. The past is regarded as irrelevant, and consequently there is no prospect of a future. It's as though art had allowed itself to be disinherited, abandoning its resources to exploitation and plunder. The current situation reminds me somewhat of the eclecticism of the early 19th-century before Manet appeared, or even the *fin de siècle* when Symbolism became popular.



Blaze 1 1962

The Hermaphrodite [1973]

It has long been established that both male and female psychological patterns are present in all of us, in differing degrees, and that simple biological differentiation offers us a concept of the whole matter that is both incomplete and inadequate.

It seems to me that in many cases the richer the personality the more harmoniously present is the duality. The artist, in particular, draws upon it quite naturally while working; the artist could almost, in fact, be said to be a hermaphrodite at such times.

In the act of love, physical differentiation establishes polarities which, when resolved, may lead to the birth of a child. This relationship would appear to find a parallel in the indispensable dialogue between the artist and the work-medium. There those polarities can result in the creation of a work of art.

I have never been conscious of my own femininity as such, while in the studio. Nor do I believe that male artists are aware of an exclusive masculinity while they are at work – not even Renoir, who is supposed to have said that he painted his paintings with his prick. (To me this remark expresses his attitude to his work as a celebration of life.)

For the artist who is also a woman, I would not deny that society presents particular circumstantial problems. But in my opinion these are on the wane, and in any case, few male artists have avoided analogous physical and sociological problems of one sort or another: for example, poverty, illness, unsympathetic marriages, alcoholism, geographical isolation, etc.

Women's liberation, when applied to artists, seems to me to be a naïve concept. It raises issues which in this context are quite absurd. At this point in time, artists who happen to be women need this particular form of hysteria like they need a hole in the head.

The Artist and Society

talking to David Thompson [1973]

The artist today is still, essentially, a very isolated person. This is something you don't realise at first, and when you do, it comes as a shock. After all, the relationship between an artist and the world he lives in – his relationship to 'society', if you like, or 'the public' – is extremely close to the centre of his activity. But then he discovers, as all artists know, that the activity that is so important to him is not generally thought to be really 'relevant' by other people. At the most, it's considered a kind of cultural embellishment, a decoration. And that discovery is absolutely traumatic.

The artist has become isolated increasingly ever since the Industrial Revolution, and he struggles with this isolation. It's a prison, a deprivation, and if he's not to be overwhelmed by it, he not only has to accept it, he must transform it into his own definition of freedom. This means relying on his own judgement, going for his own sources, building up his own criteria, developing his own insight – in fact, assuming the burden of total responsibility for his decisions about the way he works, and for all his actions as an artist.[1]

Now, that's a very double-edged thing. Responsibility of that kind is a tremendous pressure – freedom isn't easy to handle. And the artist's commitment to it can make his relationship with 'society' – for want of a better word – exceedingly difficult. The public may see his behaviour as self-indulgent. They may be bewildered by it, and they can even, as has happened so often in 20th-century art, become actively hostile to it.

And yet, although this can be the artist's greatest sadness, it can also be his greatest opportunity. Out of his isolation he can forge values of his own that he'll guard very jealously, and which he'll make sure can never be eroded by minor problems, minor issues and minor demands.

You see, the only commitment he has to society today – at least in my opinion – is to accept his liberation from it. It is an exacting position, but I think it's the only one open to a contemporary artist. It can be a stimulant to him, even if it's also, in other ways, sometimes depressing.

I don't think, unfortunately, that there can be any such thing as an ideal relationship between the artist and society. It's just a terribly difficult situation, and very unstable, and something that has to be constantly revised and kept as fluid as possible. When you think of the reception

given recently to the Stuyvesant Foundation's experiment of setting up contemporary sculpture in various city centres, where the works were attacked and sometimes damaged by people who should have known better,[2] you realise that the *only* constructive possibility is tolerance. A real willingness to expose oneself to new experiences. This means that you need inspired and very, very well-informed people at the helm, so to speak, of public patronage.

Artists themselves ought to be best at this, and they do keep trying to organise independent bodies to look after their own affairs, but they're so used by now to the business of being isolated and separate, it's got so far into their backbones, that they find it almost impossible to agree on even social issues.

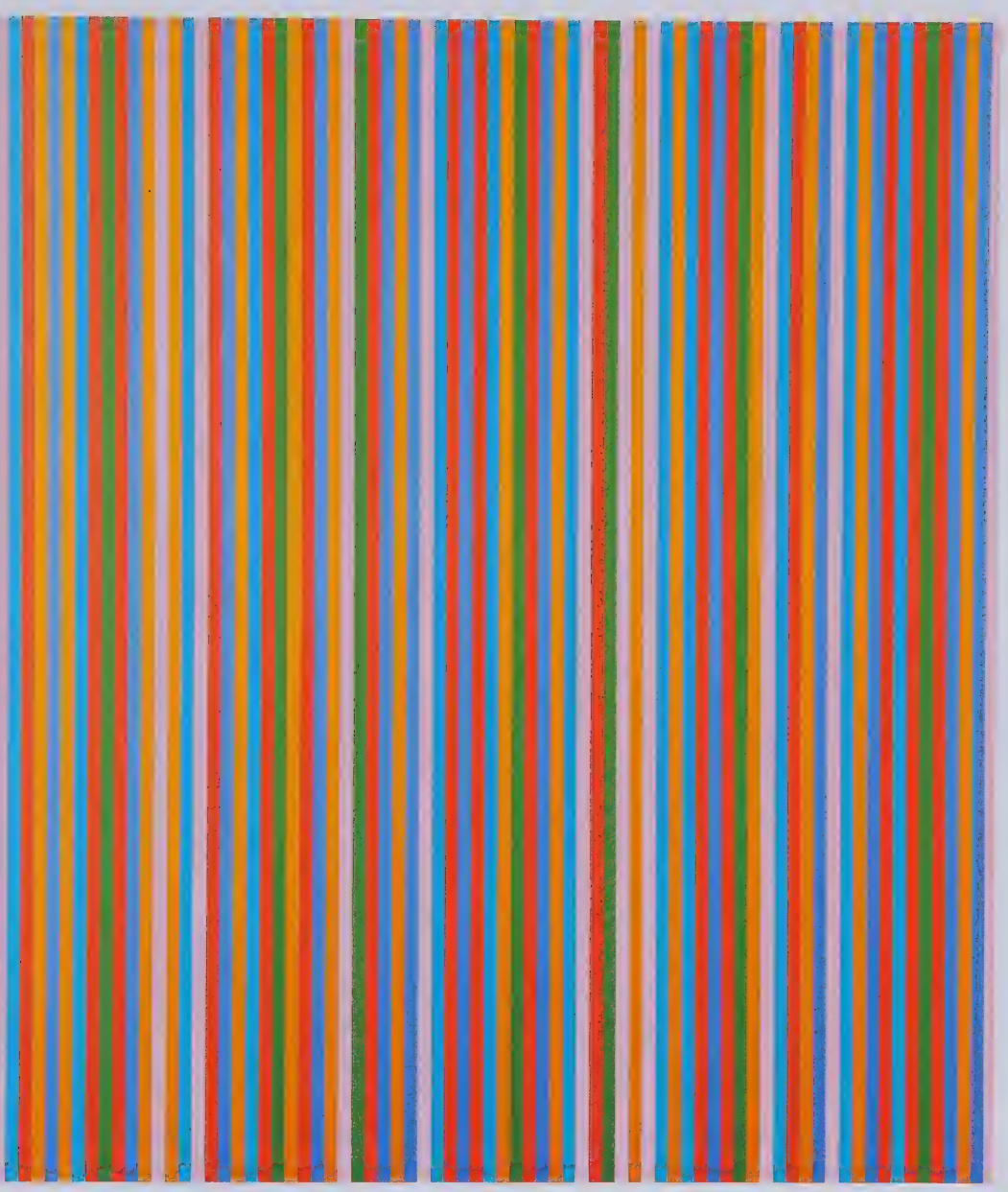
Admittedly, it's a difficult responsibility spending public money on activities the public may think it doesn't want to support, but I think it's just got to be accepted as a difficult responsibility. It's a job that has to be done by people on committees who have the courage to say 'This work is better than that work, and in our opinion we would like to show it to the public.' And they should be people who aren't too influenced by new tendencies, but who aren't too influenced by letters from angry members of the public, either.

On the whole, public support for the arts in this country, even when it isn't adequate, is on roughly the right track – better than, say, in France or the United States. One has to accept, of course, that a certain amount of money is going to be wasted. That's inevitable. How much of the money that's constantly poured into technological training or scientific research actually bears fruit in terms of cash spent? No one questions the wastage there, and it should be the same with art schools.

Yet look at this totally unjustifiable cutback that was 'recommended' recently on part-time teaching in art-schools – a really valuable system that allows students to keep in close touch with professional artists.[3] The growth rate of further education in the sciences is up in the 40 per cent range – a figure that has to be set against an image of continual inefficiency in the placing of students afterwards. The poor art schools, by contrast, have maintained only a 1½ per cent growth rate, and yet statistics show that a far higher proportion of art-school students find work allied to their training than science students ever do, so what excuse is there for such a cutback, apart from prejudice and bureaucratic facility?

On the other hand, I don't think vast sums should be spent on these mistaken great schemes for art-centres and palaces of culture. They're just ghettos, initiated and run by devout well-wishers who want to tidy

something up and make a place for it. Art's not like that. Artists need something much more flexible, which is what our organisation S.P.A.C.E. tries to provide.[4] We've found studio space for some 500 artists now, at comparatively little cost, because what we've asked for is to be allowed to make use of *wasted* space – buildings temporarily not being used, which we could adapt for our own flexible purpose and relinquish when they were needed for housing or re-development or whatever. That's the kind of support which can really be useful.



Parasol 1984

Holidays

talking to Vanya Kewley [1996]

I don't take holidays just for relaxation. I would find lying on a beach hot, uncomfortable and pretty unendurable. The sort of holidays I take are part and parcel of my work as a painter.

Of course, being in the studio is the heart of the matter, as it is for any artist. But going out and 'looking' has been vitally important to me for as long as I can remember. I spent most of my childhood in Cornwall which was in itself a kind of wonderful holiday – in spite of the War being on, which had led my mother to take my sister and me down there in the first place. In many ways there wasn't much to do, except walking on the cliffs and looking at the seas, the skies and all around. The lovely thing about walking in the country is that, although one may go the same way, it never looks the same. If you walk with the sun behind you, all the colours are fully saturated, that is to say, the sky is solid blue, the sea displays its turquoises, greens and violets, and along the path beside you go tamarisks, gorse and stony lichens like a moving frieze of pinks, greens and yellows. On the other hand, the very same way, taken walking into the sun, is almost black and white, the colours being virtually bleached out: the sky appears a sheet of silver, the sea glitters with a myriad points of light, and the rocks and cliffs are reduced to either plain silhouettes or smoky shades of grey.

In fact, I have always been very much affected by the particular sort of light of the various places I have visited. It can be extraordinarily different – like the clarity and strength of the Pacific light in Tahiti, which seems match to the abundance of the tropical vegetation, or the fine golden rays of the afternoon sun falling on the stone lanterns in the Kokedera moss garden in Kyoto. Such sensations have meant a lot to painters. Since I have started to work in France part of the year, I realise how tremendously important the environment created by light was to some of my favourite artists such as Monet, Cézanne and Matisse.

My first visit to Paris was in the late 1950s, a time when the austerity of post-war Britain had not yet come to an end. One was only allowed to take £35 a year abroad. I stayed with a friend at the Hotel Louisiana, a run-down place in the Rue de Seine, very popular with impoverished, Continentally-orientated English intellectuals at the time. We looked at

exhibitions, read books – there had been very few books on Modern art till then. John Rewald's books on Impressionism and Post-Impressionism had come out, there was Roger Shattack's *The Banquet Years* about Paris at the beginning of this century, and we devoured the new 'Documents of Modern Art', being published by the Museum of Modern Art in New York. But most of all we argued enthusiastically over dinner about what we had seen. I vividly remember walking into the Jeu de Paume and seeing the Manets, the *Olympia* and the *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* – staggering paintings.[1] And then all those Monets! It was a feast, I couldn't have enough of it.

It is one of the great privileges of being a painter that you find unexpected relations wherever you go. Visiting museums is a special sort of holiday: a journey in time, through which one discovers partners in imagination and whole areas of creative adventure. But this is only one side of these explorations. It is extraordinary how, by looking at works of art, however remote they may be, one finds a way through to the unique character of a place, of a culture, even in its present guise.

My visit to Egypt was rather like this. I went with my sister and Robert Kudielka, an art historian, and of course we saw the great monuments – Saqqara, Giza, Karnak and Luxor. They are, as one knows, the expression of a cult of the dead. However, as we travelled the length of the Nile, I couldn't help noticing how the narrow strips of cultivation each side of the river stood out against the white escarpments of the desert like the settings and bands of their ancient jewellery. What a stupendous stage the desert provided for the display of that civilization! Suddenly I saw the role those reds, blacks, blues, turquoises and whites played in their everyday objects, their wall paintings, illuminations and sarcophagi: they were colours to celebrate life and well-being, the gifts of sunshine.[2]

Although I recreated those colours later in my paintings I never search for material that may be useful in the studio. This would spoil the very sensation that I can take back with me. On some occasions the experience has been so powerful and overwhelming that it was and still is practically inaccessible. The first time I went to India I remember the door of the aircraft opening, and there it was: the warm velvet of the Bombay night – frangipani, jasmin, petrol, urine ... an indistinguishable compound. Looking at classical Indian art such as sculpture, architecture and dance really helped me to relate to the almost incomprehensible vitality of that country. It was a spiritual experience, a feeling as though one was going back to a kind of home. Despite the many strange and baffling aspects of Indian life today it seemed to me that, perhaps, Christian

Europe must have been rather like this, before we lost our sense of religion. I cannot forget the delicacy of relationship between people I experienced there, the respect for the old, the formality of conduct independent of being rich or poor. The acceptance of life in all its complex and contradictory features goes way beyond anything we can achieve in the West at present.

Travelling is also a way of being alone, and as my work makes me a loner, it is indeed a natural form of recreation. I do not mean this in a negative sense: the closest companion of artists is their work. I need silence, both interior and exterior. I remember the breathtaking tranquillity of Borobudur, set in the middle of the Javanese jungle. It is a huge stupa-type temple with no interior at all, consisting of stone terraces which lead from the realm of earthly pleasures to the plateau of pure spiritual fulfillment. In climbing these tiers one passes some of the finest Buddhist reliefs and sculpture and at the same time rises to an increasingly ecstatic state of awareness. The inner and the outer sphere become one without losing their different nature. It's like the aesthetic experience of the site itself: a massive grey stone building almost dematerialised by a vaporous light – and yet being serenely set against the teeming life of the jungle.

I have often found a broader understanding of works of art by visiting their original sites. But it can also be the other way round. A painting or a book may trigger a desire to go somewhere. I would love to go to China to see the mountains of their great ink painters and those pale pure colours which appear in their robes and ceramics. And having recently read Pablo Neruda's *Memoirs* I would like to visit Chile – the amazing country he describes. There are still a number of holidays ahead, I hope, which will add an extra urgency to going back to the studio and doing something about the pleasure of 'having seen'.

Personal Interview

Published under the title 'Bridget Riley CBE, Painter' in *Inspirational Women, Interviews with 12 Women who Encourage, Enlighten and Entertain*, Nikki Henriques (ed.), Wellingborough 1988, pp.137–43. All women interviewed in this book were asked to name and describe their 'heroines'. The introductory paragraph in Riley's interview has been replaced by what must have been the first question.

1 From Nigel Gosling's review of Riley's retrospective exhibition at the Hayward Gallery London in 1971, 'Fearless on the Frontier', *The Observer*, 25 July 1971.

2 Maurice de Sausmarez (1915–1969), painter, teacher and art historian, who introduced Riley to Futurism and Colour Divisionism. Among his main publications are *Basic Design: the Dynamics of Visual Form*, London 1964, a study on the problem of teaching Modern art, and the first monograph on the artist, *Bridget Riley*, London 1970.

3 This advice to look at the great painters of the past is almost identical with that given by Matisse in 'Observations on Painting' (1945), in Jack D. Flam (ed.), *Matisse on Art*, London 1973, p.102, and particularly in 'Matisse Speaks to You' (1950), *ibid.*, pp.125–26. See also **Painting Now**, p.291f.

The Pleasures of Sight

From the exhibition catalogue *Working with Colour: Recent paintings and studies by Bridget Riley*, Arts Council of Great Britain, London 1984. An abbreviated version was first published under the title 'On Swimming Through a Diamond', *Vogue*, March 1984, pp.292–93.

1 The structure of this 'circular process' is described in **Perception Is the Medium**, p.89 and **Statement**, p.101.

Student at the Royal College of Art, 1952–55

Contribution to the RCA publication *Exhibition Road: 20th century painters from the Royal College of Art*, London 1988, p.84.

1 Riley first met Colin Hayes at Cheltenham Ladies College, where he had been her art master.

Continuing

Statement in the exhibition catalogue *Ready-Steady-Go: Painting of the Sixties from the Arts Council Collection*, South Bank Centre, London 1992, p.38.

The Hermaphrodite

Contribution to *Art and Sexual Politics*, Thomas B. Hess (ed.), New York 1973, pp.82–83. The final sentence of this statement seems to have stigmatised Riley in the eyes of the feminist movement as one of the 'many ambitious women' who helped to perpetuate 'the fiction of the mainstream as monolithic and masculine' (see Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art, and Society*, London 1990, p.310).

The Artist and Society

Published under the title 'Bridget Riley on freedom for artists' in *The Observer*, 30 September 1973, pp.40–41. This article was assembled by David Thompson on the basis of written answers to a list of questions which he had sent to the artist.

1 A conviction strongly held by the artist which she emphasised twenty years later in conversation with Neil MacGregor: 'An artist nowadays has to make his entire context, his own criteria, has to explain, has to account for his procedure as it evolves. It's almost as though he has take on the role of being his own public, his own critic, his own everything.' (*Bridget Riley: Dialogues on Art*, ^{2}2003, p.30).

2 This refers to the ambitious *City Sculpture Project '72*, sponsored by the Peter Stuyvesant Foundation. Stewart Mason and Phillip King were asked to select a group of sculpture projects to be realised in eight British cities. The public reception turned out to be disastrous, particularly in Cambridge, where 'people who should have known better' – that is to say, students of the University colleges – led the vandalisation of the art works. Cf. the documentation in *Studio International*, July–August 1972, pp.10–40.

3 A few months before, Riley had protested with other artists, including Robert Adams, Quentin Bell, William Coldstream, Victor Pasmore and John Piper, against these cuts in a letter to the editor of the *Times* which was published under the heading 'Teaching in art schools', 3 May 1973.

4 In autumn 1968, shortly after winning the International Prize for Painting at the Venice Biennale, Riley together with Peter Sedgley established S.P.A.C.E., an organisation which made working space available to artists at low cost by renting large unoccupied buildings such as, at that time, St Katherine's Dock in the old docklands of London.

Holidays

Published in the series 'My Hols' in the *Sunday Times*, 13 October 1996, in an abridged version. The article refers to four big journeys: 1977 to Japan via India, 1978 to Tahiti, Australia, Bali and Java (Borobudur), 1979–80 to Egypt and in winter 1981–82 again to India. See **Biographical Notes**.

1 In 1959, when Riley went with Maurice de Sausmarez to Paris, these great masterpieces of Modern French painting, now in the Musée d'Orsay, were still displayed in the Jeu de Paume.

2 For a more extended description of this visit, which had unexpected consequences for Riley's work, see **A Visit to Egypt and the Decoration for the Royal Liverpool Hospital**, pp.130f.

2 : DEVELOPMENT AS PAINTER



For me, drawing is an enquiry, a way of finding out – the first thing that I discover is that I do not know. This is alarming even to the point of momentary panic. Only experience reassures me that this encounter with my own ignorance – with the unknown – is my chosen and particular task, and provided that I can make the required effort the rewards may reach the unimaginable. It is as though there is an eye at the end of my pencil, which tries, independently of my personal general-purpose eye, to penetrate a kind of obscuring veil or thickness. To break down this thickness, this deadening opacity, to elicit some particle of clarity or insight, is what I want to do.

The strange thing is that the information I am looking for is, of course, there all the time and as present to one's naked eye, so to speak, as it ever will be. But to get the essentials *down there* on my sheet of paper so that I can recover and see again what I have just seen, that is what I have to push towards. What it amounts to is that while drawing I am watching and simultaneously recording myself looking, discovering things that on the one hand are staring me in the face and yet on the other I have not yet really seen. It is this effort 'to clarify' that makes drawing particularly useful and it is in this way that I assimilate experience and find new ground.

This practice is rooted in my experience of drawing from the nude and from nature. But I found it could be moved across surprisingly easily to the elements of abstract painting, centring as it does on enquiry and what happens down there on the paper. I have always believed that those 'ultimate' statements of the great protagonists of Abstract art were, in fact, declarations of new radical beginnings. Would those principles and geometric forms really yield the riches dreamt of? Or would they prove a block to creative will and passion? But, in art, prohibitions and denials are always a challenge and a powerful spur to enquiry.

For the last 50 years, it has been my belief that as a Modern artist you should make a contribution to the art of your time, if only a small one. When I was young, the situation was very different. Abstract painting hung like a mirage in the desert. The door had been pushed open by a small number of visionary artists – mainly Mondrian, Kandinsky, Malevich, Rodchenko. Although travelling by different routes, each had arrived at what was virtually a common core. Having discarded the figure and nature, what remained?

Colour as colour itself, those simple shapes and forms that geometry and writing provided, and the material facts.

Severe limitations indeed, but did they hold the secret of a new way of working? No tried or tested criteria existed: everything that would constitute a viable art form had to be found, discovered, re-invented or recreated. It was an immense task but one that seemed essential if the implications and insights of Modern art were to be pursued. The very bleakness and constraints of this uncharted land seemed to hold an attractive potential, as Stravinsky claimed in his *Poetics of Music*:

> My freedom will be so much the greater and more meaningful, the more narrowly I limit my field of action and the more I surround myself with obstacles. Whatever diminishes constraint diminishes strength. The more constraints one imposes, the more one frees oneself of the chains that shackle the spirit.[1]

But to be excited by the prospect of a great adventure is one thing, to act is another. To make a start, I had to sacrifice some hard won achievements and joys. For instance colour, about which I had only recently gained some understanding, now had to be laid aside until an abstract form equal to its purity could be found. You cannot just paint colour: if you try to do this you inevitably end up in the trap of monochrome painting. It was seven years before I found a way of even beginning to work with colour. But first I had to make a start.

Perhaps the time I had spent drawing allowed me to trust the eye at the end of my pencil. *Movement in Squares* (1961) began in this way. It came at the end of a time of great difficulty for me. I had very nearly lost the studio, and even when I managed to secure it I had no real sense of what to do there. Although I had taken a few steps in the direction of abstract painting, I had not yet arrived at a point where I could establish a dialogue. One evening on my way to the studio, I thought of drawing a square. Everyone knows what a square looks like and how to make one in geometric terms. It is a monumental, highly conceptualised form: stable and symmetrical, equal angles, equal sides. I drew the first few squares. No discoveries there. Was there anything to be found in a square? But as I drew, things began to change. Quite suddenly something was happening down there on the paper that I had not anticipated. I continued, I went on drawing; I pushed ahead, both intuitively and consciously. The squares

began to lose their original form. They were taking on a new pictorial identity. I drew the whole of *Movement in Squares* without a pause and then, to see more clearly what was there, I painted each alternate space black. When I stepped back, I was surprised and elated by what I saw. The painting *Movement in Squares* came directly out of this study. My experience of working with the square was to prove crucial. Having been lately becalmed, now a strong wind filled my sails.

The way of working I had found was both new and yet familiar. If my subject had been the human figure instead of a geometric form, I would have been looking for the ways in which the balance shifted. I would have found a twist or turn, which gave life and movement. I chose other geometric forms – the circle, the triangle, the oval, the curve – and found that through *drawing* I could analyse and study them. What could a triangle, for example, do and, equally important, *not* do? I put the triangle through 'its paces'. I treated other pictorial elements as units in a similar way. For instance, in 1962, when I tried to introduce a third colour into the black and white paintings, I soon realised that this was impossible because there was 'no place' for a third colour. I had come up against a problem that would in the past have been called 'plastic'. The structure I was working with was binary and that had to be broken down or opened up if it was going to include a third factor. I did this by 'pacing grey', approaching grey simply as a different kind of unit. What is grey? It lies between black and white. It can be a single, central grey, or it can move in steps or modulations of grey.

This fluidity of grey movements and its capacity to bridge the light/dark contrast allowed me to keep a door open for colour. I had to work through the black and white paintings before I could even begin to think about possibilities of colour. There are no short cuts. I had to go step by step, testing the ground before making a move. It would be a long time before I felt ready to leave the support of the greys for full colour.

Some people thought that I gave up my black and white structure for a far less radical approach to colour. But this was not the case; the challenge of colour had to be met on its own terms. Just as I had enquired earlier into the square and other geometric forms freed from their conceptual roles, I now felt I had to enquire into colour as another pictorial player – in many ways the least emancipated and possibly the most complex of all.

At that time, it seemed to me that form and colour were incompatible, that they destroyed one another. If I wanted to make colour a central issue, I had to give up the complexities of form with which I had been working. In

the straight line I had one of the most fundamental forms. The line has direction and length, it lends itself to simple repetition and by its regularity it simultaneously supports and counteracts the fugitive, fleeting character of colour. Although Seurat's dot is comparable in its simplicity, the line has fractionally more going for it.

My studies of the greys paved the way for the colour movement in *Late Morning* (1967–68). In that painting, I began in a very simple way to *draw with colour.* The blue to bright green movement is the form. At the core of colour lies a paradox. It is simultaneously one thing and several things – you can never see colour by itself, it is always affected by other colours. As a child one plays by lying on one's back and filling one's sight with the blue of the sky only to find the blue goes slowly towards grey. Your own eye produced the after-image of yellow-orange to compensate for the intensity of the blue. Colour relationships in painting depend on the interactive character of colour; this is its essential nature. I had given up the complexity of form in my black and white paintings, but I found that the principles that lay behind them – contrast, harmony, reversal, repetition, movement, rhythm, etc. – could be recast in colour and with a new freedom.

Although careful never to presume 'to know' what the pictorial elements would do in a particular situation, I began to feel that experience was fuelling my enquiry and that, whether I felt prepared to make some advance – or not – I had no choice but to do so. Having twisted my colour round the straight line, I looked again at the curve element and turned it into the supple twists of *Song of Orpheus* (1978). I drew these curves together into clustered fields spliced by diagonals.

The work became increasingly finely balanced and beyond a certain point needed firmer and more robust treatment. I returned to a broader stripe or band, but the growing complexity of the colour relationships required further changes. It is part of a painter's work to be aware of the role that distance plays in the viewer's experience. *Ecclesia* (1985) seen close up shows a particular group of painted colours. Each band has a clear identity. Step back and the colours begin to interact, further away still a field of closely modulated harmonies cut by strong contrasts opens up. I had to work simultaneously on these two levels: the physical identity of the painted colours and the visual experience of their relationship. I used cut bands of painted paper in a collage technique to adjust, change and move colours around.

This group of stripe paintings turned out to be a rich vein of colour thinking. In the end, that very richness precipitated a new approach. By

making the effort to draw, I found my way. I had to lay aside the almost magical interactive power of colour that I had taken to a high level. The stripe itself went too; its limits had been reached. I needed to move the eye in different ways over the canvas.

I searched for a new form that would be unlike any I had used before: a form that did not have the familiar identity of squares, triangles, ovals, etc. Eventually I found what I was looking for in the conjunction of the vertical and the diagonal. This conjunction was the new form. It could be seen as a patch of colour – acting almost like a brush mark. When enlarged, these formal patches became coloured planes that could take up different positions in space. They could serve several functions and being contained they were also movable: could change scale, harmonise or contrast with one another, repeat, echo, 'create places', etc. A whole new field of relationships opened up. Together with a more extensive use of my particular collage technique, I had arrived at means broader than any that were available to me before. Now, drawing with colour became central to my activity. I found I had to establish a common plane, which ran right through the composition, and from which and to which the spatial advances and recessions of colour would relate. This could not be predetermined – it had to be found afresh each time. It was essential to *get across* the area, to build a chain of visual events that would carry the eye through its own realm. *Shimmered Shade* (1990) is one of the paintings that came out of this. I had found this new way of working by taking up an opposing position. It can sometimes happen that when confronted by what seems to be a wall, which one cannot get either through or round, a kind of radical re-orientation is called for. Turning the whole thing over so that an approach can be made from the opposite side, as it were. If this is to succeed, it nearly always means relinquishing some cherished notion or something that you have relied upon. This destructive side to creative life is essential to an artist's survival.

You cannot deal with thought directly outside practice as a painter: 'doing' is essential in order to find out what form your thought takes. The 'new curves' that I started in 1998 grew directly out of paintings such as *Shimmered Shade*. The latent visual arcs and sweeping movements came to the fore in *Painting with Verticals 1* (2006) and *Red with Red 1* (2007). Retaining the diagonals and verticals of the earlier group of paintings, I introduced a curve that connected to the existing structure. This is the underpinning of my new curvilinear work. The vertical is still there, acting like a break in the movement across the canvas. The cut collage pieces define the various contours that arise from combining and re-combining

the slender curve with its diagonal accents. This has developed into a layering technique that allows me to weave forms and colours together in a supple plastic space. I have reduced the number of colours and increased the scale of the imagery. Would it be possible once again to build up a repertoire of these invented forms, a repertoire that might gradually acquire sufficient momentum to put itself at risk, to precipitate its own kind of hazard? It is only through the experience of working that answers may be discovered within the inner logic of an invented reality such as the art of painting.

Seurat as Mentor [2007]

There are great artists whom one venerates and admires but to whom one does not turn for guidance. Georges Seurat, on the other hand, created work that not only is extraordinarily beautiful, but can inspire. It inspired Van Gogh, Matisse, Delaunay, the Futurists, and many others; and it gave me a start. Even today, I feel a thrill when I read Félix Fénéon's analysis of *La Grand Jatte*, which ends: 'Let the hand be numb, but let the eye be agile, perspicacious, cunning.'[1] It was Seurat's painting that first drew me because, after having been taught drawing extensively, I felt at a loss in approaching colour. From his work I learned something about the interrelationship of colour and tone as well as the advantages and limits of a strictly methodical approach. In looking back now, I think that my initial interest in Seurat has been maintained and developed through a shared preoccupation with perception and a love of contrast in painting.

In my review of Seurat's centennial show in 1991 at the Grand Palais in Paris I put a strong emphasis on his drawings, particularly the tonal studies.[2] At that time, my own colour work had shown me once again the importance of the light-dark scale for building a pictorial space. This is, of course, an academic insight, which at the time of my art school studies in the early 1950s was barely appreciated any longer. But I was fortunate, as I later realised, to catch the tail end of an academic training in life drawing that for an artist like Seurat was an indispensable and undisputed starting point. I was taught by Sam Rabin, a fine draftsman and a brilliant teacher in the classical manner. From him, I learned to analyse the pose of the model, the balance of the body, proportion and the distribution of weight. Rabin always posed the model with great care, introducing problems step by step so that a student did not attempt too much too soon. He would warn that one cannot expect to make one advance after another, and that periods of consolidation were necessary. He taught that it was only by the patient study of appearance and by making the effort to understand what one saw that one could discover the particular kind of information needed for drawing. He would say, 'What is the model doing?' and repeat this question until he received the reply 'She is standing.' He would then ask, 'Is your drawing standing?' And, indeed, was it? Rabin would then demonstrate. For a new student, only a few lines – the plumb line, one line

each for the angles of shoulders and hips, and another for the relationship between the standing feet – established the essentials. At a later stage he would show how a drawing could be built up and developed.

At the end of the day's work, he would set five minute-poses, and sometimes these could be treated as tonal studies. Rabin taught these in the same way that he taught figure drawing: by question, answer and demonstration. Sitting down in one's drawing place he would say, 'What is the lightest area you can see?' This was followed by, 'And what is the lightest area in your study?' At first one had difficulty in establishing this 'lightest area' because the paper itself was the lightest thing. This, however, was precisely the point. It was not a question of depicting light but of discovering it within the means. If this paper white was to be reserved for the form or shape of the lightest area, it followed that everything else had to go down one tone of diagonal hatching. From this palest grey field a further stage of elimination defined the next lightest part, the rest of the study being uniformly lowered by further hatching. In this way white was slowly but steadily taken out of the study and replaced by areas of deepening tone. The figure was no longer a separate entity but part of a visual field. Relationships were not concentrated on a single subject but embraced the space itself. This process of elimination led to an abstraction – not to Abstract art but an abstraction from nature. In this way, the discipline of tonal analysis was a first step toward Seurat's method and the starting point for his mysterious conté drawings. It could be used as an area of study in itself and at the same time provide a base for picture-making. Toward the end of my time in Rabin's class he would sometimes say, 'Wait until the model is posed, and when you come into the studio do not look until you have reached your place. Then look up. What you immediately see, the visual impression of the whole – that is what your drawing should show.'

This can be an ideal preparation for painting, as it was for Seurat. But for me, these many years of thorough academic drawing threw up an unexpected barrier: I could not find a way of treating colour. By the late 1950s, colour became a pressing problem. I looked at paintings, read about the artists I admired, and tried many avenues, in particular those opened up by Munch, Matisse and Bonnard – painters whose handling of colour was a major factor in their art and all of whom had started out from an academic background. I attempted to copy a Bonnard but abandoned it because it seemed impossible to follow his train of thought. I realised his work, beautiful as it is, relied on an impromptu, almost ad-hoc continuum of intuitive responses that left one at a loss as to the order in which they had occurred.

It was the luminous light of *Une Baignade, Asnières* (1883–84) (p.269), in The National Gallery in London, that gradually revealed a way forward. Hanging on the walls of the Impressionist galleries, Seurat's masterpiece seemed to me to stand at the end of this great tradition and at the threshold of an unknown future for the art of painting. The purity of the painting, its discretion, its lack of bravura, and the almost impersonal way in which the artist set about his work appealed to me. This modesty, however, could not conceal the undeniably grand conception of the painting. It was clear that colour was responsible for this amazing radiance.

To try to understand more, I made a copy of a small painting by Seurat, *Le Pont de Courbevoie* (1886–87). I worked from a reproduction, as I had done previously in copying. It helps not to be confronted with the overwhelming presence of an original. The reproduction measured 18 by 22 cm, and my copy was made on a canvas measuring 76 by 96 cm. It was bigger because I was concerned not with Seurat's beautiful pointillism but rather with following his train of thought, and for this purpose I needed a larger brush mark. The painting is predominantly blue and yellow. On the natural scale, blue is a dark colour and yellow a light one. However, if the natural order is inverted – that is to say, blue is lightened and yellow is degraded – then not only is a colour range achieved that equalises the tonal difference, but the problem of transparency in the yellows is reduced. Yellow can still be used as a light colour, but now has an opacity and pallor rather than a brilliance.



Copy after
Le Pont de Courbevoie
by Georges Seurat
1959



Pink Landscape 1960

I discovered that Seurat used a ground prepared with diluted yellow ochre rather than the *alla prima* canvas of the Impressionists. It may not have been his reasoning, but this mid-tone allowed him to pitch his lightest colours very precisely. By doing away with the white ground, he also avoided another source of transparency and thus achieved a beautiful, soft luminosity in his painting. Furthermore, Seurat underpainted his dots or 'points' with larger strokes of crosshatching, laying in the main areas. The very small scale of his pointillism was calculated to increase the interaction of the colour. My larger brush mark allowed me to analyse his optical mixture – the perceived blending of colour as opposed to the physical mixing of pigments – back into its constituent colours. The lightest area is the river close to the bank, in the foreground. There, a very pale blue and a contrasting yellow (degraded to an ochre and lightened with white) act against one another. Softened by pink, they give rise to a host of subtle pearly greys that establish the principal sensation: that of being by a river on a misty autumn morning. These greys, produced by optical mixture, are taken up through the painting, shifting and deepening in tone as they go. Along with these slight shifts, the movement of colour crosses the expanse of the river and travels through the reflections of the jetties and the bridge, up to the bridge itself; there it regains a lighter passage below the opposite bank before climbing up into the sky. Against this delicate open orchestration of space are placed the finite forms of trees, little boats, masts, sails, figures, and the grassy bank, using deeper yellow ochres, dark and pale blues, greens, crimsons, pinks and reds, all shifting the basic optical mixture. In the centre of the painting our eyes are seized by a few astonishingly pure yellows, pinned like some bright ornament to the pier of the bridge.

Apart from the pleasure in making my copy of Seurat's beautiful painting, I learned a great deal. I went on to make a number of paintings of my own based on my understanding of his use of colour. One of these, *Pink Landscape* (1960), played a key role in my thinking at the time and could almost be said to have precipitated my black and white work, though it is in fact built on strong colour contrasts. In the summer of 1959 I was travelling in Italy, visiting museums and looking at works of art. I stopped near Siena, got out of the car and stood looking out over a great plain. It was an immense arid expanse shimmering in the heat. The sheer volume of light seemed to shatter everything in sight. I wanted to make a painting showing the disintegration of this landscape under the fierce sun. A thunderstorm was advancing and had already obliterated the

horizon. I made a line drawing of the general disposition of the hills across the plain, a tonal study and a colour analysis. Back in London, I worked on a painting that I hoped would recreate the experience outside Siena. When the painting was finished, I was both pleased and disappointed. It was a competent application of Seurat's use of colour, but the sensations of light and heat over the Sienese plain were simply not to be found in it. In trying to realise these sensations, '*ma méthode*' (Seurat's term)[3] was unfortunately of no use to me. I had more to learn about method and its role. I came to see that any method, if it is too firmly formed in advance of its function, inhibits or may even block original work. At the same time, an ordering of work is unavoidable, indeed essential. But how is this to be accomplished? Method was surely relevant, but in what capacity? As a Modern artist, one could not simply 'find' the right method, any more than one could 'find' the right criteria for one's activity. Such securities had vanished with tradition. It became clear that one's first task as an artist is simply this: to create a way of working, to discover 'doing' and to establish the terms upon which a creative dialogue could be sustained. In short, to start again. From Seurat I took the *example* of method rather than the method itself.

The following year I made my first black and white paintings. When I started on this new work, many people thought that all I had learned throughout the 1950s had been abandoned. But this was not so. I simply treated that accumulated experience differently. At the time, I referred to this change of approach as a 'reversal', meaning that the ordering of the work was reversed. I had a kind of diagram I never drew out but held in my mind. In Seurat, 'the thing seen' passed through method into 'the thing painted'. In my new practice, method produced 'the thing seen' and served, rather than governed, 'the thing painted'. Neither in Seurat's work nor in my own could this ordering of experience remain immutable. The artist's eye moves continually backwards and forwards between start and finish. Scanning, focusing and searching, this 'making eye' roves over the entire process it has initiated, sustaining a dialogue between the artist and the work. Furthermore, this dialogue, vital in any creative effort, also monitors method.

Apart from clarifying this basic issue, my encounter with Seurat had yet another result that informed the beginning of my black and white work. With hindsight I can see that he awakened and strengthened my interest in contrast. In painting this is less a matter of principle than of temperament. There are some artists who think in terms of the positive

value of a form or a colour, and there are others who work with contrasting relationships between forms and colours. Seurat is a great master of this second group, as his drawings clearly reveal. He developed the conventional study of tone into a highly abstract mode of representation that commands the whole pictorial field, allowing the figurative motif to emerge out of an all-encompassing opposition of light and dark, black and white.

If we look at *Courbevoie: Factories by Moonlight* (1882–83) at a distance similar to that of the artist when drawing, we are confronted by an almost impenetrable plane of darkness. Blacks and near-blacks dominate; as we strain to see more we lose ourselves in a tantalising web of loose, open traces that weave a multidirectional pattern before our eyes. Seurat distracts us, and we are rewarded in this distraction by the rich softness of his black conté mark-making. Slowly the veiled surfaces yield to our searching: space opens up, forms take shape, identities emerge. The depth of the recession is spanned by two vertical poles, a plane establishes a flat wall in the foreground, and ranks of industrial buildings drop away toward the horizon. Low in the sky hangs a full moon. Tension is created by contrast: near and far, vertical and horizontal, enigma and clarity, black and white. If one steps back, an immense space is disclosed.

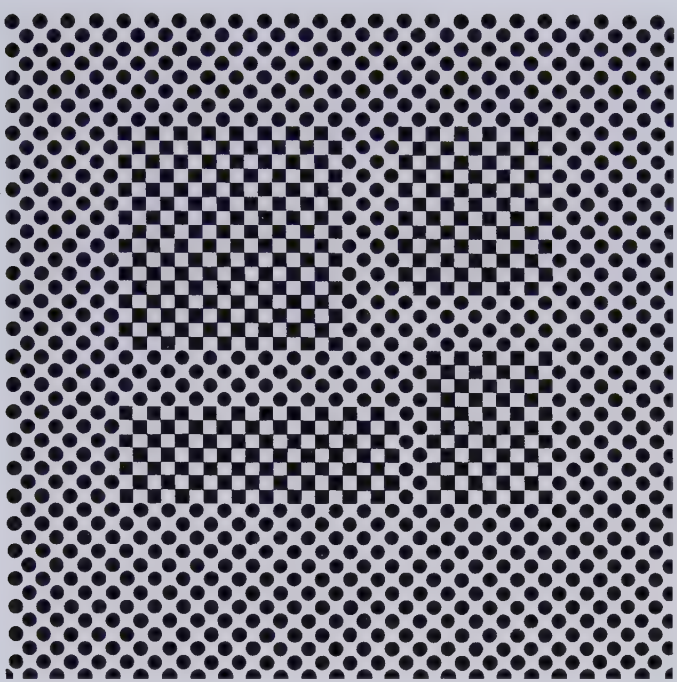
In the drawing *Man Dining (The Artist's Father)* (1883–84) there is again a domination of black over white. The head and body emerge out of an airy, mysterious darkness. The white of the napkin around the man's neck is pitched against the blackness of the bottle of wine in the foreground, each marking out clear positions in space. Between these two polarities are the mid-tones that fulfill all other requirements of depth and volume. It is here, in these subtle shades, that Seurat concentrates his efforts. The white of the paper is gradually eliminated as he draws fine layers of loose, feathery lines. These delicately executed marks retain traces of the texture as well as the whiteness of the paper. Through this carefully controlled transparency, the mid-tone range is subtly extended and its resonance increased. The wisps, scribbles, and arcs are dispersed over the forehead and shadowed features, and, without changing weight, are massed around the back of the head, across the shoulders, and down the arm, building up a sombre monumentality. Seamlessly, the conté marks include the airy space behind the figure and, by a concentration of black strokes down the opposite side, the head is thrown into relief.

This use of light against dark is, of course, a classic approach to portraiture. However, one important aspect of the originality of Seurat's development is his abstract transformation of academic practices. He

makes continual use of opposition, which leads to a formal drawing fabric as stable and abstract as the dot will be in his paintings later. The conté lines take on very different kinds of handling, remaining as rigorously free of verisimilitude and gesture as the conventional hatching that preceded them. Transparency is what both techniques have in common, the white of the paper contributing to the drawing from start to finish. Seurat's loops, knots and lattices describe nothing in particular, but this only serves to heighten their abstract qualities. For, in Seurat, nothing is something. An apparent contradiction is thus turned into a physical perception that denies any vacancy or emptiness of space by prompting the activity of sight to discover in its own way what can be seen.

Perception seems to be more alert and energetic when its objective is not fully explicit. I realised this when I made my own paintings based on Seurat's approach to colour. In *Pink Landscape*, the optical mixture ranges from a deeper intensity at the top of the painting to a lighter passage at the bottom. The repetitive brush marks build up a rhythmic field, an overall tension that can act as a veil or mask for some kind of disclosure or pictorial event. I called this a hidden, or 'buried', image. This sensation is the theme of a black and white painting I made in 1961 called *Hidden Squares*. I started from a field of small circles in which I 'buried' some squares. I considered the question of distribution and made many scale studies. The scale studies turned out to be of three sorts: those to do with the relationship between the square and the circle, those to do with both forms seen simultaneously, and those to do with determining the scale at which a spectator could find the right viewing distance. All of these had to be looked at together. I had difficulty in drawing the small size of the circle I needed; even the smallest compass was too large. I found a tiny screw-top lid and used this for the field of circles. In terms of distribution, the small circles were repeated evenly over the surface. From this regular pulse, the image – the squares – emerged. They were centred, echoing the edges of the support. As I worked, I realised that this was the sensation I had tried to capture in *Pink Landscape* but that *now*, thanks to Seurat's example and through my 'reversal' of the function of method, it had become accessible to me. I went on to make more buried images, including *Tremor* (1962), *Deny 1* (1966), *Deny 2* (1967), *Cataract 3* (1967), *Song of Orpheus 1–5* (1978) and others.

But to go back for a moment to *Man Dining*, it is worth discovering how much more you can 'see' by drawing than by just looking. I copied this amazing drawing to try to follow Seurat's way of seeing. The precision with which details are seen and then only the barest hint selected for



Hidden Squares
1961

retention is breathtaking. Seurat's control of his webs and meshes allows him to direct attention here and there. Definition is present and yet masked by the arcs, dots, and traces. We feel with our eyes more than we see. In this abstraction of sensation the lowered eyes, the nose, and even the mouth can be found. As I drew, the position of the fingers holding the spoon became clear and the sediment down the inside of the bottle of wine appeared.

Une Baignade, Seurat's first great painting, is rather like an assemblage of the procedures and discoveries made in drawing. One of these procedures is the concentration on the single figure that enabled his movements of thought and enquiry to be followed through with a minimum of distraction. In the drawing *Woman with a Dog* (1882–83), the figure stands before us in asymmetrical pose, the shapes of her head, cloak and dress are seen as one virtually flat, near-black silhouette. A very slight shift between the darkness of the cloak and the deeper tone of the dress beneath opens up a shallow space within the silhouette. The drawn edges of this silhouette are of great interest to Seurat; they do not quite function as either contours or lines, and are perhaps better thought of as juxta-positions. This seems to be one of those positive contradictions that

can be found on many different levels in Seurat's work. He first establishes through the agency of low light – in this work the light is either artificial or it is the onset of darkness – a shadowy uniformity in the drawing. Then, working within this narrow range, he brings out differences. The closer the tones, the more Seurat works on dividing them. He concentrates on the places where the differences meet, heightening the mutual contrast exactly where juxtaposition occurs. The result is not only the beautiful halo around the figure but also a subtle intensification of the dark tone just within the confines of the silhouette. The exact location of these juxtapositions and of what they consist play an important part in Seurat's painting as well as in his drawing.

My engagement with Seurat was at its most intense in the late 1950s, and it is usually to that period that I find myself returning when connections between his work and my own abstract paintings come to the surface. One of these connections focuses on edges, but of an altogether different sort from the shadowy boundaries of drawings like *Woman with a Dog*. In *Nurse* (1882–83), Seurat seized every opportunity to place dark against light, building a beautiful rhythm of alternating contrasts. The long curve of the nurse's dark dress continues up into her white cap in a slender serpentine that nearly bisects the drawing. It is repeated in the curve of dark hair under the cap and continues down over the breast and into the supporting arm under the child. This second dark curve is brought into sharp contrast with a vertical panel of whites made up of the straight edges of the nurse's large apron and the infant's shawl. As a white interval, this interrupts the movement of the drawing, rather like a pause in the flow of action. Over and above depending on dark-light juxtapositions for their definition, these curved shapes also have a volume. Seurat draws them together as one spatial entity by the sheer functionalism of his lines. He darkens the edge where the front of the apron turns away and, conversely, clears a passage of white along the back of the nurse's figure so that this beautiful curve can be seen clearly. With these strong lines Seurat moulds, shapes, almost 'sculpts'. Faces and hands are lost in mid-tone, but the two white heads acquire dark halos of black crayon.

There are other studies of single figures in which these formal inventions are developed. *Reclining Man* (1883) is a drawing for the figure lying across the foreground in *Une Baignade*, and it was in the painted version that I first saw it. When I later discovered the drawing it simply reinforced what I had observed in the painting: in the relationship of tone to colour the treatment of this figure is recognisably of an old academic





Georges Seurat: *Seated Boy with Straw Hat* 1883
Georges Seurat: *Une Baignade, Asnières* 1883–84 (detail)

order. The edges within this drawing have been very carefully planned. The movement and volume of the man's back as he lies on the ground is drawn so as to leave untouched the white edge of his jacket. This is juxtaposed with a plane of dark marks. The same treatment but in reverse is applied to the edges of the black trousers seen against a lighter ground. It is interesting to see how much Seurat relied on the information he had obtained in the drawing, and to implement this information he used classic tonal colour. That is to say, in the juxtaposition of the green grass with the cream jacket, the open lattice of brushstrokes turn to a darker green and a brighter white as they draw toward each other. Moving down the figure, between the grass and dark trousers the grass is lightened and the trousers darkened. These contrasts become clearer and stronger at a distance. There is no colour change; the light and dark of the drawing is transferred as light and dark to the painting.

When I first looked at *Une Baignade*, this concept of tonal colour was familiar. But as my interest in this painting grew I found other more surprising and beautiful events taking place. One can see Seurat exploring different ways of translating the tonal information gathered in his drawings into overt colour contrasts. One long edge, from the profile of the boy sitting on the bank, down his arm and along the river bank to the corner of the painting, tells a revealing story of Seurat's rapidly developing colour consciousness. These juxtapositions are not only ones of close colour contrast; they also set up distinctions between near and far. This spatial attribute adds greatly to the complexity as well as to the richness and power of colour.

It is exciting to watch the progress Seurat made in translating tonal oppositions into colour contrasts. In the handling of the boy in the straw hat, the change is well underway. In the drawing for this figure, the light-dark opposition is thoroughly worked through. Space and form are interlocked in an alternation, which both preserves volume and exploits the juxtaposition of edges. For the translation into colour the Impressionist mid-tone is the guide.[4] Instead of the soft and sumptuous lights and darks of the drawing, an orchestration of perfectly adjusted colour contrasts flickers within and around the figure. From the back of the straw hat, violet touches follow the curve of the shoulder down to the blue singlet, where the violet grows stronger in contrast to the yellow and yellow-green strokes added to the grass. This same blue singlet turns toward green where it meets the magenta-pink cummerbund. In the rolled up trousers, an optical mixture of low-toned reds, violets, and blues is tilted toward its blue tendency in juxtaposition to the orange-brown edge of the cushion on which the boy sits. Even the shadowed face is given a lighter halo in the pale grass. In the treatment of this figure, although only a detail in this great painting, Seurat shows a new grasp of painted colour that pushes open the door to a deeper understanding.

There is an interesting correspondence between the handling of the conté crayon in the drawings and in Seurat's brush marks in specific areas of *Une Baignade*. It is not to be found in the treatment of the flesh or figures but in places that are seemingly unimportant, where little or nothing is happening, like the grass. There Seurat layers his colours in lattices of long, open, multidirectional single strokes, building up in the sunlit passages from deep, strong greens, which act almost as a ground, through to lighter yellow-greens and blue-greens lightened with white. Lighter yellow ochre, 'degraded' orange, and a few lilacs can be discerned. These veils interpenetrate and are so open in application that not only can all be seen but an airy, loose, totally abstract colour space is created – one in which the luminosity of colour equals the transparency of the drawings. On looking more closely, even the function of the dots, arcs, and feathery wisps of the conté crayon reappears in a single dark stroke, a brighter patch, or an overlay of an unexpected colour.

The relationship between drawing and working with colour was clearly of great interest to Seurat, and certainly it was as critical to me in its abstract form as it had been in my earlier figurative work. In the late 1960s, when I used stripes to make my first colour works – the *Chant* paintings and *Late Morning* – I was often asked why I did not use the

highly developed formal structures of my black and white paintings for colour. As I explained at the time, I needed a neutral form to allow the energies of colour relationships to develop on their own terms without being required to serve some other purpose, such as describing, identifying, or even just 'filling in'.[5] My choice of the line as a nonspecific form was inspired by Seurat's choice of the dot. It has direction and length. This gives the line valuable 'edge exposure' that is useful for building rhythms. The difference between Seurat's nonspecific form and mine is essentially one of intention. He wanted to represent the perception of colour in nature through isolating and reassembling its constituents, whereas I wanted to release and organise colour's perceptual activity *down there* on the canvas. But there still remains a common problem: How to articulate colour? This, of course, makes the case for drawing.

Seurat's work and thought played an important role in my own development as a painter, but there is something else that eludes me and which I suspect is as much, if not more, to the point. Seurat dealt in an extreme manner with the realities of what and how we see in nature and in both the making of and the looking at a painting. He went to great lengths to push the boundaries of what can be examined. He enlisted 'rational' and 'scientific' understanding, only in the final analysis to find these wanting. The paradox is that Seurat, who fervently subscribed to such disciplines, pursued – undercover from himself as it were – a much more extraordinary goal. Comprehension is not everything; the unaccountable has a place in our lives, particularly in that of an artist. Some advantages of the tradition lay in the conventions that occupied a certain level of conscious engagement. These demands were like a protective shield; they allowed the artist's unconscious to enter the work without attracting undue attention. Sitting before and feasting our eyes on *Une Baignade*, we scrutinise, study, absorb. We look for something and we find it. Not in any one thing – this subject or that object – but in something barely identifiable, something that lurks around every corner, seems hidden in the most open and declared of forms, something elusive and pervasive. Seurat, involuntarily perhaps, has presented us with the mysterious. No longer located in subject matter, in dusk or moonlight, in half-seen faces or shrouded figures, this unknown seems to have changed places, to have moved back to us, to be part of us. It lies here in our own powers of sight, emerging as one of the great mysteries and delights of being alive.

In Conversation with Maurice de Sausmarez [1967]

On your return from Italy in the summer of 1960 and, prior to that, in your tremendous interest in Seurat, it seemed to me that things were already beginning to germinate relative to your subsequent way of working.[1] Would you agree?

Well, one of the things I remember about working in Italy at that time was that I started to dismember, to dissect, the visual experience. I tried to analyse the colour of the situation, the form, the linear axes and the tone in quite consciously separate statements.

I well remember the separate colour units, almost like considerably enlarged passages from a neo-impressionist picture. If these pointillist-like fragments could have been 'blown up' to an even larger scale they would have become entirely optically-operative works.

You are probably thinking of a painting of a pink landscape based on a view over a huge plain. Now, that was a powerful visual and emotional experience. The heat coming off that plain was quite incredible. It shattered any possibility of a topographical rendering of it. Because of the heat and the colour reverberations, to be faithful to that experience it was only possible to 'fire it off' again in colour relationships of optically vibrant units of colour. It wouldn't in fact have mattered if those had been black and white, or green and red – the facts of local colour were quite unimportant. The important thing was to get an equivalent sensation on the canvas.

Would you say that if there was any relationship between your thoughts at that time and the Futurists, whose work you had then recently seen in Milan,[2] Boccioni for example, it was in the attempt to work out a vocabulary of signs, a vocabulary of marks, a vocabulary of pictorially structural elements, which, when brought together, would evoke certain states of feeling or states of mind – not descriptively in the usual illustrative manner but symbolically?

Yes, it is a question of substitution. As Cézanne said, painting is a parallel to nature and the expressive quality comes through the structural means, through honouring both.

Would you say that it is this that links your work in the pictorial field with the idea of serialism in modern music – the attempt to control all the constituent parts of the compositional process by employing extremely disciplined means in a fully free and expressive way?

Yes, I think serialism is a very good parallel[3] because in the early phases of working on an idea, I might for example choose a unit, say an oval, and I 'pace' this unit, as I call it. I put it through its paces, I push it to the fullest extent where it loses, or almost loses, its ovalness, its oval characteristics. I see, so to speak, what an oval will do.

Do you do this in your mind or do you actually materialise it on paper?

I do it physically because there is no possible way of doing this purely conceptually.

No, I appreciate this, but presumably you could have a hunch about the thing, a strong intuition that the particular unit is capable of considerable exploration?

Exactly. I might find for instance that a certain triangle is much more restrictive than I had thought. I find that the most restrictive form of all is a circle.

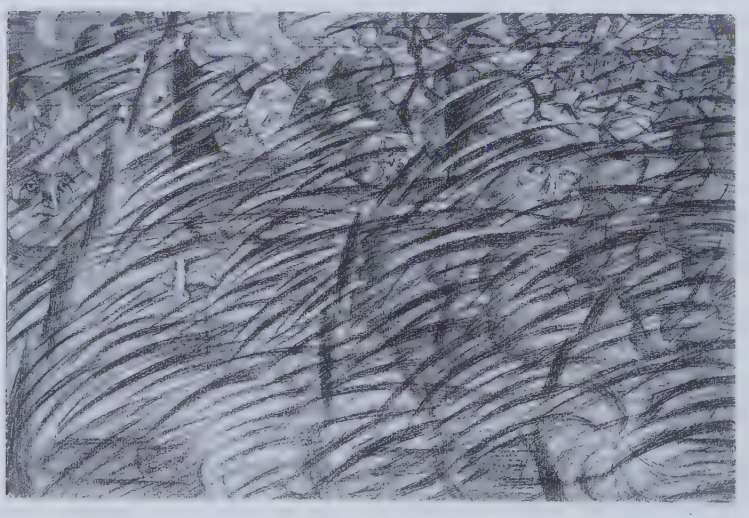
Now, is it out of the nature of this early 'putting the thing through its paces' that you begin to see the possibility of expressing a feeling or idea, or is the idea or the feeling a very late outcome of the work?

It comes very early. In fact, having now some five years experience behind me, I am familiar with some of the things some forms will do in some situations, how they might behave, so that my hunch is already reinforced by experience. I don't waste much time on red herrings, or irrelevances. Nevertheless I never jump to conclusions, I never presume to know. I go through phase by phase each time because there may be something different in the demands I am making on this form which may miraculously throw up new possibilities.

So, in fact, if you could describe the phases through which an idea moves it might be something like this – initially you have a sort of 'hunch' about a configuration and the unit involved. Then you put the unit, or structural elements that have occurred to you, through a whole series of different situational responses, provoking them, so to speak, to vibrate against each other in several ways, in a set of structural variations. This goes down in a number of small physical notations and drawings. Often I suppose it is only



Umberto Boccioni: Study for *States of Mind (Those Who Stay)* 1911



Umberto Boccioni: Study for *States of Mind (Those Who Go)* 1911

necessary for you to work out a quite small fragment to see the potentialities in it – you don't need to work out the whole thing each time?

Oh no. But of course absolute precision is needed in even the merest fragment.

These are the earlier ideas or studies. Now, is it from this experience and these initial studies that you elicit the idea of a big final painting? Clearly this must throw up quite a number of possibilities and alternatives?

Yes, it does. I usually find myself faced with a number of structural choices and at this point I start to think in levels, so to speak. If I have something moving in one direction on one level, and another direction on another level, counteractions are taking place. Sometimes a situation may carry these statements and anti-statements two or three deep, and sometimes it will become top-heavy and the structure will collapse, simply because there isn't enough emphasis given to three or four major relationships, and by the time I get to six inter-operative factors I've arrived at a jumble, arrived at incoherence because it has become too elaborate. I believe more and more that we are at a point now where the work must be additive, one simply cannot go on striking one note *ad infinitum*.

But to go back to what we were saying about the early phases of a work, what you appear to be doing in the early stages is harnessing certain potential forces and playing them against each other to generate new situations, or qualities, or energies.

Exactly, it's the sort of space between these energies that takes on the character of, as it were, electrically charged fields – it's as though the arrows instead of doing that, do this.

I suppose that in the early phases of the planning of a painting the bringing together of quite powerful forces may sometimes spark off, or bring into being, something quite gentle. For example Breathe *is really a slow painting, isn't it, and yet the elements that are used to bring it about are quite powerful.*

I think that this is something to do partly with the scale of the area, but more essentially with the scale of the unit.

Now, this question of scale – you place it very high in importance?

Yes, certainly. To take an example, when I had *Black to White Discs* on a small scale it was a slow painting and when it became larger it became slower still. When its character was revealed in this slowness I realised that by increasing the scale a more positive statement of slowness would be made.

So in point of fact these energies you have been talking about are very dependent on the actual scale; sometimes at a small scale the energies will presumably work at a faster speed, and vice versa?

Yes, sometimes, but you cannot generalise. However, as I said, it is not so much the scale of the area that counts, rather more the scale of the unit.
Yes, the scale of the unit and, from that, the degree of intensity with which the units will inter-operate.

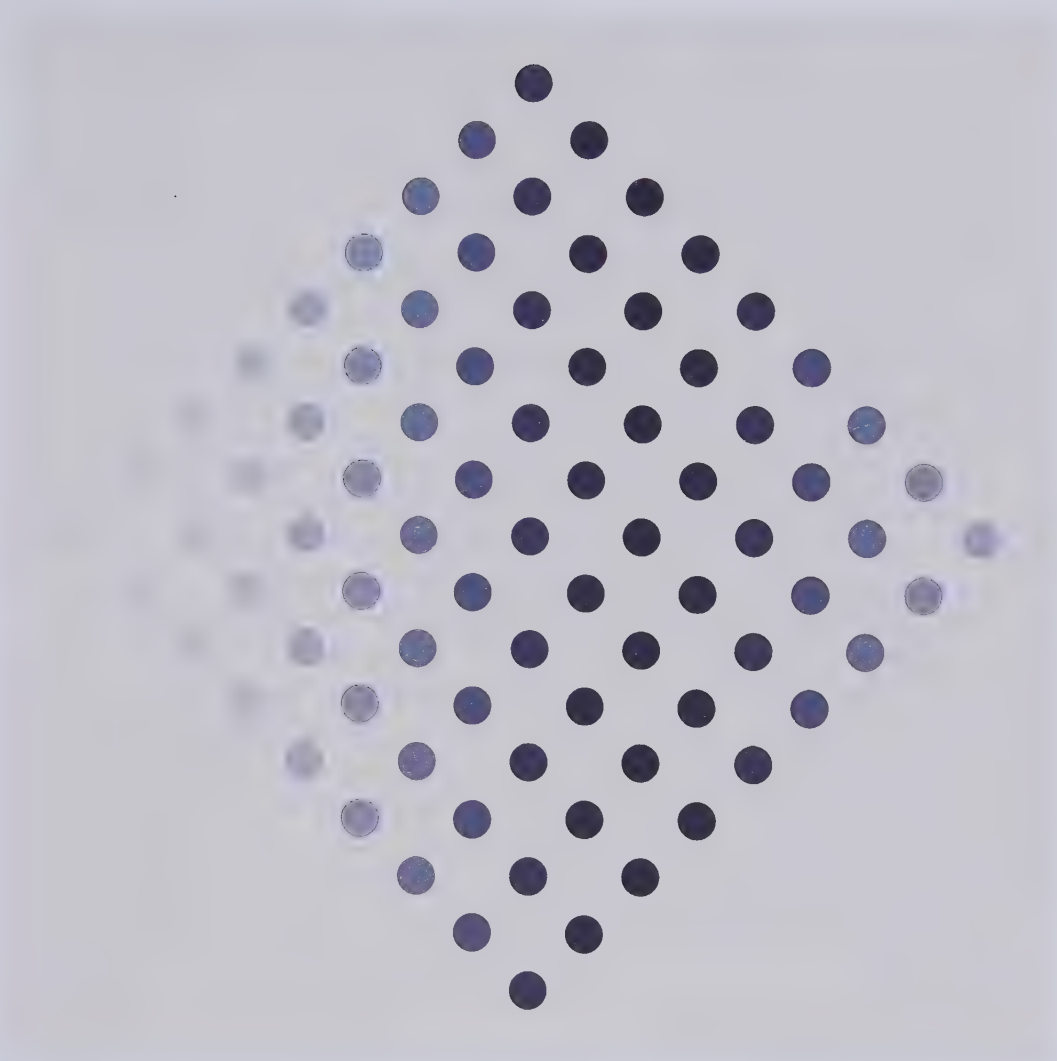
Exactly, and this is where you have to deal with frequency, visual frequency.

Or, in other words, a sort of optical bounce. You can, as it were, bounce the structure very high or just off the ground. Now, is it at this point that the clarification of a title takes place, what the painting is about or what sort of mood it is going to represent?

I think the choice of title, or the clarification of the character of the painting has been becoming clearer and clearer gradually throughout the whole period I have been working, not suddenly at any particular stage of the work. In fact, one of the ways that I can detect red herrings, or things that cloud the issue, is when the picture radically changes direction halfway through. This is something that can happen and which I don't trust.

This element of consistency therefore means quite clearly that you have a pretty clear concept of a goal, somewhere you hope to get to with the painting.

Yes, I have. I think it is very much like playing with a hoop as a child. You play with a hoop and it goes along and you run with it and the hoop keeps going, but if the hoop bounces on a stone you don't exactly



Black to White Discs 1961–62

know where you are going next … Of course, when it hits a wall you know perfectly well that that's not right, but in rather less final situations I suppose this is where the intuitive hunch comes in.

You know when the thing begins to move in diametrical opposition to your thoughts and feelings about it in the early stages?

I feel it has something to do with allowing the energies to breathe, as it were. If they are given a chance those energies will come through full-charted. I never feel that I confer any energy on anything, it's all there to be unlocked and articulated.

So in a way it's on this level that one could say that your work is still to some extent rooted in the concept of natural forces, physical forces?

Yes, physical forces, and unless thought becomes physical feeling it doesn't really work. About a year ago I had probably overworked and I was forcing myself to continue and I started on a series of ideas. They had an impeccable logic that was most exciting in itself, an exhilarating mathematical concept. It was one of the few occasions when I didn't 'pace' anything. I didn't even select a unit – a situation almost unique in my work. I then tried to find the actual physical situation in which this perfect thing that I had built up intellectually would operate … and I could not find one, I just could not make it visible. In point of fact I had, finally, to assume that it had never been truly visual in my terms at all.

In fact you are building not just in 'good ideas' but in forms, in forces, in units, in elements, in energies?

Yes, but each of these words could represent higher electronics or something else. The important thing is that I am using those factors visually, as they emerge before my eyes. It is from the visual externalisation of something that the dialogue starts between me and the pictorial medium.

There is a story about Degas and Mallarmé that seems relevant here. Apparently Degas tried hard to write poetry for a long time and one day said to Mallarmé 'You know I cannot understand why I am not able to write good poetry, I have the most marvellous ideas' and Mallarmé is reputed to have said 'Poetry isn't made with ideas but with words'.[4] *Something similar*

holds good for you too; unless you can somehow bring this thinking to terms with your medium and actually conceive in the physical stuff, the thinking you do is not relevant. It just doesn't tie up.

Yes, that's true, but I also agree with Boccioni that even smells, noise and so on, have a visual equivalent and can be presented through a sort of vocabulary of signs. His use of the word 'ambience' to describe this sort of inclusiveness of experience seems so right.

Your works certainly represent feelings and personal experience but I would not have said that you were in any real sense an expressionist painter. Your pictures relate to personal feeling and experience in a somewhat elliptical fashion, not at all in a directly impassioned way.

It is a question of the dialogue between the medium and myself. The medium is every bit as strong as any human psyche, or will, or brain – one is well matched, if not sometimes out-matched, in this dialogue.

To what extent are you disposed to think of your work in terms similar of scientific experiment?

I think that experiment goes on in the drawing and preparatory phases, and also between paintings. But as I have more and more paintings behind me I find that I experiment increasingly slowly because, whereas in the beginning one can make vast strides in a few basic things, as one goes on one finds that those discoveries or experiences, if they are not refuted, are still operating and one is forced to experiment in an ever-tightening field.

But the work itself, the finalised products, to what extent do these seem to you to be part of an experimental situation?

The finalised work is not.

I rather expected you to say that, but I think this is something that is subject to much misunderstanding. People frequently speak about optical painting as though it were a rather primitive experimental stage of something that may ultimately become art, rather than its being an art of full achievement.

I think that one of the most interesting things about Biederman's book is simply its title, it's on the nail: *Art as the Evolution of Visual Knowledge.*[5] I feel sometimes a slight awkwardness in having to use the term 'Op art' because it smacks of a sort of gimmicky selling slogan of purely temporary significance.

Nothing could be further from the truth. It has had a long build-up from the past and one feels quite sure that it is going to have a continued development in the future.

I think this is undeniable. I am absolutely certain that optical painting, as we call it now, has added something to the language of formal art, to plastic understanding, which cannot be ignored or eradicated. In the same sense that Cubism added something to a concept of space which, once having been assimilated, could not subsequently be discounted. You have to come to terms with it.

What are your views on the attitude of artists, like the Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel, who see the whole business of art today as being a continual process of research?[6]

It seems to me that the idea of research in painting is a deliberate effort to create a link with science and has also something to do with the desire to move the artist firmly but determinedly from a peripheral position socially, into a central position where he can hold his head high in a world of computers and that sort of thing.

This mention of computers brings us to the question of de-personalisation in the whole procedure of painting. There have been attempts to present this sort of painting as a serious effort to remove the evidence of personal involvement in order to allow the works to stand as things in their own right, purely as phenomena. What is your feeling about this?

Superficially it sounds like a rather glib comment from a Philistine quarter, but I think that there are quite a few artists who have promoted this idea. To me there is one area in which it is quite untenable – the area of decision. If you refuse to make use of your faculty for deciding and for selecting you have to programme everything through the entire field. Now this, although it might seem to be quicker, would in fact be

very much slower, and, more to the point, it is a denial of man's intelligence and perception. People have sometimes said to me 'Why don't you use photography or silk-screen?' but they fail to realise that in many of my paintings the units are all fractionally different.

In many respects the way you work would seem to be through a process of objectivity rather than subjectivity, you are watching what happens on the canvas rather than what is going on inside you.

Yes, indeed. No matter what I do it will be subjective, and so to develop as much objectivity as I can, is simply counter-balancing this inevitable presence of myself in the work. De-personalisation is, I think, a bogus hue and cry. When I was teaching children in classes of twenty and thirty I found that however much one set them a common problem, each child provided a different solution.[7] I never found a uniformity of solution however strictly the problem was proposed. So I feel that if a group of artists were commissioned to make a series of paintings using triangles, every one of these works would be different because the decisions would have been taken by different people. It's the decisions that are the important factors.

This is the creative element, this is really where the whole art lies.

Yes, but you must have something to decide about, and this is your medium through which ideas have to become physically specific.

To return to the use of the term 'Op art', have you ever thought of an alternative? Is there any other term that might describe this development more adequately?

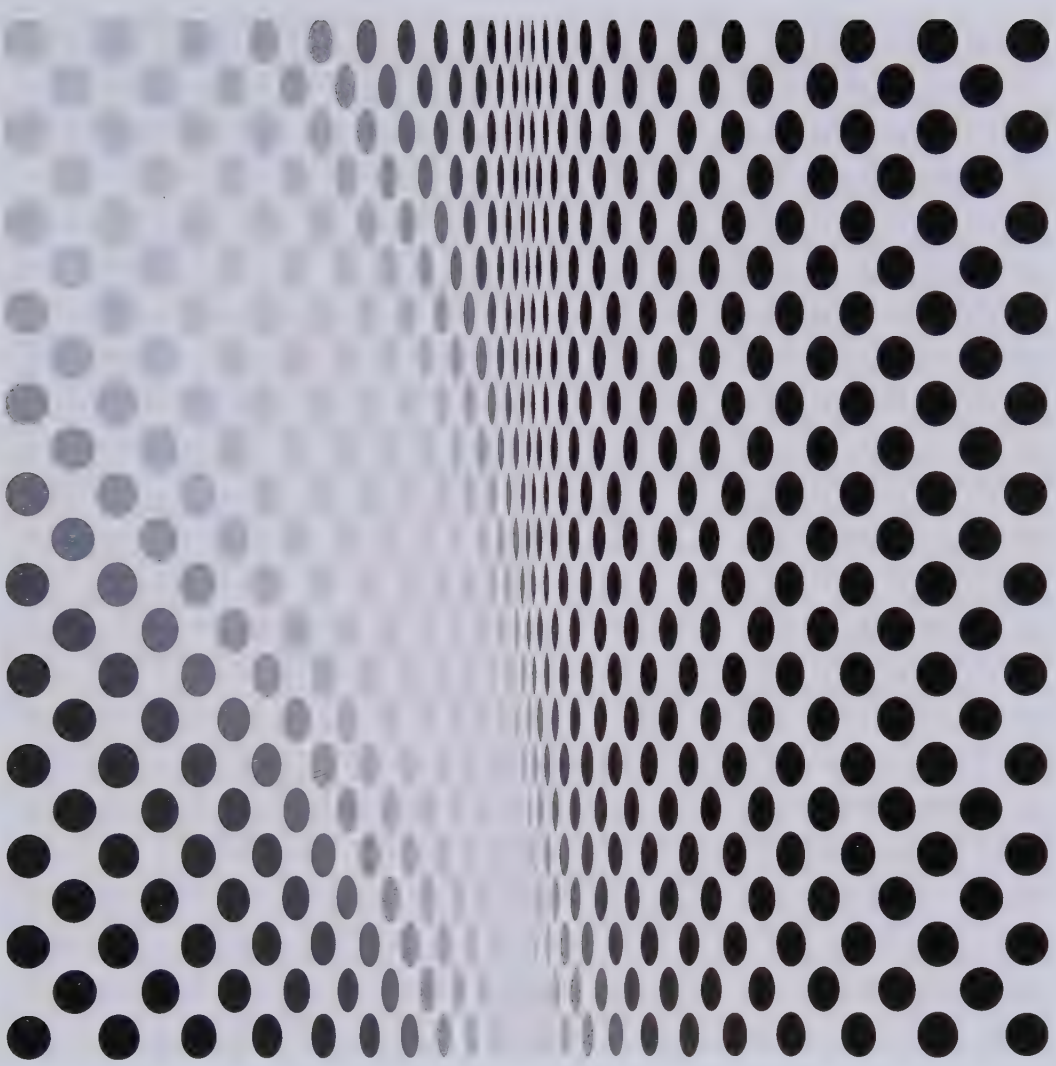
I think Seitz's term 'Perceptual Abstraction' was quite good but even that was limited.[8] In its crude way I think the term 'Op art' is perhaps right, but it's the contemporary connotations that I resent. In the sense that it is an approximation like the term 'Constructivism' I think it's right.

You have said in an earlier interview 'I think my conception of space is more American than English' and I am wondering whether you have anything further to say on this subject of conceiving space?

I certainly think of American space as being open space, shallow space, a multi-focal space, as for example in Pollock, and I feel more in sympathy with this than with centralised European space, the focally centred situation of the European tradition. Nevertheless, I use occasionally this concept of space because it can accommodate two counterpoint centres. But on the whole I tend to work with open area space – and when I refer to this as 'American space' one must not forget that it had its origins in Mondrian. It demands a shallow push-pull situation and a fluctuating surface. Now, sometimes I am able to bring this about simply by two-dimensional interactions, but sometimes it may go too far and actually break the space. For instance, cracking a whip describes a curve, a whiplash, which can be seen as an even, linear movement – or as a three-dimensional form in space. In my curvilinear paintings I always try to eradicate the 'illusionistic' reading, but not at the risk of destroying the original impulse. This is one of my biggest difficulties.

But then you not only work with these units you were speaking of earlier, you also use changes in speed don't you? Are these represented in your mind by proportional variation, or arithmetic series? For example if you say 'Seven, three, one', that might represent a sort of sequence which controls an optical speed.

A lot of my notations for recent paintings are written down in this way, and one might think that I have selected a particular proportion, such as seven and three, because of some perfect relationship independent of sight, but I am in fact experimenting with visual tempi. For example, a sequence of seven positions may look slow in relation to one of three positions, if I try six and five it may not be discernibly different, but in the case of eight with two the jump is too big visually. By the time I have decided upon seven and three, I have drawings pinned up around the studio showing other pairs of visual tempi from which I have chosen that particular one as being right for my purpose. But there are two types of tempo. There is the overall tempo of the picture and there are the different speeds of movement of the units within that structure. I think the first time that I became conscious of this was in starting to use grey. I wondered why I was using grey; it is mid-way between black and white and clearly this relationship is encompassed in the three stages: white, mid-grey, black. But you can also have it in five beats, seven beats, twenty-four and so on, and all the time you are in fact changing the



Loss 1964

tempo. I became very interested in this question of visual time. I worked through a whole series of paintings using this concept, as you can see in *Where, Remember, Loss, Hesitate* and others.[9] This has led to my trying to pitch this type of grey movement against the structure of the formal movement, as in *Deny* for instance.

What you call 'tempo' is obviously generated by placing the actual units relative to one another in the visual field, so that this is in effect an absolutely fundamental issue?

Yes, it is. One of the most difficult problems I have been involved with recently is that of warm and cold greys. I thought that if I split the grey sequence in two, it might give rise to additional energies. But two is a difficult situation, it can be like a full stop. I found that it only fully justifies itself when one factor is constant.

Isn't this really true of all virtual dynamism or perceptual dynamism. Isn't it dependent on there being somewhere a constant against which other things will appear to move or vary?

This, I now realise, is a known principle: the interdependence of static and active. But when I personally first discovered this I was tremendously excited. And this is also interesting in relation to our earlier discussion about experiment. When you are using a basic truth, a phenomenal fact, you can't put it aside and supplant it with another – it is a fact. It is rather like gravity, once you have realised the fact of gravity, it doesn't change and from then on you have to reckon with gravity.

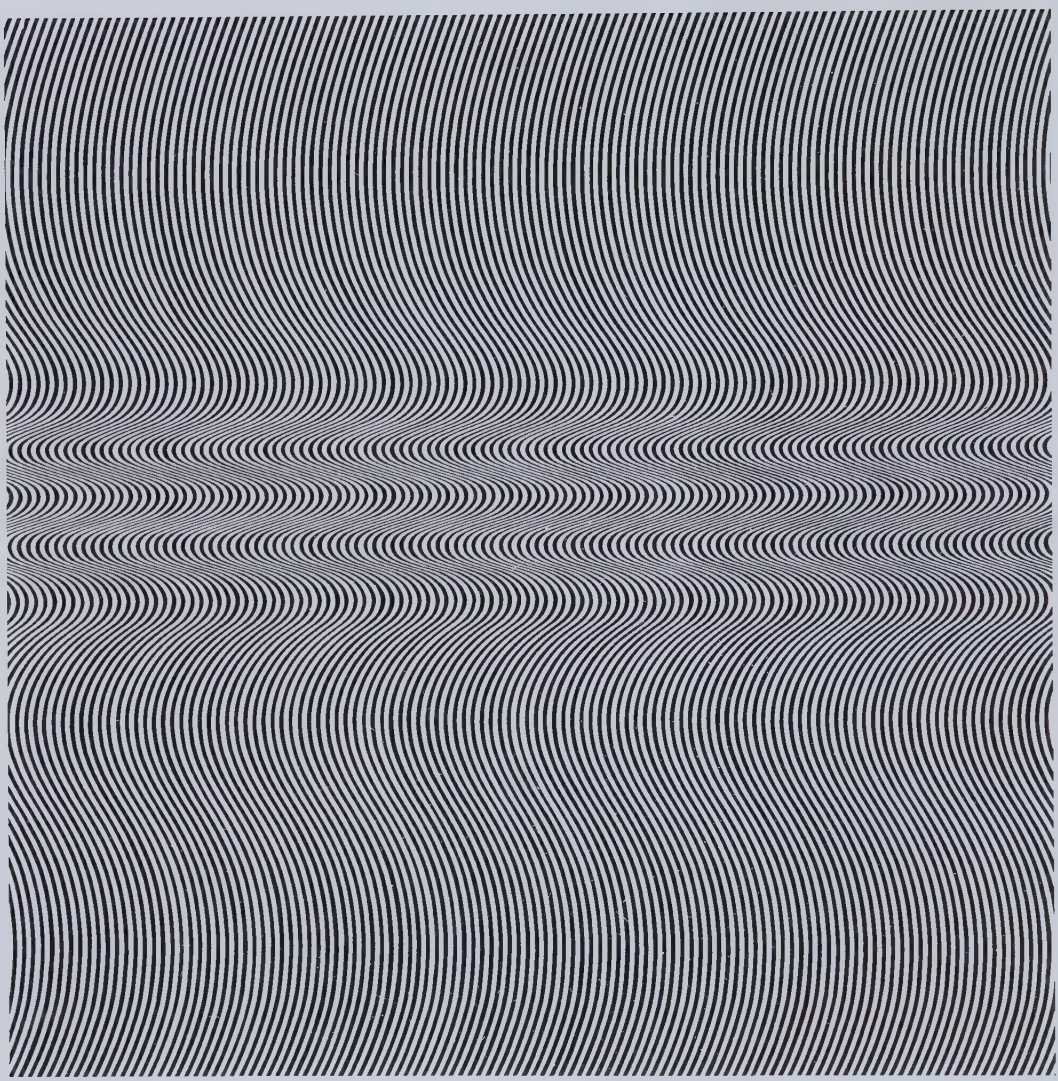
To the extent that you are building through a sequence of phases, so that, in the course of time, the totality of this experience in terms of experiment is at your disposal, always.

It sometimes amazes me when people say 'How do you work?' because in fact it is all in the painting, it is absolutely self-evident. If someone is interested enough to look at the painting he will find out all there is to know. Nothing is hidden, other than a few structural lines maybe which I do not want to be visible. To leave traces of tick-tackery around is a form of inverted craft snobbery, but eliminating the constructional lines doesn't obscure in any way the record of the decisions in my paintings. For

instance, in some paintings where there is a greater tension at the base it should be obvious to any spectator that the curve, if I happen to be using that unit, has moved and changed in a certain way, and this gives rise to the increased tension.

The mystery of creation for you then is not so much in how you work, or the phases in the procedure, but in what is evoked out of the inter-play of those tight, straight-forward, physical elements that anyone can observe in your paintings. You yourself must experience a revelatory excitement in the emergence of this intense dynamism, the by-product as it were of your total frankness in the use of all that lies on the canvas.

It is the measure of the vitality of the medium – the answering back – in the creative dialogue.



Current 1964

Perception Is the Medium [1965]

The American scene has an impressive reputation in Europe, and we hold the achievement of many American artists in high respect. When I paid my first visit to the USA last March I felt confident that my work, whether liked or not, would be judged with both insight and discrimination. I left three weeks later with feelings of violation and disillusionment, relieved only by the enormous warmth with which I was received by many individuals.

What had happened? I had had a number of conflicting experiences. My work had been hung in the Museum of Modern Art and vulgarised in the rag-trade. I had been involved in a sociological phenomenon with alarming implications, and one which was disquieting, also, to many Americans. *The Responsive Eye* was a serious exhibition, but its qualities were obscured by an explosion of commercialism, band-wagoning and hysterical sensationalism. Understandably, this alienated a section of the art-world. Most people were so busy taking sides, and arguing about what had or had not happened, that they could no longer see what was actually on the wall. Virtually nobody in the whole of New York was capable of the state of receptive participation which is essential to the experience of looking at pictures. Misunderstandings and mistaken assumptions took the place of considered and informed judgment.

For this reason I should like to offer some basic information.

To begin with, I have never studied 'optics' and my use of mathematics is rudimentary and confined to such things as equalising, halving, quartering and simple progressions. My work has developed on the basis of empirical analyses and syntheses, and I have always believed that perception is the medium through which states of being are directly experienced. (Everyone knows, by now, that neuro-physiological and psychological responses are inseparable.)

It is absolutely untrue that my work depends on literary impulse or has any illustrative intention. The marks on the canvas are the sole and essential agents in a series of relationships which form the structure of the painting. They should be so complete as to need, and allow of, no further elucidation. The basis of my paintings is this: that in each of them a particular situation is stated. Certain elements within that situation

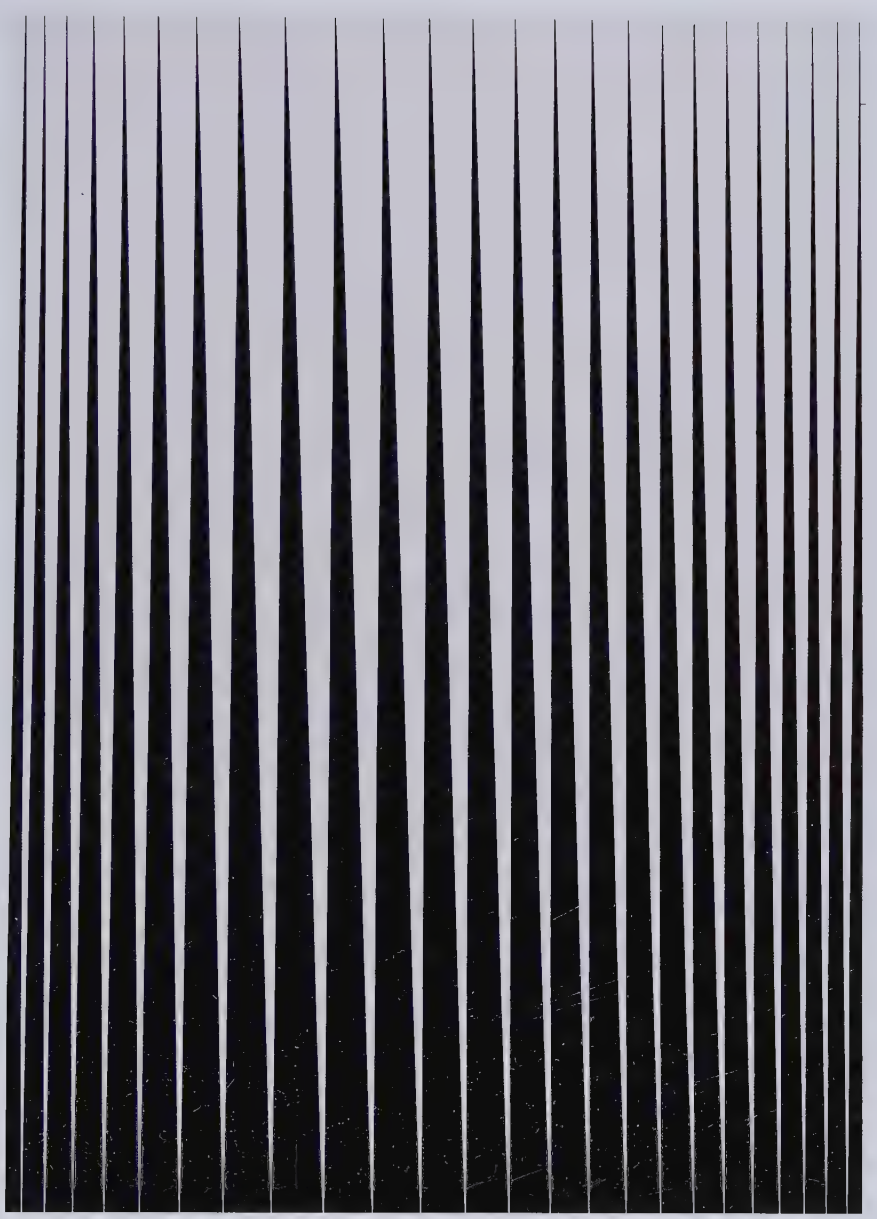
remain constant. Others precipitate the destruction of themselves by themselves. Recurrently, as a result of the cyclic movement of repose, disturbance and repose, the original situation is re-stated.[1]

I feel that my paintings have some affinity with happenings where the disturbance precipitated is latent in the sociological and psychological situation. I want the disturbance or 'event' to arise naturally, in visual terms, out of the inherent energies and characteristics of the elements which I use. I also want it to have a quality of inevitability. There should, that is to say, be something akin to a sense of recognition within the work, so that the spectator experiences at one and the same time something known and something unknown. I identify with this 'event'.

Other polarities which find an echo in the depths of our psychic being are those of static and active, or fast and slow. Repetition, contrast, calculated reversal and counterpoint also parallel the basis of our emotional structure. But the fact that some elements in sequential relationship (the use, e.g., of greys or ovals) can be interpreted in terms of perspective or trompe l'oeil is purely fortuitous and is no more relevant to my intentions than the blueness of the sky is relevant to a blue mark in an Abstract-Expressionist painting.

It also surprises me that some people should see my work as a celebration of the marriage of art and science. I have never made any use of scientific theory or scientific data, though I am well aware that the contemporary psyche can manifest startling parallels on the frontier between the arts and the sciences. (Once, for example, I spent three weeks on a curve which was of vital importance for one of my paintings. Just as I had pinned up the final drawing on the wall of my studio, someone brought in a friend who was working on a secret project which involved the accumulation of energy. He also had begun work three weeks earlier on a particular problem, and the curve on which he had decided for his solution was identical to mine.)

I am writing only of my own work. Other artists now working in the Op field may agree with me partially or altogether, and some may not agree at all. Knowledge of a painter's intentions may be of interest, but in the last analysis stance alone will never make a work of art. Ultimately the degree of visual sensibility is the vital agent in transforming a concept into the indefinable experience which is presented by a work of art.



Breathe 1966

Interview with David Sylvester [1967]

You're very conscious, of course, of the optical effects you want to present?

Yes, but not entirely conscious. Though I can foresee certain things happening, it's such an enormous field that things will always happen that you don't anticipate.

How often do you get optical effects which you completely failed to anticipate and that you want to suppress?

Quite often. Sometimes I can control them. Sometimes I can suppress them without damaging the rest. But, for instance, in the painting called *Breathe*, those echoes that run up from the base and shatter the forms right up to the top – though they are necessary in three-quarters of the painting, I don't want them at the top. But I cannot get rid of them at the top without eliminating them from the whole canvas altogether. They are a flaw, one that I have to accept.

What of Deny*? It seems to me that two optical effects happen there. One is that the little ovals, when seen from a certain distance, seem like pieces of reflecting steel, cut out and stuck to the painting, shiny and light-catching. Was that part of the intention?*

No, it wasn't.

Secondly, there's a curious effect, when you stand close to the painting, of a thick grey mist or smoke between you and the painting. Was that part of the intention?

Yes ... obscuring, negating it.

What else was in your intention?

To oppose a structural movement with a tonal movement, to release increased colour through reducing the tonal contrast. In the colour



Deny 1 1966

relationship of the darkest oval with the ground, the change of colour is far more pronounced than it is between the lightest oval and the ground, where you get a tonal contrast – almost a black and white relationship – happening instead, which knocks the colour down.

Do you sometimes find that in the end an optical effect which was not one that you anticipated in a painting turns out to be the one that interests you most?

Sometimes. And sometimes I'll examine that one separately, more fully in another situation.

You paint from drawings, and you usually make a number of drawings for every painting, and a great many drawings which don't lead directly to a painting. Are these ever drawings made for the sake of making drawings, or are all your drawings made with the idea of doing a painting?

They're always towards a painting. When I've selected a unit which I'm thinking of using in a painting, I make this unit visible, so that I can see its attendant problems and its potential.

When the unit first comes into your mind do you already have an idea of what sort of scale the painting is going to be on?

No. The scale comes from the physical thing, from the visual statement.

During the making of the drawings?

Yes.

How often have you done a painting in one scale and found that it was wrong and that you had to begin again?

Very seldom.

When you're wrong, do you do the discarded painting again on a different scale? Or do you tend to be bored with the idea once you've got the scale wrong the first time?

No, I do it again.

But you are saying that before you've done a drawing you've got very little idea whether the final thing is going to be big or small?

Yes, that's true.

But you nowadays habitually paint larger than before. Would you like to re-do your old paintings larger?

No. They are right as they are.

Meaning that the ideas in your early paintings were ideas for paintings on a smaller scale, necessarily?

Necessarily.

And that now your ideas are for paintings on a larger scale?

Yes.

Does the fact that you are working on a larger scale give a feedback to the ideas themselves, so that these are now mostly ideas for larger paintings, or is it that, among the ideas which you make drawings of, you then carry through those which demand a larger scale and tend not to bother with those which would be done on a smaller scale?

No, it's the first one. Paintings breed. You work in certain groups. I remember before my first American show I started to work on a group of things which all became small paintings. There was nothing I could do to change the scale. The ideas demanded small canvases.

Do you want your work to be aggressive towards the spectator? Do you like it to hurt your eyes?

I don't mind either way. But I remember being very surprised when people first complained that it hurt their eyes, because it has never hurt mine.

No?

No, never. Not *hurt* them.

Does it make them water?

No.

Doesn't it give you a pain?

No – no *pain*! It gives me pleasure.

Does it give you that famous admixture, pleasure-pain?

Possibly, in that it is a stimulating, an active, a vibrating pleasure.

Comparable to what?

Running … early morning … cold water … fresh things,
slightly astringent … things like this … certain acid sorts of smells.

Really? You enjoy certain acid sorts of smells?

Yes. I don't like heavy smells. I like light, buoyant smells.

Like ammonia?

Oh no! Like wood being cut.

Yes, but what about wood being cut when the saw gives a sound like a squeaky chalk on a blackboard?

I don't mind that. That blackboard sound has never bothered me.

Well, that's very interesting. It may throw light on why you don't worry about the eye-jerking effect of your paintings. Because I think there's no doubt …

Don't forget I see them grow. That could make a difference.

I don't think it's that, because it seems you don't mind other things which tend to get most people on a nerve. But the fact that you see the paintings grow – does that make a difference? The painting I have, for example, I've had it for years, but it still hurts my eyes.[1]

Well, only in that I can never see a painting of mine quite as other people do.

Don't they have an optical effect on you, for example?

Of course, certainly they do.

Now, if they have an optical effect, don't they have an eye-hurting effect also?

No, these are different qualities. I don't experience this eye-hurting business but I experience the optical effect.

You see the lines moving to and fro?

Yes, but I find that an exhilarating thing, a stimulating sensation – never painful physically.

That sounds very masochistic, Bridget.

I have been accused of that, but I don't think it is that.

If other people, while liking your work, find it eye-hurting, what do you feel about that?

I think it is beside the point. I think this would be a very offhand response, simply to react like that.

Well, believe me, it can go on. I've lived with one of your paintings.[1]

Yes, but surely you get involved with the painting? And I don't see how you could get involved with the painting if you only experience this eye-hurting effect.

No, I didn't say I only experience it as that. I think it's rather like certain music by John Cage and LaMonte Young, which, while one responds to it aesthetically, is nevertheless undoubtedly painful to hear. And there's no getting round the fact that it is painful to hear and that it really produces a noise level or a pitch level which makes it in some sense disagreeable. I don't think one ever reaches the stage when this ceases to be an element in one's experience of it.

Yes, I see that.

But you've certainly no aggressive intention towards the spectator, have you?

No, not as such.

Do you think of your work as aggressive?

Not necessarily. I think of there being colossal energies involved … in the medium … in the units, intervals, lines … I know that they are high-voltage, potentially.

Does that mean you want the spectator to get something like an electric shock?

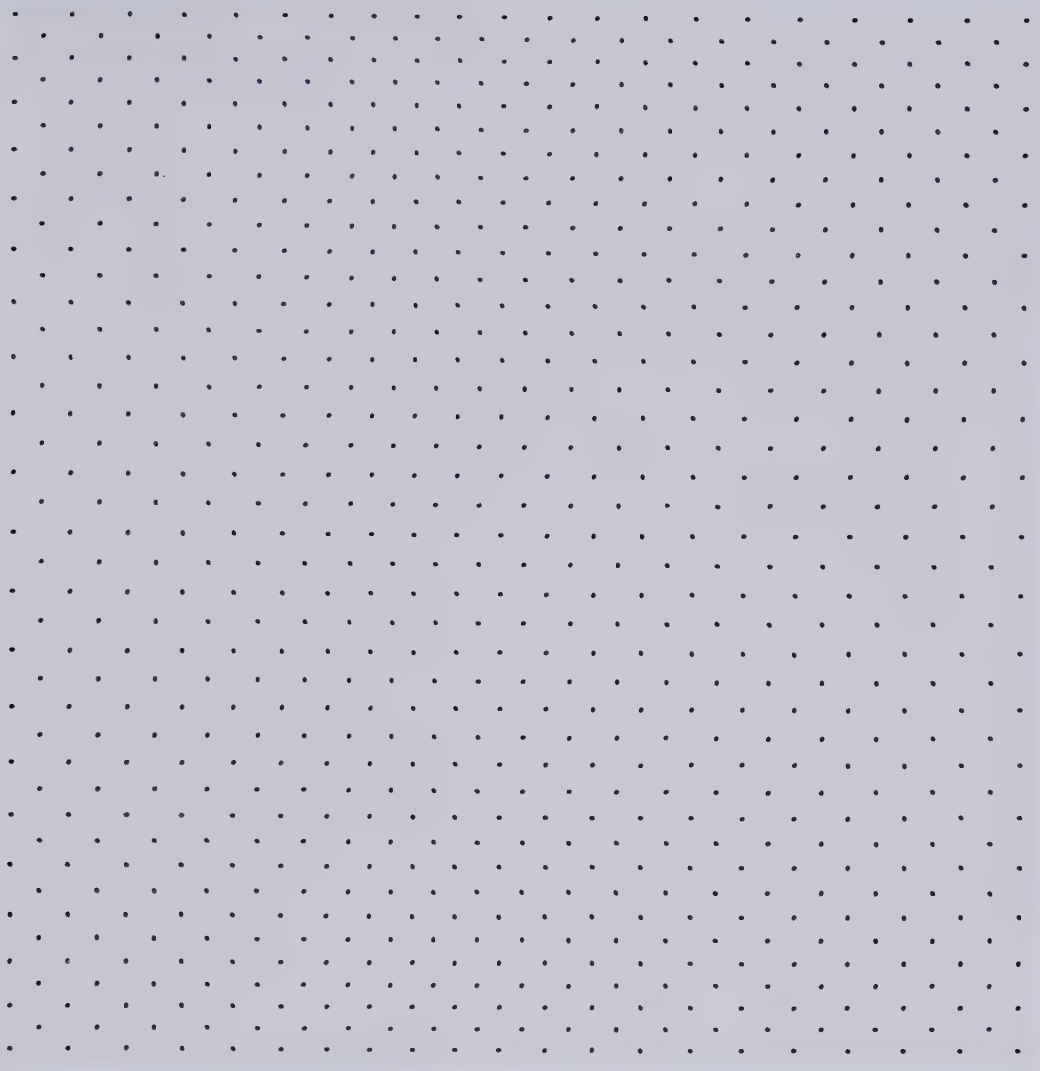
I want the spectator to experience the *power* of these elements. For instance, I called one painting *Static* in the sense of a field of static electricity. It is visual prickles. But I don't find that a painful physical thing. It's a quality: as velvet is smooth, so this is a sparkling texture – visually. The key to this, I think, is in the actual stuff I am dealing with – the elements themselves. This may strike you as a strange comparison, but I feel that when Michelangelo said that he let a figure out of the stone, so I feel that I let the energy out of the forms, the elements, via the relationships.

When do you think of the titles?

Sometimes while making the drawings, rarely while carrying out the painting, sometimes after it's finished.

You say, for example, that Static *is so called because of the idea of a field of static electricity. At what point did that association first come to you?*

At one stage I thought of calling the painting 'Discharge', with the idea of arrows, say, being discharged in your face as you looked at it. I rejected that, but it led me to the other. Actually, I thought of the painting itself when I was going up a mountain in France which had a vast expanse of shale at the top.[2] It was a extremely hot day. I was getting anxious because we were going in a car up a steep narrow road. Visually it was total confusion; I felt there was no possibility of understanding the space of this



Static 1 1966

situation. You couldn't tell whether this shimmering shale was near or far, flat or round. One of us said it was like the desert. We found it so alarming that we got out of the car, which of course intensified the sensation. But it was much cooler at the top, and into my mind came the beginnings of *Static*, a mass of tiny glittering units like a rain of arrows.



Units used in *Static 1* on previous page (detail)

Do you often get ideas for paintings from visual experience of reality?

Occasionally, but in a roundabout way, in that visual experience, all experience, of reality adds up to a whole thing, an overall state of being. One might go to a strange city and feel extremely desolate, might have missed people whom one thought one was going to see, might be oppressed by the city. It might be built of dark stone. The houses might be very tall, one might feel cold, and have this feeling of oppression. Those three or four days could add up to a totally oppressive period. These are the sorts of things that I could recognise later in one of my paintings, if I had felt them deeply enough.

Statement [1970]

My final paintings are the intimate dialogue between my total being and the visual agents which constitute the medium. My intentions have not changed. I have always tried to realise visual and emotional energies simultaneously from the medium. My paintings are, of course, concerned with generating visual sensations, but certainly not to the exclusion of emotion. One of my aims is that these two responses shall be experienced as *one and the same.*

The changes in my recent work are developments of my earlier work. Those were concerned with principles of repose and disturbance. That is to say, in each of them a particular situation was stated visually. Certain elements within that situation remained constant. Others precipitated the destruction of themselves by themselves. Recurrently, as a result of the cyclic movement of repose, disturbance, and repose, the original situation was restated. This led me to a deeper involvement with the structure of contradiction and paradox in my more recent work. These relationships in visual terms concern such things as fast and slow movements, warm and cold colour, focal and open space, repetition *opposed* to 'event', repetition *as* 'event', increase and decrease, static and active, black opposed to white, greys as sequences harmonising these polarities.

My direction is continually conditioned by my responses to the particular work in hand at any given moment. I am articulating the potentialities latent in the premise I have selected to work from. I believe that a work of art is essentially distinguished by the *transformation* of the elements involved.

I am sometimes asked 'What is your objective?' and this I cannot truthfully answer. I work 'from' something rather than 'towards' something.[1] It is a process of discovery and I will not impose a convenient dogma, however attractive. Any artist worth consideration is aware that there is art beyond art-movements and slogans, that dogma can never encompass the creative process. There is art beyond Op art, an art which engages the whole personality and draws a similarly total response from society.

In Conversation with Robert Kudielka [1972]

You are one of the few artists today who make preparatory studies. Why don't you work on the canvas directly?

Well, that would be impossible for me because the structure of my paintings has to be precisely balanced. They need immaculate execution. I have to build up a bank of visual information first – about colours, forms, proportions, directions, etc. This is the essential basis to my work.

What returns are there from this 'bank'?

The studies I make have different purposes. At the beginning I try to be as unselective as possible – to allow things to happen, later gradually tightening up until all aspects have been drawn together.

How do you find your direction in this process?

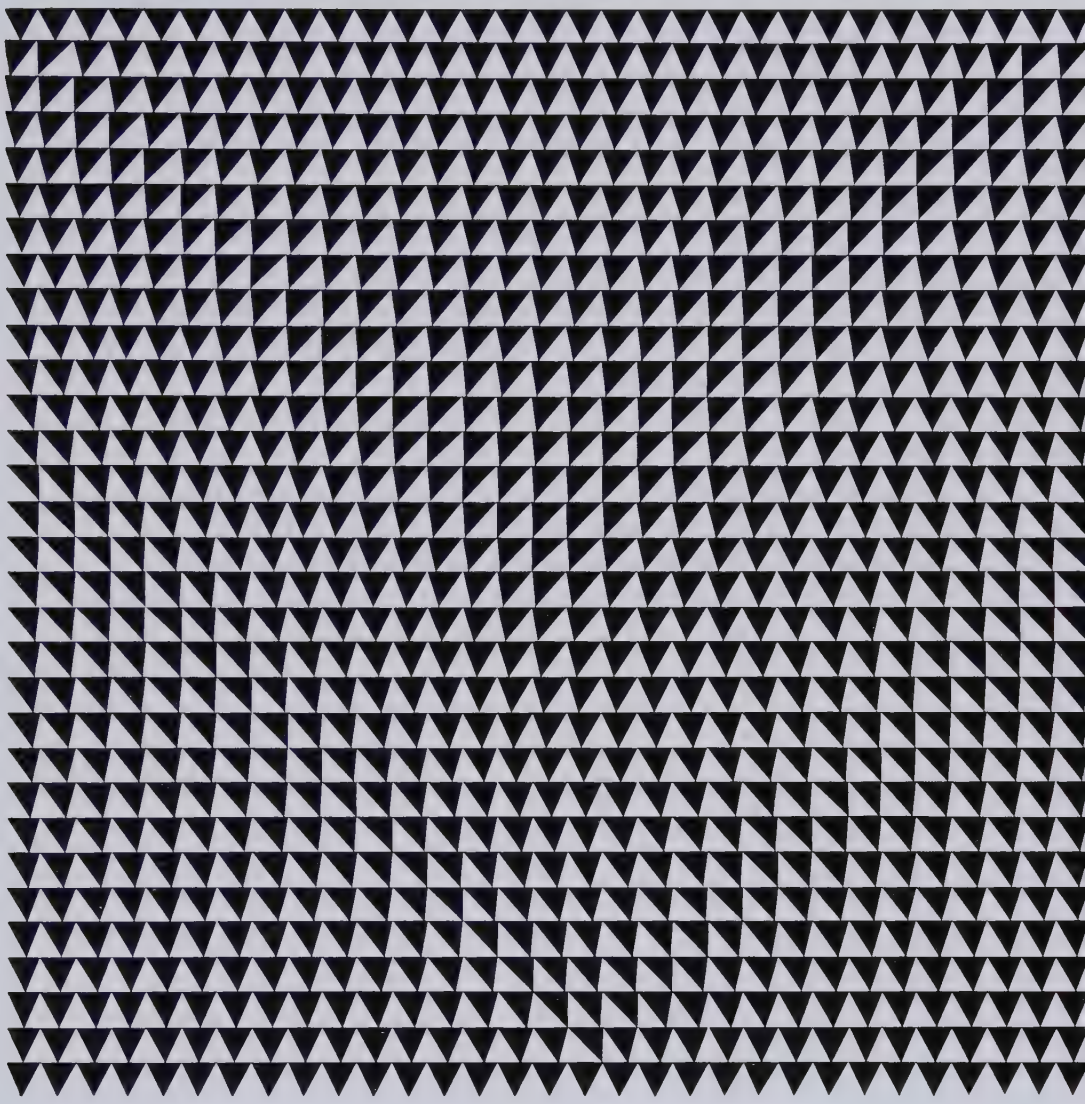
I proceed by trial and error – exploring and slowly establishing a particular situation. Obviously many studies will be discarded *en route* to a painting, though they may still be interesting as visual statements.

And yet, there is a difference between a study and a painting …

There are several differences. The studies deal with aspects, the painting with totality. The studies are flexible and malleable, whereas the paintings are decisive and finite. And, of course, there is the obvious difference of scale.

What does scale mean to you?

Maybe scale could be compared to a key in music. Scale is not simply size, although size is a factor of scale. Changing the size of an image always means recreating its scale. I have to readjust and rebalance the factors involved. It is an act of perceptual equation. Sitting at your table and working on a study is quite different from your response to a painting which is hanging on the wall. There is no possibility of enlarging it automatically.



Shiver 1964

If scale is the key in which your work is notated, what theme are you playing? Is it in the air or do you invent it?

No – I take *something* – a colour – say yellow. What is yellow? Merely a name, an inert notion. But if you put a yellow with other colours, in different proportions and positions, it starts to show a certain potential. It may appear lighter or darker, expand or flow into other colours, changing them. It could glow, advance or recede and so on. None of this behaviour you would know until you try. So right at the beginning I think … well, I just see what yellow can do.[1]

What about the forms you use?

When I started, around 1960, forms such as triangles, squares, circles, rhomboids, etc. were no longer burdened by the heavy load of associations and symbolic overtones which they had carried in the Twenties and Thirties as Constructivist motifs. They were simple forms without any pretentions, in a condition for working with. Just 'to hand'.

Yet there has been a change. The more you got involved with colour, the less distinctive the forms became.

In my recent colour work I have been using stripes, either parallel or twisting around each other, because they are unassertive forms. Form and colour seem to be fundamentally incompatible – they destroy each other. In my earlier work, when I was developing complex forms, the energies of the medium could only be fully released by simplifying colour to a black and white constant (with occasional grey sequences). Conversely colour energies need a virtually neutral vehicle if they are to develop uninhibitedly. The repeated stripe seems to meet these conditions.

You think that a more elaborate shape would not be suitable?

No. Take a green triangle – it has three points, three conflicting directions, there is a central volume in the form and an active edge exposure: all these factors add up to complexities which would effectively inhibit the green's expansion and mutability. I have always tried to avoid 'colouring forms'. I want to create a colour-form, not coloured forms.

Are you concerned with perceptual principles?

Well, look at the paintings. I'm not demonstrating any scientific principle, nor perceptual, arithmetical or geometrical. That doesn't interest me at all.

I wonder what the context is within which you work?

Relationships such as constancy and change – contrast and harmony – identity and contradiction – directions – rhythm – pace – repetition – accumulating and dispersing density.

Let's take an example. What does the oval mean to you?

In a sense the oval is a directional circle. Its range lies between the emphasis on direction on one hand (at the expense of its circularity), and emphasis on circularity (at the expense of direction) on the other. An oval is very different in character at each extreme. When it is highly directional it is a light, fast form. As the directional aspect decreases the oval becomes heavy and static.

But surely these dynamic relationships are not confined to single forms?

Of course not. It is very important that each form finally relinquishes its separateness in the whole. It must be fully absorbed. So while it is necessary in the early stages to analyse each unit, my aim is to enable it to release sufficient energy to precipitate its dissolution in totality.

So the single forms are the means to create a total situation?

They are part of the medium with which I am working.

Well, what is the medium?

Superficially the medium seems to be identical with the means. And obviously this is true in a sense that, for the composer, actual notes or particular instruments are part of his medium. But the medium as a whole is the relationship of this sort of means between themselves and me. I am, like the musician, a kind of 'listener-in' – overhearing potential activities.

'Listener'– that's a beautiful description, and a paradox, too. Because in this case the listener is also the speaker. After all, you make *the paintings.*

Yes – for quite a long time I was embarrassed by using the word 'I', the first person, in relation to my work – I much preferred to say 'one', because I felt that this thing, the medium, was so strong and rich, that I was just an agent who caught these various inflections and allowed them to play their own thing – freely.

What do you mean, to allow things to 'play freely'?

When these elements are *not* asked to do something which is against their nature – (not asked to serve concepts or to represent) – *then* I think that they are allowed to 'play freely' – to show their vitality. But there are hazards, for instance, of merely recording automatically in a random kind of way. These energies are, in a proper sense, 'wild' – one can easily be overwhelmed, carried away. This results in images which are virtually inaccessible, beyond perception, in fact. And yet this is the *core* of the medium and it is in this area that fruitful dialogue takes place. It is not only a one-way relationship of taming the wild, but can also be the reverse. I am supported by the medium but at the risk of being overwhelmed by it – the medium both carries you and threatens to carry you away. I don't trust a painting unless it has had this period – it is the only route by which to avoid the decorative or the academic.

The opposite of the wild would be the decorative?

Yes, the known, which is easy to handle, easy to arrange, because you are completely familiar with the relationships. Their vitality has been sapped – their energy used up – their teeth, so to speak, have been drawn.

I wonder how far this polarity of the medium affects the spectator. The subject of your earlier black and white work for instance, is movement …

There are at least two forms of movement. The 'one-dimensional' movement, which has to do with progression. Movement described on the picture plane itself.

It's readable –

Yes – but as you look at the painting you become involved in another kind of movement as a total experience which happens in time, successively, between you and the canvas – the graphic movement anticipates this kind of experience.

So in one case it is traditional, descriptive movement, like Futurism, movement opposed to stability. The other is movement not opposed to stability but occurring simultaneously – in a sense, even provoked by stability, as in Descending.

That's perfectly true. And this interplay between movement and stability is paralleled in my recent work by the interplay of light and colour. The colours painted on the canvas can be identified as certain hues – but as one looks at the painting one sees a luminous disembodied light, variously coloured.[2]

I see, you don't 'describe' light by colour.

No, I don't paint light. I present a colour situation which releases light as you look at it.

That means that the painting doesn't exist factually.

No, in a way, it only comes to life when looked at from a certain distance.

If you stand close to the canvas you just see the colour –

Yes – objective hues, say cerise, olive, turquoise –

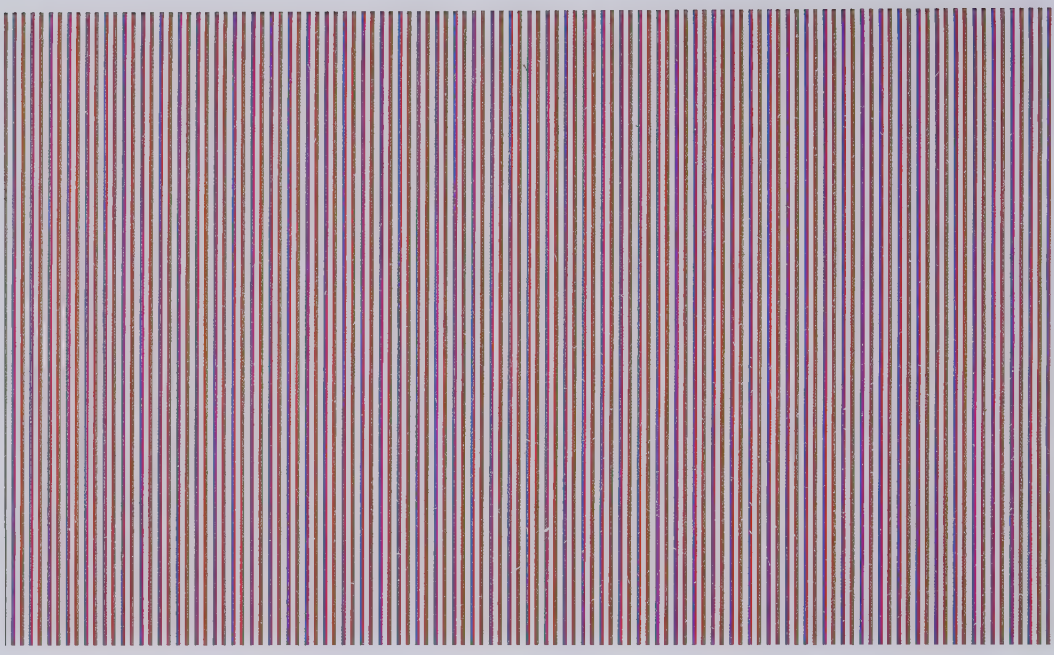
But if you stand too far away from the painting?

You only see a nebulous grey. The painting has eluded you.

And between these two extremes – the experience you intend?

The area of activity – of light.

So light is also something which happens between two polarities: the stable body of colour –



Late Morning 1967 – 68 (right: detail)

And its absolute dissolution. When grey eclipses the light, the painting is unable to offer anything.[3]

Is that how the spectator experiences the medium?

Well, he is probably caught in an dialogue similar to my own. It is interesting to watch people looking at a painting because without any prompting they try to relate to it – they try to find a position in which the thing works for them. A point from which they can experience it. People vary a little – as to how much or how little they can be involved – they unconsciously choose their own relationship to the painting.

Do they choose? They listen.

Yes – to let the painting speak.

Working with Nature [1977]

My paintings are not concerned with the Romantic legacy of expression, nor with fantasies, concepts or symbols.

I draw from nature, I work with nature, although in completely new terms. For me nature is not landscape, but the dynamism of visual forces – an event rather than an appearance. These forces can only be tackled by treating colour and form as ultimate identities, freeing them from all descriptive or functional roles.

The context of painting provides an arena in which to tap these visual energies – to unlock their true potential and latent characteristics. Once released they have to be organised in new pictorial terms, every bit as much, though quite differently, as when painting nature in landscape or still life.

The new motif determines the size, the proportion, even the 'way up' of the painting just as the old natural motif determined these factors before. In working on a painting I choose a small group of colours and juxtapose them in different sequences, to provide various relationships and to precipitate colour reactions. These 'colour events' are delicate and elusive, they have to be organised to make them more *present* – more *there*, more *real*. I take for example three colours, say magenta, ochre and turquoise plus black and white, a situation which then triggers off airy iridescent bursts of colour.

I choose a form and a structure in which to repeat these colour clouds, to accumulate them, to mass them until each painted unit is submerged in a visual rhythm which, in turn, collectively generates a shimmering coloured haze. This luminous substance is completely meshed with the actual coloured surface and together they provide the experience of the painting.

Into Colour

in conversation with Robert Kudielka [1978]

In 1965 you wrote about your black and white work: 'The basis of my paintings is this: that in each of them a particular situation is stated. Certain elements within that situation remain constant. Others precipitate the destruction of themselves by themselves. Recurrently, as a result of the cyclic movement of repose, disturbance, repose, the original situation is restated.'[1] Is this also true for the colour work you have been doing since 1967?

Yes, in a way. I still start by establishing a particular situation. All my work is one thing, as it were, it may appear different but it is essentially the same. As I used to choose a particular form in my black and white work as a point of departure, I now choose a particular group of colours. For several years I used only three colours in each painting, though more recently I have used five – and with those colours, say, yellow, pink, violet, blue and green, I build up a structure which does two different things at the same time: the individual colours change their identity through juxtaposition and by re-relating these juxtapositions the collective colour of the group is changed.

But there doesn't seem to be a cyclic momentum now. As a spectator you can't rely upon a stable point of departure because the shifts and changes are already taking effect from the very first glance at the painting.

That's because you cannot establish a clearly recognisable constant in colour, as you can in form. Colour, and especially the coloured light it generates, is naturally not as distinct as the black and white contrast was.[2]

So could one say that change itself has become the constant in your recent work?

You could say that change is a consistent characteristic of colour, but in perception these changes do not take place as ruptures, nor are they in any sense rapid. They are shifts within a particular envelope. Every painting has its own character – its own 'light'; it may be a fresh shining sparkle or a saturated yellow glow, or even a dusky mid-tone. But none of these qualities can be precisely nailed down any more than those of real daylight. They are unavoidably elusive.

REVELOPMENT AS PAINTER

This makes the work very susceptible to changing conditions of light, doesn't it?

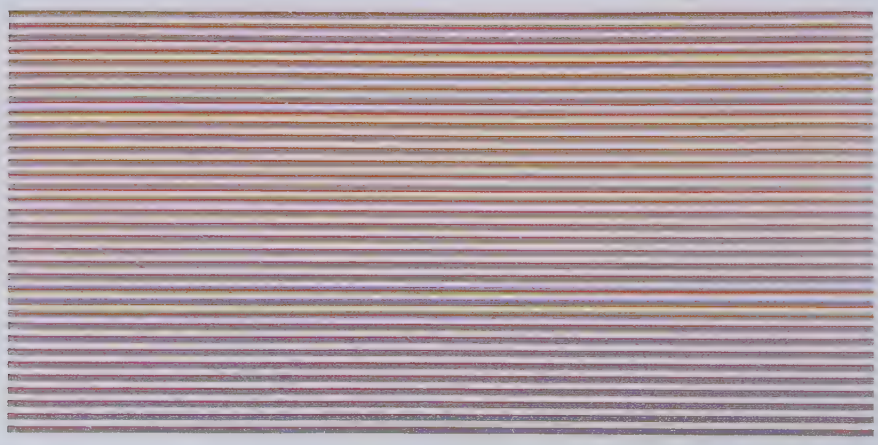
Very much so. In fact, one of the problems I have to deal with is that these recent paintings come across in startlingly different ways in any given light.

I suppose it is this uncertainty that makes them difficult to grasp or penetrate. The grey paintings which you did around 1966, like Deny, Drift, Cataract *and others, still approached the issue of light and colour according to the binary principle of the black and white contrast.*

Those paintings are not so much about contrast, or colour for that matter, as about tone – tone in its purest sense. *Deny* and *Drift*, for instance, were built on an inversion of colour and tone. When the tonal values are equal you can clearly see the colour opposition between the dull red and blue. Conversely, when the tonal contrast is at its strongest the difference in hue is overpowered by the opposition of light against dark.

Explained like this, in this technical way, it sounds rather close to a perceptual demonstration.

Good heavens, those are only the mechanics of the painting – not the actual experience. Most people are not even aware of them; and they need not be either. I didn't choose the title *Deny* by chance. That whole group of paintings grew out of, and away from, the absolute opposition



Rise 1 1968–70 (right: detail)

of black and white. I wanted something which operated on more levels, was capable of more development, had a more 'grey'd' quality, like the indeterminate nature of reality.

It's very interesting that Cataract, *which already anticipates your final step into colour painting, despite its firm tonal structure shows a loose spread of bright luminous colour in the area where the dominant grey curves split into red and turquoise.*

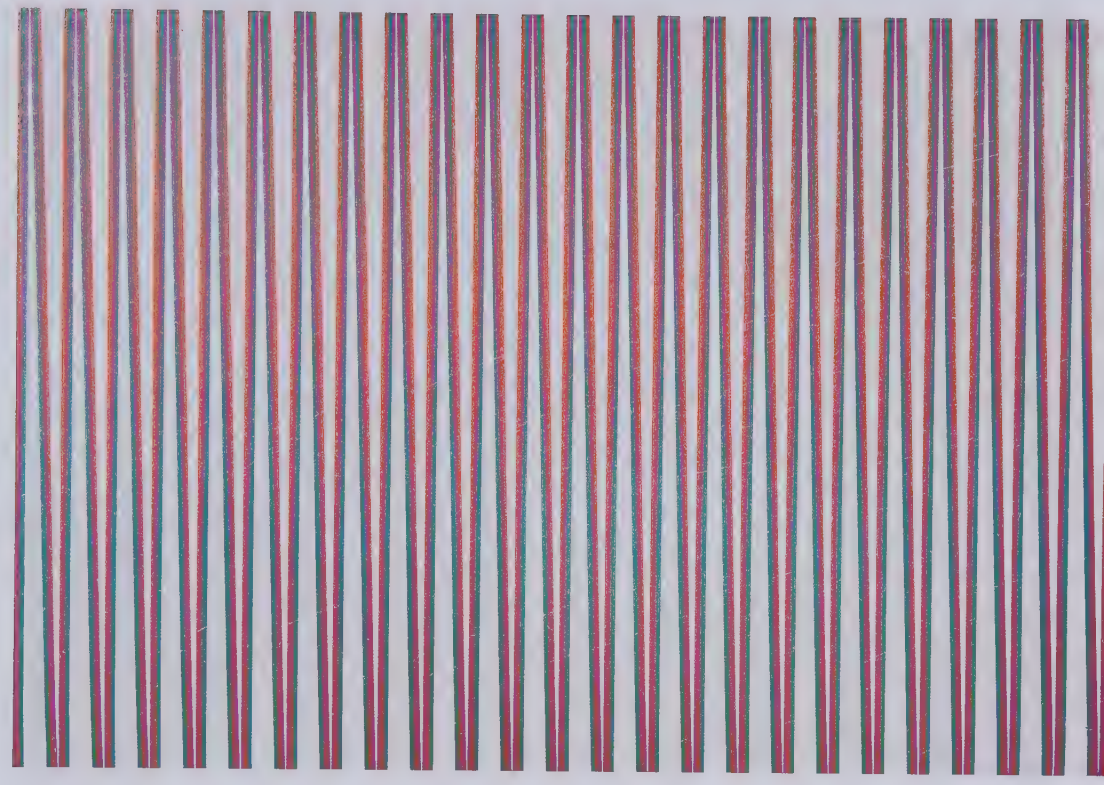
Those colours spread from the edge, the curve has a long edge-exposure. The stripe paintings that I did afterwards also depend very much on this quality. The ovals in *Deny* still contain visual energy, as separate entities, rather like the pointillist marks of Seurat did. But a long thin line of colour, essentially 'edge', without a large volume to carry, is the ideal element to work with this elusive relationship between colour and light.

This means that it was not a stylistic choice that stripes became the dominant formal element in your work from 1967 to 1973?

No, not at all – nor for that matter was my using of larger areas. The reasons lay in the necessity of building up a fluctuating colour field. In the same way that I had to sacrifice distinctive forms in order to release the energy of colour-light, it was necessary to increase the scale of the event in order to prevent focused looking.

You mean that the visual 'grip' had to be loosened? In Late Morning *or* Rise, *for instance, I feel it impossible to encompass so large a field because the eye is foiled in its attempt to penetrate the repetitional structure. This rebuff, however, doesn't lead to perceptual inertia. Paradoxically, it seems to be the beginning of the spectator's engagement with the painting.*

That is true. Technically *Late Morning* consists of a repeated red constant right across the canvas, paired with a sequence from blue to green. *Rise* is a three-colour painting, only magenta, turquoise and olive, used in different juxtapositions. But what actually makes the paintings alive is the discharge of coloured light. In the centre of *Late Morning* it is a golden-tinted haze, and in *Rise* disembodied colours spread over the entire surface.



Orient 4 1970



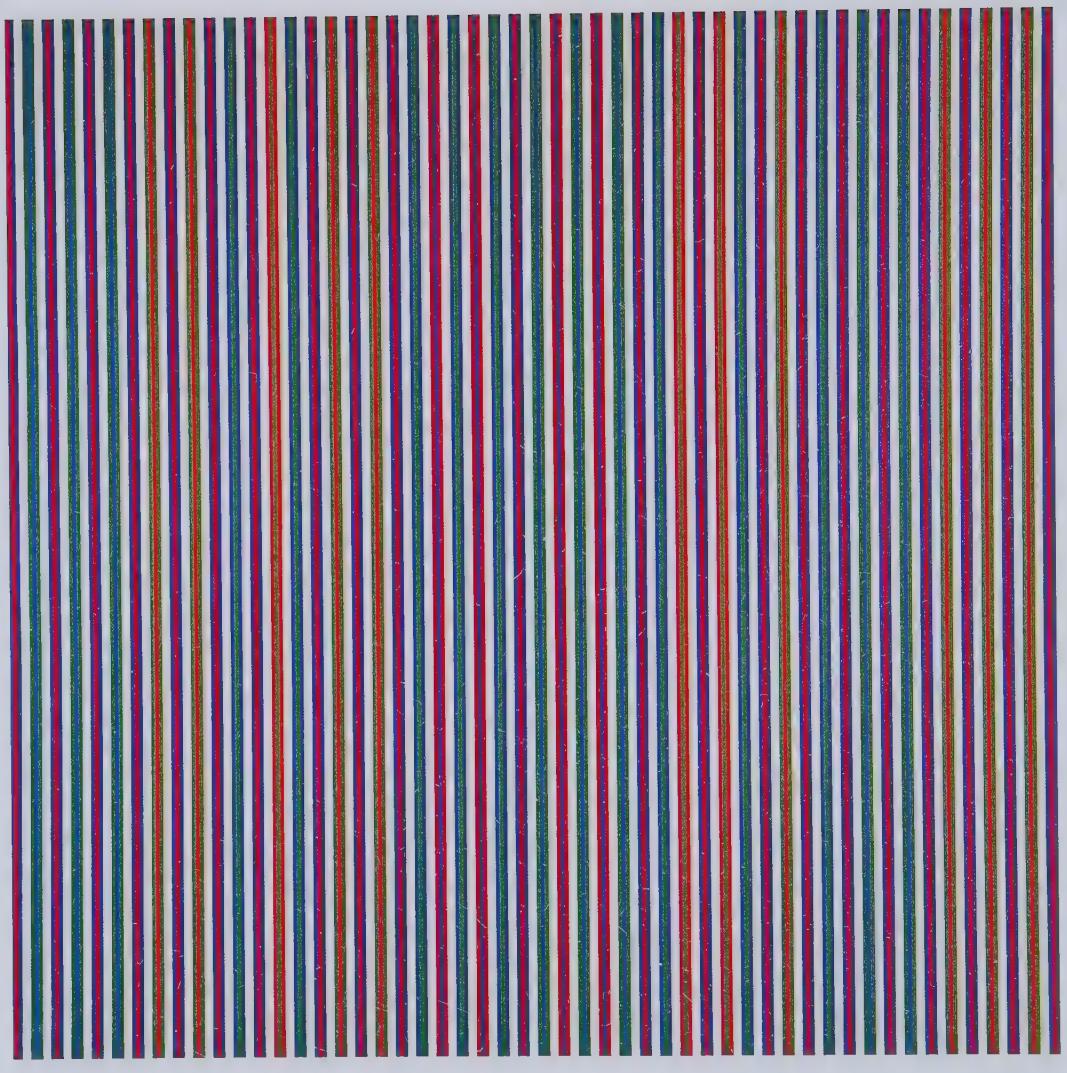
Cantus Firmus 1972 – 73

The simplicity of the constituents is astounding. Most of your colour work before 1977 is based on three colours plus white and the structural device seems to be similar in each case: two colours are nearly opposites (like red and green in Late Morning, *or magenta and turquoise in* Rise 1*), while the third colour is an adjacent which shifts the emphasis. It reminds me very much of the aesthetic principle which underlies the Zen gardens of Japan: main stone – counter stone – adjacent stones.*

That's interesting. From *Rise* onwards I realised that it was very important *not* to have a direct opposition. If there were, the colour energy would be locked up in the complementary contrast, as though in a straightjacket. It is released by instability, a freely floating flux. Each colour has to be balanced so that the slightest influence from a neighbouring colour will throw it off that very balance – and this is true for all of them in turn, whether there are three or five colours, so that they continually shift this way and that. But there also has to be an overall colour-bias which governs the entire canvas. Otherwise the sheer amount of coloured light released will lead to iridescence, light energy running right around the spectrum. But I was only able to bring about such a general emphasis after a while – at first it was confined to certain areas and patches.

I also see a structural bias of colour, going against the actual direction of the bands. If you look at Late Morning, *and in particular* Veld, *the colour activity seems to rebound against the linear thrust. It can be so intense that – in the strong light you prefer for these paintings – the lines momentarily seem to twist, and I wonder whether this led to those twisted bands which you have been using since 1970?*

I had found out quite early that perceptual activity takes place in opposition to the graphic field. In *Orient 4* and *Vapour* I made deliberate use of this.In those paintings I crossed one line diagonally over the other two and mirrored this configuration. These 'cross-overs' eventually became 'twists' of all three colours. What happens then you can see most clearly in *Zing* (p.35). Green, red and blue twist around each other in turn four times within a continuous band; and by mirroring these vertical bands a series of colour zones appears, travelling horizontally across the canvas. The colour of each of these zones is not *literal* colour – it is not actually painted. It emerges solely through visual fusion.



Pæan 1973

The paintings around and following Zing *form one of the most coherent groups in your work. However, the final paintings,* Fade *and* Clandestine, *show a return of grey and black sequences. Did you feel the need to reintroduce a more plastic pictorial space?*

You may be right, but I never consciously thought in such terms. I wanted to give more substance to the colour zones through those grey and black sequences. Perhaps you can see the sort of things I was involved with best in a big painting I did at that time, *Cantus Firmus.* In this canvas each side is visually pinned flat by equalising tone and colour, and a layered space opens up towards the centre. It's rather like being in a Gothic cathedral where light filters through the throng of the columns and gives the sensation of a space which seems to be both open and closed at the same time.

However, this density was achieved by recreating the tonal momentum of your grey work in the late 1960s. Pæan, *being about the same problem, seems to me a more developed work. There you have introduced a similar 'substance' without employing a tonal movement – simply through the grouping of three clear and strong colours – red, blue and green – in different juxtapositions.*

I painted *Pæan* about the same time as *Cantus Firmus* in fact, and they are related through their titles. *Pæan* is like a powerful chant gathering momentum through assembling blocks of colour bands in an apparently random way. But there is an underpinning of order based on the different spatial sensations of these blocks. The greatest depth is in the centre of the canvas whereas towards each side this space is reduced to support the central event.

I remember in about 1974, shortly after you had completed these two paintings, that you started to use the term 'plasticity of the medium' in talking about your work.[3] *Yet there was still a problem of organisation, if I remember correctly. After years of strict formal structuring, you had touched very closely, especially with* Pæan, *on the fringes of free painterly organisation.*

It was a double-edged experience. On one hand, I liked the rougher visual texture which I was able to bring off by grouping blocks of colour solely according to their perceptual presence; and I saw a whole new area opening up. On the other hand, one cannot tackle the instability and infinite variety of colour relationships without relying on some sort of

formal backbone. You can see in Matisse just how essential drawing is if one is going to be involved with colour.

I would like to take this point further. It seems that this 'formal backbone', which, I agree, colourists seem to need, became in your work the gentle, flowing curve – rather like the arabesque was for Matisse.

Maybe. At any rate, in the mid-1970s I started to use the curve again, this time as a rhythmic vehicle for colour. This was different from the earlier paintings like *Cataract*. By using twisted curves I could bunch up colour sensations in a way that went further than the lateral groupings in *Pæan*. When colours are twisted along the rise and fall of a curve their juxtapositions change continually. There are innumerable sequences each of which throws up a different sensation. From these I build up clusters which then flow one into another almost imperceptibly.

The result reminds me somewhat of Pollock's work, in sensation at least. Paintings like Aurulum *and* Reef *have the same sort of open rhythm.*

Pollock has always been a hero of mine. But if there is any similarity whatsoever, I have arrived at it by a very different route. It's almost the opposite approach. The unexpected thing in his free structure is the immense control, whereas the unexpected thing in my controlled structure is the free play of visual forces. In effect, my formal scaffolding is buried to such an extent that it becomes subservient to the 'action' of the colour.

More than that, I think. In this group of paintings you also started to eliminate the white ground which had been an amplifier of the colour interaction for a long time. The use of plain grey and later of tinted greys has added a new plastic density to your work.

It was the need for an overall envelope. Having stepped up the colour activity through those clusters provided by the twisted curve structure, I had to re-establish a colour dominance. The coloured grey grounds – a violet grey in *Reef*, a yellow grey in *Aurulum* – were a straightforward way of doing this.

But not for long, it seems. The next step, basic to the Song of Orpheus *series and also to the* Orphean Elegies, *led in the opposite direction. You increased the colour activity even more.*



Aurulum 1977

You mean by my substituting two more colours for the grey and so making five colours altogether and an entire field of twisted curves at the same time?

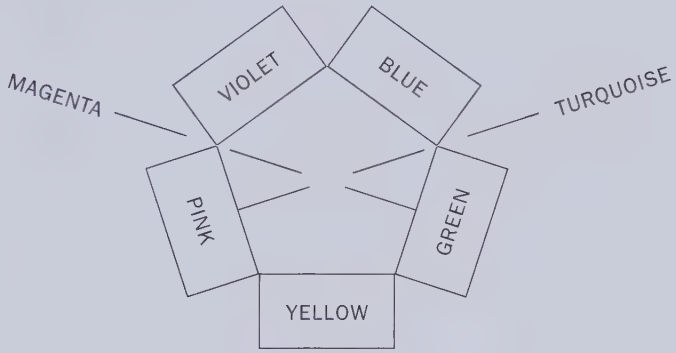


Song of Orpheus study: Harmony blue and green in two colour twist. Violet, pink and yellow in three colour twist
1978

Yes. It appears to me that your work tends to evolve through a kind of exchange between past and present: you sometimes paint out what you have set up perceptually in earlier paintings which in turn gives rise to fresh perceptual activity and so a growing complexity is brought about.

It's certainly never a one-way movement. I try to keep the constituents of any complexity simple. There is a tremendous range of colour inflections in the *Song of Orpheus* canvases. But the origin of this profusion is a simple structure. All five colours – violet, blue, green, yellow and pink – relate to each other in such a way that, if one assembles them as they would be in the colour circle, they describe the shape of a pentagon. Each colour is in such a position that its complementary would be exactly between the two

colours opposite, e.g. turquoise, being complementary to pink, is not actually painted, but if it were, it would lie between the blue and the green. Similarly, magenta, the complementary to the painted green, would lie between the actual violet and pink. This is the rationale behind my unstable situation because the missing complementaries are all evoked by the colours actually present, and this applies right around the whole group. At the same time, neighbouring colours are fusing visually: if the yellow is next to the pink a fugitive orange appears; and again, if that same yellow is bordered by the green or even by the blue, different yellow-greens appear. So I am dealing with both at once – the fusion of harmonies and the evocation of complementaries. This is the framework within which I articulate the colour event of the painting.



It seems to be a perfect example of the principles underlying all your colour work. If one were to strip the paintings bare of what they are, namely works of art, one would be left with these two phenomena, colour-fusion and the simultaneous contrast. I wonder if you constructed this astounding 'pentagon' before making the paintings?

No – simply because I couldn't. I think there is a naïve and widespread misunderstanding about theories of colour. Take the colour circle, or rather the function of the colour circle: it is a purely theoretical concept existing in the mind but not in our actual experience. Nobody can ever paint it out 'correctly' because the moment one tries to visualise what has been proved by optical experiment you get involved with pigment – and all the scientific purity is lost. I could teach the so-called principles of my work to anyone in, say, half an hour, but I doubt if it would be of much use. Because once you get involved with colour reality you are



Orphean Elegy 2 1978

immediately faced with an immense range of variables which govern your vision. These cannot be isolated intellectually without distorting the facts of sight. I discovered the colour structure of the *Song of Orpheus* paintings simply by trying to get a specific colour sensation.

In what way?

Well, I realised that I needed more colours than just three if I wanted to do without a white or grey ground. So I had to open up and re-relate my group of colours. It was rather like Divisionism in reverse: instead of dividing up the sensation of colour I had to find my 'building blocks', the particular hues and shades that could best generate an envelope of coloured light. For example, I knew that I would need the presence of a red, but as it had to work with all the other colours it had to be implied rather than stated; that is to say, I looked for something that would *behave* as red. So eventually I paired violet and pink which between them, in the context of the other colours, generate different reds. In the same way of course the particular pitches of the blue, the green and the yellow had to be found. It's a question of working entirely through relationships, you see. Only afterwards I realised that the colours could be placed in that 'pentagon' I showed you. I could never have constructed it in advance because I would not have known what to look for.

I wonder what you are looking for now. The studies in your studio suggest that you are shifting ground yet again.

Yes, I have to. I think that there are now too many colours and that this hinders a true colour character. In fact, I have only become fully aware of the problem of colour-bias through doing these new paintings and by looking at the paintings of Turner and Monet again. All painting which focuses on the perception of colour seems to have a problem with iridescence.

You mean the kind of 'rainbow look' which occasionally surfaces in Turner and Monet? It can make the paintings look 'unnatural', as though the colour has got out of control.

'Unnatural' is rather a loose term. What one means perhaps by 'natural' colour is what has been achieved by Matisse. His paintings always

show an awareness of colour totality. But each colour maintains its own characteristics – being sustained, and not submerged by others.

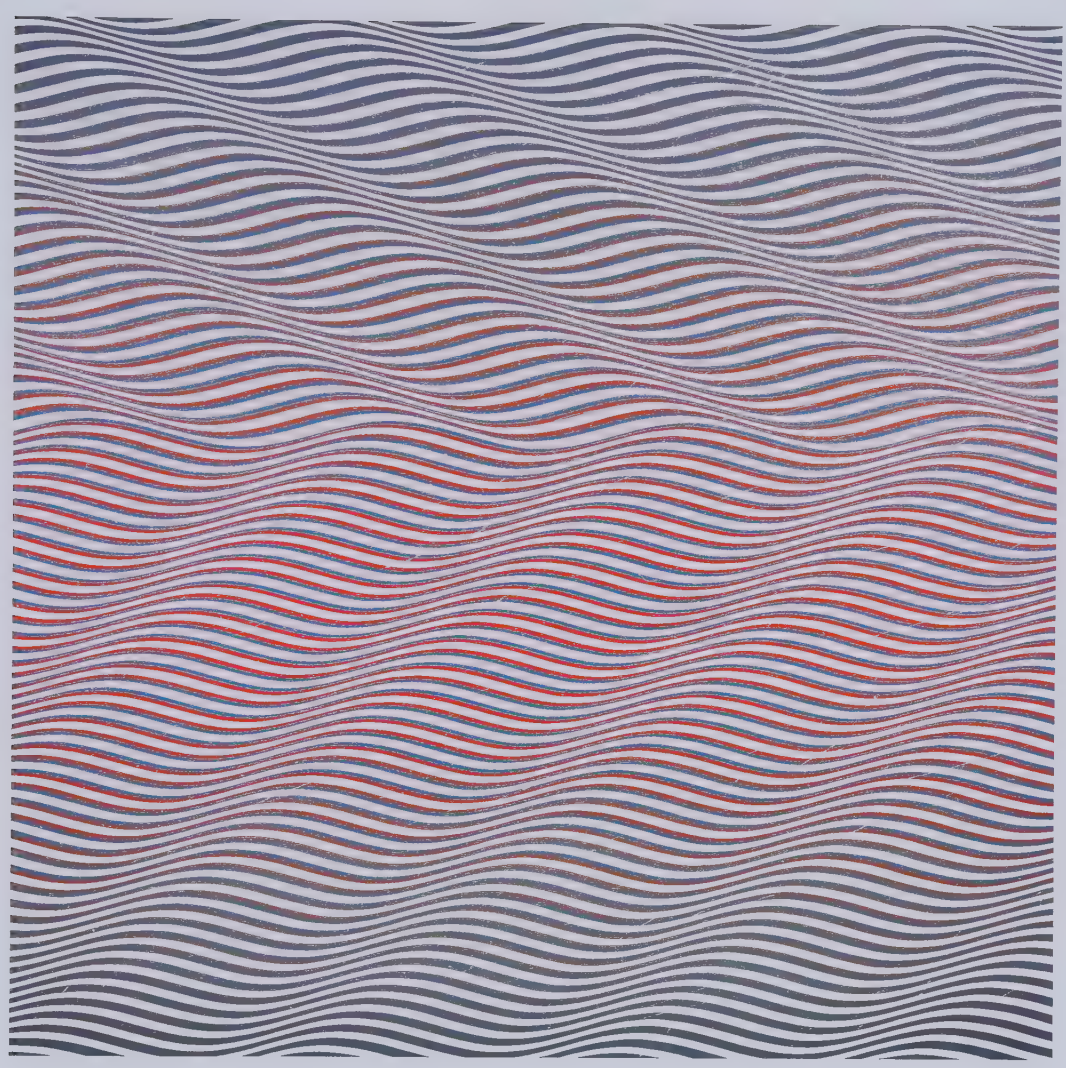
Is that your intention, too, now?

In my own way, yes. I am getting into an area of such delicacy and refinement that I feel it cannot be right. I adjust and adjust and the whole thing is poised so precisely that I fear it is too vulnerable, too rare an endeavour to be healthy. I need something more robust, something stronger. If what I now understand is really true, it should take bolder treatment. I would like to make the duality of colour more clear. Its identity has to be preserved but at the same time it has to stand, I think, a certain degree of modification through interacting with others.[4]

It seems to be inexhaustible, ploughing that field, and very fascinating. But when you are working at your north-light table, trying to get the colours right, often, I know, struggling with one colour for days – aren't you worried sometimes that people might think your activity superficial or even irrelevant?

Well, the whole venture of being a Modern artist could be called irrelevant and superficial. But leaving aside that aspect of your question: if one wants *to do* something at all, which is fundamental to being an artist, one soon realises that as a Modern artist you have to find something to do it *with*. It can be anything provided it takes you out of yourself and helps you to act freely. Earlier I chose form, and later colour, which I believe to be more precise because it is closer to our experience of the real world. Unstable and incalculable, it is also rich and comforting. For a painter it is an ideal vehicle because it can be both a revelation and merely the surface of things.

One of your favourite authors, Marcel Proust, would certainly agree with you. In his essay On Reading *he says about painters in general, and Monet in particular: 'This surface with which they charm and disappoint us, and beyond which we would like to go, is the very essence of that in a sense depthless thing – a mirage arrested on a canvas – which is a vision. And the mist which our eager eyes would like to pierce is the last word in the painter's art. The supreme effort of the writer as of the artist only succeeds in raising partially for us the veil of ugliness and insignificance that leaves us incurious before the universe.'*[5]



Cataract 2 1967

A Visit to Egypt and the Decoration for the Royal Liverpool Hospital [1984]

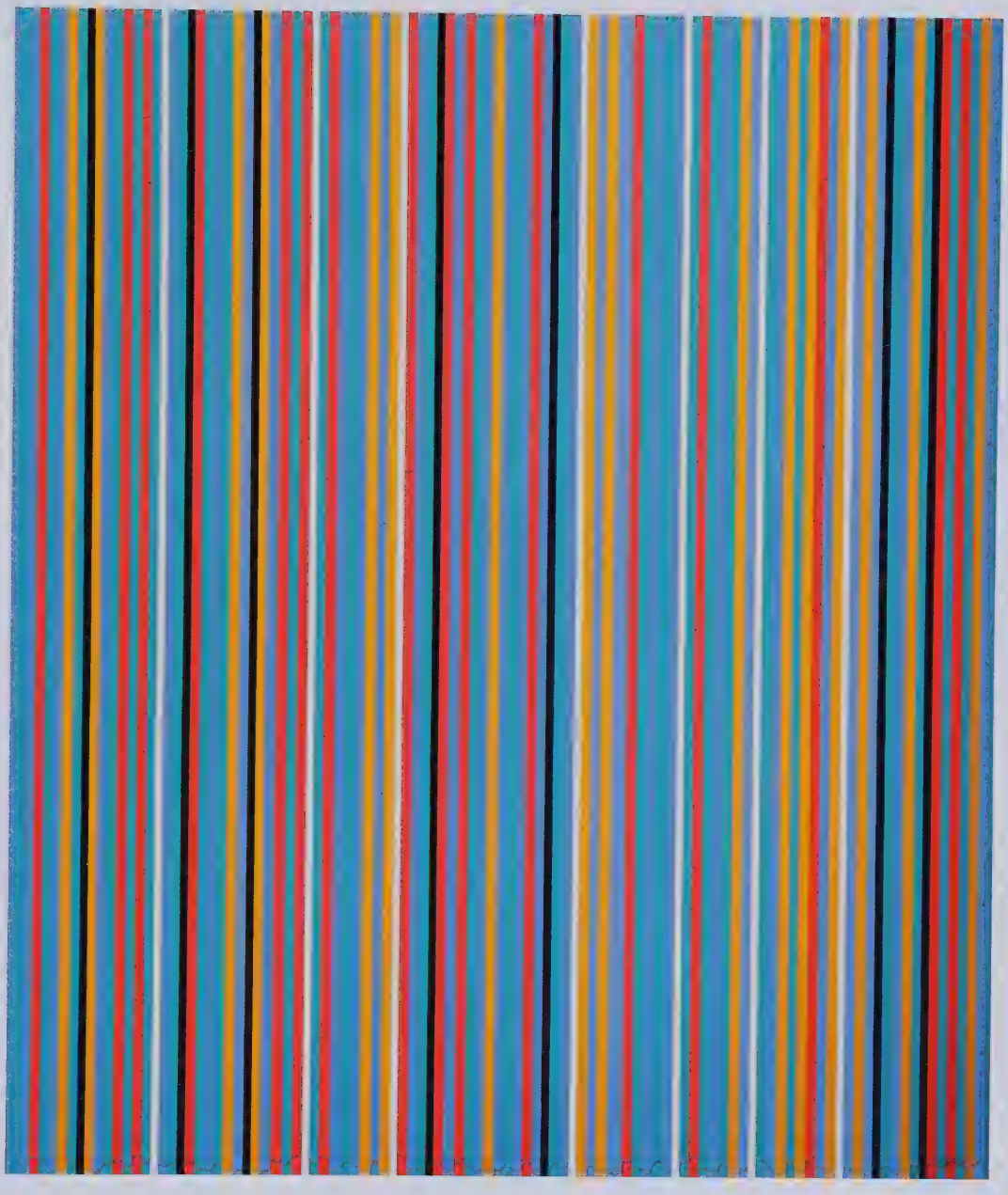
I did not come to work with architecture from a Constructivist background. My work has its roots in perception, in how we see things, and I found my closest historical 'relatives' in the French Impressionists and Post-Impressionists. In the late 1950s I was still working in a figurative style much influenced by Seurat. I learnt from him the close connection between colour and light. But by the time I painted *Pink Landscape* (1960) I was already, without knowing it, drawn towards abstraction. Instead of trying to depict or record the heat and light of a plain in Italy, the subject of the painting, I wanted to make an equivalent for that shimmer of heat, to generate a sparkling, crackling sensation.

Cataract (1967) is a fully abstract painting. The curves, which like the dots and dashes of *Pink Landscape* form the rhythmic matrix of the painting, are made up of pairs of coloured greys which go from barely tinted hues to pure red and turquoise. The effect is of a sudden flood of bright colour.

Big Blue (1982) is one of a group of paintings made at the time of the Liverpool commission. I did it soon after I had been to Egypt. The colours are purer and more brilliant than any I had used before. The vertical bands form groups and intervals. The painting introduces itself with a strong thrust from the left, opens out into a slower passage and turns around in a gentler echo or recapitulation on the right. Although this somewhat musical description faithfully accounts for the painting's conception and construction, it does not mean that one necessarily 'reads' it successively from left to right. Standing in front of the canvas all is simultaneously present, one relates and re-relates the colours both singly and collectively, the underlying structure being more sensed than observed.

THE LIVERPOOL PROJECT

The new Royal Liverpool Hospital is the largest of its kind in Europe. It was a very ambitious project. The authorities wanted to gather under one roof the various relevant University faculties and the medical faculties usually scattered around the city. It took ten years to build, and ran into serious financial difficulties. Very soon after it was completed a committee was



Big Blue 1981–82

formed with the idea of inviting artists to decorate the hospital. It consisted of professors from the University, surgeons and the chief administrator from the Hospital, the director of the Art Gallery and some distinguished Liverpudlians known for their interest in the arts. They asked four Liverpool artists and myself if we could each do something.

I went and had a look, and I didn't know what to do at all. I was offered very nice walls on which I could paint a mural but I felt that this would not be to the point. The hospital was having a serious graffiti problem – partly because of its size and partly because of its anonymity. You couldn't tell on which floor you were, where you were going or even recognise where you had been. Obviously the staff get their bearings quickly, but because of this they easily overlook the fact that the largest part of the hospital population is inevitably newcomers – there are over 1,000 outpatients each day. So the sense of bewilderment about where you actually were seemed to me the thing which I wanted to tackle, and I imagined that it would be quite easy. I thought if I used colour coding – I could mix some good colours – I could work out a system whereby you approach a certain medical unit via accelerating or decelerating units of colour, so that you would know whether you were moving towards or away from the heart of the dental area, or the eye area, or the maternity unit, according to how these colours increased or decreased. But when I was sent maps in order to work this out, I realised of course that it was a multi-dimensional problem because the Hospital facilities were linked in so many different ways. It was just too vast a logistic scheme for me to cope with, especially as the building was finished and any attempt I might have made would have deteriorated into mere graphic information, devoid of aesthetic value. I also found that the colours which I had brought with me were disappointing when put up in the hospital because the walls weren't sufficiently dressed. They didn't have the kind of finish that could take a plain colour and simply looked raw and impoverished.

A VISIT TO EGYPT

At that point I happened to go to Egypt. I went on my way to an exhibition in Tokyo and throughout my visit it never occurred to me that this would have any bearing either on my work or on the hospital problem.

Walking round the Giza group of pyramids one realises how carefully the site on the edge of the desert has been chosen. Beyond the

pyramids one can see the green of the Nile Valley and also, very faintly, the escarpment on the other side. The Nile Valley itself is a slim, slender ribbon of fertile cultivation on each side of which lies arid desert. To the Egyptians this inhospitable area was the 'other side' of life, the Land of the Dead. They believed it to be a real place. Over there 'lived' Pharaohs and nobles who had crossed over, and their subjects equipped them with everything that they would need in that future life. Life and death must have been physically close for the Ancient Egyptians. As they worked in the green fields, whose abundant produce was legendary throughout the ancient world, they had only to raise their eyes to see the stony spectres of the great pyramids, so near they could almost be touched.

Going further up the Nile, from Lower Egypt to Upper Egypt, the desert changes. The West bank becomes a high escarpment, rocky and mountainous and there is, correspondingly, a shift in the way of dealing with burial – a cultural shift. Queen Hatshepsut's temple, which marks a high point in later Egyptian art, has been built into the rock face which towers above it, in a series of shallow horizontal planes moving forward. The square exterior pillars which line the façade are completely covered with carvings in a technique called intaglio. The image is sunk in a hollowed area, the forms are carved within the plane, nothing protrudes: the highest point on a softly curved cheek could only be as a high as the surrounding wall. Intaglio preserves the sense of surface intact. In the North African sunlight the incised line may be dramatically emphasised but the flatness remains taut and firm. The pillars would have been painted. Relief is a method of wall carving with which one is more familiar, it is softer and gentler, in a way less assertive. The Egyptians often used it for interiors and of course it too was painted. The strong emphatic line of intaglio, suitable for an external statement, might have been felt too harsh indoors. Although technically different both intaglio and relief are decorations which strengthen the wall surface visually.

The tombs of the later Pharaohs are deep underground in the Valley of the Kings and are hewn out of solid rock, in the desolate escarpment which flanks the Nile near Luxor, the ancient Thebes. To visit them, one leaves the green valley, crosses the sizzling heat of the desert and descends deep down into the earth. Gradually one loses all sense of orientation, one has no idea of direction or even how far below the ground one is. The actual tomb chambers are plain rectangular cubicles of no architectural distinction, but they blaze with colour and life. One has the feeling of being suddenly transported back into the bustle of the Nile valley itself.

There, in a veritable no-man's-land, the artists have brought about a feeling of sunlight, well-being and pleasure. They have 'painted in' what is essentially not there – they have painted in the architecture, carved cornices, friezes and skirting boards; age old points of reference. They have painted flattened images equivalent to relief and intaglio. All these devices taken together create firm walls where otherwise there would be nondescript surfaces. In this way the stone cells were turned into places which celebrate life and thus defy death. It is not far short of miraculous. When these tombs were actually being packed with all that was necessary for the after-life, there would also have been large painted carvings, free-standing figures, vehicles, pottery and many other things, and one can imagine the actual throng that would have inhabited these places.

Colour of course played an important role in such a scheme. The Ancient Egyptians had a fixed palette. They used the same colours – turquoise, blue, red, yellow, green, black and white – for over 3,000 years. These basic colours were used for everything; for painting the inside and outside of their buildings, for their boats and vehicles, for their furniture and pottery, for their clothes and beads. In each and every usage these colours appeared different but at the same time they united the appearance of the entire culture. Perhaps even more important, the precise shades of these colours had evolved under a brilliant North African light and consequently they seemed to embody this light and even to reflect it back from the walls of the underground chambers which no daylight ever reached.



Tomb of Amenherkhepshef, Valley of the Queens, Luxor

Apart from the Valley of the Kings there are also the Tombs of the Queens which are particularly radiant in colour. In fact, there is a whole necropolis including the tombs of nobles and of the craftsmen who worked on these tombs and who actually lived on the west bank, at Deir El Medina. As they were not part of the high religious cult of the Pharaohs their burial involved less pomp and formality. The tombs are altogether more expressive of the everyday life of ancient Egypt.

In the tomb of the Sennedjem, a craftsman, the success of establishing a sense of place, of making an architectural framework in an eccentric space is, I think, a triumph. On the barrel vault of the ceiling Sennedjem and his wife are shown in a magical scene, receiving gifts from a goddess who rises like a nymph from a sycamore fig tree. But despite the dreamlike quality of the narrative the understanding of flatness still holds the surface of the curved ceiling as firmly as any wall plane in the great tombs.

Into these tombs went all the things that had coloured the life of the owner – his pleasures, his occupation and everything that he would have liked to have with him as well as what he would need in the Land of the Dead. The scene of 'Hunting and Fishing in the Marshes' from the tomb of the Noble Nakht has a tremendous feeling of action about it. One can practically hear the beating of the birds' wings and the thrashing in the papyrus at the edge of the water. The formalisation of the papyrus is a very cunning way of making both another wall division and providing a little echo of the frieze above. Even when the Egyptian painters are relaxed in their handling, the amazing formal abstraction continues: the water is represented absolutely flat, as a vertical plane.

The tomb of Noble Sennefer is famous for the painted vine which covers the ceiling. It's a brilliant invention. The ceiling was rough hewn to a depth of at least six inches, fluctuating between projections and hollows. This may well have been deliberate. It supports the plastic sensations of a vine as it grows, climbs and spreads above you: the curving of the stem and the branches, the heavy clustering of the grapes, the turning of the leaves. The painting of the vine is as economical in its actual treatment as it is ingenious in using the physical roughness of the ceiling. The vine leaves were clearly painted as single flat discs of colour – with three little strokes added on top to indicate their real shape. So even in the smallest detail, the formalisation of a vine leaf, the prevailing cultural conventions still hold.

I came back and I was faced with the hospital. So I took stock of the wall with new eyes. It had a two-inch economy skirting board and a nine-inch band of black rubber to prevent heavy pieces of equipment damaging the walls. Costs had escalated and savings simply had to be made in the standards of the interior and they inevitably were at the expense of appearance.

I decided to try to compensate for what had been foregone. I increased the skirting to six inches by 'faking' it – that is by adding a bit more to it, and I introduced a third black band up above to give balance to the corridor; something to look at up there, something to alleviate the vacancy. Between these demarcations I put broad bands of one basic colour and lightened these with narrow white bands to build up a rhythm. I then added bands of other colours. The first design was fundamentally blue, with red, black and white. It was rough and rather crude but it did the job, it held the surface taut and it gave the wall a presence, so I developed the design in other colours and refined it. But then something happened. I had, unconsciously, reverted to painterly thinking and introduced subtleties of colour as though it were a canvas. I made five full-scale cartoons of different colours and took them up to Liverpool to try out in the corridors. When they were pinned up, the one which I had treated more as a canvas than as a decoration looked wrong. I wondered why and eventually realised that it needed to be *looked at*, like a painting, rather than taken in as a whole. This clarified for me what I was trying to do. A decoration should not demand scrutiny, should have no details to attract



Royal Liverpool Hospital decoration 1982

attention. It should be passive on exactly those points where a painting has to be active. You should become aware of a decoration almost bodily: as being below you, at waist height; and above you. The other full-scale designs clearly had these qualities and worked well. Of those the hospital staff chose the one they wanted.

The next problem was how we were going to get the design up on the wall. It wasn't practical to paint it because the corridors were immensely busy. We decided to print it on vinyl, which could then be installed like a wallpaper. Graham Henderson, who has worked as an assistant and silk-screen printer for me, took endless trouble to get the right colour saturation and density.[1] We printed it in panels and hung it, waiting to see what would happen. The chief nursing officer was worried that the large area of white in the middle of the decoration could be an invitation to scribble, but I felt that it would be all right and that we should risk it. The printed vinyl has been up for two years now and though of course it is battered and scuffed and has been 'used' it can be washed, it can be replaced and it is not expensive. It is what you might call a working decoration. And so far there hasn't been one single piece of graffiti on it and *that* is the real test.

The whole experience was very interesting and taught me a great deal. Following the Egyptian example, I painted the architecture, rethinking classical points of human reference – skirting, cornice, dado, frieze – and I used bright, flat colours to give light.

It seems to me that decoration has a function as fundamental to human environment as the need to construct in the first place and that it goes way beyond mere embellishment. One does not even have to go back as far as Ancient Egypt; nearer to us, in the Renaissance, decoration was clearly used to extend the architectural bones into a flowing, rhythmic space and to establish those points of reference through which human beings relate to their surroundings.

According to Sensation

in conversation with Robert Kudielka [1990]

When I visited your studio in 1985 I saw some of the last stripe paintings you made. Subsequently you introduced narrow regular diagonals and then increased the scale of all units, orchestrating large areas of colour. Throughout that period you retained a strictly limited palette. In several respects your recent paintings display marked differences. What prompted you to make these changes?

In the mid-1980s I felt that if I continued in the direction my work was taking it would inevitably lead to over-refinement. Those selected limitations, disciplines and attitudes which had previously provided grit and grist to my mill might now, unless I discarded them, get in the way of any real development. As one can see in Matisse, to preserve a freshness in working it is important to go back sometimes to first principles.[1]

And yet these new canvases do not seem to be pared down further – quite the reverse in fact.

No. Nevertheless they have been preceded by dispensing with a few notions such as the exclusivity of an absolute, extreme stance, rigorous control, even *the new*. In making them I am trying to use a way of working which as an Abstract painter I might have considered obsolete earlier. It seems to me that Abstraction, in the bare eighty odd years since it began, may be only at a similar stage in its development to that of the Italian Primitives.

But what about the contribution of an artist such as Mondrian? Surely you would not regard him as primitive?

No, not at all, he's just the opposite. Mondrian is a kind of Giotto in Abstraction in that he took Abstract art beyond any naïve state of icon-making, giving it plastic values and relationships which can only be compared in their potential to those which Giotto introduced into figurative painting.[2]

In what way do you relate to Mondrian? I can see that there could be a connection to his late paintings, particularly to Broadway Boogie Woogie.

I've always loved that painting. In the 1960s I even tried to make a full-scale copy of it. But that little exercise taught me that one cannot get into and take off straightaway from a great work of art, especially a late one. Better to go back to earlier, less formed stages. Mondrian's roots lie in Synthetic Cubism, out of this came the entire body of his work. If one looks, for instance, at Picasso's *Portrait of a Young Girl* (1914) one sees that he has eliminated the distinction between the figure and its surroundings and redefined this relationship through the collage technique as an open flowing rhythm. Mondrian turned this particular spatial quality, determined as it is by pure relationships, into the basis of a plastic art which 'destroys', as he puts it, any concrete assertion of the elements with which it is constructed.[3]

But the 'destruction and annihilation' of which Mondrian speaks is not the same as the perceptual dissolution in your work.

No, certainly not. He wants to bring about a kind of dynamic opposition in which all factors – line, form, colour etc. – lose their separate existence



Pablo Picasso:
Portrait of a Young Girl
1914

and simultaneously retain their different character. Whereas I used to try and push the elements to such a point that they hovered on the brink of sheer sensation …

And now?

It's different – in fact almost the opposite. Right up to, and in some ways including, the stripe paintings I used to build up *to* sensation, accumulating tension until it released a perceptual experience that flooded the whole as it were. Now I try to take sensation as the guiding line and build, *with* the relationships it demands, a plastic fabric which has no other *raison d'être* except to accommodate the sensation it solicits.

The result is a remarkable change on two counts, in the type of sensation produced as well as in the fabric that carries it. Pure visual effects and chromatic interaction in particular are much less prominent; and the even colour structure that came after the compact imagery of the black and white work now seems to have been overtaken by an entirely different attitude to the whole process of pictorial organisation.

Well, I wanted *more*. A way of working which allowed me to get to grips with plastic issues, to get closer to the real problems of painting. I threw out notions of what the result should be. I crossed the vertical register with a strong diagonal, upsetting the balance of the canvas. That gave me time. I could work against those directional forces, counteracting them through colour and rhythm.

What then is your objective if not compositional harmony?

If one is trying to give sensation a leading role one is dealing with something elusive, essentially unstable, and highly responsive. When it is going well everything you do, even the smallest change made, will affect the entire field. In order to get somewhere one has to have two things in mind: to keep the spatial flow of the painting open and, at the same time, to hold it in place through continually checking it. I suppose this could sound like a paradox, but only if one thinks in logical terms. In painting, it seems to me, *contrast* is the basic relationship. Even that which appears to be harmony is actually a harmony of contrasts, be they spatial, directional, formal, chromatic, tonal, etc.



Ease 1987

Obviously colour is still very much on your mind, although the new paintings seem to be less concerned with 'colour for colour's sake'.

Yes. I no longer treat colour in a purely perceptual way. Sensation of colour is a different thing, it takes in attendant qualities, so to speak, such as glitter or sombreness, buoyancy or weight, dull glow or full brilliance, impalpability or density, softness or hardness – in short a surprising variety of sensual relationships.

What about this curiously unpredictable space? It seems to me as if the colour activity which you played out in the past chromatically has now been turned into an abstract spatial movement.

I think of space as another plastic agent grounded in colour organisation. As you know, colours can adopt different planes, similar ones or approximately the same, according to the context in which they are placed. So a certain green, for instance, may be pushed forward by one group of relationships and nearby the same green, with different affiliations, may counteract that step by drawing back. Meanwhile adjacent colours may be taking up spatial positions which emphasise, modify, or even reverse the planes of those greens. In this way a gentle kind of emerging and receding syncopation arises that can pick up pace, sometimes developing into a rhythm.

But the dynamism is not just cumulative, is it? In looking at your new work one is made aware of a rhythm alternating between the recognition of a specific area and the sudden realisation of the field as a whole. There are always firm and clear constellations which can be spotted and discerned spatially – one plane of colour distinct from another. But in those moments when the eye periodically switches to a simultaneous view of the totality of the canvas this assessment collapses, giving way to a completely different reading. The undeniable depth of the paintings doesn't seem to operate on a figure-ground relationship – not even in the sense of ambiguity.

No, it has to be an *abstract* space. That is to say, if sensation alone is the yardstick, then the painting has to be a place that allows for the relatively independent workings of sensation. Although in the objective world sensations are always prompted by something or other, they are not necessarily bound to whatever may trigger them off. They have a life of their own, as every painter knows when he is working: they



Set Fair 2 1990

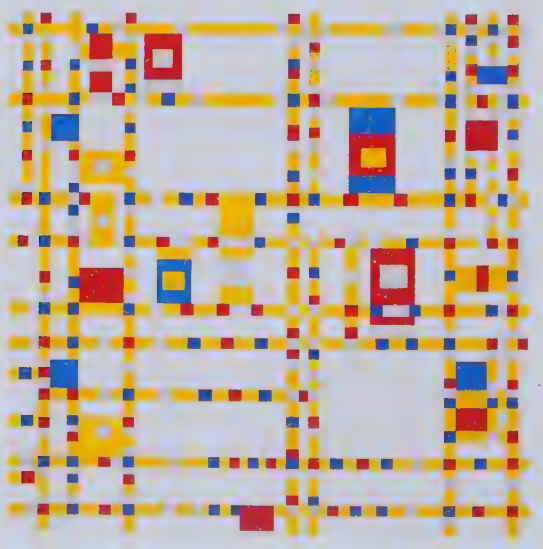
change, but not in any logical way; sometimes one may not even notice them, only to find them turning up again with unexpected force; but, above all, they are *coherent* – without being in any way continuous. Disruption, friction, sudden ease and deceptively smooth passages all play an important part in the web of sensation.

It is, then, this working experience that has led you to discard the criteria of the unified image?

Yes. It's simply not enough to operate from the closed world of a specialised ideal. If a painting is to be a work, a work that aspires to the condition of art, it is obliged to express the tenor of existence. There is no escaping the changing pulse of our experience. To assert, for instance, a holistic image or the even distribution of incidents as a viable expression amounts to counterfeit, mere 'fabrication'. Art has to be expressive of the urgency and failure, love and inadequacy that drive human endeavour.

Expression – that's the term, I think. Despite your reference to Mondrian I have the feeling that your new work is somehow closer to that of Jackson Pollock.

I see little significant difference between the two. *Autumn Rhythm* meant as much to me as *Broadway Boogie Woogie.*[4] After all, sensation is not a question of style.



Piet Mondrian:
Broadway Boogie Woogie
1942–43
©2009 Mondrian/Holtzman Trust c/o HCR International Warrenton, VA USA

Braque spoke about the space of Cubism, and Picasso always of the form, and although one defines the other, the approach is diametrically opposed. To speak about the space in a painting is less immediately clear than to speak of the form. Form implies shape, volume, parts which are nearer, parts which are farther, and that defines the space. If you start with building a space you have to find forms which articulate it coherently. It's a more difficult approach, but it is one which in Modern painting is bound up with the interest in colour. In Renaissance painting, broadly speaking, the forms describe positions in a perspectival space, but when painters first tried to put colour onto those forms they found that an object in the background could appear to be on the same plane as one in the foreground. They discovered that colour took up positions of its own, independent of any linear or perspectival organisation.

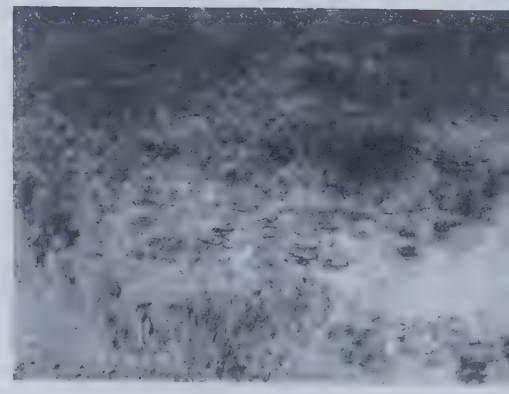
In the real world one generally identifies things, and colour is seen as related to them, as the colour of leaves, atmosphere, earth, water, skin, clothes, silk or satin, etc. But in painting colour is the one material through which everything is brought into existence; there is no other underpinning except the surface of the canvas. That's where the problem opens up.[1] Colour activity is incomparably stronger in painting than in external reality. This is something that all good painters know; but imagine what it must have been like to wrestle with this in the teeth of a rigid system such as linear perspective. It was the Impressionists who in their different ways took the form and space that colour makes as the determining factor in organising a painting.

While Modern painters have probably learnt most about the space that colour describes from Cézanne there's been a tendency to think that Monet is merely beautiful and suggestive. (As Cézanne said: 'only an eye' – adding though, – 'but what an eye!') His great weakness in many people's minds is the lack of structure. But in fact, Monet's paintings are structured – and as radically so as Cézanne's – although according to a different perceptual experience. Monet seems to paint what we actually experience in looking, the drifting and gathering of sight itself. In his late water-lily paintings he achieved a sort of perfection after a lifetime of research, *as a painter*, into the nature of perception itself.

There is seldom a single focal point in my paintings; in general, my paintings are multi-focal. You can't call it un-focused 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 centre has something to do with the loss of the 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'.[2]

As it is generally felt, I think, that such a thing as an absolute focus is no longer possible, other ways of paying attention to things that matter have to be found. Obviously this has concerned other arts as well. Proust, for example, is actually a writer without a single focal point, and so is much of Samuel Beckett;[3] some modern music and, again, Monet's late water lily paintings. It is all to do with the loss of certainties. Nevertheless, in losing this focus we find ourselves moving in a new range of experience, open to things that were previously less accessible.

In my earlier paintings I wanted the space between the picture plane and the spectator to be active. It was in that space, paradoxically, that the painting 'took place'. 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 in it credibly.

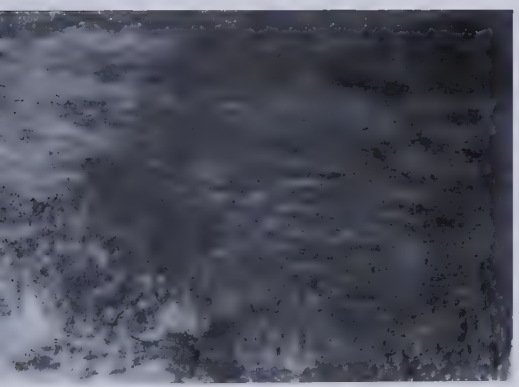


I discovered a well-known principle (it's always exciting when you find things for yourself): that you cannot have movement without its opposite – stasis. There is no change without a constant. If you can bring the two things together in an image you have a dynamic, something that is not descriptive of movement, but which gives the sensation of it. For instance, in the painting *Descending* every other vertical is straight and evenly disposed across the canvas. So that the movement goes in a zigzag progress through alternating straight and curving verticals, from a narrow closing at the top left descending to the narrow strip of diagonals at the bottom right. It is one thing against another. In my recent paintings it is the active diagonals that are countered by the static verticals. (Cézanne and the great Venetians knew that the diagonal thrust helps to activate the slow backward and forward pulse of colour.)

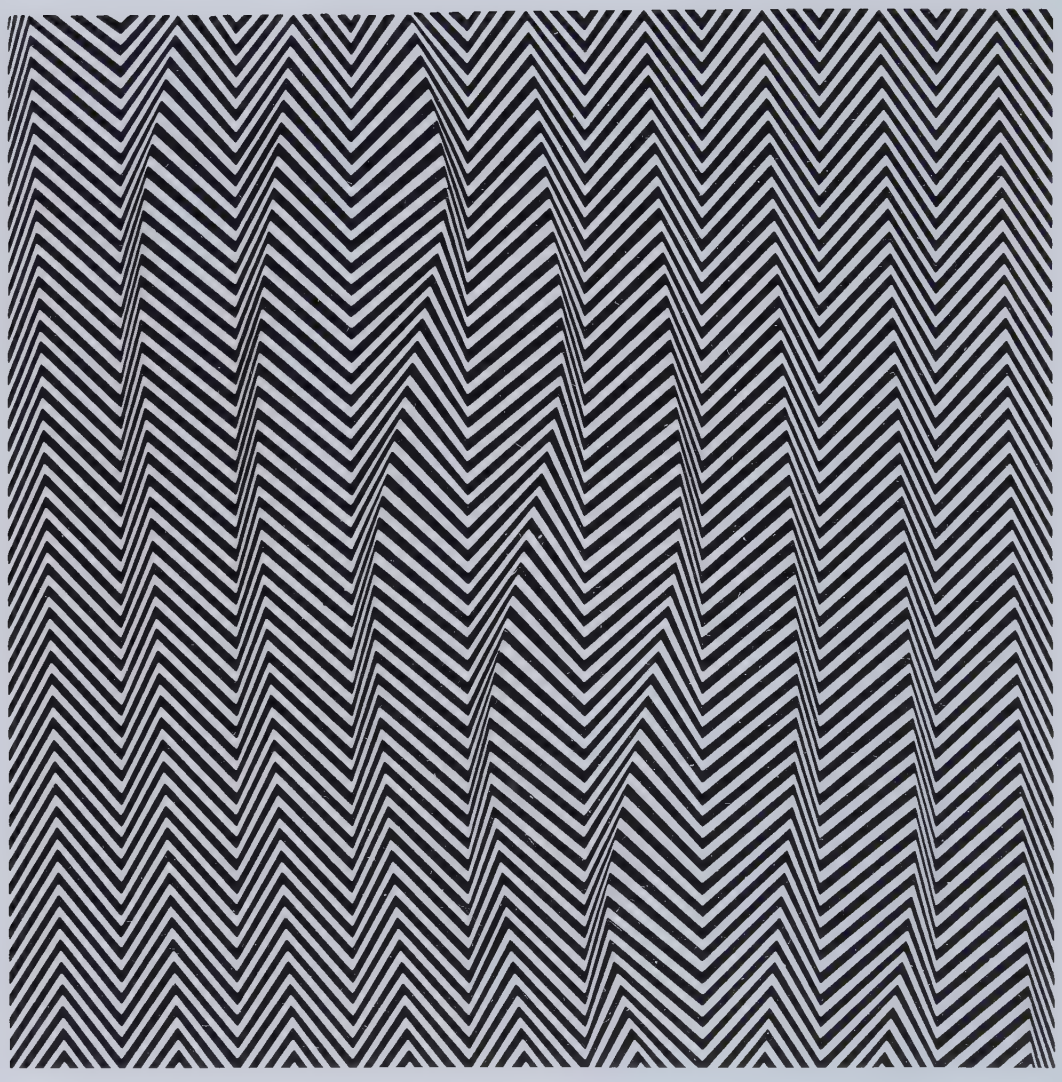
MAKING THE PAINTINGS

People sometimes ask me how the paintings are made, and I always find that an odd question. Everything about the painting is there to be seen on the actual surface. The paintings themselves answer this question; there is nothing I can add to what I have put down there. I know that might sound as though I were evading the issue, but it is in fact true.

In making the paintings I proceed step by step, and test the ground before I make a move. It may be that which gives the impression that my approach is programmatic. Actually, it's a process of trial and error, in general and particularly in finding out about the next move.



Claude Monet:
The Water Lily Pond
c.1915-26



Descending 1965/6

In a daydream way I have a sort of hunger about what I am going to do, or rather about the sensation I want the painting to precipitate or convey. It's actually bringing this sensation into existence that is the difficulty; what Cézanne called 'realisation'. Not only is the whole subject extremely elusive, but being perceptual it is as much inside one as it is 'out there' in the work. I used to set out to capture it as if one were casting a net to catch sensation and make it visible. Now I build it up, make a sort of fabric with different places and situations so that there is more to it.

Copying is the old way of learning. In 1959 I made a copy of Seurat's *Le Pont de Courbevoie*. 'Doing the same' is a way of getting closer than you ever can by simply observing. I learnt a great deal, and some of the implications of what I had experienced then only became clear to me much later. At that time I came across a wonderful review of Seurat's work by Félix Fénéon, in which he says: ' ... here in truth the accidents of the brush are futile, trickery is impossible; there is no place for bits of bravura, – let the hand be numb, but let the eye be agile, perspicacious, cunning.' [4]

PAINTING AND REALITY

When I made the first black and white painting, I did not intend to make more than one. And then I became interested; I thought perhaps I can try one more. The first one hadn't done quite what I wanted, which was to say something, as a very personal message to a particular person, about the nature of things.[5] At that point in time I wanted to say: that *there were absolutes*; that one could not pretend that black was white. I wanted to make a deliberate statement, to make a thing that put itself into hazard by some aspect of its own nature. And that was the beginning of the black and white paintings. People at the time thought, and some people still seem to think, that they were paintings having to do with optical experiment (and with what was called 'Op art' later on); really they were an attempt to say something about stabilities and instabilities, certainties and uncertainties. They were never simply about how fascinating it might be to take black and white and put them together into those optically dynamic configurations.



Attar 1976

I learnt a great deal about colour from copying Seurat. His 'method', as he called it, is more accessible than, say, the way Cézanne and Monet treated colour. But I still did not realise for a very long time to what a profound extent the basis of colour is instability. An element so responsive to relationships and interaction as colour cannot be stable and definitive in the same way that forms described by line can be. A square is a square. It is an absolute. One recognises when a square ceases to be a square. It's conceptually defined. But a blue ... ! The hues of blue are infinite, and the same blue will look different in different contexts: in reality, and more crucially, in a painting. One never sees a colour isolated, and so you never know exactly *what any particular colour is in itself.* On a canvas, true, it is physical paint, but colour is not just material. Each shade or hue gives off a different light, and they interact according to their neighbouring colours, where they are placed in the whole, and what their quantities are.

In the paintings I did in the early 1980s, after my visit to Egypt, I chose long thin vertical stripes, because they have very little body and are mostly 'edges'. The interaction between colours is most intense when one colour borders on another. The long edges of the stripes maximise this relationship. When placed vertically the colour event is seen as a horizontal spread of coloured light.

It's in those paintings that I began to build with sensation directly. In that review by Fénéon that I quoted before he says something else which is very much to the point: 'These colours, isolated on the canvas, recombine on the retina: we have therefore, not a mixture of material colours (pigments) but a mixture of differently coloured rays of light.'[6] That is right – but it's not simply light waves in the scientific sense of wave-lengths. It's more as though the colour is breathing, giving off a subtly tinted cloud of its own transformed energy. It happens all the time in nature, but it comes into its own in painting: there colour is at its purest.

Something to Look At

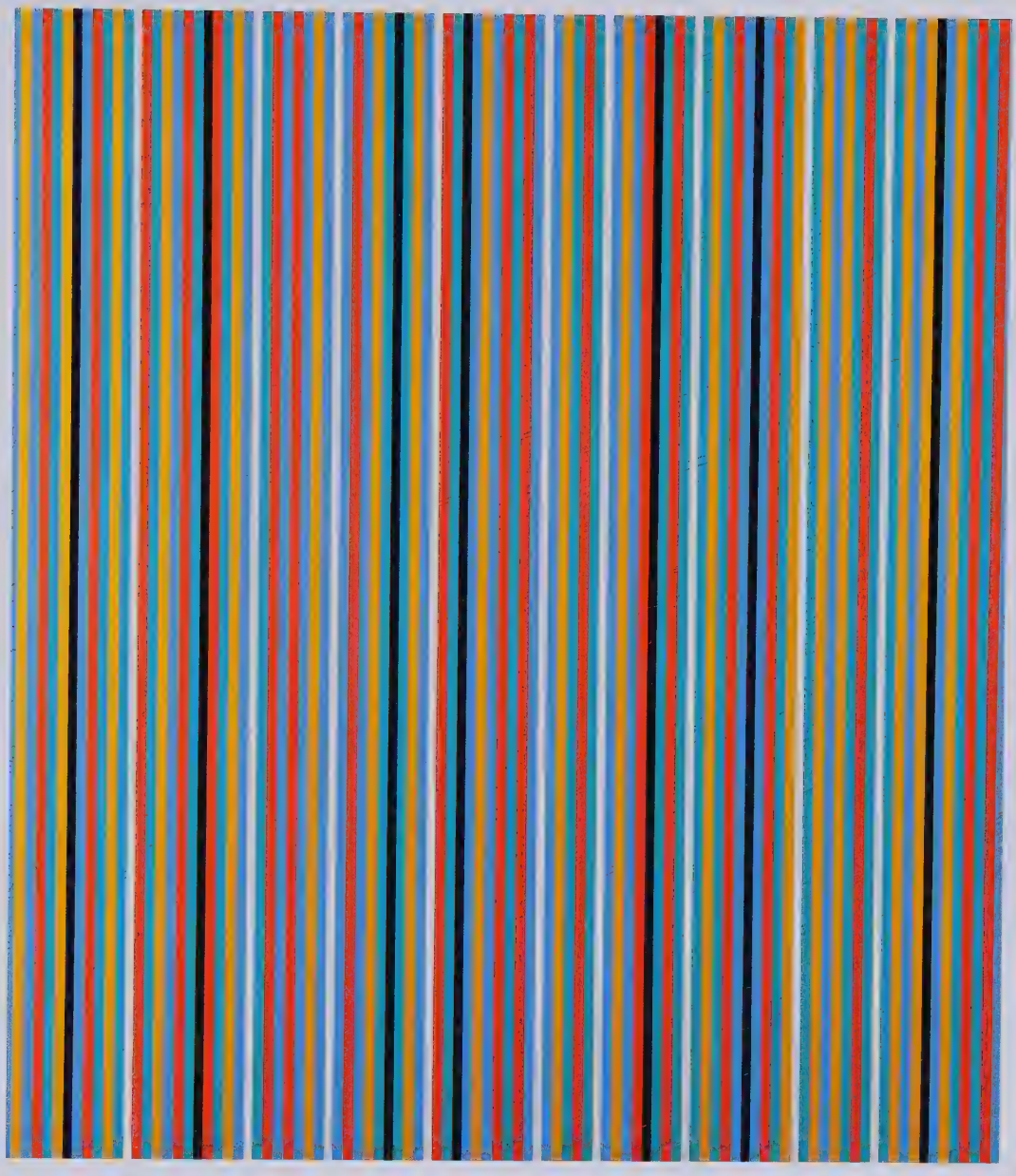
in conversation with Alex Farquharson [1995]

Your paintings, although abstract, all have titles. In what way do they refer to a particular place, subject matter or content outside themselves as paintings?

I try to title my paintings according to their spirit. I think paintings should have titles, they can be a small bridge by which the spectator can enter into the painting. I usually draw on memory, memories of sensations in the past which have some sort of correspondence with those in the painting. Take for instance *Winter Palace*, a painting which I made soon after visiting Egypt in the winter of 1979–80. It belongs to a group of paintings which I began on my return. In Luxor I stayed in the old 'Winter Palace' hotel. It was a luxurious visit in many ways: cool fresh mornings filled with brilliant light, the silk-smooth surface of the Nile, seemingly undisturbed, and each day seeing the tomb paintings, with their pure and beautiful colours. But when it came to titling the painting I had completely forgotten these details and was somewhat at a loss. Then my dealer – thinking of Russia – said: 'What about *Winter Palace?*' It was just right, suggesting something cool, something luxurious, something man-made, fabricated, and of course the colours I had seen in Egypt! *Set Fair* had a different sort of christening. There is a white movement running through the painting and a buoyant feeling about it. My assistants normally have the radio on, so sometimes I hear those cryptic weather messages sent out for sailors off the coast of England. One often used is 'set fair' – implying that the course is good and promises well.

When do these associations come in?

Certainly not at the beginning. I do not set out with the idea of making any reference at all. I start from the means, from the colours, from the forms, from those two together. But as I go on criteria evolve through which I judge what I am doing, I let myself be guided; though in an oblique way. That is to say, sensations that I have experienced somewhere at some time begin to indicate a direction. They are not attached to anything particular, but when I recognise them in a painting, in certain abstract relationships there, then I feel that I have got something *real*, that I am on



Winter Palace 1981



Conversation 1992

firm ground and can build. Take a sensation like shine, for instance, which has always attracted me, as it has many painters – Van Eyck, Rembrandt, Renoir, Veronese, Delacroix, Matisse, to name only a few. Now, there is the shine of hair, the shine of skin, of certain fabrics, of leaves, of water, and many other things. But when one gets shine in a painting it's not the shine of actual hair or skin or water that is shining there, but something the painter has produced, on the surface of the canvas. Or take the sensation of something being solid – as opposed to something impalpable. Colours can adopt the most surprising qualities when put in particular relationships. They can appear heavy or light, hard or soft, warm or cold, and so on. When I am working I may be following up specific qualities like the feeling given by sun-warmed stone, or the coldness of metal, by rough earthenware, the softness of sand, pale golden corn. I will have experienced these sensations on countless forgotten occasions – and when I find them again on the canvas, this is a point of contact.

I can see these kinds of associations, particularly in your recent colour work. But how do they affect making a painting?

You can't of course build with associations. As Paul Klee says: 'Creative art never begins with a poetic mood or idea, but with the building of one or more figures, the harmonisation of a few colours and tonalities … '.[1] For me this means that I don't begin with the appearance of form and colour as such, but with their spatial properties. That is the first step, and through building a coherent spatial order various and diverse sensations emerge. I try to sort these out and assign them rightful places. Some may go by the board, and when this happens I simply lose that particular instance and opportunity – yet others will arise in their stead. If this 'placing' goes well the actual sensation becomes part of the formative fabric of the painting. But until the whole is brought together, everything is uncertain and subject to change.

This sounds very much like how a composer might organise his work. When looking at the studies for the vertical stripe paintings one can't help seeing the much used analogy between music and abstract painting.

There is a parallel indeed. Music provides a sensual experience by the organisation of a limited range of formal means – notes, scales, intervals and their possible relationships. This is an essentially abstract basis. But

obviously this does not mean that music has no content. In fact, the abstract formulation is both the key to an original experience and the actual realisation of it. This seems to me where the correspondence between music and painting lies. For instance, in the group of stripe paintings to which *Winter Palace* belongs I deliberately used a classic musical structure.[2] On the left-hand side an introduction states the theme of the painting, as it were, the principal colour relationships and their potential chords. Some aspects of these are then developed, particularly those which contrast spatially and chromatically with the opening phrase. This passage, which is altogether more subdued, is followed by variations and repetitions of the initial theme. Finally the second, quieter movement, with its spatial and chromatic contrasts, is echoed in turn and brought to a close on the right side of the canvas. This left to right reading seems to be quite natural to a vertical stripe organisation. But of course one of the things which began to frustrate me, and increasingly so towards the end of this group of paintings, was that I wanted to be able to go around a painting, to take your eye upwards, downwards and diagonally across, in all sorts of ways and rhythms that I could not manage with just the vertical bands. Also, as I went on, the colour began to fill up the paintings to such an extent that it seemed as though it could hardly be contained any longer. These were the main reasons why I moved …

You mean, why you upset the vertical field with a strong diagonal thrust? This was certainly a major formal change, as one can see in Set Fair. *It seems to have affected the meaning of your paintings as well. Unlike so much abstract painting that one could call formalist there is some sense of content in your work, although obviously not in a figurative or landscape way.*

Well, one has to distinguish between subject matter and content. They are completely different things. The subject of a work which rates as a work of art, whether it's a poem, a piece of music, or a painting, has been treated in such a way that it appears literally as subject *matter*, something on which and with which the artist has worked, and it is this involvement – this response – which creates the content. Cézanne's apples do not simply represent the fruit which you can buy in the market, they are not a substitute for the real thing. What one loves about them is the artist's reaction to them: his particular response to their roundness, to their good rich colours, to their earthy weight and solidity. That's what makes the content. Or look at Velázquez's *Las Meñinas*, that enormous painting



Lagoon 1 1997

in the Prado. It represents a scene at the Spanish court, but what is expressed is the fragility of those figures at the bottom of the canvas – and the artist conveys this human understanding by an extraordinary piece of pictorial thinking. The tiny Infanta and her attendants are pitched, with all the glitter and bric-à-brac of their regalia, against a monumental volume of impalpable grey which fills the canvas. It is the very first thing you see and sets the tenor of the whole painting.

It's quite remarkable that when speaking about your work you generally refer not to other abstract artists, let alone those of a formalist orientation, but to artists from the past with a figurative subject matter or to modern painters who chose not to take the path towards total abstraction.

I think Abstract art should try to be as resourceful and as expressive as the great figurative art of the past. It's no good continuing to think of it solely in terms of formal reduction. A painter like Matisse, for instance, has practised a far more abstract use of colour – particularly in his Fauvist work and his late paper cut-outs – than any of the radical abstract formalists. If Abstraction is going to win its case and prove its viability it has to be more concerned with the real issues of painting than with concepts and theories. I would like to show that my abstract chromatic and formal means make as good and practical a basis to start from as figurative subject matter did in the past.

In your very recent paintings there seems to be a new freedom and richness in the way forms and colours are organised. There is an overlayering of shape, in particular, combined with incredibly vivid, somehow specific colours, creating a sense of illusionistic space – very airy, like the space of skies and water …

It's the sensation of *depth*, which I've always been interested in. In perception depth is the primary spatial dimension, as Merleau-Ponty saw.[3] The idea of a two-dimensional 'flatness' in painting is a geometric concept of the same sort as the construction of a perspectival box which gives the 'illusion' of a three-dimensional projection. Pictorial space is deep in the sense that there is nothing behind, as it were, no ultimate base or distance to which it relates. It is made up of contrasts and the different planes which colours adopt on the canvas. I began to explore this kind of depth in the colour stripes of paintings like *Winter Palace*

and *Parasol*. At first it was very shallow, the advances and retreats of the colours in their various relationships were rather slight, but as I went on and eventually broke the vertical structure it became more and more possible to open up and articulate depths in the painting, to make an airy, shifting space in it.

But what does this space consist of? It looks as though it's made up out of colours – but at the same time the planes of colour seem to exist in *it … I can't quite sort this out.*

That's the point – colour does both, it's both the planes and also the space which envelopes them. In working out this relationship I'm not unlike a composer who occupies your ear with sounds and rhythms which hold your attention, and in listening to this structure you hear something more, something between and around the notes – and this is in fact the content of the piece. The colours in my paintings should engage the eye, give you something to look at, and in time, through ordered looking – with having seen some things first and others, more slowly, later – you may become involved in an experience that is not just visual. The paintings offer, each through its different character, a space which invites and accommodates a certain group of sensations – and it is *there* the content can come through.

In Conversation with Isabel Carlisle [1998]

Bridget, the great contribution of Abstract art to the 20th-century is that it found a way to express human experiences that cannot be conveyed in figurative painting. Can you say in what way abstraction takes the shared experience of being alive in the latter part of the 20th-century and expresses it in a way that has not been expressed before?

I think that the emergence of Abstract art in the 20th-century has placed it in a unique position as an art form. It's clearly at a very early stage in its development, and as such, it's very much to do with discovery, with discovering its parameters, its forms and its language. But there are different understandings of abstraction. At the beginning of the century, abstraction was generally seen as a way of distilling an essence. It soon became clear, however, that this could not be achieved in any absolute sense by artists. Samuel Beckett made an interesting distinction between artists who tried to express some sort of quintessence and those who work in the face of there being no such possibility.[1]

In Mondrian both these strands exist. He was certainly striving for a universal principle, but at the same time he realised that this could not be imposed as an absolute. There seemed to be no alternative to expressing precisely this insight, and expressing it solely through the bare and simple means of painting itself. In this way, Mondrian, apart from the obvious difference of style, is surprisingly close to Jackson Pollock. Both discovered forms of expression which, as I understand the term, are purely abstract. For Mondrian the putting together of the abstract elements of painting, in the way that he had analysed them, became expressive in itself. 'Composition is expression', he stated.[2] Pollock, on the other hand, saying 'I am nature',[3] is expressive through his gestures, through his responses to what was happening as he worked on a painting. Both are genuine abstract realisations in that the finding of the means and the discovery of the content are one and the same thing.

Even with new forms of art, an artist is not working in isolation. There is an awareness of the cumulative body of human experience – history,

literature, physics, psychology and so on – that enables a new point of view, a new understanding to be reached. What influences of this kind have you found important?

Apart from looking at paintings, which I have gradually found out how to do, reading has meant a lot to me. Not so much because you actually learn anything that you can apply directly to your own problems, but because you find that your own dilemmas are shared by other people. For instance, when Beckett says 'the expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express ... together with the obligation to express',[4] it's a consolation – and an encouragement to know that he felt this.

In that way, there have been a number of artists earlier in the 20th-century who were well aware of the very big cultural changes threatening art altogether, and who, while acknowledging and recognising these changes, were determined to salvage what could be useful in new forms. It's hard work, however it's the only way that can win through to new solutions. Unfortunately, considering how pressing the problem is, the artists who seem to be trying to deal with this situation now in their work are relatively few.

The last of my heroes in this context would be Francis Bacon, who has a great deal of an abstract painter in him, despite what he may say himself about abstraction. For me, at any rate, the figurative subject matter is the least expressive aspect of his art.

When people look at your paintings and drawings they feel dazzled, transported, lifted out of everyday existence. Yet you have always maintained that your paintings do in art what nature does all around us. Can you explain that further?

People frequently experience visual events in nature which are far more violent, and even blinding, than anything I have ever done on canvas. A glittering expanse of sea or a shimmering tree is far more disturbing. The hub of the matter seems to be what is expected and what can therefore be accommodated. People would be very shocked indeed if the world itself was as dead in its appearance as they seem to expect a painting to be.

It seems that you have had a gift from an early age, as a child in Cornwall, to be able to apprehend and enjoy moments of visual intensity. One example that you have given is of watching the sun going down behind a headland,

throwing the masses of rock into black silhouettes while the sea becomes a blinding sheet of silver. Would it be wrong to make any direct connection between any specific place or time and a specific painting?

Yes, it would be wrong. When I am working I respond to the visual properties which emerge, and through these I build up a complex of sensations in which you will perhaps rediscover certain experiences which you have encountered before in nature. That is to say, the final painting is the source of this discovery and not simply an afterthought or the consequence of a previous experience. Or to put it another way, nature is not a starting point somewhere outside my work which then leads me into doing it.

Artists in the 20th-century have been very conscious of the collapse of the shared experience of spirituality as religion has declined. Is there an aspect of your art, perhaps the intensity that it conveys, that is conceived and therefore presents itself as spiritual?

I have tried to push things to their extremes, which is maybe what you mean by intensity. In extreme situations – which is one advantage of abstraction, having only its own reality to contend with – you may experience particular sensations more acutely. But intensity isn't simply a matter of intensifying something. Some visual experiences can be very powerful, almost overwhelming; others may be extremely delicate. Spirituality in art is never a question of a direct intention projected autonomously onto a work, but one of response. As an artist, your response is freely made; it cannot be forced. If you look at the great art from the past, you will see that its spirit does not lie in any sort of cognitive structure or vision, but in an appreciation of life and its celebration: not only the joyful or ecstatic, but also the shocking or terrifying aspects. An artist feels a need 'to do something' about the very fact of being alive, rather like a bird feels the need to sing.

Colour has come to be central to your work. Do you see a crucial link between colour and the spiritual as Kandinsky did?

Not in the same way as Kandinsky did. He seems to have believed that colours in themselves are expressive of certain feelings. But I think this is not so, not even in his own work. Take red, for instance: it can be

warm and comforting or it can be harsh and aggressive. It always depends on the precise shade and context, and this is especially so in painting.

Of course, your early work, the work that quickly brought you artistic success and a certain amount of perhaps undesired fame, was in black and white. One painting which is not here, but which we should talk about is Kiss *(1960/61). As your first definite statement in black and white after a period of uncertainty, which started in 1952 when you went to the Royal College of Art, it is a pivotal work. How did it come into being?*

Kiss was preceded by a completely black painting which had failed. I tried to find out why I was so dissatisfied with it and thinking back to what I had discovered in copying Seurat, I realised that there was no opposition within this black painting. So in the next painting I did, I added white and put a straight line against a curve. Where they almost touch, there is a tiny visual flash, which suggested the title. From that time on I pitched my work on contrast.

From that first painting onwards, you have used assistants in the execution of your art. It is a workshop practice that goes back at least as far as the Renaissance, but is far less used today. You have said in a conversation with Michael Craig-Martin, 'It's part of the meaning of the work that I don't want to interfere with the experience of what can be seen.'[5] *How concerned are you with liberating your art from the working process and the visible brushstroke?*

I am not at all interested in any sort of liberation from the working process; quite the reverse. Holding myself at a certain distance enables me to be more engaged, not less. One of my assistants once said to me: 'We do the nice part, and you do the hard work.' It seems to me that it is in making the decisions – rejecting and accepting, altering and revising – that an artist's deeper, real personality comes through. Pollock is unmistakably there in his finest drip paintings. But with his tin and the splatter stick he most explicitly avoids any direct physical 'touch'. And Mondrian, too, is very much Mondrian in his paintings through the total exposure of the decisions he makes. His meticulously painted surfaces reflect his belief in the work of the spirit as constructor and composer.

With Movement in Squares *(1961), you were already using the visual 'language' that is recognisably your own. From the perspective of 1998, can you perhaps outline what the constants of that language are, the grammar, syntax and vocabulary?*

Perhaps the example of music, another abstract art, might help. On the simplest level, it appears to be made up of sounds which are assembled according to certain sensations: high-low, long-short, loud-soft, etc. These differences are put together, or composed, in a highly abstract, conceptualised manner. Repetition and variation, assembling and dispersing, reversal, mirroring and development are part of a method which, far from inhibiting the sensual pleasure in sound, actually provides for and enhances it. In the end, one listens to music in order to hear. It would seem to me to be an ideal achievement in abstract painting, if one were to look in order to see.

One thing that you do which is especially noticeable in the black and white paintings, is to lead the eye of the viewer in and out, up and down, in an exploration of the image. Part of the excitement comes from the tensions that you create through oppositions of tone or colour (black-white and later warm-cool) and of movement (a horizontal or vertical acting against a diagonal, for instance). How essential is this tension to your art?

It's vital – tension has to be there. But it need not, and I think should not, be always at the same pitch and intensity. One cannot scream the whole time. You have to change gear in order to maintain tension; even relaxation plays a part in this. Ideally one would like to be able to run the whole gamut.

With the introduction of colour this basis of your work seems to have shifted in a decisive way. In your conversation with Michael Craig-Martin you said, 'I saw that the basis of colour is its instability. Instead of searching for a firm foundation, I realised I had one in the very opposite.'[6] *Can you explain further what you meant by this and how it came about?*

Well, my black and white work is based on a contrast between stability and instability. It has a firm structure which is momentarily dissolved in perception. In colour there is no such basis. Colour relationships are susceptible to change right from the beginning, although these changes

Shift 1963



Rêve 1999

are certainly not abrupt or dramatic; in fact, they are rather subtle and complex. My new colour structure is a kind of shifting ground, which is as different from a stable basis as it is from rapid fluctuation.

In the 1970s your use of colour became increasingly complex, reaching a high point with the curve paintings of 1978–80. But then your work seems to have developed in a different direction. You began by organising vertical stripes of colour in open or free groupings and then you broke up the homogeneity of these stripe formations with the thrust of a diagonal. As a result the whole balance of the pictorial field was destabilised. Paintings such as Code of Manners *(1988) and* Danae *(1990) for example offer an experience of looking which allows the eye to enter and emerge at a myriad number of places. The work itself, it seems to me, has acquired greater depth, while you have talked about a greater freedom in your working*

process which involves working more on the full-scale cartoon, putting in and taking out shapes and colours. It is as if the creative impetus of working with constraints had given way to the creative freedom of release from constraints. Is that correct? Can you tell us more about this new working process?

It has certainly changed, and that in a fundamental way. I wanted to get more involved with the problems of painting in a plastic sense – building different places, layering depths and trying to provide multiple visual readings. But first I had to give up some staple tenets of my work which I had long held. The most difficult to forego was colour interaction, which although still present is no longer so dominant. This entailed shifting my work over from a perceptual orientation to one of sensation. It was less a question of 'release from constraints' than of developing a new range of criteria. My very notion of 'rightness' has changed, becoming both more open and more exacting at the same time. I love Rilke's comment on the 'good conscience of these reds, these blues' in a Cézanne painting,[7] meaning that each of them had most scrupulously been put in the right place and at the right pitch.

There seem to be many changes taking place in your work at present. In the huge black and white wall painting for the Kunsthalle Bern, Composition with Circles 1 *(1998), are you in one sense completing a cycle back to your beginning, albeit producing a work of extreme complexity which only years of experience could achieve? Or is the wall painting simply part of the exploration for a new use of curves? Would you say these last pieces signal a new departure?*

Yes, the basis of my work has recently been shifting again, and you are right, both lines of enquiry are closely linked. I found I could only use black and white in one situation for the sense of transparency they gave, while in the other pieces I need colour to build up a different sort of depth. It's part of the conditions under which I have chosen to work that I find myself from time to time having to respond to unforeseen demands thrown up by the work itself. But for this very reason, I can't say, as I am sure you will understand, anything very much about these developments at present.

Supposed to Be Abstract

in conversation with Robert Kudielka [2001]

Your recent success in New York, thirty-five years after the The Responsive Eye *exhibition, is remarkable in that you haven't been celebrated as a figure from the past, but as a contemporary. Reviewing your show at the Dia Center for the Arts, Peter Schjeldahl wrote that looking at a collection of your paintings from 1961 to 1984 is like 'opening a time capsule and finding today's newspaper'.*[1] *Why do you think this is so, this feeling of looking at work that is new and not at all 'dated'?*

Maybe it is because I have always tried to avoid making tasteful decisions. Of course it is inevitable that there are fashions and styles at any given time but I don't think that these form a sound basis. Or maybe it is because my view of past art is critical and appreciative rather than historical. No matter how much you love and respect the past, you simply have, as an artist, to stand on your own feet.

But this independence from the various academies of Modernism has had its price. With the renewed interest in your work, some of the old clichés have also reared their heads: the idea of a psychedelic background to your images and the notion of a computerised approach to painting in particular.

Aren't they two extraordinary opposites? The computer and psychedelia? During my opening at Dia two young girls appeared: 'We're painters,' they said, 'Abstract painters – were you on drugs?' 'No', I replied. 'Thought not!', they said and, with an air of triumph, they vanished.

The association with the computer is more difficult to untangle, I think. It has long gone outside the confines of the art world. There was an American introduction to a well-known textbook on database design and applications several years ago which featured your 1961 painting Movement in Squares – *without crediting this image to you, implying that it could have been devised by a clever computer programmer.*

Some people first made this connection in the late 1960s and I used to dismiss it without further thought, partly because it was irreconcilable

with my working methods in the studio, and partly because I knew nothing whatsoever about computers. I can see now that it's the 'binary' look of my black and white work, which appealed to those who were familiar with computer logic. Nevertheless the connection is superficial and misleading, as one can see by the continual use and even the increasing popularity of my early paintings for illustrations in computer textbooks.

You mean that even skilled computer wizards, with highly sophisticated design programmes, cannot produce equally striking and convincing images on their own?

Exactly so. The computer may be excellent at manipulating a given set of data or information, it may even, once it has been instructed, generate variations on my paintings ad infinitum. But it cannot initiate those very particular kinds of dramatic structures which I wanted in my black-and-white paintings in the 1960s. A computer simply does not understand what I called to myself the 'sense of inevitability'; and its mind would go blank when faced with the task of constructing a visual order which produces and accommodates disorder without yielding to it – as I did in ***Movement in Squares.***

This may be why computer analysts are inclined to read your black and white work the wrong way round. Both the database design publishers and a recent German book titled Computer und Kunst *by Erwin Steller reproduce* Movement in Squares *upside down – with the short passage on the left and the long one on the right. And indeed if one regards the painting only numerically there is no difference – in terms of the increase and decrease of its elements – without taking into account the third factor: the perceptual dissolution which relates the two unequal black and white movements.*

You can't experience those black and white paintings if you only count and measure their elements instead of seeing what they do. Everything in the painting – contrast, weight, unit, scale, and speed – functions in such a precise way that together they precipitate a state in which each seems to momentarily lose its particular role and characteristics, before recovering this particularity again. At the beginning it was essentially a cycle of repose, disturbance and repose.

This cycle, of which you have frequently spoken,[2] *is a three fold structure rather than a binary one and seems to be essentially a cultural configuration.*

E.H. Gombrich pointed out, in his conversation with you, that this structural concept of your work is, at least in Western music, the basis of all music: 'the possibility of a resolution of a discordant sound in a cadence'.[3]

I believe this happens in Shakespeare's sonnets too. In the one which opens 'Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?' he proceeds, beautiful line by beautiful line, to dismantle the comparison until he reaches the nadir, beauty obliterated 'by chance, or nature's changing course, untrimmed'. There, with tremendous verve, Shakespeare reverses direction, the sonnet climbs again. Beauty is recovered and its immortality ensured, in the only form he can support – as a work of art.

But this three fold structure only applies to your paintings of the early 1960s, doesn't it? Then the scenario changed.

Well, it may be that this had something to do with my feeling that the black and white structures were almost too complete. At first I could not find a place in them for colour, or a way in which I could introduce it. What I needed were some more fluid, intermediary modes, which would allow me to break through the straight alternation. So I introduced greys, first neutral and then coloured, and through this I found a way to handle pure colour. Colour turns out to be the perfect vehicle for me because it is made up of harmonies as well as contrasts and, though unstable and fugitive, it also comes through as a powerful presence in its own right.

It is interesting to see that after 1968, when you introduced pure hues, your work with colour was dominated by two main tendencies for nearly thirty years. In the first place the formal complexity was radically reduced to accommodate the activity of colour; and through this the range and richness of colour grew until it reached a point where it could dictate the formal requirements. It seems to me that the introduction of a dynamic diagonal in 1986 was rather more an attempt to organise the increased colour differentiation, which had gradually emerged, than a return to formal complexity. Some of your paintings – such as High Sky 2 *(1992) – could include anything up to twenty-five distinctly different colours. But since 1998 this has changed drastically: the palette is now limited to four or five colours – and the forms appear big and surprisingly simple.*

The change is not really so surprising, I think. It began back in the mid-1990s, when I tried to give fuller reign to the curves and arcs, which had



Evoë 1999–2000

been filtering through the colour organisation of my diagonal paintings. For a long time I tried to introduce parts of circles, based on the slice-like segment at which one arrives if one divides a circle vertically into six equal parts.

I remember studies and a few paintings, such as Lagoon 1 *(1997), in which this curvilinear element appeared among the rhomboid forms. But initially the curves were bent to the left only, in opposition to the prevailing diagonal thrust, and the scale of the units and the range of colours employed were not much changed. Only in 1998, after two years of extensive probing and many trials and errors, did you arrive at the perpendicular swing, the paring down of your palette and the explosion of scale. What finally prompted this rapid resolution of what was obviously an intricate problem?*

Well, many factors suddenly came together. There was the wall drawing for the Kunsthalle Bern (1998) in which I used circles on a big scale, though simply as linear elements. There I realized that the new spatial structure, which was beginning to emerge, would need a rethinking and simplification of colour relationships.

Just as years ago the use of pure colours had forced you to simplify your formal means?

Yes. Perhaps the most surprising thing was that the curve did not allow me to add a new form to those I was already using. It took over and emphasised the feeling of gravity through its curvilinear swing. The colours and their proportions took on different weights, and consequently the balance between them became more fluid.

From the outside this looks like a shift in orientation within familiar territory. If the preceding rhomboid paintings with their structural density were reminiscent of Cézanne's small constructive planes, the new work shows a certain affinity to Matisse's late paper cut outs – except for the underlying rhythm.

I suppose the fact that I had been working with cut-out pieces of paper for a long time …

Almost twenty years is certainly a long time!

Well, true – once I began to use curved shapes with those big flat areas of colour, the association probably became inevitable. But as you said, the structure in my work differs very much from Matisse in that it is supported by a rhythmic underpinning, some layers of which are apparent, while others remain latent.

The interplay between overtness and latency seems to be a recurrent factor in your work. In earlier paintings such as Black to White Discs *(1962) or* Cantus Firmus *(1972–73) it was often a basic formal device that was hidden by and within the appearance of the work, whereas now layers of different rhythms seem to support, obscure, and even oppose each other.*

You played me a fascinating piece of music by György Ligeti recently …

You mean the six Etudes pour Piano *he wrote in 1985, all of which work with the rhythmic phenomenon of 'simultaneous layers of different tempi' (Ligeti)?*[4] *The piece I played you, the so-called* Warsaw Etude, *is based on sixteen fast pulses per measure. There are however passages in which the right hand of the pianist accentuates every fifth pulse and the left every third – thus creating the sensation of superimposed melodic layers. The resulting perceptual complexity reminds me very much of the paintings you have been making since 1998.*

Perhaps the only significant difference might be that in my work the rhythmic layers are not the same but are varied in their structural character as well. Paul Klee, who was a good musician himself, realised that in one respect painting had a considerable advantage over music: it could make the simultaneity of different rhythmic patterns clearly perceivable.

In looking at your new work one can still detect a basic vertical structure underlying the whole. Although seldom shown in the drawing itself, it nevertheless controls and stabilises the dynamism of the curves. 'My curves are not mad', Matisse said. 'I have derived constant benefit from the use of the plumb line.'[2]

He's right, of course, he must have learnt this early on from academic figure drawing. The vertical is an essential structural element in organising curvilinear weights and balances. The sheer physical necessity of breaking up the big canvases of *Evoë* and *Parade 1* (both 1999–2000) into panels of two and four gave me an opportunity to emphasise the latent vertical structure.

Now, a powerful diagonal is played against this stabilising register, very much as it was in the preceding group of paintings. But in the new work it has a different dynamic effect. The sharp parallel cuts, all accentuating the diagonal rising from bottom left to top right, seem to literally drive the rhythm of the paintings.

The drive is really brought about by the third element, the curve, which defines and shapes the rhythm. When played through a series of arabesques the curve is wonderfully fluid, supple and strong. It can twist and bend, flow and sway, sometimes with the diagonal, sometimes against, so that the tempo is either accelerated or held back, delayed.

Just by itself the formal description is very revealing. The swing of the curve and the increased rhythmic complexity have added a feeling of body and weight to your colour work. The abstract, essentially musical organisation has become infused by a new sense of almost physical elation. When I look at paintings like Evoë *and* Parade 1, *I can't help thinking of primeval dancing or the ancient iconography of the Bacchanal.*

To tell you the truth, when I had finished *Evoë* and was thinking about its title, I toyed with the idea of calling it 'Bacchanal without Nymphs', and another painting, still untitled, 'Bacchanal without Satyrs'. But then I remembered just in time that I am after all supposed to be an abstract artist.

The Spirit of Enquiry

in conversation with Jenny Harper [2004]

Reflecting on your practice – as a painter who has been working for more than 40 years – it strikes me that, as at the beginning of your professional career, you are a thoroughly Modern artist. What do you think were the specific problems of modernity and which issues still interest you?

To put it as simply as possible, the dominant feature of the modern era has been a steady dropping away of the old stable hierarchies. This became apparent intellectually in the Age of Enlightenment and simultaneously, on the social front, in the Industrial Revolution. Traditional values and pre-ordained structures were continually questioned, replaced or even abandoned. This process inevitably affected the practice of art. Artists found that they could no longer expect – or be expected – to communicate through a commonly agreed imagery; alternative routes had to be discovered. The experiences and responsibilities of the individual had become important in ways they had never been before. It was – and is still – impossible to retreat from this modern achievement.[1] Only by accepting this situation can artistic insight find echoes and responses in a wider public. But relying solely on one's individual resources is not quite enough. To give your work more than a personal validity you need the support of a more objective framework. Where can one find this if not in the past? I believe that it is possible to rediscover principles and laws in older work quite independently of the styles in which they initially appeared.

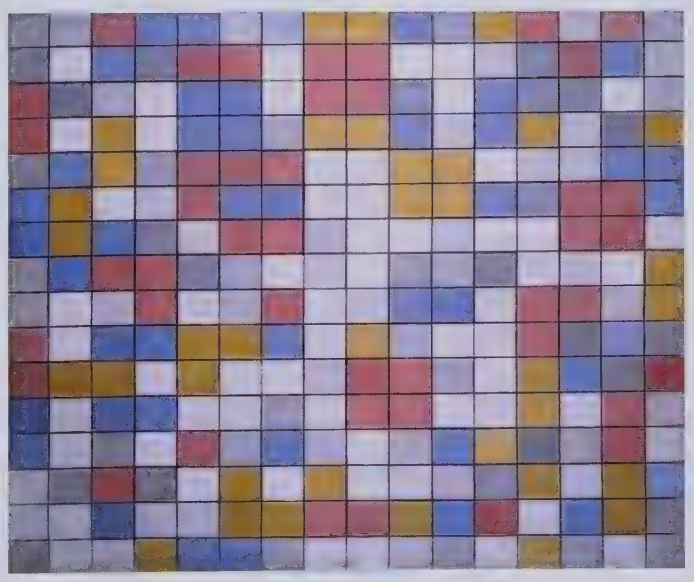
Another important feature of your approach – and one which is important in the intellectual links you make with modernity – is your admiration of the work of a number of artists from the past. You have been very open about your admiration of individual artists like Seurat and Cézanne, and others such as Poussin, Mondrian and Paul Klee. You've seen yourself as linked to a lengthy tradition and entitled to analyse and take critical advantage of the lessons and stimulations it offers.

Yes, I have looked carefully at Seurat, Cézanne and others. To think that I rank myself with such great figures would be a misunderstanding. Above all, I believe that one should not deprive oneself of the pleasure

of looking at and appreciating what has been achieved. But as an artist you also want to know more about your practice. While one has to accept that the role of art and its subjects do change, the practical problems do not. Finding out what is integral to an art form and on what relationships it depends illuminates the problems that may arise and this, in turn, gives you a way of dealing with them. How, for instance, to treat colour, pictorial space, structure etc.? These problems have, of course, been treated differently in different periods, by different personalities, but recognising the basic issues helps you with your own work.[2] This is where art assumes the role of enquiry. True modern painting, I believe, should always be a beginning – its own re-invention, if you like.

You have recently been a visiting professor at the de Montfort University in Leicester and you asked the students there to copy a Mondrian.

There were several reasons, really. When I began to teach I had just co-organised (with Sean Rainbird at the Tate Gallery), an exhibition tracing Mondrian's development *Nature to Abstraction*,[3] which was a fascinating task. *Chequerboard with Light Colours* (1919) is the painting I asked the students to copy. It came after Mondrian's *Pier and Ocean* studies made from his memory of walking by the sea at night, seeing the sparkle of the stars above and their reflections in the dark sea. He treated

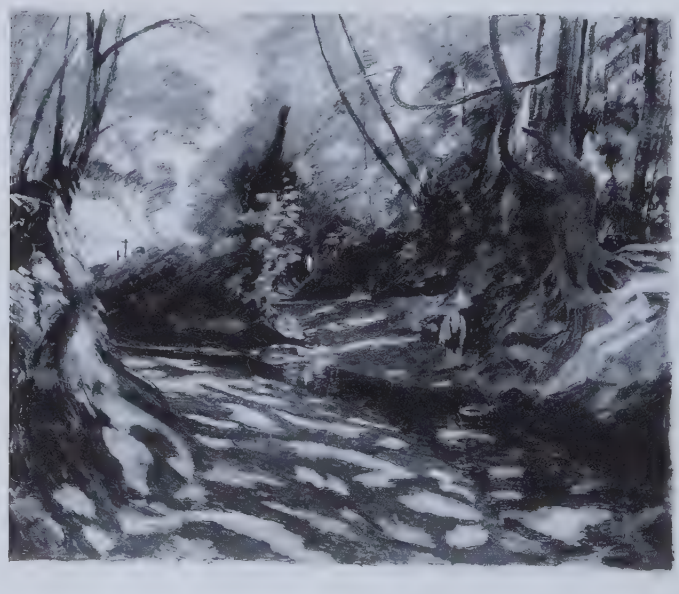


Piet Mondrian:
Composition with Grid 9: Chequerboard with light colours
1919
©2009 Mondrian/ Holtzman Trust c/o HCR International Warrenton, VA USA

this same sensation in a number of different ways and I wanted the students to see these differences and to understand that such an experience can be expressed in a variety of ways, even by the same artist. Another reason was to make clear that making a copy is not simply mechanical but a positive way of assimilating someone else's thinking. You can get closer to another mind through direct imitation. After all, this is how we originally learn our own languages. Imitating a work is simply one of the best ways of internalising its artistic logic. As Leonardo said: 'He who can copy can create.' This observation is just as valid today as it was in his own time.

You started with figure drawing and that was very important to you but in this case these students are launching into abstraction …

Not really. Abstraction is fundamental to painting in general. If you are painting a portrait, a figure or a landscape, the colours you have on your palette and which you will have to use on your canvas are inevitably different from the colours you see in the world around you. Similarly, in dealing with the advances and recessions in the picture plane, you will be facing a problem far removed from actual physical space. Painting has been an abstract art long before Abstract Art became a style and a theory.[4] I have an assistant, Andrew Smith, who has worked for me in the studio for



Andrew Smith:
Lympstone 1
1996

many years. He is a landscape painter who has successfully tackled difficult subjects such as light falling through foliage because he is capable of organising this diffuse sensation in a properly abstract manner.

As well as the Mondrian exhibition, you recently organised an exhibition of the work of Paul Klee at the Hayward Gallery. How do you relate to Klee's art?

I worked with Robert Kudielka organising this exhibition of Paul Klee's work because, like Mondrian, Klee has been pivotal for me. There are different aspects of influence. One can be influenced simply by the appearance of something, or by the possibility of reaching through the appearance to the thinking behind it, as I was with Seurat. At other times one is influenced by the ideas and not the appearance of the work. That was how it was for me with Klee. He showed me what abstraction meant in painting and how to enquire in an artistic way.[5]

Mondrian is an artist who consistently worked within particular limitations. Like him, you have always felt it was important to be constrained rather than be totally free. I was thinking again of our conversation about the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins and the way he felt constrained but also profoundly liberated because of this constraint.

I was amazed by his modernity. Recently, I was given a book of his poetry and prose notes, with a very good introduction by Walford Davies.[6] Hopkins deliberately uses words as *things*, talking of the *thingness* of the word. He wanted his poetry to be read aloud, so that the patterns and rhythms of stresses on vowels and alliteration became virtually abstract *things* to work with. As he went on he subjected words to tighter, more complex disciplines. But this strict formality was eased and brought to life by his love of nature. Sadly he destroyed much of his early work, feeling that his pleasure in nature was an indulgence and incompatible with his vocation as a Jesuit priest. Fortunately, he came to see that his feeling for God was echoed in the natural world, and that for him celebrating the natural world in verse was a way of praising his Lord.

That is very similar to the way you describe the early impact of your walks in Cornwall, your love of the countryside around your studio in France, your observations of nature, the blossom, the tiny irises …

I felt I knew Hopkins. But I did not have his moral inhibitions towards pleasure in nature. The problem I had was when I realised that any direct depiction of Cornwall would not express what I felt about being there.[7] How do you convey the freshness of a walk across the cliffs in the early morning, the blackness of the sea in deep shadow or the shiver of tiny grasses blown by the wind? I wanted to recreate such sensations – and this longing has shaped and still informs my understanding of abstraction. I start at the other end, so to speak, prepared to find sensation – en route to a painting.

Your own work is being embraced and looked at freshly by a younger generation. Postmodernism has made much of the affinities between contemporary art and the art of the past, as well as the relationships between fine art and popular culture. In the early 1960s your work was plagiarised for fabric designs. You were clear that this was wrong, that you felt violated by it.

I think there is a tremendous difference between artists imitating or even directly copying one another, and something primarily done for commercial purposes, which the dresses were. One is about learning and understanding, the other a rip-off and a trivialisation.

Younger painters such as Philip Taaffe have also copied your work, and others like Damian Hirst acknowledge and pay homage to you more obliquely in theirs. Even the New Zealand artist Peter Robinson has made works reminiscent of your Uneasy Centre *(1963). In a sense you occupy a very different space in the mind of these young artists.*

I thought Philip Taaffe missed the point. My work did not need to have content pumped in by washes of colour and personal marks. He seemed to think that he was supplying something that was missing whereas I had deliberately rejected that kind of painterly handling in order to speak more clearly. He did not even try to 'appropriate' – that is to say make something his own. I visited him and offered to show him how to make a curve, but he wasn't interested in that.[8] He simply adopted somebody else's imagery in order to re-edit it with his own garnish.

Perhaps now artists are borrowing in a lighter way, making reference to the visual images they admire, works by artists that mean something to them and have a resonance with the problems they face. I think a number of artists remain fascinated by your practice.

I am thrilled to have this response. However, I continue my own practice despite Postmodernism. I acknowledge that the concept of 'appropriation' allowed a renewed moment of reception for my work. It is true that Appropriation Art had a point in opposing exaggerated notions of novelty in Modernism, but it seems to have run out of purpose and impetus. Unfortunately it failed to re-establish a positive attitude towards copying and the art of the past, it probably had more to do with the widespread fear that artistic invention has dried up. The only answer to this sort of depression is working – steady working.

I'm intrigued that you are including working drawings and collages in this exhibition. Have you come to accept that they're interesting in their own right and that they help others understand your work?

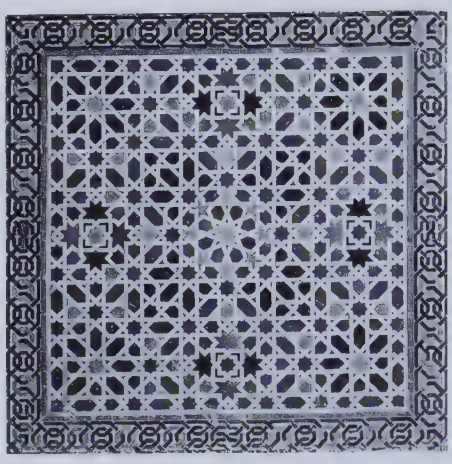
Yes, I have. That's exactly what has happened: the studies aid accessibility. I don't want there to be anything mysterious about the way that I work. I mean there is doubt and uncertainty, and the very act of enquiry means that things go wrong and have to be changed and revised. But to me this is part of the pleasure of working.

Showing your working drawings and collages is also a way of demonstrating how very 'unscientific' your work is, that it's imaginative and in a constant state of flux. Scientific experiments and artistic experiment are of a different nature, which is revealed with these preparatory works.

Well, I hope that it can clarify those sorts of differences. Enquiry is certainly not a question of proof or demonstration, although certain fundamental principles may emerge. Each work exists on its own terms and the relationships that make it up are always unique to each piece. The spirit of enquiry points the way. It can also develop one's powers of recognition so that one can see what one is doing more clearly – what used to be blind intuition is now conscious intuition. I think that intuition in its best form is conscious.

Visits to different parts of the world have been important for you, from the Egyptian tombs to India. I wonder if we could talk about your appreciation of Islamic art and architecture, particularly since your recent visit to the Alhambra.





View of the Court of the Myrtles looking towards the Comares Tower: The Alhambra, Granada, Spain.
Polychrome glazed panel in the Hall of the Ambassadors: The Alhambra, Granada, Spain.

I experienced a strong feeling of pleasure being in some of those courts – the tiling, the patterning, was fascinating. I began to realise that the artists had spent a long time analysing how these intricacies might be geometrically layered, but then the best pieces elaborate themselves into pure perception, letting off clusters of colour sensations, of dynamics that seem to loose their moorings completely from the structures that gave rise to them. And, of course, this becomes a contemplative act; it grows slowly, not yielding itself in one glance – contemplation is certainly built into one's appreciation of the Alhambra.

Is that contemplative quality something you wish your own work to have?

Yes, and it has a bearing on something that happened recently. I gave a talk on my work at the Rhode Island School of Design and there were some very interesting questions at the end. One student asked me about the spiritual. I hadn't prepared myself for a question like that, but I found myself saying if – as in abstract painting – line, colour, space and shape are freed from the service of description, from function in an applied sense – then there may be a parallel in the intellectual sphere. When our mind is freed from the need to apply itself to something – to the practicalities of life so to speak – we may open our intellect to a wide range of speculative activities, as 'use-less' in their practice as those found in the 19th-century definition of Fine Art. Following along these lines

I said my main activity in the studio is the exercise of judgement – pure judgement. It could be said that it is my intellectual 'mode' or form of thought when I am working, and can properly be called 'pure' because, like pure colour, such judgement is distinguished by having no referential role outside the work itself. It seems that many people feel that there is something 'there' in good abstract painting that can neither be assessed objectively nor dismissed as mere mystification. Think of Mondrian – or the Alhambra. Ad Reinhardt regarded Islamic architectural decoration as an origin of Abstract art.[9] After we met at *The Responsive Eye* exhibition in 1965 he wrote to me, in his inimitable handwriting: 'YOU KNOW, DON'T YOU, WE BELONG TO SOME FAMILY OF ARTISTS, SAME ONE, NOT CHINESE OR INDIAN OR JAPANESE OR ITALIAN, MAYBE MUSLIM, THAT NON-FIGURATIVE ARAB AND PERSIAN CROWD.'

When we spoke yesterday about the diagonal series, those rhomboid paintings you were working on from the late 1980s to the mid-1990s, you said that there was a moment where you felt your work had reached a particular point of freedom, but you decided against pursuing it.

I think that good work needs an internal resistance – it has to set up a tension within itself. I don't think one can ever make what you might call real progress in a situation of total freedom. That's why in the late 1990s – when I used the curve again which I'd always found a stimulating element – I returned to using a smaller range of colours. I incorporated the curve to the diagonal grid I had previously been using. This threw up a whole lot of new shapes to work with and released certain rhythms that I hadn't been able to use before. These were very good experiences, encouraging, affirming.

And it must be wonderful to achieve this sense at this stage in your career.

Yes, it is. When I showed my painting *Rêve* (1999) to the critic David Sylvester, he immediately thought of Matisse – and in a sense, he's right. David said, 'It isn't a bit like Matisse, but I think it's an avenue that you would not pursue were it not for Matisse. There seems to be more than one way out of Matisse.' Recently I have been relying more on the feeling of the work. I am surer of my feelings when I work and allow these to prompt what I am doing. And once more there is the paradox – I have found a stricter foundation results in greater freedom.

Work

Written for the catalogue of the Arts Council touring exhibition *Flashback: Bridget Riley* that started at the Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool (25 September – 13 December 2009), subsequently travelling to the Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery, the Norwich Castle Museum and Art Gallery and finishing at the Southampton Art Gallery in December 2010. A German translation of the first two paragraphs has been previously published as 'Artist's Statement' in the exhibition catalogue *aus / gezeichnet / zeichnen* of the Akademie der Künste, Berlin, 2009, p.120.

This is the most comprehensive description of the artist's development right up to the recent curve paintings as she sees it, though solely under the aspect of her involvement in 'drawing'. Because all of the following texts in this section substantiate, enlarge or modify this 'map' any detailed comment seems to be superfluous. For the status of this text see **Introduction**, p.17.

1 Igor Stravinsky, *The Poetics of Music*, Cambridge, Mass. 1942, p.65. Riley quotes the same passage in her dialogue with E.H. Gombrich in *Dialogues on Art*, ^{2}2003, p.65.

Seurat as Mentor

This essay was first published in the exhibition catalogue *George Seurat. The Drawings*, Jodi Hauptman (ed.), The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2007, pp.185–95.

1 Félix Fénéon, 'La VIIIe exposition impressionniste' (1886). Cited after John Rewald, *Seurat. A Biography*, London 1990, p.108.
2 Cf. **The Artist's Eye: Seurat**.
3 Later Seurat's method became commonly known as 'Pointillism' or 'Divisionism'. Fénéon first analysed it in close contact with the artist and described it as the additive mixture of five different portions of colour perceived in any given object *en plein air*. Riley quotes this description in detail in **Colour for the Painter**, p.240.
4 In working *sur le motif* the Impressionists, and Monet in particular, corroborated Delacroix's insight, that 'le temps gris' – an 'overcast sky', ie. a certain mid-tone – is the most favourable condition for the perception of colour. See also **Colour for the Painter**, p.238.
5 Cf. **Conversation with Robert Kudielka**, p.104.

In Conversation with Maurice de Sausmarez

First published under the title 'Bridget Riley and Maurice de Sausmarez, a conversation' in *Art International*, vol.XI, no.4, April 1967, pp.37–41. Reprinted in M. de Sausmarez, *Bridget Riley*, London 1970, pp.57–63.

1 Riley spent the summer of 1960 with Maurice de Sausmarez in Italy, visiting museums, exhibitions and historical sites as well as painting in the countryside. The most important souvenir of this journey is *Pink Landscape* (1960), a seminal painting in her transition from Neo-Impressionist to Abstract work.
2 During her Italian visit in 1960 Riley saw at the 30th Venice Biennale the exhibition *Mostra storica del futurismo*, celebrating the 50th anniversary of the publication of the Futurist Manifesto. De Sausmarez, who was a specialist on Futurism, also took her to see the Futurist collection of the Galleria d'Arte Moderna in Milan, where she was particularly impressed by Boccioni's series *States of Mind* (1911).
3 This parallel with serialism in music is in Riley's understanding obviously restricted to the exploratory stages of her work. But there were other aspects of her black and white paintings which attracted contemporary composers. Alexander Goehr, for instance, was interested in the after-image effects of the chequer-board structures which inspired two piano pieces of his *Opus 18*, first performed by John Ogden on 11 April 1965 in the Royal Festival Hall.
4 The incident is quoted from Paul Valéry, 'Degas-Danse-Dessin' (1936), in *The Collected Works*, Jackson Mathews (ed.), vol.12 ('Degas, Manet, Morisot'), New York 1960, p.62

5 The book *Art as the Evolution of Visual Knowledge*, Red Wing, Minn., 1948, by the American artist and theoretician Charles Biederman (1906–2004), exerted some influence in the 1950s on Constructivist painters and sculptors.

6 The Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel was founded in July 1960 in Paris. Its main members were Julio Le Parc, François Morellet, Francisco Sobrino and Vasarely's son Yvaral. Riley took part in the 1964 *Nouvelle Tendance* exhibition at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris. But this was the only time she joined this international movement whose aim was an art 'beyond the ideas of Art Informel as well as those of Constructivism' (*Nouv. Tend.* cat.). Although she was attracted by the new subjects of movement and light and the concept of participation on the side of the spectator, she did not believe in the social utopia of mass production.

7 During the difficult period after art school Riley taught in 1957–58 at the Convent of the Sacred Heart, Harrow.

8 William C. Seitz, the Curator of Painting and Sculpture Exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, who was responsible for the exhibition *The Responsive Eye* (1965), preferred the term 'Perceptual Abstraction' to the popular name 'Op art', coined by Jon Borgzinner in 1964. In his introduction to the catalogue of the show he related this new development to Impressionism: 'The perceptualism of the present ... is more concentrated than that of impressionism because the establishment of abstract painting has made it permissible for colour, tone, line, and shape to operate autonomously' (p.7). This may explain why the exhibition, which established Riley's international reputation, could include such different artists as Josef Albers and Morris Louis, Victor Vasarely and Frank Stella, Ad Reinhardt, Ellsworth Kelly and Kenneth Noland. See also **Perception Is the Medium**, p.89 and **Conversation with Lynne Cooke** p.311f.

9 All four paintings are based on the inter-relationship between two different movements: a formal progression from circles to ovals and tonal sequences of grey bridging the contrast between black and white.

Perception Is the Medium

Published in *Art News*, vol.64, no.6, October 1965, pp.32–33, cont. p.66. This article was provoked by the ambiguous reception of *The Responsive Eye* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Riley's huge and completely unexpected success was overcast by the commercial plagiarism of her work through fashion designers and the critical depreciation of the entire artistic tendency as superficial and pseudo-scientific. Although the editor of *Art News*, Thomas B. Hess, had contributed to the polemical climate with his review 'You can hang it in the hall' (*Art News*, vol.64, no.2, April 1965), he was fair enough to open the pages of his magazine for a reply by the artist. The title is partly an allusion to Marshall McLuhan's slogan 'The Medium is the Message', partly a contention of Clement Greenberg's positivist notion of the 'medium', which was a topic much discussed amongst artists at that time.

1 This is Riley's own version of the more elaborate cycle described in Anton Ehrenzweig's essay 'The Pictorial Space of Bridget Riley', *Art International*, vol.IX, no.1, February 1965, pp.20–24. The distinguished theoretician of iconoclasm in 20th-century art, who has given a place of honour to Riley in his last book *The Hidden Order of Art* (1967), knew the artist since 1963 and collaborated with her in analysing the cyclic momentum of the perceptual structure. See also **Statement**, p.101.

Interview with David Sylvester

Published in *Studio International*, vol.173, no.887, March 1967, pp.32–35. At the time of the interview the painting which was eventually titled *Breathe* (1966) was still referred to as *One* – a change of mind on the part of the artist that has led to considerable confusion among more recent readers of this interview. To prevent further difficulties this anachronism has been eliminated.

1 David Sylvester had the early stripe painting *Horizontal Vibration* (1961) in his house.

2 The mountain is Mont Ventoux which is not very far from Riley's property in Vaucluse. See **Biographical Notes**.

Statement

Included in Maurice de Sausmarez, *Bridget Riley*, London 1970, p.91.

1 This passage almost literally corresponds to a famous declaration of Dylan Thomas on his poetry: 'I think it should work from words, from the substance of words and the rhythm of substantial words set together, not towards words. Poetry is a medium, not a stigmata on paper.' See *The Collected Letters of Dylan Thomas:* Paul Ferris (ed.), London 1985, p.181. Although Riley did not know this statement, she has been a great admirer of the poet's work since the 1940s and her conception of the 'medium' is equally opposed to leaving 'stigmata on paper'.

In Conversation with Robert Kudielka

First published in a German translation in the exhibition catalogue *Bridget Riley*, Kunstverein Göttingen, 1972, pp.4–10. The English original appeared one year later in *Bridget Riley: Paintings and Drawings 1961–1973*, exhib. cat., Arts Council of Great Britain, 1973, pp.9–13.

1 This description of the approach to colour parallels the one of 'pacing an oval' in the **Conversation with Maurice de Sausmarez**, p.75.
2 The following references to the 'disembodied light' brought about by periodic colour structures are related to paintings like *Late Morning* (1967) and *Orient 4* (1970).
3 This early reference to the critical role of distance in colour perception has been extended in Riley's radio conversation with E. H. Gombrich, see *Dialogues on Art*, ²2003, p.47f.

Working with Nature

Published in *Contemporary Artists*, Muriel Emanuel (ed.), London 1977, pp.807–08. The statement reveals how deeply Riley's understanding of nature is rooted in the English 18th-century view of nature as energy which inspired the English landscape garden and the painting of Constable and Turner. It may be noted that this clarification of her attitude directly precedes her renewed interest in classical Modern French painting, stimulated by the great exhibitions of Cézanne and Monet in the late 1970s. See **Biographical Notes**.

Into Colour

Completed in April 1978 for *Art in Australia*, but not published. This is the only text dealing extensively with the colour structure of the 'curve paintings' of 1974–78 which were included in Riley's 1978–80 retrospective exhibition.

1 **Perception Is the Medium**, pp.89–90.
2 The basic instability of colour remained a primary concern for the artist until she changed her working method in the 1980s. Cf. **The Experience of Painting**, p.149 and *Dialogues on Art*, ² 2003, p.59f.
3 The term 'plasticity', which has become central to Riley's thinking since the mid-1980s, is further explained in **According to Sensation**, p.140, and in my contribution to the exhibition catalogue *Bridget Riley: Paintings 1982–1992*, Nürnberg / London 1992, reprinted in *Robert Kudielka on Bridget Riley. Essays and Interviews 1972–2003*, London 2005, p.121f. See also **Mondrian: the 'universal' and the 'particular'** pp.286.
4 In **The Colour Connection** Riley admires Veronese for having achieved exactly this balance, pp.202f.
5 Marcel Proust, 'Days of Reading (I)', in *Against Sainte-Beuve and other essays*, Harmondsworth 1988, p.211.

A Visit to Egypt and the Decoration for the Royal Liverpool Hospital

Paper presented to the Royal Institute of British Architects, 6 September 1984. Published in *Transactions 7*, vol.4, no.1 (20th-Century Series), 1985, pp.62–69. Apart from referring to Riley's biggest decorative scheme so far in connection with architecture this paper recalls her visit to Egypt in winter 1979/80 and the circumstances in which she discovered the colour balance that became instrumental to her work in the early 1980s. The original slide lecture has been adapted for the present purpose by cutting some of the descriptions of Egyptian art.

1 Graham Henderson was an assistant to Bridget Riley in the 1970s and has printed many of her silkscreen prints. Cf. Robert Kudielka, 'Introduction' in *Working Methods 4: Bridget Riley: Silkscreen prints 1965–78*, exhib. cat., Arts Council of Great Britain, London 1980.

According to Sensation

Published in the catalogue accompanying Riley's exhibition at the Sidney Janis Gallery, New York, in March 1990. It showed eight new paintings: *Rio*, *Certain Day*, *Little Ditty*, *Gaillard 2*, *Shadow Rhythm*, *Marseillaise* (all 1989), as well as *Cool Place* and *November* (both 1990). The title was chosen in response to a question raised by a painting by Jasper Johns, *According to What* (1964). Riley saw this painting in 1965 and always regarded the query in the title as the crucial issue for the Modern artist. She wanted to emphasise with her answer a recent shift of her orientation. In 1992 it was used for the Hayward venue of the 1982–92 retrospective exhibition which showed her move from a perceptually orientated way of working to the primacy of 'sensation'.

1 A recurrent theme in Matisse's writings which is summed up in his 'Letter to Henry Clifford' (1948) in a metaphor often referred to by Riley: 'Indeed, if gardens were not dug over at the proper time, they would soon be good for nothing. Do we not first have to clear and then to cultivate the soil in season? – The preparatory work of initiation, of renewing, is what I call "cultivating the soil".' In *Matisse on Art*, p.121.

2 The comparison has first been made in **The Flowering of the Abstract** (1983), p.189. Its meaning is explained in **Mondrian: the 'universal' and the 'particular'**, p.288.

3 For further clarification of Mondrian's understanding of 'destruction' see both **Mondrian** pieces in the final section, p.283 and p.288.

4 The conjunction between Mondrian and Pollock is a staple point of reference in Riley's thinking. See the **Conversation with Maurice de Sausmarez**, p.84, and **Mondrian: the 'universal' and the 'particular'**, p.289.

The Experience of Painting

From the exhibition catalogue *The Experience of Painting: Eight modern artists*, South Bank Centre, London 1989, pp.50–56. This piece is based on tape-recorded conversations with Mel Gooding, the curator of the exhibition.

1 The distinction between 'perceptual colour' and 'pictorial colour' is a basic theme of Riley's Darwin College lecture, **Colour for the Painter**, p.222f.

2 Bryan Robertson has recorded a similar statement from his conversations with the artist: 'Our bearings still suffer from the concept or suppositions of Renaissance theory, which is "man as the measure of all things". But man is part only of a bigger whole and this whole is neither centripetal nor centrifugal. It is much more open and egalitarian; and the structure of this whole, as opposed to a circle (Renaissance), is an infinitely subtle grid' (*Bridget Riley: Paintings and Drawings 1951–71*, exhib. cat., Arts Council of Great Britain, London 1971, p.14).

3 The encounter with Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* in the early 1970s had a profound effect on Riley's understanding of the workings of the creative spirit, cf. my introduction to *Bridget Riley. Paintings 1982–1992*, Nürnberg/London 1992, reprinted in *Robert Kudielka on Bridget Riley*, pp.129–45. Samuel Beckett's early essay *Beckett: Proust*, London 1931, further clarified and confirmed her understanding, as can be seen from **Painting Now**, pp.291f.

4 From Félix Fénéon's review of the 8th Impressionist exhibition, cf. **Seurat as Mentor**, note 1.

5 Cf. the reference to the split with Maurice de Sausmarez in **Personal Interview**, p.27.

6 Also from Fénéon's review of the 8th Impressionist exhibition (see note 4).

Something to Look At

First published in the catalogue accompanying the exhibition *Bridget Riley, Recent Works: Paintings and Gouaches 1981–1995*, Spacex Gallery, Exeter 1995. Reprinted in the catalogue *Bridget Riley: Recent Paintings and Gouaches*, Waddington Galleries and Karsten Schubert, London 1996. The conversation relates to the Exeter exhibition which included the new lozenge-paintings, such as *Set Fair* (1989), *From Here* (1994) and *Reflection* (1994), as well as two earlier stripe paintings, *Winter Palace* (1981) and *Parasol* (1984).

1 J. Spiller (ed.), *Paul Klee: The Thinking Eye*, London 1969, p.22.
2 Cf. the description of *Big Blue* (1981–82) in **A Visit to Egypt**, p.128.
3 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'Eye and Mind' (1961), in *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays*, James M. Edie (ed.), Northwestern University Press 1964, pp.159–90. In this essay Merleau-Ponty distinguishes between Descartes' mathematical concept of space to which depth is 'a third dimension derived from the other two' (p.172) and the painter's experience of depth as the primary dimension of perception, quoting Giacometti's remark on Cézanne: 'I believe Cézanne was seeking depth all his life' (p.179).

In Conversation with Isabel Carlisle

First published in the catalogue of the exhibition *Bridget Riley. Works 1961–1998*, Abbot Hall Gallery, Kendal, Cumbria, 1998. This publication contained detailed descriptions of paintings, studies and silk-screens included in the actual exhibition. Some of them have been removed for the reprint of the conversation in the catalogue of Riley's show in the Galerie Beyeler, Basel, 2003, which is presented here.

1 Samuel Beckett, 'Peintres de l'empêchement' (1948), in *Disjecta. Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, Ruby Cohn (ed.), London, 1983, pp.133–37.
2 This is not a literal quotation. Riley summarises a conviction of Mondrian that he expressed several times since 1915, for instance in 'The New Plastic in Painting' (1917–18): 'The composition expresses the subjective, the individual through rhythm ... At the same time it expresses the universal through the properties and dimensions and colour value and through *continuous opposition of the plastic means themselves.*' Quoted from *The New Art The New Life. The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian*, Harry Holtzman and Martin S. James (eds.), London, 1987, p.39
3 Bruce Glaser, 'An Interview with Lee Krasner' (1967), reprinted in *Jackson Pollock. Interviews, Articles and Reviews*, Pepe Karmel (ed.), New York, 1999, p.28.
4 Samuel Beckett, 'Three Dialogues' (1949), reprinted in *Disjecta*, pp.138–45.
5 *Dialogues on Art*, ²2003, p.63.
6 *Ibid*, p.60.
7 Rainer Maria Rilke, 'Letter to Clara Rilke, 13 October 1907', in *Rainer Maria Rilke: Letters on Cézanne*, Clara Rilke (ed.), London, 1988, p.50.

Supposed to be Abstract

Published in *Parkett*, No.61, May 2001, pp.22–26.

1 Peter Schjeldahl, 'British Flash. Having Fun with Bridget Riley and Damien Hirst', *The New Yorker*, 6 November 2000, p.104.
2 Cf. **Perception Is the Medium**, p.90.
3 *Dialogues on Art*, ²2003, p.103.
4 György Ligeti, *Études pour Piano, Premier Livre*. Erika Haase, Piano and Harpsichord. *Col legno* Musikproduktion, AU–031 815 CD.
5 *Matisse on Art*, p.112 ('My Curves are not Mad').

The Spirit of Enquiry

First published in the catalogue of the exhibition *Bridget Riley: Paintings and Drawings 1961–2004*, Museum of Modern Art, Sydney (Australia) and City Gallery, Wellington (New Zealand), London, 2004. Reprinted with a German translation in *Bridget Riley: Bilder und Zeichnungen 1959–2005*, Aargauer Kunsthaus, Aarau (Switzerland), London–Aarau, 2005, pp.221–22.

1 For Riley's view of the historical conditions of Modern Art see also **The Experience of Painting**, p.144, and the conversation with Neil MacGregor in *Dialogues on Art*, ²2003, p.29.
2 This practical attitude to history is further elaborated in **Painting Now**, p.291f.
3 Bridget Riley, *Mondrian: Nature to Abstraction*, introduction to the exhibition catalogue, Tate Gallery, London, 1997.

4 The abstract nature of art in general, including figurative painting, is part of Riley's discussion with Andrew Graham-Dixon in *Dialogues on Art*, 2 2003, p.69f.

5 Riley has clarified her debt to Paul Klee in her introductory essay 'Making visible', to the catalogue of the exhibition *Paul Klee: The Nature of Creation*, Hayward Gallery in association with Lund Humphries, London, 2002, pp.15–19.

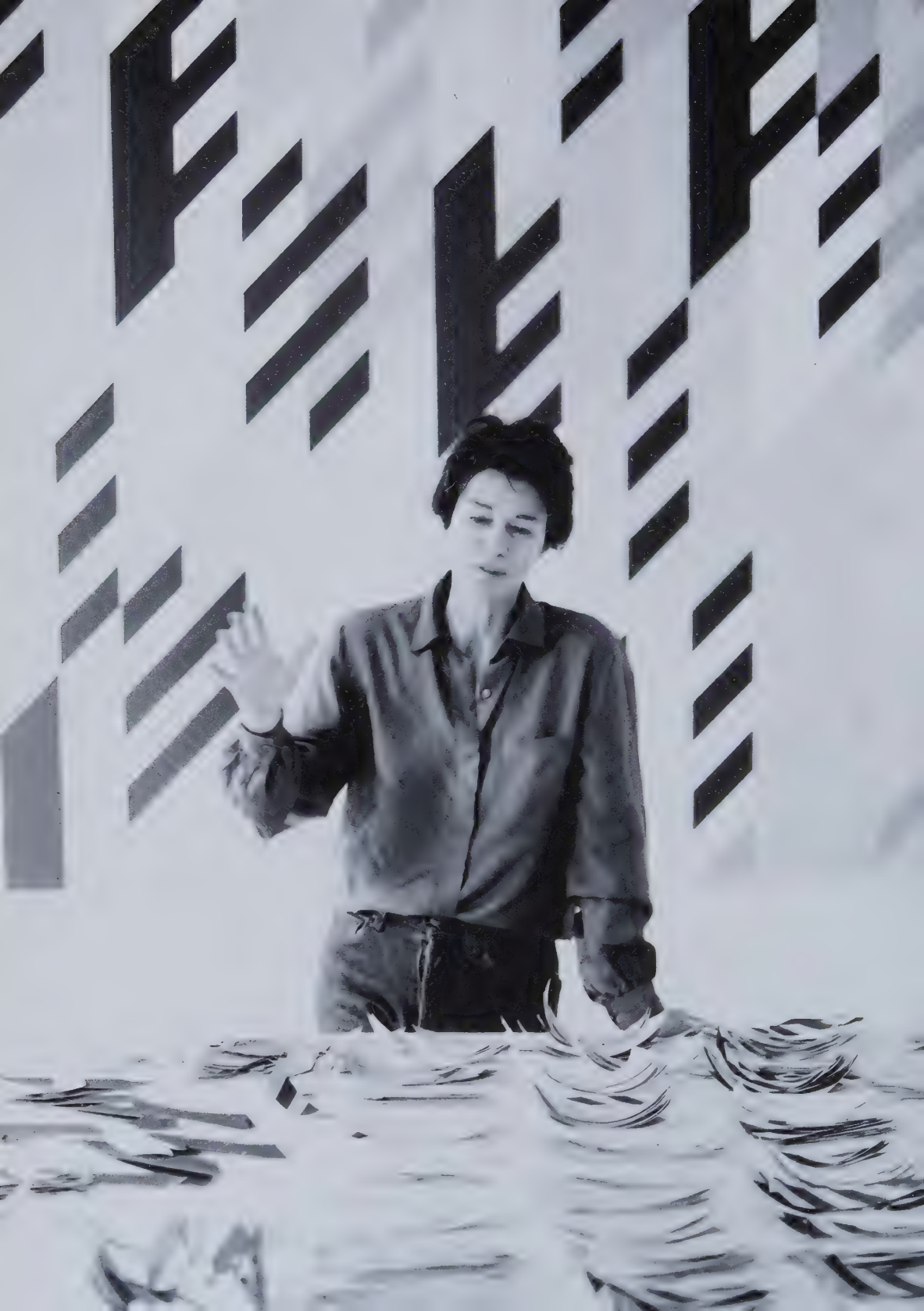
6 *The Poems: Gerard Manley Hopkins*, Walford Davies (ed.), London–Vermont, 1999.

7 The impossibility of approaching the energy and vitality of nature in a direct way, by describing its appearance, is discussed in **The Pleasures of Sight**, p.33f, and in **Seurat as Mentor**, p.63f.

8 In 1986, after the opening of her exhibition in the Jeffrey Hoffeld Gallery in New York, Riley visited the 'simulationist' painters Philip Taaffe and Ross Bleckner in their studios.

9 Since 2006 Riley has become increasingly interested in Islamic calligraphy und Persian miniatures, particularly in the early Savafid paintings. This interest reflects her recent preoccupation with opening the picture format to the wall, as can be seen in her wall paintings of 2007 (Berlin, New York) and 2008 (Musée d'art moderne de la Ville, Paris). See Kudielka, 'Sound, Unrest, Dance and a Flourish on the Wall' to the catalogue of Riley's show at the Max Hetzler Galerie, Berlin, 2007, pp.16–20.

3 : ON ART AND OTHER ARTISTS



The Flowering of the Abstract [1983]

This century has been one of dramatic changes within the visual arts, and there is no reason to suppose that the pace will slacken. However, looking back on the last eight decades, the sources of change seem themselves to have shifted. In the earlier years they seemed to spring from a genuine desire within the artistic community for renewal. Latterly fashion has come to be a significant source of motivation.

I think it very probable that in the future there may be a divergence of paths: one tendency will come more and more to resemble the world of pop music, with group following group or movement following movement, supported by a vast promotional structure. Simultaneously, genuine development will tend to go underground. Thus the Western world will produce an inversion of the effect of totalitarianism, with commercialism replacing party ideology as the dominant factor. Consequently for each succeeding generation the task of disentangling the worthwhile from the ephemeral among recent as well as current painting will be increasingly difficult.

In my view the innovations of the second half of the 19th-century and of the first half of our own have not yet been fully developed and still carry the seeds for the future. Alas, since the Second World War this precious heritage has been plundered in such a damaging and superficial way that both artists and the interested public feel disillusioned and sense that Modern art as a whole has somehow let them down or simply failed. Yet one has only to go back to the works of the great innovators to see their true stature and to regain access to the still imperfectly appreciated wealth which they bequeathed.

Great periods of artistic flowering are rare and short: only 30 years for the high point of classical Greek art, for instance. Valid insights, however, hold good, even if they are neglected during periods of decline and doldrum. Abstract painting, now some 75 years old, is still relatively in its infancy. If Mondrian was the Giotto of Abstract painting, the High Renaissance is still to come.[1]

In particular, the potential of what is called abstract colour painting, which places particular emphasis on the interplay between colours, has barely been touched. I would expect and hope that by the year 2020 abstract painters will be extracting from this endlessly rich seam a range of exciting work which will genuinely enlarge the vocabulary of art and our perception of the world around us.

The Colour Connection

in conversation with Robert Kudielka [1989]

Some time ago when you were asked to choose works from the National Gallery Collection for an exhibition titled The Artist's Eye, *I remember that you considered a different selection. It was to be focused on the perception of nature and would have included paintings by Constable, Monet, Seurat and others.*

Yes, that's true. But my preoccupations have shifted a little and I have become more and more involved in the problems of plasticity – in that intangible quality which gives a painting its constructive coherence. The artists whose work I have selected have each used colour in this particular way, as an element of construction.

That's an interesting idea, to associate colour with construction and plasticity. Is this the theme of the exhibition?

Yes, and I very much hope that the seven great paintings shown in this exhibition – by Titian, Veronese, El Greco, Rubens, Poussin and Cézanne – will make it clear. These artists do not exactly form a tradition, but they connect in many ways. Some of them even through personal contact,



Titian:
Bacchus and Ariadne
1520–22

others solely through artistic judgement and appreciation. All of them however have one thing in common: they were interested in what it means to *build* a painting in plastic terms.

So you start with Titian.

Yes. He is the first great colour painter. Giorgione may have seen some possibilities before him, but he seems to me to have thought that colour could stand by itself almost independently of drawing. It's an easy mistake to make – one gets excited by what one imagines will be a new freedom from old constraints. Titian, however, seems to have felt the need to re-orientate the pictorial means as a whole rather than to abandon any one aspect in order to include colour more properly. A new and bold approach to composition was needed. The painting *Bacchus and Ariadne* shows him rising to this challenge in an amazing way.

Painted between 1520 and 1522, shortly after Titian's professional breakthrough with the Assunta *of 1518, it marks the beginning of his mature work.*

The painting is a shock, even today. We are so inured to the notion of shock in modern painting that we have come to suspect its validity. So one is reassured, while marvelling, by this painting's enduring capacity to startle. How is it done? The sheer volume of blue, and *what a blue*! You think at first that there is something wrong with the painting, that no one in his right mind could have hoped to get away with such an outrageous colour.

Some people still think that the pigment has changed, or might have been falsified by restoration.

I don't think that this is true. For instance, the red-brown tree in the top right is actually painted that colour. It's not an oxidisation of green. Modern conservation with its scientific analysis of pigments is able to ascertain such technical details.[1]

It also tells us that the sky around Bacchus has lost some of its intensity through retouching.

But that doesn't affect the general scheme of the painting.

It's not a question of speculation about the original appearance of pigments or their state of preservation, is it?

No, that would be a red herring. How colours are identified doesn't discriminate sufficiently anyway. Our conception of the various hues has probably changed just as much over a period of time as they themselves have aged a little. It's irremediably obscure and quite irrelevant, provided that no great damage has happened to a painting. A painter would not be an artist if he were to pursue that sort of perfection. Monet, when his eyesight began to fail him, painted some of his most beautifully subtle canvases from the names on the tubes.[2] To be able to do something like that was only possible because he knew through long experience that in the end it was the precision of relationships that counted.

And that, indeed, seems to be the crucial issue of Bacchus and Ariadne. *Titian uses his blue with an abundance equal to its splendour. But how is it related? Deep blue was traditionally regarded as a difficult colour, even shunned by the Antique painters, because it seemed to threaten the coherence of imagery.*

Titian however relates it in an extraordinary way. It seems as though he has taken this very hint from the past, and by pushing it to an extreme has turned it to his own ends. He makes no attempt to integrate the blue through other hues of equal intensity. With the exception of some of the reds, all the other hues – the greens and warm flesh tints – are very soft indeed.

But Titian re-enforces them as it were by endowing them with a particular dramatic role.

Exactly. He uses the complexity of his narrative to balance the blue. The action depicted and one's reaction as a spectator are linked in a special timescale invented by Titian for his subject. The pictorial time of *Bacchus and Ariadne* is a matter of instants. Straight after the saturated blue one sees the explosive force of the diagonal which cuts right across one's perception.

One can almost hear the mænad clashing the cymbals.

It's as though she says 'Now!' This shows clearly one aspect of Titian's pictorial time.

Titian has taken two successive episodes from the myth and turned them into one pictorial instant. His Antique sources, Catullus and Ovid, both tell the story of how Ariadne was abandoned by a faithless Theseus on the island of Naxos and how Bacchus found her there. But each poet elaborates a different moment in the chain of events.[3] *Catullus depicts Ariadne in her grief, watching the ship disappear, when suddenly, 'from the other side', Bacchus makes his entry; and, in describing the god's following, he mentions nearly all the characters in the painting. Ovid, retelling the story a generation later, shifts the emphasis to the encounter between the god and the mortal. To show Ariadne his love Bacchus transforms her diadem into an immortal constellation: the Crown.*

It would seem to be almost impossible to combine events of such fantastic diversity, but Titian succeeds because his way of building the painting equates to the poetics of mythology. Everything is bound together within a structure of analogies and contradictions. For instance, although the general character of the Bacchic retinue is disturbing, it also seems to be pervaded by a surprising sweetness which, like a gentle breeze, stirs the trees and, passing lightly over the whole, reaches its zenith in Bacchus – one of the most unforgettable images ever painted.

His arrival traps Ariadne. Titian creates a sense of inevitability by directing the entire movement from which the god springs against *the left to right reading of the painting.*

The encounter is rendered inescapable in every way. The space around Ariadne seems to have a depth all its own, a narrow corridor as opposed to the spreading lateral passage of the retinue, but at the end Bacchus awaits her too, in the crown of stars thrown into infinity. The combination of two such different types of space is an amazing device, hardly less so than the main contrast between the blue and the earth colours.

But how is the unity of the painting achieved? So far we have been mainly speaking about oppositions, disruptions and counter-movements.

I think that Titian achieves his unity by building the painting according to those very factors which would seem most likely to tear it apart. What I mean is that he works through an intuitive logic of oppositions, distinguishing and simultaneously relating every inch of the canvas in

a continuous web of contrasts, echoes, reversals, repetitions and inversions without either trying to form a unifying envelope or depending upon any simple common principle.

Is this what you mean when you talk about 'building with colour'?

Yes, but even when Titian considers the other properties of painting, such as form, he still thinks in terms of colour – that is to say, in contrasts and echoes. For example, Bacchus and Ariadne are clearly shown as complementary figures – and the girl with the cymbals is a secondary counter-image, her assured stance contrasting with that of Ariadne. Bacchus himself, with his open ease of movement, is the opposite of the twisted man struggling with his snakes. The very age of Silenus, who brings up the rear of the retinue, is reversed in the youth of the faun who leads it. The grace of Bacchus and the splendour of his gift to Ariadne are inverted, as it were, in comic distortion, by the barbaric offering of the clumsy satyr to the girl with the tambourine.

So the relationships between the figures in the painting form a dramatic analogy to the colour structure.

Yes, take the line of Bacchus' glance, it echoes the main diagonal. And this, which goes right across the canvas, dividing the painting into a blue area and a predominantly earth-red one, offers a sensitive edge across which these two main colours and their derivatives are reversed. Slivers of blue sparkle between the trees, the paler shades of the clouds are suggested in the dress of the girl with the tambourine, a full strong sky colour reappears in the skirt of the woman with cymbals, and at its most intense the blue culminates in Ariadne's clothes. Conversely, the reds at their earthiest and heaviest are reserved for the snake-bearer, who sets off a major colour echo in the autumnal tree above. Shifting hue, the reds travel down to Bacchus, where the magenta cloak and the flesh tints, quite soft colours in themselves, acquire almost full chromatic force by being isolated against the blue. Finally, the reds reach their most brilliant exponent in the vermillion of Ariadne's scarf, set against the blue of her dress.

How about the clear yellow cloth below? It seems almost arbitrary at first glance.

It has a sort of *repoussoir* role, putting the strong red and blue contrast of Ariadne's clothes into a relative position by introducing a third tension and at the same time strengthening the greens. So cunningly does Titian build his colour that this surprising addition is immediately absorbed into the whole canvas by his placing a few patches of yellow sunlight in the landscape above.

This is a fascinating way of looking at the painting. But don't you think that it hampers or even impedes the reading of the image?

No, how could it? Titian goes way beyond simply illustrating a mythological tale: he offers us a new way of experiencing it by transforming it into a purely pictorial event controlled by plastic considerations.

What do you mean by 'plastic considerations'?

By plastic I mean that which hangs between the cognitive reading of an image and its perceptions. If one looks at the painting there is clearly a gap between the mythic illusion which one can 'read' and the immediacy of the sensations one experiences through the sense of sight. Titian uses the archaic imagery as a veil through which he creates an intangible web of organised sensations within the painting. The content of this web is as removed from the arcane quality of the myth as it is superior to mere decoration.

But how is this brought about?

By working with this 'between' as a primary consideration. It means that X and Y, say, are less important in themselves than the relationships they give rise to. Titian uses various structural particularities of colour for just this purpose. Whatever you see never exists simply and solely by itself, as an isolated sign or symbol, but by playing its part within a context in which relatedness as such is of the first importance.

You mean, that it is the quality of the relationships within the work which constitutes the plastic character of the painting, its 'hanging between'? Cézanne defined colour as 'the place where our brain and the universe meet',[4] *and he demonstrated his answer to this challenge with a famous gesture – that of joining both hands together with all the fingers firmly interlocked.*

Titian's web is certainly not as tight. He can afford to have celebrated mythic figures such as Bacchus and Ariadne standing out of the pictorial fabric. But if one looks at the grouping of the other figures it is very revealing how far the primacy of relationship is pushed. There are very few figures indeed which are complete in themselves – shoulders overlap, legs seem to belong to several creatures, hidden limbs acquire illogical substitutes – so that, in effect, figures are broken up and reassembled in a new plastic anatomy which I call to myself 'collective figuration'.

It's the beginning of the colour structure he developed over a period of fifty years. Whereas in Bacchus and Ariadne *Titian still relies upon certain formal places for colour, he later goes on – in works such as the* Death of Actæon *in the National Gallery – to fabricate pictorial unity almost entirely out of a continuously shifting modulation of a group of colours, carefully chosen and balanced for this purpose.*

And that is the enigma of his achievement.

Though such extreme solutions could not directly give rise to the Venetian tradition of colour as we know it.



Paolo Veronese:
The Adoration of the Kings
1573

One cannot go from high point to high point, as Pascal says. It was Paolo Veronese who took the necessary steps to translate Titian's innovations into comprehensible principles. Titian is the kind of painter whom one can only admire. For practical guidance it's better to turn to Veronese. At least this is how both Delacroix and Cézanne understood it.

It's a pattern of appreciation which seems to have conditioned Veronese's own response. When this Paolo Caliari from Verona arrived in Venice in 1555, he encountered a Titian at the height of his powers. But instead of succumbing to the influence of Titian's mature work he found his own measure through relating to an earlier phase of the master's development. It seems to have been paintings such as the Pesaro Madonna *from the early 1520s which were to provide his own starting-point.*

The connection is clear when one looks at the *Adoration of the Kings.* There is a similar diagonal development of the colours, articulated by the drapery, set against a massive piece of architecture.

But obviously the colour is notated in a different key. The hues are less brilliant and a specific tone, a kind of medium lightness, seems to prevail throughout the painting.

I don't think it is a different key but the use of a coherent colour envelope as such which makes Veronese's approach so different from Titian's. His colour is based on a mid-tone level which is used in two ways, as an actual grey and as the abstract pitch towards which all hues relate. The grey must have been a wonderful silvery shade when first painted, and it probably related to the actual setting of the painting.

Unfortunately the church of San Silvestro, for which this painting was made in 1573, was converted in the 19th-century in such a way that the original setting no longer exists. But it is very likely that the grey of the stone together with the subdued church light provided an architectural framework perfectly tuned to that inflected, indirect light, le temps gris, *which Delacroix was to regard as the most favourable condition for the observation of colour in nature.*

Veronese uses this grey in two ways, as an armature for the colour structure and for wrapping around all his figures, bathing the whole in

its light. Quite naturally the principal hues compatible to such a milieu are unstable ones. There are no central blues, reds or yellows – they would break the grey envelope. Instead he has tangential derivatives, colours which are tipped and slanted towards the secondaries: towards turquoise or lime green, mauve or earth-red, ochre or orange.

The approximation of all colours to a common mid-tone, emphasised by a pervasive grey, destabilises the chromatic identities. This is a strategy which you have often employed in your own work, as I remember, in order to release the perceptual energy of colour.[5] *But instability as such without a structural counterpoint, can easily result in visual inertia. How does Veronese articulate this diffuse, spatially rather shallow blend of colours?*

By interlocked diagonals – powerful lines which zigzag sharply down and across the painting. The restrictions in any spatial movement back and forth imposed by the shallow range of colour are compensated for by twisting the dynamics of recession flat, as it were.

So a device, found by Giorgione and developed by Titian, is elaborated in an almost systematic fashion. In the absence of the projective pull of perspectival space, diagonal vectors activate the painting. In the Adoration *this structural reading is literally illuminated by the shaft of light which singles out Mary, in a long falling diagonal, as the focus of the painting.*

If Titian's diagonal is a bold thrust – Veronese's is as gentle as a silken cord. Understated, almost transparent, this beam of light is still strong enough to swing the entire movement of the *Adoration* in a slow arc – like the clapper of a great bell.

That's a beautiful simile. It encompasses both the linear organisation and the development of colour.

The movement is made up of 'weights'. Each of the principal hues is laid out first in clear bold statements. Take the reds, for instance. The heaviest accent is obviously the big coat of the kneeling king, although it is hard to say exactly which sort of red it is – whether the warm or cool variant is dominant. In the bulk of the brocade an orange-red mid-tone is played against a lower, cooler red which is extended into the blue-magenta lining of the epaulettes. Smaller in area but more brilliant, the orange



In Attendance 1994

red reappears in the headdress of the man behind, a culminating point, which is echoed in the breeches of the king with the golden cloak. The orange-red theme is concluded in the dull burnt orange of Joseph's clothes, circling round the surprisingly light mauve-magenta of Mary's dress.

And what about the shadowed attendant on the extreme left?

He plays a similar role in the red movement to that of Joseph. If Joseph is the chromatically subdued end of the red arc, the attendant is the beginning: a low-keyed obscure prelude.

But there is also a slighter extension, a barely visible pink-magenta thread, which is woven into the fabric of the painting. It can be traced in the shine of the horsemen's armour, in the sparkle of the censer carried by the black king, as well as in the appliqué of the trousers. This peripheral flicker travels via the light grey horses in the background right up to the middle of the painting, where it is substantiated by the lilac belt of the man with the red turban. It continues in the pink decoration of the luggage and eventually dissolves into a luminous orange-violet reflection in the horseman standing by the stable.

If you look carefully you can see the same treatment in all the other colours. It shows his method of working in the studio. First, the big areas would have been blocked in by Veronese and his studio assistants – in this case, his brother and his two sons. Then, as the painting developed, smaller marks of the same or closely related colours would have been added across other areas. Trimmings, trappings, light falling and shadows would all offer pretexts for extending and, as you say, weaving the colours in and through the painting.

It may be a simple working procedure, but it is also the clue to his magic of suggestion. Whatever he wants to indicate – light, a particular texture or plain local colour – seems to be primarily a question of how far he would transform these basic blocks. Thus, the very same ochre could remain as an inconspicuous earth or flesh colour, or be treated to the most incredible permutations. It could be converted into the airy texture of the plumes or into an even flow of light; it could be raised to the appearance of 'real gold', like in the cloak of the kneeling king, and it could be played down to the bland sensation of animal skin, as in the ox directly opposite. But sometimes, and most perplexing to us, he didn't bother with elaboration at all, like in the

hand of that red king, which seems to be proof of the claim of his detractors that he could not paint hands at all …

Yes – but of course that's nonsense! Veronese left this hand indistinct because it is meant to be ignored, to remain in half-shadow. His sort of reasoning doesn't go in for detailed accuracy but for a collective truth. Look at the king's arm and the cloak of his page. They form together one red shape, but Veronese separates the figures in a way that is really remarkable. Instead of delineating the sleeve he distinguishes it from the cloak by a clear touch of green which is only connected perceptually to the green tunic of the man with a red headdress behind him. It's sheer plastic invention.

Yes. It is one of those instances through which Veronese delighted the protagonists of Modern painting in the 19th-century. Delacroix used to say that he had discovered the law of contrast in Veronese's Marriage at Cana *in the Louvre – and that before Chevreul even started his scientific researches.*[6]

But I don't think Veronese had our modern idea of complementaries. It's the totality of colour that matters to him. The little green mark is one of the smaller traces of the green movement. There are others nearby, such as the olive touches in the tassel and lining of the big collar worn by the silver-white figure in the foreground. They help to alleviate the weight of the greens in much the same way as the pink marks do the reds. In fact, the passaging of the greens almost mirrors that of the reds. Beginning with the cloak of the black king, a huge green block of darkly saturated olive and emerald, it is raised to maximum brilliance in the tunic of the figure in the background: a wonderfully clear fresh green which equates to the intense red of his turban. Aided by those smaller traces, it then finds its way to the opposite cool end of the green scale, turquoise, in Mary's cloak – rounded off with one last touch of olive in the lining.

But surely this does not account for the entire green theme?

No. It can be perceived in reverse; and possibly this is the more significant direction. As a turquoise blue it starts with the sky, travels down in the wings of the angels and arrives at the figure of Mary as the colour of her

cloak. There it splits into blue and green. As blue it gains prominence, thanks to colour contrast, in the golden brocade of the kneeling king, while the green tendency is extended to the moor's cloak. One could find many more such surprising relationships and correspondences. Nothing seems to be arbitrary in Veronese's world; yet the colour unity appears so natural, that it may be hard to believe that it is deliberate.

This balance between ease and order must have been at the root of his legendary 'fame' which lasted right up till the beginning of Modern art. Veronese was the famous painter par excellence: much appraised as long as praise seemed to be the highest form of appreciating art. But he fell somewhat into oblivion when art became subject to methodical interpretation. Cecil Gould said that the lack of proper art-historical studies on Veronese presents 'a task of alarming dimensions'.[7]

This may have to do with what I termed 'plastic'. Veronese lays bare the web which hangs between perception and cognition more openly than Titian because he doesn't seem to be interested in expression. One can see that this could easily be misunderstood as merely 'decorative'.

The 'most gentle entertainment', soauissimo trattenimento, *Ridolfi calls it, as opposed to the* eroica maestà *of Titian.*[8]

Yes. But this gentleness or sweetness is not weak, or a lack of some vital artistic quality. It is a sort of preferred detachment. A renunciation of what is loosely understood as expressiveness could perhaps have seemed to a sovereign spirit such as Veronese simply the setting aside of a distraction which would allow him greater freedom on a deeper level. His form of expression is purely plastic – *that's* what makes it so strong and enduring. And, I think, why it has meant so much to other painters over the centuries.

It is certainly more complex than a quick glance can grasp. All aspects and characters of the painting seem to share a collective identity: each of them is specific, but none peculiar, isolated from the others; and the situation in toto, though a magic and unique event, is far from being charged with the glamour of the extraordinary.

It's the actual reality of colour. One wonders, as one cannot with the Titian, why the painting is so familiar. It almost seems as though



El Greco:
The Expulsion of the Traders from the Temple
c.1600

Veronese not only dealt with his own problem in painting but provided an insight which has reappeared again and again in canvases of different styles and periods. This insight would seem to be that beyond any identifying of subjects or any isolating of elements – such as, for instance, strong hues – the *whole* is regarded as the most important thing. And it's exactly at that point that colour plays a key role. One of colour's mysteries is that it can do two contradictory things at the same time: each individual hue can contribute to the overall sensation, and yet still can remain itself.[9]

Is it the painter's realisation of that inconceivable entity – the colour *of colours?*

Yes, probably.

But what then about El Greco? Why did you include the Expulsion of the Traders from the Temple *in your selection? He seems to be far from being a colourist: his space is torn up by vehement perspectives and his figures are shrouded in a dramatic chiaroscuro – devices which are, by all accounts, not sympathetic to colour.*

That is true, but it's only part of the story. There is another side to Titian's understanding of colour. Apart from showing its subtle complexities he also saw the need for a certain toughness to push out its boundaries. It shows the breadth and strength of the Venetian tradition that it could

sustain a wide range of temperaments and controversial interpretations. El Greco, an expressionist in our terms, may rock the colour boat through Mannerist distortions and intense religious feeling. But in doing so he adds an important new force to colour's armoury – and that is *rhythm*. Take the strong projection of space which you mention. It is certainly there, but it is interesting how the perspective is handled. Instead of one, there are two vanishing points: the main one directly to the right of Christ and an eccentric one to the far right. Being crooked or skew-whiff, they counteract the very focus they promise and, through that, provide the lateral tension of the rhythm which he builds across the canvas.

The whole composition seems to reverberate with oblique correspondences. The equilibrium of the central symmetry swings between the agitated traders on one side and the passive observers on the other. And again, this *balance is set off – skew-whiff, as you would say – through the dynamic figure of Christ in the centre foreground and his counterpart, the abstracted girl in the far distance on the right. But what role does colour play in all this?*

It works in two ways. Unlike Veronese, El Greco makes a clear distinction between the brilliance of his strong colours and a pervasive, liverish, putty grey which seems to form a sort of bed for the accents of the painting. One function of this strange grey is to bridge extremes: between lights and darks, warms and cools and, very ingeniously, between the main yellow-blue contrast. Its other role is to draw together the flesh colours and the stone of architecture.

The correspondence is almost metaphorical – and strongly reminiscent of late Titian. Do you remember the Pietà *in the Accademia in Venice? There you have a similarly mysterious equation between stone and flesh. It is known that on his way from Crete to Spain El Greco stayed in Venice between 1565 and 1570, and worked as a studio assistant to Titian. Although in formal terms he owes more to Tintoretto and Bassano, his colour sense seems to have been formed, if only partially, by that impalpable grey which permeates Titian's colour.*

But only partially. El Greco tears the grey apart by shattering his colours across the picture plane. These outcrops of colour – like highly-lit rocks – are then interrelated through a kind of cross-over thinking. One can see it most clearly in the blue and yellow of the pair of conversing figures in the right foreground: the colours are inverted, remaining almost equal in

quantity, in the yellow and blue of the two people on the left of Christ who flinch away from him. The man in the yellow cloth and the woman falling backwards are re-formed in a new abstract unit, a colour synthesis, which provides a key to the plastic structure of the painting. Quite apart from the actual 'story', colour redefines the figuration in such a way that axes of visual tension are created which form a rhythmic framework for the figure of Christ.

He is placed in the centre of the action, as one would expect; and yet, Christ also seems to be completely set apart from the other figures. The magenta of his robe is a unique accent, the only red besides the subordinate orange in the waistcoat of the trader in the left foreground. He alone incorporates the full tonal contrast of the painting, carrying the darkest shadow in his blue coat and exposing the highest tonal pitch in the glittering highlight down his right side.

One can certainly see Christ as a single figure, but he is also the quintessence of the whole painting. His gesture is drawn through the responses of those around him. The action doesn't exist, and yet, it is almost palpably there. The swing of his upraised arm is described in the curve of the priests watching the event, and the stroke of the flail is anticipated in the exposure of the bodies which will receive it. The whole painting spins around the vortex of this movement which is not literally depicted – which is only virtual, implied in the actual structure.

Do you think it was this virtual 'energy and motion' that attracted Pollock to El Greco when he made his copies after reproductions in the 1930s?

It may have been. There is a free-floating rhythm in the painting which seems to hang there, self-contained, almost dancing – and quite flat. El Greco places the eye-level very high, tips the foreground – emphasising this through the overturned table – and, further aided by the *repoussoir* figure bending over on the left, he pushes the whole lower half of the painting back.

The suspension accounts for the surprisingly serene presence of the painting. Although severe, the interference of Christ is not shown as any Herculean labour of purging the stables, as it were, nor is there any trace of bitterness or condemnation. While the flail is about to strike, the girl on the far right calmly counts the money in her hand, an innocent accomplice in the



Peter Paul Rubens:
Allegory of Peace
('Peace and War')
c.1629–30

machinations of the world. Two reliefs in the background confirm the symbolic meaning of the incident which El Greco has conveyed so superbly. The left one shows the first expulsion, the expulsion from Paradise, whereas the right one, representing the sacrifice of Isaac, implies an enigmatic promise of redemption, based on the analogy of a father willing to sacrifice his son.

I am very much aware that this painting cannot be fully appreciated by concentrating on its colour alone. That is true, of course, of all these paintings, but especially so in El Greco. He aspires to a different spiritual reality than that offered by colour, although it probably could not have been realised so powerfully *without* colour. One could see him at one end of a scale, the other end of which might be Rubens.

The Allegory of Peace *is indeed another world. Everything there appears in a different light.*

And what a wonderful light! If you first catch sight of the canvas from some distance there seem to be big bright cloud-like shapes sailing through it. They turn out to be the bodies which are the luminous heart of the painting – there's nothing lighter anywhere else. In a sense these flesh colours generate the internal radiance of Rubens' masterpiece.

As if flesh were turned into a source of light instead of being equated with stone. But how is it done?

It's brought about through a spectrum of colours – there's no other way. Certain colours placed in certain juxtapositions can generate a sort of light, as Seurat knew later on. Rubens isn't in any position, though, to base his procedure on an analysis of light. He draws on physical suggestion instead. Skin is a very complex colour compound, and subject to an infinite variety of inflections. Look at the great long back on the left. The surface is a little worn, and that enables one to see parts of the colour structure more clearly. There are yellows, violets, pinks and greens, all raised to a very high key indeed. Being so pale they would not be able, just by themselves, to bring about this extraordinary brilliance. But in a context of extension they gain sufficient strength to do so. All the strong shades of yellow, violet, green and red, which appear and reappear in drapery, act as exponents of those fugitive tints. The colour is orchestrated with such a resonance that even the highest notes can carry its theme.

An ingenious device, which has influenced generations of painters right up to Delacroix and Renoir. It was certainly prepared for by the role which the flesh colours had assumed in the understanding of Venetian colourism. But this tradition alone does not sufficiently explain Rubens' innovation. In 1613 a friend of his, Franciscus Aguilonius, published Six Books on Optics, *to which Rubens contributed the illustrations. It is generally assumed that he also had a share in the revolutionary thesis included in this work: that all colours can be deduced from three primaries – blue, red and yellow.*[10]

Perhaps Rubens was the first painter to have a distinct concept of the totality of colour. The best proofs of this new approach are the copies after Titian which he made in Spain in 1629, shortly before the *Allegory of Peace*.

They all show – like the portrait of Charles V *now in the Courtauld – a remarkable shift towards red, yellow and blue. Rubens understands the colour unity of a painting generally in terms of those three primaries, through which it can be produced.*

And furthermore, he turns them into a source of light. The painting is divided into two parts. Colour and brilliance enter from the left in force and take over the entire foreground; the rest is dark, an annihilation of both these qualities. But this darkness is not entirely negative: it has a role – one of pushing the whole composition right up to the front of the picture plane.

In other words, there is no plain chiaroscuro, *no continuous modulation from light to dark. Colour and light play their own theme against a dark background which is only momentarily broken up by the amazing passage of blue sky. Otherwise the space is extremely frontal, reducing the possibilities of organisation quite considerably.*

Rubens uses the most celebrated gift of the Venetian tradition, after colour: the diagonal. It recurs time and again as a formal agent aiding and abetting the organisation of colour. As often, Rubens goes from corner to corner. Two huge diagonals cross the canvas. One rises from the back foot of the entry figure on the left, runs up through the figure of Peace, or more precisely, along the line of the red cloth over her lap, continues through Mars' shield and out through the phantoms in the top right. The other falls from the woman with the tambourine, via the satyr's wreath of leaves, the cornucopia and the putto's head, and ends in the outstretched leg of the girl in gold.

But there is obviously an explicit preference for the downward movement. Minerva's strong arm determinedly pushes away Mars, who is drawn by the Fury of War, as if to protect the gentle gathering of light and colour against the threat that looms over it.

It's more a matter of balance, I think. Rubens establishes a relationship between these opposing directions by building up a grid or lattice around which he can twist or through which he can pour his colours. Do you see the two red diagonals echoing one another? The first starts from the heavy backcloth in the top left, falls down beside Peace, floods into her drapery and finishes below the cornucopia. The second begins in the big fold hanging down from the tree, travels through Mars' cloak and ends in small touches of red in the landscape to the right.

So he actually repeats and extends the axial relationship throughout the painting – in much the same way as he proceeds with his colour theme – providing compartments in which he can allocate its development. Is that what you mean by 'lattice'?

Yes. Take the beautiful yellow gold. Making use of his lattice he twines a long curving garland of yellows down and across the painting. Sometimes it enters into this or that relationship with different colours, and at other times it plays out a virtually independent movement. But

in either case, although it may be hair, metal, fruit, clouds or skin, Rubens disposes it quite logically.

According to what sort of logic?

That is difficult to say. It's certainly *not* a logic concerned with 'substance'. To go back to the yellow. It seems to be the most important colour of all, and yet there is not a great deal of actual yellow in the painting. So it must be the question of an implicit quality. At its most brilliant, in the lightest parts of the bodies, it is indistinguishable from the sensation of light itself, before Rubens moves it into greens. The satyr carries the main modulations: bronzed and burnished by juxtapositions, all the inflections are there – ochres, olives, browns – which taken together yield a radiance comparableto that of the two women. As a lodestone of the yellow movement this figure is flanked by two surprising adjuncts in the chain of colour cadences. One is the treasure carried by the entry figure …

A personification of Plenty, according to the attributes accompanying her.

In the golden bowl and vessels the hues are warmer, lighter, more transparent. The other extension is the group of fruits offered in the cornucopia. Pale and opaque in the gourd, the yellows shift their character through the grapes towards turquoise. Picking up the reflection of the distant blue sky, these clusters form a little coda to the yellow development, which ends in the wings and the back of the putto. And just when one thinks that the variations are concluded the whole thing starts up again, with a counterthrust of clear yellow gold in the dress of the girl on the right setting off another chain of events: the shine of hair and skin, the blazing torch, the reflections in the armour, sunlight striking the clouds.

The autonomy of the colour structure is very apparent. If one contrasts this painting with the Veronese, one is made aware of an important shift of emphasis. In the Rubens the plastic properties assume a significance of their own.

But not in a decorative sense surely.

No, his subject matter seems to be affected as well. It has long been acknowledged that the configuration of Peace and her child is directly related to the painting of Venus, Mars and Cupid *at Dulwich, where Venus feeds*

Cupid in the same playful manner. In Rubens' mind an image seems to be capable of carrying different meanings in much the same way as a colour theme may represent the most diverse objects. The significance of any entity or element is not determined by an external reference, but is conveyed simply within the context of painting.

That sounds familiar! Does Modern art start that early?

The tendency is certainly borne out by the two Poussin paintings you have selected. Look at those Arcadian shepherds, dressed as though for a pagan festival rather than a biblical event. There is a sense of classical composure in the bacchanal which one would not associate with an orgiastic rite. Poussin presents a world which is so evidently a pictorial abstraction that it eludes any historical reference.

That helps to account for his formality, which can be quite disconcerting if one rejects the type of invention in his paintings or if one doesn't



Nicolas Poussin:
The Adoration of the Shepherds
1633–34

understand the need for this extreme artifice. His work is not unlike grand opera, which can only be enjoyed by accepting its conventions.

This may be the experience of Poussin today. But when he started to work in this manner there were no such conventions. He had to invent the rules himself. An amazing achievement, and even more so as it was in opposition to the course his development seemed to be following at the time. When first in Rome, he joined the ranks of the bravura painters for a while and indulged in such gross rhetorical excesses as the Martyrdom of Saint Erasmus *and the* Massacre of the Innocents *– images of unbridled violence. But suddenly, between 1630 and 1631, he changed into that formidable pinnacle of order and control.*

Both the paintings I have selected are from the mid-1630s, so his work must have reached its classical form very quickly. Poussin probably had some sort of crisis, rather like Cézanne, which set free a deeper creative self. Despite the widespread view to the contrary, it's often a rather uncouth or oddly intense temperament which excels in discipline and formality – in the arts at least.

How would you describe the particular rules he invented for himself?

They are very clear in *The Adoration of the Shepherds*. The way he uses his diagonals tells one a great deal about his reasoning. Those that recede in space are counteracted by those that lie parallel to the picture plane. There is a long passage projected back from Mary to the light in the distant sky, and the implicit line of this recession is simultaneously described by the completely flat diagonal of the shepherds bending down towards the child. The same thinking is even more apparent in the treatment of the architecture. The wall with the arch behind Mary is in a perspectival plane which is paralleled by the oblique angle of the roof drawn across the surface of the canvas. The end of the stable beam projecting towards us is illuminated by a patch of golden light virtually identical with that in the clouds behind it.

The device is consistent, and what is more, the double reading is extended to the presentation of the figures. While their bodies are beautifully rounded, their drapery is treated in a different way. Poussin simplifies tonal modelling to a light and dark contrast: the lighter parts provide for the most brilliant

hues, the darker for subservient shades. Through this he can create a powerful colour structure independent of local values.

And one sees the colour as a circular rhythm. Starting off with a sharp blue in the entry figure – who carries what amounts to the palette of the painting, a basket of fruits – it drops down to a contrasting orange qualified by pinks, tans, ochres and sage greens. Then, reaching an echoing blue around Christ and turning back through Mary's cloak and Joseph's yellow sleeve, it comes to an enigmatic stop in the two onlookers in the shade …

A fermata.

… before returning to the opening note via the scene of the Revelation to the Shepherds, a small painting within the painting, removed in time and space.

It's truly musical isn't it? By suspending the weight of the two traditional disciplines governing painting – architecture and sculpture – Poussin introduces a new affiliation of plastic thinking: the simile of music.

Yes, the whole painting seems to be composed in a particular harmony. The colours of the rondo are carried on in a kind of serpentine movement. They are transposed into the pale yellows and grey blues of the sky and finally reassembled in the group of cherubs, a flurry of delicate tints carried by a perfectly poised cluster of diagonals.

What about the blend of earth-red, ochre and a bluish grey in the architecture?

It's a beautiful composite colour – and perhaps the most important one in the entire canvas. It reverberates like a chord throughout, modulated towards the blues, the earthy reds and yellow oranges in turn. The equilibrium of the painting seems to depend on the range suggested by this colour.

And one's emotional response as well. Poussin was very much aware of the expressive character of his colour harmonies. In a famous letter to one of his patrons, Chantelou, he claimed that he employed different 'modes' of expression for different subjects.[11] *It's a reference to the Greek theory of music, but it can be very misleading if one tries to verify it in his work because there is no actual 'system' which he applies. Nevertheless he chooses his colour*



Nicolas Poussin:
The Triumph of Pan
1636

chords very carefully in relation to the character of the subject he is painting. Don't you think it is significant that in the Adoration *he excludes that deep carmine which often figures so prominently in his religious paintings?*

I don't see how Poussin could have included that particular colour here. It would have upset the entire balance of the painting. But it is interesting that you mention it – plain red may not be physically painted in anywhere, but the sensation of redness is so strongly suggested by the colour chord that you sense it in every corner of the canvas.

How would you then explain the difference of the Triumph of Pan*? The actual colours seem to be very much the same: blues, earth-reds, greens and yellows.*

They may be much the same, but they are used very differently. The painting has nothing to do with the sweetness of a harmony. One sees instead a display of frictions and facets. The colours are contrasted, red against green, blue against yellow, light against dark. The mellowness of a mid-tone pitch has been replaced by a full tonal gamut running from darkness to sheer glitter.

It's a buoyant and exultant 'mode', and it seems to be based upon an increased emphasis on rhythm. If you compare the painting with a small crayon and bistre study for a Bacchanal *in the Louvre, you can get a good idea of the tonal underpinning carrying this rhythm.*

The little study certainly has a tremendous pace. But in the painting colour modulates and slows down that rhythm, allowing complex counter-movements to develop. The whole movement grows and fills out: the rhythm, no longer an even beat, becomes progressive.

You mean there is a left to right development in the painting?

It's not a simple, straightforward progression. The diagonal which runs down the mountain to Pan, along the arms of the nymph decorating him, to the little boy – who with great glee seems to be pushing the entire movement back – this diagonal both propels and opposes the collective development which builds up against it. Poussin pitches direction against counter-direction. In his preparatory studies one can see him pushing and pulling the image about, kneading it like dough.

The rhythm literally re-creates the bodies, giving rise to the most surprising instances of pictorial anatomy. As to your 'collective figuration', look at the amazing entry group. The man with the fanfare is firmly built into the physique of the other two figures surrounding the girl on the goat – joining them or being joined to them, whichever way you look at it. His left leg straightens out, as it were, the back of the kneeling man with the flower basket on his head, while his right leg is linked with that of the man holding the girl, whose other leg helps to support the goat. One could go on pointing out such liberties throughout the whole group. But alone they would probably only add up to an entanglement of bodies, were it not for the decisive role colour plays in relocating identities.

There is a lovely broad colour diagonal, which runs from the tip of the flower basket through the two nymphs up to the tambourine, turns, and removed in space, travels back through the landscape and the sky. Cool and fresh, it is made up mainly of whites, blues and violets, accompanied by contrasting oranges and yellows. Apart from the drapery and the statue – ideal carriers for the boldest colour abstractions – the chain is linked through the pale shine of skin, its violet shadows and

the blue haze of distance. The thrust of this diagonal is encircled by a twisted curve of earth-reds, apricots, pinks, oranges and rosy colours. Poussin's collective figuration allows him to draw with colour a modulated sequence which begins with the kneeling man, curves up above the nymph on the goat, down below Pan, round the second nymph in liłac blue, and end up in the fluttering drapery on the far right. This beautiful warm colour-form is punctuated by little clusters of sage greens, turquoises and yellow ochres, which appear as wreaths, hair and iridescent silk.

If one adopts this way of looking, the notorious 'Poussin barrier' quickly vanishes. Most people, I think, sense that they are not meant to recognise well-worn sentiments and clearly identifiable facts in these highly abstract compositions. In looking at the painting one is made aware of a deliberate diversion in its perception, like listening to a musical overtone …

But it's not an overtone! In this instance the musical simile is misleading. It's just the opposite. That curious, elusive quality you are referring to is the ***substance*** of the painting, the entire body of relationships which Poussin has so carefully fabricated.

But the fabric does not simply serve representation. It subverts, as it were, the connection between the eye and the mind by diverting and redirecting one's attention. For instance, once one has become aware of the colour organisation which you have described so beautifully, the grandeur of the spatial display becomes apparent. The cross of the quarters which is pinpointed by the highlight on the golden crater draws one's attention to the off-centre position of Pan, revealing the crucial role of the vertical plumb-line. From its base, close to the satirical mask at the bottom, a kind of V-shape opens up which encompasses the core of the painting, setting apart two triangular compartments to the left and right. These broad divisions, with approximately four or five figures in each section, act like the ribs of a big fan, unfolding in space.

As a comment on those diagonals Poussin drops a few small hints in the foreground to help one see the painting: the pan-pipes in sharp perspective on one side, the vase on the other. They say, in effect, look where we point – use the projective spatial reading we indicate. If one takes these hints, the two wings of the movement appear thick, deep and curving forwards.

It's double reading again, isn't it? The angles of perspective played against the flat diagonals of the big V. But where is the vanishing point? Behind that charming couple in the centre, the woman teasing the fallen satyr?

There is no literal convergence. Instead, Poussin joins up the highly lit foreground, the central recession and the far distance in his usual contradictory fashion. They can be seen as successive steps backwards; or the same passage may be perceived as nearly flat, as space stacked, so to speak, with one visual event piled up one upon another …

Beginning with that masterpiece of pictorial fiction: the loosely draped cloth in the bottom centre, enigmatically resembling the shape of a figure.

It's a wonderful invention. In some ways the touchstone of the painting. So white, with its dark shadow above, it undercuts the gravity of the scene through its relationship with the clouds in the sky. It seems as though the weight of one's glance has somehow pressed this cloth, and as a result a vision has sprung up. It may still be earthbound in its rougher quarters to the left and right, but as these are drawn back into shade the more delicate centre floats free, suspended, almost levitating above the ground below.

One wonders, anyway, what the imagery means – beyond the painting. In a way the Triumph of Pan *concludes the legend of mythological painting which began with Titian. Poussin was the last of those great painters of whom Cézanne said 'they made the sap circulate again in all those dead trees.'* [12]

Mythology *per se* may be over, but something much more important, the splendour of painting itself, was carried on. One only has to take Cézanne by his own words to see a new way opening up. Take real trees, nature – Poussin's background so to speak …

To make the sap of painting *circulate again?*

Yes – Cézanne, he places his composition, *The Bathers*, firmly in nature and in that new context remakes the tradition all over again.

'Poussin before nature', as Bernard reports him to have said. [13] *But surely this does not mean that he painted* The Bathers *after nature?*



Paul Cézanne:
The Bathers
(Les Grandes Baigneuses)
about 1894–1905; exhibited 190

No, they are clearly not painted in terms of natural reality, or verisimilitude, but they are treated as part of nature in a very special sense. They seem to be built up out of the sensations nature provides. The bodies are like rocks, or clouds; limbs suggest branches. In working *sur le motif* Cézanne realised that light, reflections and shadows dematerialise the objects to such a point that they become malleable and can be refabricated. The *harmonie générale*, the unity of colour, to which he often refers, provides the building material for this refabrication. But this harmony is not a physical fact, readily available: it is a labyrinth of relationships to which perception opens the door.

And what one sees appears at first crude and coarse. What Cézanne calls a 'harmony' can be a shock.

Yes, comparable only to that encountered in the Titian. In *Bacchus and Ariadne* it is the power of blue pitched against the narrative, a tension between perception and conception. In *The Bathers* perception is held by a different reality – *paint*, uncompromisingly so.

The attention which the painting commands seems to spring from its very intransigence.

Even so, there is still a surprising amount that is familiar in it. There is the entry figure and also the one which reverses the movement. Look at the contrasts, echoes and modulations in both form and colour, the presence of a colour envelope and, of course, the diagonals.

I agree, the affinities are striking, and yet … the thinking seems to be quite different. For instance, the use of diagonals here bears no resemblance to that in any of the other paintings.

It seems that they have a wide range of functions. Although there are major diagonals in the trees and figures, none completely bisects the area or determines orientation. None leads a progressive movement. But they contribute both to divisions within the canvas and to the interplay of rhythms. The entire surface is charged with forces, meshed in an angular fabric of extraordinary muscularity. Thrusts are pitched one against the other, even the brush marks have a directional pull. Through a multiplicity of diagonals Cézanne builds up a highly sensitive visual field which allows him to accumulate and disperse tensions, to shift changing rhythms through the painting.

The coherence is, as you say, quite extraordinary. Each place in the canvas has its own character, and although all of them are mutually interrelated, the particular unity which emerges doesn't seem to absorb these distinctions – its amazing firmness depends rather on the capacity to retain individual frictions. This is an unprecedented way of setting about 'order' in painting. But it is interesting that it seems to be restricted to Cézanne's oil paintings. In his watercolours he aims much more, like Poussin did in his ink drawings, at an overriding rhythm.

And like Poussin, Cézanne also uses his colour to qualify rhythm. But more to the point, he makes it – perhaps again like Poussin, though in a different sense – substantiate his vision. The palette is introduced through the girl and tree on the left, a composite configuration on many levels. Tonally they state extremes of contrast, formally one entity – her back leg plants the line of the tree trunk firmly on the ground, her head merges into the bark. Jointly, these two present the colour harmony of the painting – in the tints of the body, in the shades of vegetation. It consists of ochres, blues, pinks, greens and whites – derivatives of earth, skin, sky, sunlight, leaves and opalescent clouds.

So it is one collective colour bracket which is distinguished mainly through tone and the emphasis which its actual placement suggests?

Yes. To put it as simply as possible: Cézanne takes his group of colours and works his painting with all of them together. They may be present in a light area or in a dark one. In either case the tonal pitch of the whole group will be affected. The same area will also be predominantly one of these colours, with all the others modifying it in turn. For instance, see the body of the woman lying on the ground. Ochre sets the key at a certain tonal pitch; greens, pinks, blues and even the whites are adjusted, broadly speaking, to this pitch; and together they play through the body. Quite clearly their main role is not one of describing the form, or of turning it in space. In fact, they are deliberately placed in such a way that it is impossible to read them like that, as one can in Rubens for instance. Their dislocation sets them free to be perceived in their own terms, as colours, and to be re-related as a harmony, shifting its internal relationship inch by inch.

This means, if I understand rightly, that there is no particular area in the painting where the colour harmony is fully explained or could be seen at its most prominent, as it was in the complexion of skin with Rubens. Cézanne develops his group of colours with an ever-changing bias throughout the painting, displaying one tendency here, another there.

It is what he called *moduler*. There are no 'boundaries' in Cézanne's way of drawing with colour. He may use lines but not for any delineation or confining of a form. The beautiful backs of the two young girls turned towards the sky are built up of parallel strokes of colour which include the back of the woman lying down, the drapery, and the leg of an adjacent figure in one rhythmic entity. The dominant white turns this passage into a subtle variant of the cloud colour above. The broad strokes of white-blues, white-greens, white-pinks and white-ochres reappear, more closely related. Cézanne modulates them by dividing the principal hues. So, across these backs, the blues include a variety of warm and cold shades; the greens, turquoises and olives; the pinks, lilacs and ochres.

This could sound very mechanical, as if a set of chosen colours is methodically broken down into its possible derivatives.

Do you think so? It's actually how nature herself operates. Cézanne knew this. He had seen for himself, out there in the open air, that all colours are present in any given situation, though of course in different

proportions, strengths and tones. The sensation produced by that 'mechanical' handling of colours in those backs we have been talking about is one of luminous light. When he tackles a dark area, he resorts to the same technique. Take the tree trunks and foliage on the extreme left. The whites are opened up to a range of subtly-tinted greys. The blues gain intensity and depth but still operate as a scale of warm to cold. The greens include strong variants of olive and turquoise. The reds are reduced to some low-key violets and browns. The yellows almost disappear, just a very few traces of yellow green remain. Fundamentally it's the same, it's only – and an all-important *only* – that the sensation Cézanne re-creates in each instance through his palette is a *particular* balance of the unity of colour.

Which Veronese had understood imaginatively?

Cézanne proves it. The sensation of the standing stone-like woman in the shadow of the entry figure requires that he reduce this same palette and, keying it into the sky, makes this presence almost transparent by a few touches of ochres and strong greens. It's a rebalancing of his general harmony in response to a sensation which – if not actually seen and painted *vis-à-vis* has been perceived, assimilated, analysed and recalled.

And yet, one question still remains. Cézanne's 'logic of organised sensations' may be fully convincing, and in the meantime even widely accepted by the public, when it is applied to still life or to the Montagne Sainte-Victoire. But with a painting reminiscent of such a grand iconographic tradition, one issue begs questioning: Who are these figures? If they do not resemble any women we know, what do they represent?

One cannot say who they are in any literal sense, or what they may represent with any certainty. But one thing is clear, they belong to a place – a *place* best described as Cézanne described it: through colour.

You mean that these figures are located, within the modulations of the painting, precisely between the cool blue-and-white dominance of the sky and the warm green-and-ochre tendency of the earth colours?

Yes, they are. But more important, it seems to me, is a shift of context, the basic tone of the painting. It's all about blue. The blue of Titian is

that of infinity, a quality which is essentially 'over there', to which mortals may relate by contrast and to which the god-like can connect through divine gestures. But Cézanne's blue encompasses us and all things in an entire range of vision. It spans from the most fugitive inflections to the impenetrable volume of the sky.

But it does not lose anything of its remoteness, despite coming up so close in front and virtually radiating out from the painting. Cézanne's blue seems to be the perfect envelope for the enigmatic rapport among his figures. They are overtly turned away from us, with one significant exception, pin-pointing this attitude. Although there is no contact between the figures, apart from the continuous web of colour, the whole assembly is quietly pulled together towards an inexplicit goal.

Painters have always needed a sort of veil upon which they can focus their direct attention. It's as though the more fully the consciousness is absorbed, the greater the freedom of the spirit behind. In the tradition an important aspect of this veil was given by mythology and the Bible. If these spiritual perspectives are no longer available, the alternative is not plain realism. At the most, the painter may be led through the pursuit of his art, like Cézanne was, to 'realise' the veil of reality as such.[14]

This is an endeavour of a very high order, but it is perhaps the quintessence of Modern art. It may explain why both Picasso and Matisse had a special love for Cézanne's late Bathers. *In 1908, on the threshold of Cubism, Picasso worked on a group of related images which finally led to the famous* Three Women*; and Matisse as early as 1899 bought Cézanne's* Three Bathers, *which he kept with him, as a kind of talisman, for almost forty years. But they were both figurative artists. How does an abstract artist relate to this past?*

Simply by looking. There can be no other viable relationship to history for a painter today. As Modern artists we are not supported by any tradition that provides a reliable context of working, but we can appreciate, as no one before ever could, the privilege of looking at the achievements of art as a whole.

Colour for the Painter [1995]

For all of us, colour is experienced as something – that is to say, we always see it in the guise of a substance which can be called by a variety of names. For instance, pale, golden yellow may be the colour of hair, of corn, of certain fruit, of a precious metal, of some flowers, or woven into fabrics, or fall as patches of light. We usually see colour as the colour *of* something – it is not a natural thing to see colour simply as itself alone, unless, of course, we happen also to be painters. For painters, colour is not only all those things which we all see, but also, most extraordinarily, the pigments spread out on the palette, and there, quite uniquely, they are simply and solely colour.[1] This is the first important fact of the painter's art to be grasped.

These bright and shining pigments will not, however, continue to lie there on the palette as pristine colours in themselves, but will be put to use – for the painter paints a picture, so the use of colour has to be conditioned by this function of picture-making. The proper term for this use of colour by practitioners of the art is 'pictorial colour'. For some artists – and most surprisingly it has only been a very small number – the necessity to come to some sort of understanding of pictorial colour has prompted the most passionate of enquiries and some of the greatest artistic adventures. Obviously, what is perceived in the world about us is the primary experience of colour, and for the painter it nourishes and sustains, even if, like me, that painter today should be an abstract artist. 'Perceptual colour' is our everyday experience of colour and, like nature itself, it is a common condition. As long as we possess sight, these sensations are our constant companions, regardless of the degree to which we are aware of them. So the painter has two quite distinct systems of colour to deal with – one provided by nature, the other required by art – perceptual colour and pictorial colour. Both will be present and a painter's work depends upon the emphasis they place first upon the one and then upon the other.

Cézanne's remark in his letter to Emile Bernard of 23 December 1904, that 'light does not exist for the painter'[2] refers to this duality. He has only the pigments on his palette and from those he has to fabricate, bring about, any sensation of light that he wants in his picture. As it is with light,

so it is with other visual and plastic sensations. For perceptual space the painter has to invent pictorial space. The same applies to our perceptions of form and weight, etc.: each sensation must be recast in pictorial terms. And if these are to 'work', as painters say, then together they must create a pictorial reality which is credible – so a painter has to find a way of uniting all the elements in a picture to make a whole.

THE UNITY OF COLOUR: TITIAN, MONET AND CARAVAGGIO

In European painting, a remarkable development occurred in Venice at the beginning of the 16th-century, which introduced an entirely new approach to colour. This was a unique event and one which did not take place in any other tradition of painting, not even in Persian or Chinese art, despite their great sophistication. It seems that it might not have happened at all without the insight of one great artist – Titian. Previously and in other traditions, painters had used what is termed *relational colour* in their pictures. This means thinking of colours as individual hues and placing them in the picture on a system of balances – a red against a blue, or a soft shade against a brilliant one, or one pale colour against another. Whatever the particular colour may be, it is treated as a separate item and given a specific role of its own to play in the organisation of a picture. Many great and beautiful works of art have been made using such a relational approach to pictorial colour.

But it also opens up a problem – as one can see in Titian's early work. In *St Mark Enthroned and Other Saints* (1510, Santa Maria della Salute, Venice) parts of the figures and coloured draperies seem strongly dislocated and misplaced – there is a conflict between projected space and colour in the picture. The blue drapery which covers St Mark's knees is an odd shape, behind which the red of St Mark's tunic seems to float somewhere above the column on which he sits. *L'Assunta*, which Titian painted for the Frari church in Venice some eight years later in 1518, shows a very different approach. One would think that a scene describing a man sitting on the top of a column with a group of people standing on the steps below would be more readily convincing than a young woman borne aloft on clouds and surrounded by angels and cherubs. But this is not so – it is the 'imagined' scene, the invention, which is credible and this is entirely due to Titian's new solution to the colour problem. Here the colour, instead of conflicting with the projection of space, is meshed as

one with it – they are more than inseparable – the colour actually describes the forms and their position in space.

Titian treats colour in the singular, as *colour* not as colours; he does not treat them as separate identities to be balanced one against another, but uses colour altogether as one single element, which shapes and forms his painting. The colour sensation of *L'Assunta* is a warm rose, which runs through the entire composition. It turns towards brown in some of the clouds supporting the Virgin, takes a clearer rose in the cherubs, goes through oranges and browns towards yellows behind her, to be driven towards the strongest red hues in her robe and those of the two worshippers in the foreground below. Their reds, in turn, emerge from browns, magentas, dull red violets – countless variations on the rose theme. This whole scheme is laced with, and thrown into contrast from time to time by, the greens, blues and whites of other robes, draperies and the sky. As this multi-hued colour moves through the painting, turning from shade to shade as it goes, it describes the great plane of the clouds, the bodies of the cherubs, the immensity of the celestial heavens, the limbs and the figures, and places them firmly in an invented spatial structure which is entirely credible. This extraordinary new way of *drawing* a picture, with *colour* rather than line, is the beginning of Titian's great innovation:[3] the approach to colour which was to put European painting on a road that no other tradition had trod before, or for that matter, since.

At the other end of this tradition, which sprang from Titian's astounding insight into the unity of colour, stand the Impressionists and Post-Impressionists. Monet's approach came from a different corner, but it arrives nevertheless at the same point. His pictorial colour is unified by a perceptual '*enveloppe*', as he called it. This famous envelope is the bridge by which Monet can cross from the thing seen to the thing painted – to seize the very light and air, as it were, which envelopes a subject and to analyse precisely the qualities of colour which make it up. It is a way of accounting for the fact that in nature, too, we can see the one 'colour' which defines the impression of the many. Each envelope provides a particular unity of colour and so each canvas in a series is able to present a subtly different sensation.

If you compare two paintings from the series that he made in the valley of the river Creuse in 1889, *La Petite Creuse* (The Art Institute of Chicago), and *Petite Creuse, Sunlight* (Private Collection) you can see what Monet was able to achieve through his famous envelope. Both paintings show the motif from exactly the same point of view, but at slightly different times of day, under slightly different weather conditions, and at slightly

different dates in that winter of 1889. All these small differences mean that the whole motif is distinguished by a different sensation of colour on each occasion, one that not only affects the actual local colours themselves, but that also produces different colours for the lights and the shadows, and in the reflections.

In the Chicago painting, *La Petite Creuse*, you see cool sunlight running along the distant hill tops, catching the sides of the valley and skimming over the rocks and ripples of the river as it flows towards you – a sparkle of the palest yellows. This unmistakable winter light is accompanied by cool, luminous shadows. High in key, they back up the colour of the light with transparent blues in the distance, gradually stepping up intensity as they advance until in the foreground, via the violets, they yield to the reds. In addition, the complexity of all the shadows, near and far, are compounded by reflected lights, which dematerialise the forms of rock, shrub and hillside. What remains are insubstantial wraiths of luminous colour, which weave their way through the painting.

In the later canvas *Petite Creuse, Sunlight*, the sun is stronger. Warmer shades of yellow, pink and even light magenta flicker through it as the light follows virtually the same course as before. Not surprisingly, greens, rising from the palest turquoise to pure viridian, appear alongside the blues in the shadow sequences. The reds of the shaded rocks in the foreground are more pronounced here than in the other canvas. Traces of bright oranges and greens light up odd unexpected areas of the painting and culminate in the group of trees growing by the river bed.

There is a very revealing little incident attached to this painting. Monet was working on this series in the Creuse Valley for most of the late winter or early spring of 1889 (March to May). He had begun this canvas and then had to leave for Paris. When he returned he found the little oak tree, which stands aside from the others on the river bank, had put out new leaves and this change so upset the envelope of his painting that he felt unable to carry on with it.

Here is part of a letter to Alice Hoschedé (8 May 1889):

> I'm going to offer fifty francs to my landlord to see if I can have the oak tree's leaves removed, if I can't I'm done for since it appears in five paintings and plays a leading part in three, but I fear it won't do any good as he's an unfriendly old moneybags who's already tried to prevent access to one of his

> fields, and it was only because the priest intervened that I was able to carry on going there. Anyway, therein lies the only hope of salvation for these pictures.

The following day he wrote:

> I'm overjoyed, having unexpectedly been granted permission to remove the leaves from my fine oak tree! It was quite a business bringing sufficiently long ladders into the ravine. Anyway it's done now, two men having worked on it since yesterday. Isn't it the final straw to be finishing a winter landscape at this time of year? [4]

The problem of this little tree highlights the creative paradox which was to give Monet such anguish and frustration whilst at the same time being responsible for some of his most ravishing canvases. Monet, in order to re-create a unity of colour in his painting had, *sur le motif*, to feed his colour vision by acute observation. And it was only through resolving and re-resolving this creative paradox over and over again that Monet emerged as the great colourist we know – one in fact who found he *had* to invent a pictorial colour scheme as artificial in its own way as Titian's and, for the same reason that all artists adopt artifice, in order to come closer to a truth.

Although *L'Assunta* was a breakthrough and laid the cornerstone of Western colour space, to see Titian developing this initial insight we have to look at the work of the 1550s. In his *Danae* (1553, Museo del Prado, Madrid), he clearly puts pictorial colour first and foremost, and by doing so achieves an unprecedented unity. The colour runs through the painting as though it were a single element, binding it all together. Look, for instance, at the colour of the hair, which follows the drawing of the far arm, breast and torso. This same hair colour turns into the colour of the contour of the near arm and side of the body. It is picked up and strengthened by the gold bracelet and reappears as the colour of the little dog. Traces of it also appear in the golden trimming on the magenta-coloured velvet curtains. The cool blues and greys of the painting are at their strongest in the sky and the grey-blue of the dark cloud. But this same grey-blue, which continues into the old servant's cap and blouse top, and is carried down into the shadows of the rumpled bed, is, in every case, a *plain* grey. It appears a *blue*-grey only through the contrast with the golden bronzes of the servant's skin and the yellow golds of the shadows on Danae's body.



Titian:
Danae
1553

A green, suggested by the landscape seen in the 'gaps' below the servant's arm and apron, re-appears on the other side of her body in the base of the stone column. This elusive green softens the juxtaposition of the magenta reds with the blues of sky and mountains.

The magenta reds of the drapery strike a chord of three tones: 'mid' on the left side in the foreground, 'deep' in the centre middle distance 'light' and 'brilliant' in the right foreground. The white bed linen is decorated by embroidered bands of magenta-pink in various strengths. This embroidery is a ruse by which Titian can take traces of the magenta from the draperies towards and even into the figure. The brilliant burst of golds, pinks and whites in the sky *is*, so to speak, the collective colour of Danae's body.

One might expect that with such an auspicious start, a tradition of colour painting would unfold quite smoothly. But it was not to be quite as simple as that. Titian himself was an overwhelmingly powerful figure: in addition to his achievements in the field of colour, his genius excelled on many artistic levels. Not only was he a hard act to follow in terms of stature, it was also extremely difficult to immediately penetrate such a complex body of work. The success of Caravaggio depended in part on his offering a manageable interpretation of Titian's approach by reducing the colour complexity to chiaroscuro, the dominance of tone over colour.

To be fair, on a superficial level Titian's colour painting can be read as a subtle gradation of light and dark values. Take, for example, the treatment of those magenta reds in *Danae*. If one isolates them from the other colours in the painting, they begin to look rather like three different shades of the

same hue. For someone trying hard to grasp precisely what principle lay behind Titian's way of painting, such passages could seem to offer not only a clue but also, very importantly, an intellectually comprehensible one. As a result, European painting was plunged into a heavy veil of *chiaroscuro* which was only sporadically lifted until the Impressionists arrived, who banished tonal painting and rinsed colour clean again.

In *The Burial of Christ* (1600–04, Vatican Museums, Rome) Caravaggio's new solution is fully formed. An impenetrable, almost uniform darkness, so pronounced as to be virtually black, accounts for the background. Strong white light falls on the group of figures carrying the corpse, throwing parts of them into sharp relief and others into deep shadow and dominating the space and the modelling of the forms. The result is a dramatic contrast of light and dark, the very essence of *chiaroscuro*. Colour is reduced to a minor role, appearing only as a few isolated hues in the garments: brown for the tunic of the man lifting Christ's knees, dark blue for Mary's headdress, red and blue for the robes of the man supporting the body. And that is all.



Caravaggio:
The Burial of Christ
1600–04

Caravaggio's influence was immense. It spread right across Europe, even into the most remote provincial schools of painting. The solution of *chiaroscuro* neatly circumscribed the problems raised by Titian's colour space. It also had the advantage of being highly conceptualised; that is to say, it introduced into painting a view of light as being separate from colour. This was in line with general assumptions; it could be described, understood from engraving, and practised almost immediately. Not surprisingly, it was a great success and became the mainstay of a good deal of European painting right through to the 19th-century.

But Titian's original insight was simply too big to be ignored for long. Two very different artists took up the challenge and established a connection – one was Veronese and the other Rubens.

VERONESE AND RUBENS

The stumbling block to establishing a colour tradition lay in the inescapable fact that no sound basis to, or guiding principle of, such a tradition could or can, even today, be found.

When Veronese arrived in Venice in 1555, Titian had just completed the *Danae*. He was the first painter to confront the difficulty of penetrating Titian's invention and his great contribution lay in finding a way of breaking down this barrier.[5] In developing his own studio practice, he laid out clearly a step-by-step approach to the enigma of Titian's colour space. His solution is diametrically opposed to that of Caravaggio; it is focused unambiguously on colour, not on tone. He makes particular use of stuffs, decoration, architecture and objects, as agents or 'carriers' for the movement of his colour.

In the *Feast in the House of Levi* (1573, Accademia, Venice), greys play an important but supporting role. Shifted towards a warm scale, they appear in the architecture of the marble Loggia, which, with its golden lunettes, is set against a background of turquoise skies and pink buildings. Grey reappears as a neutral in the table cloth in the central opening of the Loggia.

The principal colour organisation is played out in all three openings. In each there is a strong red accent on the left, which kicks off the colour development. The most brilliant hues are reserved for the centre; the two sides are both comparatively subdued and virtually equal in weight.

In the central opening, Veronese has used vermillion against green in the foreground figure of Levi himself. From there, making use of cloaks

and tunics, he pairs grey-blue with dull orange and turquoise-blue with magenta-pink in the figure of Christ. The passage finishes with echoes of vermillion with emerald green and a further repeat of very dark orange. Behind this group are two yellow figures of servants.

The colour movement in the left opening starts off with the red-orange figure in the corner, wearing a blue collar, who 'borrows' the red sleeves of the man in olive green next to him. After a sequence of grey-blue, magenta and golden ochre the initial chord, red-orange plus magenta, is repeated. A dark-brown figure seen against the light makes the transition to a green garment and an extension of gold and black-brown in the vessel and flask standing on the balustrade. Set against this group is a grey-and-yellow figure on the stairs in the foreground.

In the right opening there is again a strong vermillion, this time seen between the columns on the left, followed by red-orange, lime green, green-blue. The light magenta of the figure coming up the stairs relates to the darker magenta of the elderly man sitting in the centre behind the table. At the end, the man leaning forward and the servant with the outstretched arm behind him are mirroring the constellation in the middle of the left opening: greyed lemon yellow against deep dark green. This whole chain of events is brought to a close by accents of grey-blue and red-orange.

Lastly the figures on the stairs and in the foreground: note the large man on the right, presumably in charge of the cellar, wears a magnificent striped costume, which gives Veronese a wonderful opportunity to use mauve magenta, grey, yellow-ochre, red, green, greyed blue-turquoise and blacks together. It is the archetype of a certain sort of costume that Watteau was to paint over and over again later on. One can see a great deal of it in the Wallace Collection in London.

This strong chord of colour equals the green and pale magenta in the opposite group of Levi and the little black attendant. Between these two colour weights, in the nearest foreground, Veronese conjures up a truly magical demonstration of pictorial colour-perception. Throughout the painting a strong warm mauve sensation pervades the shadows and their reflected lights. But in the central opening, the colour of the tiles and of the dog on the floor below pick up this fugitive sensation and turn it into an actual hue.

Like Veronese, Rubens was essentially a 'do-er', a pragmatic artist, but he also had a strong analytical streak. He copied about thirty paintings by Titian, most of them during his last visit to the court of Philip IV in El Escorial, Madrid, in 1629.



Peter Paul Rubens:
Judgement of Paris
c.1632–33

If one compares Titian's *The Andrians*, c.1520–22, in the Prado, Madrid, with Rubens' copy of it, now in Stockholm, one sees a very interesting shift in the colour. Rubens' painting is clearly based on red, yellow and blue, and their admixtures. Although Titian's certainly includes these primaries and tertiaries, he does not seem to have depended so essentially upon an organisation of these particular hues in shaping his colour.

There is another clue in Rubens' illustrations to *Six Books on Optics*, 1613, by Franciscus Aguilonius. A diagram taken from one of them shows Rubens demonstrating the relationship between the three primary colours and their derivatives in mixing.[6] Obviously the development of his pictorial colour depends very much on his recognition of the physical properties of the pigments on his palette. At the same time, red, yellow and blue are also to be found in the particular blending of the human skin. By seizing upon the correspondence between these two scales, Rubens seems to have found his colour key.

In *The Judgement of Paris* (1632–33, National Gallery, London), the first things that catch one's eye are the radiant bodies of the three goddesses, by far the lightest and brightest part of the painting. They are the prime movers of the myth and the origin of the colour in the picture. From their flesh tones, Rubens takes a compound of colour out into every corner of the canvas – here amplified to clear hues, there muted into faint shades. Pure reds, strong blues and golden yellows can be found in draperies, reflected lights, skies, distant views and shining surfaces. Subtle shades of violet, dull orange-browns and soft greens taken from body shades and

suggested contours are carried out into earth, rocks and vegetation, up into clouds and crowns of trees: they continue in the two male figures, the animals and birds, and cross the foreground in the guise of tiny plants and the peacock's tail. The orchestration of this colour movement in its grandeur and boldness is quintessentially Rubens – the plastic expression of an artist whose aim it was to master the best of the past.

VELÁZQUEZ, VERMEER AND POUSSIN

There are three other significant clues in the 17th-centuryto the continuity of this particular approach to pictorial colour in the work of Velázquez, Vermeer and Poussin. It seems to be an important factor in colour's paradox that, being simultaneously singular and multiple, once treated as a whole it lends itself quite easily to a wide variety of expressions.

Van Gogh writing to Bernard says:

> Do you know a painter called Van der Meer [Vermeer]? ... the palette of this curious painter consists of blue, lemon yellow, pearl grey, black and white. In his very few paintings there is in fact the whole richness of a complete palette; but the combination of lemon yellow, pale blue and pearl grey is as characteristic to him as the black, white, grey and pink are to Velázquez.[7]

Las Meñinas (1656, Museo del Prado, Madrid), very clearly bears out the truth of Van Gogh's observation. A vast canvas, over half the total pictorial area is taken up by a luminous darkness that envelops the farthest reaches of a huge room. In the foreground a group of figures catch the light: the Infanta Margarita surrounded by courtiers, attendants and her playmates. They are the brilliant heart of the painting and the key to Velázquez's use of colour.[8] He treats black and white as colour, infinite shades of which, alongside subtle greys, appear in the silks and velvets, linens and brocades, laces and gauzes of the royal party. Pinks accompany the passage of light as it falls across the figures. Starting with a strong accent in the suit of the little boy below the casement of the window, they run up, in varying strengths, through reflected lights, flushed skin, scarves, flowers and ribbons, to the palette of the painter in the background and end in the Maltese cross on his breast.

Almost as though they were part of some visual amplifying system, the greys of the little group echo and reverberate in the modulations of walls and ceiling above. Hovering between warm and cool, they generate the impalpable grey space which provides the setting for the sharper contrasts below.

The secret of Velázquez's celebrated greys and blacks is not to be found in any tonal concept such as *chiaroscuro*, but in his treatment of them as true hues in themselves. For this recognition he was later much loved by the French painters of the nineteenth century, and by Manet in particular.

Van Gogh is right to compare Velázquez with Vermeer and to note the characteristic difference in their colour. For Vermeer this is centred in blue and yellow as it was also for Van Gogh himself. Blue being a darker colour than yellow, which is light, there is the advantage of a 'quasi-tonal' scale which springs directly out of the relative brilliance of these hues in the natural order. Through this, Vermeer was able to transform *chiaroscuro* into colour painting.



Diego Velázquez:
Las Meñinas
(The Maids of Honors
c.1656

In *The Milkmaid* (c.1658–60, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam), yellow and blue in their purest chromatic state can be seen almost in the centre of the painting in the front of the maid's yellow bodice, where it catches the light, and in the top of her apron just below. Unlike the Infanta in *Las Meñinas*, who leads the way *into* Velázquez's colour, the milkmaid draws together as contrasts the two colours which pervade the painting. Lighter or darker, warmer or cooler yellow and blue account for the form, the space and the light, and are emphasised as the leading hues by the subordinate presence of the strong dark red in her skirt and a few lighter strokes on the rim of the pitcher.

Take the yellow theme: from the bodice it lights up the inside of her cap as a luminous shadow, continues up the shadowed wall, including the brass object and the wicker basket, growing as it goes warmer and stronger until it reaches a dull orange in the top-left corner.

The shadowed side of her bodice is also turned towards orange, likewise the shadowed side of her face and cap. It becomes stronger in the shadows under her forearms and turns into a heavy red-orange in the pitcher and vessel into which the milk is poured. It turns cooler and lighter again in the golden ochres of the bread and its basket.

The blue movement shows its deepest and strongest note in the shadowed apron, and grows lighter in the table cover and the cloth lying across it – one a cooler slightly turquoise version, the other a warmer, more violet tone, respectively. It appears as both light and dark blue in the decorated jug and cover standing on the table, turns into the cool reflected light in the shadow below the window, and in the lightest and freshest of



Jan Vermeer:
The Milkmaid
c.1658–60

all possible inflections accounts for the colour of the daylight as it falls across the plain white wall behind.

Poussin is the last of the great intermediaries, neither Renaissance nor Modern, who contributes yet another aspect to the development of colour painting. A formalist, as at heart are Veronese and Rubens, he feels the need to organise his colour according to a precept. The practices of both the other artists are rooted in the practicalities of organising their studios. In the face of the bewildering diversity and sovereign impenetrability of Titian's legacy, they are, in their different ways, great 'sorters-out'. Poussin, however, is working just that little bit later and so is in a position to raise a further question – that colour *can* be organised is one thing, but what should determine this organisation is yet another. In answer he came up with a curious reference to the Greek theory of music. There is a letter to Chantelou (24 November 1647)[9] in which he talks about his way of composing a painting in relation to the musical 'modes' of antiquity.

Although art historians quite rightly doubted this comparison, it cannot be denied that Poussin organises his colour according to particular scales and harmonies. The red he uses for a Bacchanal, for instance, will be warm, bright and joyful, whereas the one he uses for a painting from the *Seven Sacraments* series will be cooler, deeper and possess altogether more ceremonial gravitas. Obviously his idea was that, depending upon the nature of his subject matter, he would shift his whole colour harmony. But the interesting thing is that Poussin does not carry this idea through *literally*. There is no system, no impeccable logic governing his colour. What Poussin is searching for in the spirit of music is a *method*: a method for arrangements in colour, for orchestration, for modulation, for chords, for the establishment of different keys or scales, for the composition of rhythms and movements. If so, the comparison to the musical 'modes' is a metaphor.

Some of the most beautiful paintings of dance ever made have come from his hand. In his *Dance Around the Golden Calf* (c.1635, National Gallery, London), Poussin takes red, blue and golden yellow at their purest for his primary chord and places it in the robes of the three figures low down, in the bottom-right foreground. These three hues then change key and, relieved by the addition of white, repeat in the figures dancing round the Golden Calf on the left. Modulated in different strengths and tones they move back through the crowds in the middle distance on the right. Traces recur as muted shades in the distant mountains and the banks of clouds. The idol carries up the golden yellow and pitches it against the rose pinks and blues of the sky to orchestrate the climax of Poussin's colour movement.

This is a new development in European painting. It is the first genuine 'method', a way of thinking which has arisen in response to a newly felt need. With Poussin, the abstract substructure of picture-making comes very close to the surface. It is for these reasons that he has been called a painters's painter – and it may also be the rigorous and uncompromising way in which he dealt with his problems that made him such an important artist to Cézanne.

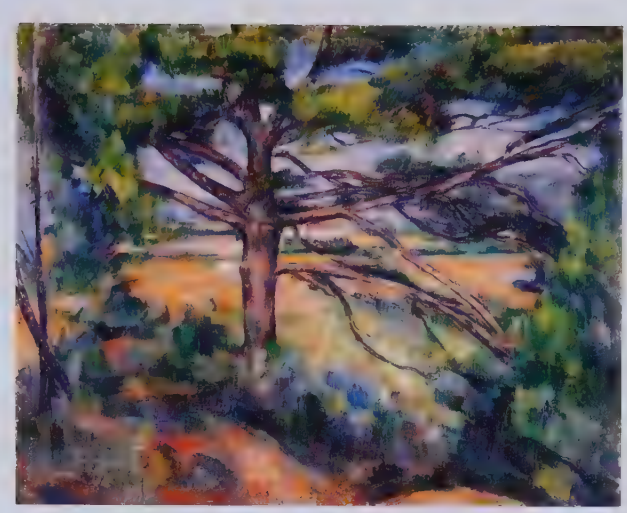
CÉZANNE AND DELACROIX

Poussin's colour is pictorial colour in an absolute sense and this is in part what Cézanne is referring to when he speaks of 'doing Poussin over again from Nature'. For Cézanne is an artist who works *sur le motif* and he is caught in the same creative paradox as Monet in the conflict between pictorial colour (that which has to happen on the canvas and which has to obey the laws of picture making) and perceptual colour (that which he observes out there in nature and is, for him, the precious source of his 'sensation').

The one thing for which Cézanne feels a need is a method – '*avoir une belle formule*' as he puts it in answer to the question 'What constitutes human happiness?'.[10] In painting Poussin seemed to possess this.

It is the origin of modulation in preference to modelling as a new way of 'drawing'. In *Great Pine and Red Earth* (c.1885–87, Hermitage, St Petersburg), Cézanne establishes the picture plane through the tree trunk and its branches. Through his colour modulations he 'draws' a new pictorial space – one created in response to the sensations the motif has aroused in him. In Cézanne the implications of Venetian colour-space are taken to quite astounding lengths. In literal terms the tree would be growing at the junction of middle-distance and foreground; in sensation it is the nearest thing to you. Passages of landscape seen through the branches are detached from their topographical location and re-formed into one continuous but dislocated plane identical with that presented by the tree trunk.

Colour modulation is the agency for this transformation. Blues, pinks, yellows, greens and luminous greys in the highest key are contrasted with related hues at their most sombre. This colour compound, generated by the tree trunk and landscape, gives the key for the mid-tone modulations which carry the blues and greens, reds and bronzes through the whole painting. The colour is so wonderfully integrated as a cohesive whole that the entire surface of the canvas gives off an extraordinary soft pearly



Paul Cézanne:
Great Pine and Red Earth
1895–97

light, an exquisitely judged result of colour interaction. This was much prized by Cézanne; he wrote to Pissarro 'You are perfectly right to speak of grey, for grey reins in nature, but it is terrifyingly hard to catch.'[11] One finds light and dark, warm and cold, soft and sharp sensations of colour orchestrated in spatial rhythms and movements. The substance of form is dematerialised. Bushes, shrubs and undergrowth disintegrate – the blue of the sky comes down into the foreground as reflected light; earthy orange-yellows appear in the crown of trees; reds pull up a distant house, push down a patch of foreground. A whole new pictorial order is created.

The perception of forms thus 'drawn' and the spaces established between those forms, although generated by the sensation Cézanne experiences before Nature, finally emerge firmly built on the canvas as purely plastic inventions. The method which makes it possible to realise these inventions, to translate sensation into pictorial reality, is comparable to the one which he perceived in Poussin – a way of thinking which would allow him to orchestrate the 'harmonie générale' of nature into an 'art as durable as that of the museums'. [12]

The art of the museums also fascinated Delacroix. In fact these two artists, besides one being a hero for the other (Cézanne made studies for an apotheosis of Delacroix being gathered to the Heavens of Great Art), shared a veritable pantheon of colourists from the past from whom they drew strength and inspiration. 'The Great Venetians', as Cézanne called them, tower over all for both artists. [13] Both followed the same route in

rediscovering Titian's colour-space – in the beginning by being attracted to Rubens, and then by recognising Veronese as *the* principle interpreter. Delacroix is the first link in the fabled 'golden chain' forged in the 19th-century by the great French painters. He copies, he observes, he learns and he reflects. For all the image of Delacroix as the Romantic artist *par excellence*, working in the heat of passion, his great admirer Baudelaire saw him as 'sang-froid animé': 'Delacroix was passionately in love with passion and coldly determined to seek the means of expressing passion in the most visible manner'.[14]

He developed a habit of going straight to the Louvre whenever he ran into difficulties in the studio to see what the others had done. It is almost as though he held a running dialogue with the past and if he couldn't understand from the work itself he then looked to Nature as 'the dictionary' in which he could find the missing word, so to speak, to illuminate the painting which he couldn't read. What finally emerged is the birth of 'peinture claire', as Monet hailed the wall paintings in St Sulpice: the liberation of colour from chiaroscuro. But long before St Sulpice, which was completed towards the end of Delacroix's life, he had paid a visit to Morocco. What he saw there made a deep impression on him: Mediterranean light, with its wealth of reflections, its luminous shadows and, above all, the focus it turned on the play of colour in this strange exotic world in which he found himself.

In *The Women of Algiers* (1834, Musée du Louvre, Paris), one sees a large patch of reflected light falling on the tiled wall of the interior in the background and luminous shadows on the head and body of the girl sitting in the centre foreground. They are, respectively, a fresh light blue-turquoise and a softly glowing creamy gold: both colours in a middle tone and together making a subtle, near complementary, contrast in the heart of the painting. They offer a ravishing clue to Delacroix's colour thinking. Reflected light and luminous shadows tend to appear as mid-tone colours – 'demi-teintes' as he called them – and he noted this pitch as being ideal for the perception of colour. It is precisely in those reflected lights and luminous shadows which are fugitively present in every part of the canvas that the colour key is to be found. One can well understand that Renoir, who as a young man was nicknamed 'Delacroix blond', loved this canvas as 'the most beautiful painting in the world'.[15]

It is revealing to take a close look at the white embroidered blouse worn by the black-haired girl half-sitting to the right of centre. This blouse has a tiny sprigged design of pink and green: a little flower and a few leaves. Where the strong light falls across the front of the girl both pink and green

appear dark and almost indistinguishable in contrast to the white. In the area of shade cast by her arm, the design shows fresh clear colours at the same mid-tone pitch as the luminous yellowish grey of her shadowed blouse. That is to say, when the tonal contrast is at its strongest the colour is diminished; conversely when the tones are equal the colour contrast becomes clear.[16]

Delacroix left little to chance; his work was meticulously planned, often long in advance. In his last great piece *The Expulsion of Heliodorus from the Temple* in St Sulpice, for instance, one can see in the foreground the temple treasure box, which has fallen open after it has been dropped by Heliodorus. Delacroix dictated the entire colour scheme of this detail to Pierre Andrieu, his assistant, who wrote it out in his notebook in March 1852, nine years before the completion of the painting.[17]

Today we know Delacroix's way of thinking through his journals and notes but these were not published until 1893, thirty years after his death. His intellectual influence was largely exerted through his friend, Charles Blanc, the founding editor of the magazine *Gazette des Beaux Arts*, who popularised his work and his 'theories'. Being also a close friend of Chevreul, Blanc may have presented these in an overly dogmatic, quasi-scientific manner, but in fact both Delacroix and Chevreul arrived independently at similar conclusions in understanding the structure of colour contrast. Years before Michel Eugène Chevreul became director of the Gobelin Workshops and began to develop a professional interest in colour, Delacroix had noted the effect of simultaneous contrast in the collar of a servant standing on the left-hand side of Veronese's *The Marriage of Cana* (1562–63, Musée du Louvre, Paris).

The Impressionists and Post-Impressionists drew on all three sources. In Cézanne's studio in Aix one can still see Charles Blanc's books lying on a shelf. The main ideas and principles are very few and rather simple – it is only in practical application that the complexity of colour's intricate nature, dependent as it always is upon relationships, becomes apparent.

SEURAT, MONET, MATISSE AND PICASSO

To Seurat it may have seemed only a small step to push further the latent scientific aspect of this perceptual heritage and to secure for colour a firm and certain basis, and to find in the century of great discoveries a fitting place for the art of painting in the very forefront of contemporary science.

He first identified and divided up the composite nature of colour in the thing perceived. These portions then had to be accounted for through specific hues and to be located in appropriate quantities of little separate touches of paint, a technique which became known as *pointillisme*. The critic Fénéon recalls Seurat making the following divisions:

> 1. *local colour*: 'that is the colour that the surface would have in white light (appreciably the colour of the object seen from up close)'.
> 2. *directly reflected light*: 'the portion of coloured light that is reflected unaltered from its surface (this will probably be *solar orange*)'.
> 3. *indirectly reflected light*: 'the feeble portion of coloured light which penetrates below the surface and which is reflected after modification by partial absorption'.
> 4. *colour reflections projected by neighbouring objects.*
> 5. *ambient complementary colours.*[18]

This schematic translation of colour perception into pictorial colour was the cornerstone of '*ma méthode*'. The list itself was actually written out at the time of *Un dimanche après-midi dans l'île de La Grand Jatte* (1884–85, The Art Institute of Chicago), his great masterpiece, but the ideas it set forth had been gradually evolving for quite some time.

In *The Bathers (Une Baignade, Asnières,* 1884), Seurat's first great painting made in one year and completed by the time he was twenty-five, '*ma méthode*' is not yet perfected and in place. Nevertheless, just because of that, one can see his way of thinking more clearly there than in a fully conceptualised piece like *La Grande Jatte.*

The first thing one notices about *The Bathers* when one catches sight of it in the National Gallery (London) is the cool fresh light which radiates from the whole surface, as though the sensation of pure daylight itself had been caught and pinned down there for us to take part in.

One sees, of course, the figures on the bank, in the river, the trees, the sky and distant buildings, but one sees them all bathed in this extraordinary soft pearly light, which seems to be both clear and at the same time full of colour.

The painting is to a considerable extent a great Impressionist painting made not *sur le motif*, but from many preparatory studies in the studio. The principal colours which are responsible for this beautiful radiance are orange

and green, blue and violet. They are mostly present at a high or mid-tone pitch. They are two pairs of complementaries which tend on the small scale of Seurat's brush marks to give off coloured greys. This contributes to the pearly look of the painting. The optical mixture of the whole could be described as layered: there is the interaction between the various hues as they are put down on the canvas, a relatively simple 'physical' interaction; and between the induced colours themselves and these painted hues a kind of secondary more complex interaction takes place. Most importantly these two sorts of optical mixture are *not* successive but simultaneous and cumulative, and together they generate the wonderful light of the painting.

Seurat works into this body of colour in several very curious and what may seem sometimes almost incompatible ways. Today, *The Bathers* might perhaps be described as a transitional or a proto-pointilliste work, and at first sight Signac, Seurat's ambitious companion, criticised its inconsistencies quite severely. There is a great deal of plain local colour for instance: skin where it catches the light is to a large extent pink; trousers, hats and boots are brown; panama hats are straw coloured; and considerable portions of the white articles, such as clothes, towels or sails, remain white.

At the same time, Seurat deliberately painted around some of these plainly stated forms according to the principle of irradiation, which has been known to painters since Leonardo observed and noted it. It says that if a light form is seen against a dark ground the contrast intensifies both light and dark edges. In the lying figure in the foreground one can see this principle being applied in a classic manner: along the upper edge of the dark trousers Seurat has introduced into his divisionist treatment of the grassy bank touches of pale colour, and where this silhouette changes from dark to light in the white jacket, little strokes of darker colour have been added to the grass alongside the white jacket. A similar treatment is used for the auburn-haired boy sitting on the bank in the centre: the front of his shoulder and forearm turn an exceedingly pale cream against a river dramatically darkened by divisionist technique into a multi-hued deep blue. This is a very powerful contrast and one which could be expected to rupture the unity of the painting, but, astonishingly, it does not. The plastic coherence which Seurat has built is so strong and resilient that it can absorb even this disruption. Conversely, the boy's entire back and shadowed face are darkened against a lightened river. The same treatment of the irradiation phenomenon is repeated unequivocally in the contours of the two bathers in the river. This way of contrast thinking is taken from tone right into colour in the figure of the boy sitting in the straw hat in the middle distance.

There, pure local colour is virtually laid aside and divisionism unifies the handling. The shadowed back is turned towards violet; the hat and the singlet strongly so, and at the demarcation line Seurat has added many little dots and dashes of yellow-green to the grass. This same singlet shows two other remarkable instances. Round the arm-hole, touches of turquoise-green are juxtaposed with the reddish orange shadow under the arm, and then green strokes turn up again, even more pronounced, at the edge of the magenta sash around the waist to which Seurat has added rosy red. Finally, more difficult to see but unmistakably there none the less, one finds along the bottom of the dark trousers deep blues next to strong oranges pulled out of the browny mauve shades of the rug on which the boy is sitting.

In the remaining few years of his short life, Seurat went on to try and iron out all the irregularities in his *méthode* and in doing so he created some of the most mysterious, beautiful and extraordinary pictorial inventions ever made. But the conflict between his achievement and his aim deepened. The more inflexible Seurat's method became, the less it could fulfil the role he had in mind for it. Each and every painting made is unavoidably a unique fabric of relationships. Change one thing and everything is changed – this complete dependence on the *particular* is not reconcilable with scientific ambition. But it is the very bedrock of creative speculation – the very fact that colour *can* only be determined through relationship prompted the enormous range of invention which its resources supported in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Monet in his great 1899 series focusing on the Japanese bridge in his garden in Giverny, is celebrating precisely this essential truth of colour. To Georges Clemenceau, he said: 'I am simply expending my efforts upon a maximum of appearances in close correlation with unknown realities. When one is on the plane of concordant appearances one cannot be far from reality, or, at least from what we can know of it.' [19]

Like a scientist, Monet has a method, but not a scientific one. He takes the same viewpoint every time. In the foreground, where each particular colour envelope is clearly set forth, lies the stretch of water with its lily pads and reflections; the arc of the Japanese bridge above states the middle distance, cuts short the recession and helps to flatten the picture plane. The background of trees, shrubs and rushes frame and contain the little pond as the centre of attention.

The changing light, its shadows and reflections become the principal factors in determining which envelope Monet will select. The tonal structure plays a very interesting and surprising role; almost photographic in its

verisimilitude, it underpins with extreme sobriety the wonderful boldness of Monet's colour.

In *Water Lilies and the Japanese Bridge* (1899, The Art Museum, Princeton), the colour chosen for the light, a pale fresh yellow can easily be distinguished in the lily pads as they lie in the early morning sun, and conversely they also show the contrast colour, a light blue-violet, in the shade. This 'pair', which precisely complement one another, is then echoed up through the rushes, through the little bridge, through the trees, saturating the entire image with their resonance.

Against these pale yellows and blue-violets, Monet threads, on the pretext of reflections in the water, a second pair of contrasts: the strong dark greens and reds which originate in a few traces tucked in amongst recesses and crevices in the upper wall of foliage. And yet a third pair, pink magentas and clear yellow greens, found in the lily flowers, buds and pads, in the shade or sunlight, compound the intricacies of the colour structure. In addition, reflected lights allow cool emerald greens to be pulled into play: they illuminate some shadows in the trees and appear fugitively in the rushes and water plants in the pond.

In *The Water Lily Pond* (1899, National Gallery, London), the lily pond again sets the key; it is mid-morning, the colour of the light has taken on a more dominant shade of yellow, which now washes a larger part of the



Claude Monet:
Water Lilies and the Japanese Bridge
1899

motif. The shadows are proportionally reduced and have turned into a few traces of an even lighter blue-violet. The reflected lights are again green, but stronger, and with a more pronounced presence. The reds and greens reflected in the water are lighter in tone and both are much warmer. As a result of this shift in his envelope the whole sensation is entirely different.

In *A Bridge over a Pond of Water Lilies* (1899, Metropolitan Museum, New York), it has changed again. It is now noon, the sunlight is bleached to a creamy white and flattens the forms throughout. The shadows have faded into the palest bluish grey. Both appear to be virtually colourless and they are brought so close together tonally that they can hardly be differentiated.

If in this painting the motif is bathed in light, in *Water Lilies: Harmony in Green* (1899, Musée d'Orsay, Paris), it is plunged into shadow and many staple points in the familiar tonal and colour structure are consequently turned inside out. There is almost *no* contrast: what comes nearest to such a relationship takes place when the two opposite ends of the magnificent green harmony are brought into proximity as yellow-greens and golds, and as turquoises and blues. This happens through the agency of the trees in the background caught by the afternoon light. They appear as huge cascades of glorious golden yellows and yellow greens. Adjacent shadow passages of dark greens and turquoises throw these bright colours into relief, and in amongst these shadows go traces of blue as reflected lights. In this painting it is the background rather than the foreground that lays out Monet's envelope.

The last painting in this little group taken from the series is *The Japanese Footbridge and the Water Lily Pool, Giverny* (1919, Private Collection). It is early evening, the light and shade form a dramatic tonal contrast, the 'action' has returned to the lily pond and once again the water plants play a central role: yellows, in a wealth of hues, for those in the evening light; clear blue-violets for those in the shadow. In between these two zones of lily pads lie astounding reflections in the water. These, through the complexity of perceived after-images in nature, are strong reds.

Two interesting contradictions are at work in Monet. First, although each work was clearly conceived at a specific time of day, what we experience in looking at a finished canvas is a serene sense of timelessness. Secondly, despite the fact that each of these paintings is a beautiful and independent work of art in its own right, Monet's series method was indispensable in their creation – through that, he was able to isolate, if we can use such a word about a group of relationships, a unique instance of colour's sensation from the myriads of such sensations. Transformed into pictorial colour a quintessence of this sensation could then be expressed.

If the precise character of such sensations could be given by colour in a painting then it is only a short step to speculate, as young Matisse appears to have done, that this insight could be reversed and that pictorial colour could become the vehicle of sensation. *The Open Window, Collioure* (1905, National Gallery of Art, Washington) shows pictorial colour as absolute. Matisse does not look for an equation to perceptual colour; instead he uses a mid-tone turquoise for the shadowed half of his interior and a magenta of the same tonal pitch for the other half where the light falls. He takes this pair of colours, the main contrast of the painting, out to the radiant sea-scape beyond the little balcony.

Palest turquoise accompanies magenta in the distant sky and sea; nearer and deeper in tone the two colours appear as the hulls and masts in the line of bobbing boats; light magenta and white are used for the glittering shallows along the foreshore. The same two colours, but much deeper and stronger, recur in the area above the open window seen in counter-light. Between the distant view and the interior Matisse inserts a filigree frame of secondary contrasts: low-keyed reds, greens and yellow greens as separate touches, insulated by surrounding whites, for the leaves and flowers of the climbing plant growing up the trellis and over the balcony.

The darkest tones, to punctuate the whites, are reserved for quite large blotches of deep blue-violet placed low down in the shade of the balcony and for big, bold marks of this same colour and black in the window reflections of the open casement.

Matisse prefers the word '*émotion*' to sensation in describing his expressive aims. Here we are up against the difficulties of translation, which can be resolved only by looking at what he did.

In 1911, he painted *The Red Studio* (Museum of Modern Art, New York). A single colour envelops the whole volume of the studio and accounts for the walls, the floor and nearly all the furniture. Although it is an uncompromising red, it is pitched at a tonal level that one immediately recognises as somewhat familiar; in fact, Matisse originally intended to paint the studio the blue-grey that it actually looked like but once on the canvas the sensation this colour gave did not match up to his *émotion* – to what he felt when standing in the room. So he changed it to red, as he said, for no reason that he could explain. Despite such abstraction, the tonal pitch of this red helps to express a particular soft even light which fills this interior.

The curtained window on the extreme left does two things: in its brilliance as nearly white it lends the red a sense of darkness and, with its cool shadows of transparent green, it seals off this enclosed space from the

outside world. This near white is picked up in the bright glare of a number of objects around the studio, particularly the basket-work chair on the extreme right, directly facing the window. The others, be they the decorated plate, the round dial of the clock-face, the plaster figure on the modelling stand, the ornaments on the chest of drawers, the painted areas in the canvases, the trailing arabesques of the plant in its vase, or even the shine in the wine glass standing on the table, *all* combine not only to maintain the prevailing sense of darkness but also to establish red and white as the principal contrast of the picture. Matisse modifies one side of this contrast by the other. A scale of tones is buried in a gradation of hues: high-keyed pink, for a quite dazzling quality of reflected light, in the big painting leaning against the wall by the window; deeper shades of pink and light rosy reds for softer reflected lights in the other paintings hanging on the wall in the background, accompanied to a lesser extent by the yellows, greens and blues – all mostly confined to patches of colour in the canvases and decorative patterning on ornaments. The dark accents are extremely limited, deep greens in the leaves of the plant in the foreground and strong blues in the background.

In *The Pink Studio* (1911, Pushkin Museum, Moscow), the companion painting, the feeling, the *émotion* expressed by the colour is still one of a luminous interior, but it is altogether lighter, fresher and airier. Matisse divides his principal colour into two shades: a pinky lilac, pale and cool, for the studio wall seen opposite in counter-light and occupying the upper half of the picture; and a rosy red, warm mid-tone, for the flattened plane of the floor below.



Henri Matisse: *The Red Studio*, 1911

The cool feeling is developed by the whites concentrated towards the centre of the canvas in painted areas of pictures hanging on the wall, sheets of white drawing paper, and in the sunlit exterior, which seems to press forward through the window panes, and more emphatically in a light, fresh turquoise for the screen standing in the centre in front of the window – traces of this same colour paired with whites can be found in the window frame, the large statue and the background of a canvas leaning against the wall nearby. Although this colour provides a subtle contrast, the dominant one is to be found in the cold grey-blue of the darkly patterned cloth thrown over the turquoise screen in front of the window. The warm side of this pink harmony is taken up and developed by dull yellows, red-browns and olive greens shown mainly together. Various modulations of these warm colours circulate around the picture in various pieces of studio furniture and equipment (that is to say, in the carpet, the statuette, and the palette), in the paintings on the wall and in the leafy trees seen through the window.

Matisse and Picasso are two such different artists that they virtually seem to complement each other. Picasso did not make colour as central to his work as Matisse did. Nevertheless, after the Cubist adventure, his quick and agile mind instantly grasped the achievements of modern colour painting.

In *The Three Musicians* (1921, Museum of Modern Art, New York) we can see his handling of colour space in a Post-Cubist way. Maurice Raynal wrote of this painting that it is rather like 'a magnificent shop window of Cubist inventions and discoveries'.[20] This is true but there is also a distinct feeling of Spanish darkness, the special light of Velázquez. The



Pablo Picasso:
Three Musicians
1921

Cubist planes are used as colours denoting positions in space which advance and recede and collectively build an airy volume in the centre of the painting. Black, white and browns laced with red, yellow and blue shift and slot dislocated parts of the three figures together in a syncopated rhythm. Browns are at their lightest for the floor of the stage on which the musicians play; deeper browns for the wings and backdrop are turned into a luminous space by the blacks moving through the composition from the shadowy figure to the left of the stage. More browns infiltrate the group, becoming gradually warmer and lighter as they advance in sharply angular planes, culminating in a red-brown for the flattened table top in front. A big blue shape, in contrast to the browns, glides between them, acting as an elusive surrogate for a leg here, a reflected light there, a mask, a shadowed shirt and even parts of the ashtray on the table.

Warm yellows and reds, from the harlequin costume of the musician playing the bright yellow guitar in the centre, raise the tonal key of the group and bridge the interval to the whites. These, as planes of light, are interspersed among the figures as the sudden illuminations which flood and flicker over various features, music sheets or instruments, hats, arms and legs in a theatrical low light.

We are now almost at the present time and no more of any significance has been added to this great body of work. It is unique to European painting and remains so. The conditions are pictorial and the insights from Titian to Matisse originate in the recognition of this fact.

This does not mean, however, that the story has come to an end. There is certainly a pause, but too much has been invested by too many brilliant minds to be ignored and, though the spirit of artistic enquiry may sometimes sleep, it does not die. This wonderful adventure, which might be called 'The Tale of True Colour', has taken many twists and turns, fallen into disuse and neglect, has been re-discovered and re-invented by such very different painters working in specific centres in Italy, the Netherlands, Spain and France at very different periods in time.

Colour's potential is enormous in the hands of the painter, and those relatively few artists from whose oeuvres I have selected only one or two paintings will have shown the reason for this richness. It is as though what might be considered colour's weakness from some points of view is for the painter its strength: just because there is no guiding principle, no firm conceptual basis on which a tradition of colour painting can be reliably founded, this means that each individual artistic sensibility has a chance to discover a unique means of expression.

Cézanne in Provence [2006]

The centennial exhibition *Cézanne in Provence*, seen earlier this year at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, was a glorious occasion. There have been strong and revealing studies of Cézanne in a number of major exhibitions in recent years. We have learnt from these and enjoyed the privilege of seeing his paintings in reality. But there has been, and continues to be, a struggle to come to terms with his vision, and although the work of devoted scholars and the practice of many artists have helped to clear the way, he remains profoundly enigmatic.

Among the exhibitions I particularly enjoyed were Lawrence Gowing's *Watercolours and Pencil Drawings* at the Hayward Gallery, London, in 1973; William Rubin's *Cézanne: The Late Work* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 1977, and Lawrence Gowing's *Cézanne: The Early Years, 1859–72* at the Royal Academy, London, in 1988. *Cézanne: The Bathers* at the Kunstmuseum Basel (1989) was a beautiful exhibition. *Copier Créer* at the Musée du Louvre in 1993 included a large number of Cézanne's copies after Puget, Rubens and others. In 1995, Götz Adriani showed a remarkable selection of paintings at the Kunsthalle in Tübingen. In 1996 the retrospective at the Tate Gallery, London, brought together a large number of works without putting forward a particular thesis. And more recently *Cézanne and the Dawn of Modern Art* (Folkwang Museum, Essen, 2004–05) looked at his influence – the 'father of us all', as Picasso famously called him.[1]

In short, all these shows had monographic, historical or systematic briefs. In anticipating the Washington exhibition, one could not help wondering how it could find a new way of celebrating and distinguishing the artist. What was presented was a surprise. The approach was disarmingly direct. It could be described as topographical, and in the case of some artists, this might be found to be superficial or merely anecdotal. But in Cézanne it leads into the centre of his work: 'I am only, perhaps, the primitive of a new art.'[2]

Cézanne in Provence picks up at this point and sets out to follow the artist as he discovers that way of which he described himself as a 'primitive'. The axis of the exhibition grows out of establishing the locality of his motifs and the order in which Cézanne used them to paint key

groups of landscapes. It shows how the changes of thought and shifts of interest in the landscape paintings are reflected in the portraits, still lifes and figure compositions which accompany them. This is supported by a beautiful selection of watercolours. Following Cézanne from site to site, from motif to motif, one gains a closer understanding of his task as he saw it unfolding in practice on the canvas and before his eyes.

The exhibition opens with a skilful combination of beginnings and mature work. Each illuminates the other. Cézanne's chief difficulties seem to be problems of space and the handling of paint. The early landscapes were painted at the Jas de Bouffan, the 18th-century manor house on the outskirts of Aix-en-Provence which was his family home. From there, Cézanne could see across to the great limestone shape of the Montagne Sainte-Victoire towering over the town on its far side. The magical period of youth, the dreams of success in Paris, the tutelage of Pissarro, are then all behind him. Ahead lie the limitations of provincial life, isolation and an ardent espousal of unremitting toil. We have been very much accustomed to bypassing the actual subject matter of Cézanne's art and regarding such realities merely as vehicles for the stupendous formal innovations he achieved. This exhibition subtly challenges this view. It shows that the motif and its judicious selection were crucial in drawing out from Cézanne those urgent creative needs which in turn could only be met by the technical responses which were to be of such huge importance to succeeding generations of painters.

The Jas de Bouffan is introduced as *House with the Red Roof* (1885–86), one of the most beautiful paintings in the exhibition. Nevertheless, one is disturbed by the right side of the house being tilted at a sharp angle and the emphasis placed on this leaning sensation by the concentration of deep blues and greens against the ochres of the building. Cézanne goes further, repeating this tilt in the line of trees on the left of the canvas. The house itself is set on a firm horizontal, which is also repeated in the line of shadows falling across the path. This is our first encounter with '*ma petite sensation*'. It is clear that Cézanne's tilt is not perspectival. These tilts are essential to the dynamics of the painting. The colour is ravishing. Cézanne builds up a rhythm of contrasting ochres and blues out of the path and the shadows falling across it. The eye is taken up to an unexplained but pictorially essential square of bright yellow ochre. This acts as a kind of hinge in turning attention towards the shadowed façade, dematerialised by the green-ochres of reflected lights. On the right, rich modulations of strong blues and greens cross the canvas. The entire passage is softened

by touches of an elusive grey-blue, reflections from the sky falling on the loosely clustered leaves below. To hold the whole together and push the red of the roof back, Cézanne has introduced a particular kind of *repoussoir* tree in an astonishing burst of sharp lemon yellows.

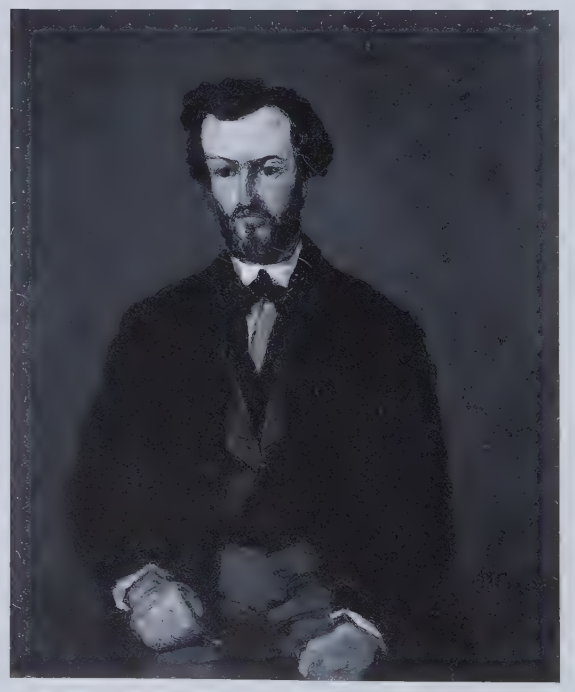
With this radiant overture to the achievements to come, one can turn to the other paintings with greater equanimity. Difficulties are much in evidence. *View from Jas de Bouffan* (c.1874) is an attempt to treat recession without the assistance of tone, but the Impressionist palette is one that handles shallow space more effectively than depth. Cézanne does not seem to have been able to engage in the little painting. In *Chestnut Trees in Jas de Bouffan in Winter* (c.1885–86), painted a few years later, Cézanne has adopted an Impressionist solution to this problem – the screen of trees – one that was much used by the great practitioner Pissarro and was to play an important role in the future. It seems that the chestnut trees were painted first. Into the open spaces Cézanne has painted patches of colour treated as virtually separate entities, frequently leaving a thin line of bare canvas.

These early paintings are especially interesting as they show that, despite the doors that Pissarro had pushed open for him, Cézanne found that he still had a great deal to learn. The problem that he shared with early Monet and one that was faced head on by Seurat a little later lies in the handling of paint – not the colour but the physical application. In what direction should the brush marks go? How heavily should the brush be loaded? In *Trees at Jas de Bouffan* (c.1874) the brush marks follow the form – the lawn, the trees and the flowering shrubs. Emphatically heavy, they certainly successfully defy verisimilitude but that only increases the question of what their function should be.

Suddenly, however, comes an astonishing little canvas *The Basin of the Jas de Bouffan in Winter* (c.1878). Cézanne would have seen the basin many times that winter as he passed by, and had time to reflect on the possibilities it offered and to find the most telling spot to place his easel – all essential preliminaries to securing a rich motif. One thinks of late Monet and the clouds at his feet in the pool at Giverny. Although far apart in dates, the bringing down of the heavens to earth or the raising up of earth to heaven is common to both artists. However, Cézanne's painting is no fleeting impression but, as with late Monet, a carefully built perception. The central vertical trunk of the tree and its reflection are seen as being on a plane brought close to the spectator. The void of the sky, its blue thinned by the wintry light, is brought down into the empty pool below.

This obliterates, through the agency of reflection, the greatest difference between near and far in one stroke.

The next section in Washington was reserved for portraits of family and friends. Chronologically it preceded the work shown on entering the exhibition. Here Courbet's influence is strong. The colour is tonal. Black is much in evidence. Impasto and the palette-knife assert the physicality of paint throughout and do much to banish any ingratiating charm. But despite the rough treatment, the tenderness of Cézanne's portraiture comes through. The painting of the poet *Antony Valabrègue* (1866) is beautifully felt. The ungainly hands clenched on his knees and the pallor of the face with its red lips and nose contrast vividly with the formality of the posture. If this portrait is compared with *Peasant* (c.1890–99), the progress made since leaving behind the palette-knife is obvious. Gravitas seems to absorb the young man. An extraordinary, powerful light is given off the whole painting, a light generated purely by colour but expressive of sensations experienced by Cézanne in the presence of the sitter. The changes of tone needed but barely achievable in the palette-knife background of *Antony Valabrègue* here become a delicate blue-grey, blue, blue-violet modulation. This is then opened up to embrace a more



Paul Cézanne:
Antony Valabrègue
1866

extensive harmony – lilacs, through violets of many shades and hues, reds, browns and ochres. These shifts of colour describe the oval of the face: reds, violets and blues along the jaw, up to the cheekbone, down the side of the nose and under the lock of hair on the forehead; lilacs, picking up from the background, as the reflected lights on the shadowed side of the face. Some colours are local, such as the touches of light rosy red on the lip, cheek and forehead, and the strong brownish-reds of moustache and hairline; others continue the *harmonie générale*. The pose is classic, the head just proud of the vertical change of planes behind – the light side of the figure seen against the dark ground, the shadowed side seen in relief against a lighter passage.

A few early landscapes and a still life also carry signs of Courbet's approach. *Bend in a Road in Provence* (c.1866) uses a device from classic landscape for breaking distance and bringing that which would be far, near. It recurs occasionally, being used in *The Bend in the Road* (1902–06) nearly forty years later.

In the third room, Cézanne as we think of him gradually emerges. But first the trail is picked up by a low-toned Courbet-like *Landscape with a Water Mill* (c.1866–71) in which the brush marks follow the forms of rocks, hills and tumbledown buildings. It is juxtaposed with *The Viaduct at L'Estaque* (1882), a painting made some ten or more years later. The subject is similar: a rocky gorge, some scrub and buildings. The horizontal plane of the viaduct cuts across the lower part of the canvas, establishing a foreground and separating the viewer from the landscape behind. But the brush marks, colour patches of small parallel strokes, are now independent of the landscape forms and almost uniform in their unemphatic weight. Subtle shades of blue-greys, olive-greys, ochre-greys and one small patch of red take the eye to a group of contrasting planes near the top right edge of the canvas for no apparent reason other than to do just that. The pressing difficulties of the brush mark relieved, Cézanne could now pursue the problems of near and far with greater concentration.

L'Estaque was a small fishing village on the Gulf of Marseille where, in the 1860s, Cézanne's mother had rented a small house. The artist, to be joined in L'Estaque by Hortense Fiquet, left Aix to escape involvement in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71. Monet left France for the same reason, visiting London with Pissarro. Both painters found new and challenging 'motifs', a term in common use among *plein-air* Impressionist painters. L'Estaque had a great deal to offer; Émile Zola described it in a short story written around the same time:

> The countryside is superb. Rocky arms jut out on either side of the Gulf, while the islands off shore seem to block the horizon; and the sea is nothing but a large pool, in fine weather a lake of vivid blue [...] The coastline leaves Marseille, curves around, forms broad indentations before arriving at L'Estaque, which is surrounded by factories that occasionally release lofty plumes of smoke. When the sun is high in the sky, the ocean, almost black, seems to lie sleeping between the two rocky headlands, whose paleness is warmed by yellow and brown. The pines stain the reddish earth with patches of dark green. It is an immense picture, a glimpsed corner of the Orient, rising up in the blinding shimmer of the day. [3]

But as Cézanne wrote to Zola: 'I have here some beautiful viewpoints, but that does not quite make a *motif*.' [4]

Cézanne first tried working down in the harbour itself, a confined viewing almost at sea level, or recording such surprising local events as a fall of snow. Only some years later did he turn and look out across the sea to the far side of the Gulf. He looks down, up and across great spaces reconciling these conflicting readings in a series of canvases. Multiple viewpoints have, of course, been treated by painters before, especially in the 17th-century. But although a pictorial problem may be essentially the same, every period



Paul Cézanne:
Viaduct at l'Estaque
1882

regards it differently and demands its own response. Cézanne's time was certainly no exception. The advent of Impressionism and the emphasis placed on visual experience deepened the problem. As Cézanne said, 'Nature for us men is more depth than surface.'[5] In *Midday in L'Estaque* (c.1876–79) the sea is treated simply as a small sharp contrast of strong blue in a landscape dominated by ochres. In *L'Estaque*, a painting also of c.1876–79, the sea, although vivid in colour, still plays a relatively small part in the organisation of the whole. Cézanne's attention seems to be concentrated on the rocks, trees and headland which climb vertically up the right side of the canvas. But here, where the foreground gives way to the middle ground, is an extraordinary area which is 'meaningless' in descriptive terms. One sees only a lively syncopated passage of sharply fractured planes and colours – an absorbing and intensely pleasurable sensation.

The exhibition continues with a great wall of paintings nearly all entitled *The Gulf of Marseille seen from L'Estaque*. Here we see the conversion of 'some beautiful viewpoints' into a workable motif, and the birth of a dialogue between the painter and his canvas. The space is vast, stretching from the craggy rocks behind the fishing village across the Gulf of Marseille to the hills on the far side. How to account on canvas for this immensity which offered no visual space-markers through which it could be articulated? But out of the difficulty came the way forward. In one of this group, we are drawn towards the horizon line. The spectator seems to be standing level with the hills on the far side of the Gulf. Cézanne takes a



Paul Cézanne:
The Gulf of Marseille, Seen from L'Estaque
c.1885

modulation of the colours from below up into the distant hills: greens, violets, pinks and ochres bringing them close. The vast expanse of blues seems suspended from the horizon in response to Cézanne's sensation of looking down. In contrast, his reading of the distant headland, fields, houses and factory buildings on the left is replaced by one of vertically stacked planes of colour rising one above the other. We look down, up and across, as the artist has done in translating his motif into a painting. We are not presented with a definitive experience but one that is essentially active and which reflects the movement of the artist's perception as he brings his '*petites sensations*' to realisation on the canvas. At L'Estaque, Cézanne taught himself to see and to reflect on the implications of this special discipline. 'What developments!', he wrote to Zola, adding, a little later, that he saw painting as 'a means of expressing sensation'.[6] The interest in perception and its difference from sensation had been part of advanced thought in Europe since the Enlightenment, but, stimulated by Impressionism, it acquired a new significance. As an individual, Cézanne had been observed as one whose openness to sensations of every kind was extreme. Writing to Victor Chocquet, whose intellectual and emotional equilibrium he admired, he said: 'Fate has not endowed me with an equal stability, that is the only regret I have about the things of this earth. As for the rest I have nothing to complain about. Always the sky, the boundless things of nature attract me and give me the chance to look with pleasure.' Further on in the same letter, he writes: 'I must tell you I am still occupied with my painting and that there are treasures to be taken away from this country, which has not yet found an interpreter equal to the abundance of riches which it displays.'[7]

At L'Estaque the display of these riches was heightened to an almost overwhelming degree. Monet, who was equally searching in his hunt for motifs, and worked further along the coast, already saw, anticipating the Fauves, the need for 'a palette of diamonds and precious stones'.[8] And again, after more radiant canvases:

> I am slaving away on six paintings a day. I am giving myself a hard time over it as I haven't yet managed to capture the colour of this landscape; there are moments when I am appalled at the colours I'm having to use, I'm afraid what I'm doing is just dreadful and yet I really am understating it; the light is simply terrifying. I have already spent six sessions on some studies, but it's all so new to me that I can't quite bring them off.[9]

Monet returned to northern France, where he felt Delacroix's *temps gris* to be more sympathetic for his observation of colour. But his rejection of this brilliance was not shared by other painters. After Cézanne's death and the large exhibition of his work in 1907 in Paris, Braque was one of the first of a veritable stream of painters to stay at L'Estaque. It would seem that they felt that here, where the great breakthrough in a new art had taken place, conditions must be extremely favourable. For Cézanne, L'Estaque marked the beginning of the discovery of his own identity as an artist. After the intensity of this long period of sustained developments, he moved away from L'Estaque and, after 1885, never returned. It was as though he had wrung the last drop from the site and now, armed with new awareness and an increased sense of purpose, could set out to find fresh motifs to test the viability of his insights.

Further inland from L'Estaque, Cézanne found new material. In *Hamlet at Payannet, near Gardanne* (1885–86) Cézanne strove first and foremost to achieve a classic firmness of space. Foreground, middleground and background are firmly established, the eye being level with the cluster of little houses in the middleground. The sight line is upward, the mountain range occupying a high horizon in the background. However, the principle sensations seem to centre on light – light observed in nature and light generated by colour. In a rhythm of shallow advances and recessions, a clearly identifiable early morning light catches the eastern planes of the houses. This cast light also triggers off a harmony of yellow- and red-ochres, creamy whites and warm orange-golds, which reverberate through the fields and hillsides as patches of pure colour. The blues of the shadowed houses, turned transparent by reflected light, are picked up in the mountain range above and, accompanied by lilacs and violets, run across the top of the canvas, giving rise to a second rhythm of planes echoing the first below.

Cézanne repeats the exercise in *House below Sainte-Victoire, near Gardanne* (c.1886–90), making the classic planes still firmer and keeping the colour movement even closer. The foreground of strong emerald-green and ochres gives way to the whites of the house in the middle ground flanked by dark trees – greens, greys, blues and ochres in modulation account for the transition from middle to background. This colour movement is brought to a conclusion in the blue-greys, blues and emerald greens on the mountain and sky. Although more modest in scale than those at L'Estaque, the motifs both bear witness to Cézanne's experience in the *Gulf of Marseille* paintings. The verticality which he was in a sense

forced to assert there in order to deal with the problem of turning a vast view into a workable motif, remained with him. Despite the more confined and stable context he had chosen, the sensations he had experienced at L'Estaque were being recast here before his eyes. The classical order he so venerated, and to which he had hoped to relate Impressionism, was proving not quite adequate to such a task.

In *Large Pine and Red Earth* (1890–95) (p.237) the structure of foreground, middleground and background breaks up. Here, the advances and recessions take place in a purely pictorial rhythm on both sides of the tree trunk. Repeats and echoes of the colours seen in the ground below the pine are to be found in the spaces between the branches. Especially clear is the correspondence of the red in the ground to the red in the roof. The white planes of houses appear each side of the tree. Golden, pale and red- ochres change places. The beautiful fresh greens in the grass are carried up into the foliage above, the blues of the sky come down into the shade below and muted violets in the near undergrowth recur as lilacs in the distance. The parallel strokes for the brush marks are mainly vertical in the foliage and vegetation below the tree, and mainly horizontal in the passages of fields and buildings.

Cézanne appears to be following a similar interest in *Trees and Houses* (c.1885), but here the dislocations are extreme. The painting raises questions of whether it has been laid aside, abandoned or taken as far as it could go. Pissarro's screen of trees is coming apart – branches do not connect with trunks, limbs are fragmented and twisted. Nor does the screen stand firmly in front of the landscape as it used to. Instead, through the agency of an exquisite colour modulation, both are meshed together. Pinks and roses, ochres running a whole spectrum between red and yellow, yellow-greens through to turquoises, light blues and lilacs appear and reappear in the spaces between the branches and, disconnected, obliterate yet other parts of the same trees, the whole an interchangeable and unstable pattern of movement. In front of the motif, Cézanne realised that our way of looking is essentially mobile. It is not a rigid, static activity, but one which scans and seeks. Movements between 'near' and 'far', 'here' and 'there' are continuous and part of our pleasure in sight.

In the installation in Washington the close proximity of *Hamlet at Payannet, near Gardanne* and *Large Pine and Red Earth* presented a kind of apex or turning point. Henceforth, Cézanne pursues that way of which he called himself a 'primitive'. The root of his 'primitivism' lies in finding an equivalent in painting for our natural vision. What he calls '*ma petite*



Paul Cézanne:
The Large Pine
c.1889

sensation' may have to do with just that – our natural way of looking. Also in this section is *The Large Pine* (c.1889), a painting that no one who knows Provence could pass by unmoved. The tree is caught in a tremendous arching movement, stretched to a limit like an archer's bow. The mistral thrashes everything in sight – a sensation of violence that is not confined to sight alone. Repeated fracturing of lines sets up passages of intense vibration, anticipating those in the studies for the *Bathers*.

Along the route from Aix to the village of Le Tholonet there were a number of sites that Cézanne would have remembered from his youth. The Château Noir was one of these and had often been visited with Zola and the other 'inseparables'. Abandoned and endowed by local legend with mystery, the ruin is perched halfway up a rocky hillside shrouded in unkempt trees and undergrowth. Built of various red and orange bricks, it stands isolated, presenting a series of strictly vertical flat planes. The exhibition has a wall of canvases that Cézanne painted of this motif. Drama is powerfully present in *Château Noir* (1900–04). His sightline places him on a level with the base of the château. Contrasting with the gold- and red-ochres of the ruin, a strong and heavy modulation of near black-blues through to greens and violets stands for vegetation. A little lighter in colour, the same modulation continues to the château and through the space beyond up into the sky. But this distance is

brought sharply back by abrupt, fractured lines and dark colour patches. Cézanne uses glimpses of a tree overhead as a pretext to carry the deep dark blues up into the sky.

In the painting of the *Château Noir* (1900–04), which was owned by Picasso, the feeling is grander and more sober. The sense of drama is considerably refined. It appears more integral to the act of making the painting, rather than located in the subject matter. Cézanne looks up towards the ruin. The verticality of space is increased. The shifting colour planes are more disciplined. The brush marks form distinct patches or blocks of colour facilitating a gradual transition to separate planes. Beautiful passages carry a few ochres down from the ruin above into the lower part of the canvas, while a *repoussoir* of pale light yellow-greens directly below the château push the body of its ochres back in space. The overall colour has a strong grey ambience. Writing to Pissarro Cézanne says: 'You are perfectly right to speak of grey, for grey alone reigns in nature, but it is terrifyingly hard to catch.'[10] Here, nearly forty years later, he has scored a resounding success. The relationship of the colours, as always precisely selected and modulated, has resulted in a delicate cancellation of the hues. Only a few 'landmark' colours remain, acting as anchors for his sensation. The 'greys' in the sky are in fact shades of magenta, after-images of the greens in the foliage, which in turn have generated their own 'local' magentas. Our natural vision, especially when stimulated by strong light, becomes saturated by concentrated looking.

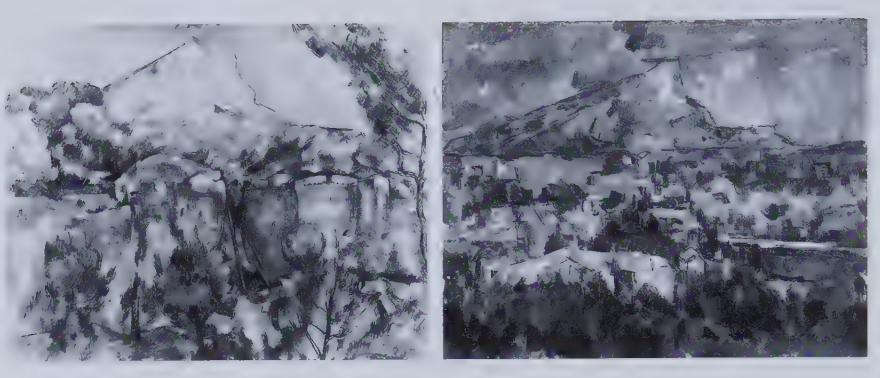


Paul Cézanne:
Château Noir
1900–04

The experience of the painting is one of great beauty. A sensation of pearlescence hovers just above the surface of the canvas. Although entirely different in character it reminds one of the wonderful luminosity given out by Seurat's *Une Baignade, Asnières* in the National Gallery, London. The practice behind this pictorial light is the same. For both artists, the source lies in dividing and re-assembling the full span of colour.

Closely related, more modest in its subject matter but equally hypnotic, is *The Maison Maria* (c.1895), a motif discovered on the way to Le Tholonet. The sensation of dazzle, the disintegration of form and space under the impact of sheer light has a violence that is enhanced by the commonplaceness of the subject matter. It is as though the power of Pan has burst in upon the stillness of a Mediterranean noon. The ochres of the house and lane, distributed through the lower half; form a basic chord against which is played an astounding modulation of greens, blues and lilacs. The sky is the source of the blue lilac sensation – the strongest of all the sensations found in this painting. Reflected lights bespatter the landscape as patches decisively registered but of an almost Impressionist elusiveness.

Still in the Le Tholonet area is the disused quarry of Bibémus. It offers a contained world with only the sky above. Nothing is visible from within except the great white shape of Sainte-Victoire, towering austere and serene over all. *Montagne Sainte-Victoire seen from Bibémus* (c.1897) deals with this motif. There is a sense of confrontation. The great stone masses rise vertically. The reality of the immense distance separating the two has collapsed. Instead, the horizon line substitutes a change of plane for the spatial volume. Having established a separation of parts, Cézanne can unite the two through a movement of planes and colours across the horizontal. The greens of undergrowth and trees provide a perfect conduit, but not the only one, for moving colour patches from 'here' to 'there'. The lilacs of the mountain descend and intensify as they go, leaning now towards magenta, now towards blue until they reach violet and purple at the bottom. They travel by way of shadows, crevices and reflections. Golden ochres make the journey in reverse, carrying yellows, cream and lemon colours through the blues and greens of foliage to the foot of the mountain and up into the sky. A few pinks and rose colours are also taken up into the blues and lilacs above the horizontal. The modulation completes a spectrum and is as carefully planned and reasoned as with Poussin. But it obeys an entirely new order – the one of which Cézanne saw himself as a 'primitive'. It is important to stress that Cézanne does not use the term



Paul Cézanne: *Montagne Sainte-Victoire seen from Bibémus* c.1897
Paul Cézanne: *Montagne Sainte-Victoire seen from Les Lauves* 1902–06

'primitive' in the way that it was used at his time to classify pre-Renaissance painting, nor as an attribute proclaiming naivety. He regards himself as one who is at a beginning, who is taking part in the very inception of some matter the full realisation of which still lies in the future.

At this point the sense of the exhibition no longer proceeds from room to room but opens out. The last 'topographical' foothold is Les Lauves, on the outskirts of Aix, where Cézanne built a studio in which to paint the large canvases of the *Bathers*. Although the axis of the exhibition has been and continues to be the landscape paintings, this main thrust has been accompanied by still life and portraiture. Now wider selections from these areas increase the flow and the *Bathers* appear (1883–1906).

It seems as though Cézanne has been gradually developing his means, his techniques, his understanding and his aims across a wide front. In the late 1890s they begin to complement one another and fit together. The paintings seem to have a greater assurance and freedom, and to take even more risks. In *The Large Trees* (1902–04), the motif may be a landscape but there is an almost figurative tension in the twists and turns of the tree trunks while the dislocated branches anticipate the ruptures and distortions of the *Bathers*. The opening between the trees has strong spatial sensation and seems to echo absent mountains or clouds. Pearly whites, blue-greys, yellow and emerald greens in large loosely painted planes contrast with even bolder blocks of earth-reds, light and deep yellow-olives, ochres and bright greens – all colours raised to high intensity. It is as though the opposition between the mountain



Paul Cézanne:
The Large Trees
1902–04

and the quarry in *Montagne Sainte-Victoire seen from Bibémus* is recast here in yet another twist of this new pictorial drama.

In *Houses on a Hill, Provence* (1904–06) great movements in colour sweep across the canvas, generating intervals and incidents only as needed according to the integral rhythm of the whole. The speed at which one's eye is taken through the repetitions, mirrorings and contrasts is breathtaking. That very speed is then reversed, the eye drifts, falls in slow arcs, settles and pauses. This musical sense of movement is conducted by the planes of colour. Dull violets, brown magentas, grey-blues, dark reds, olives, spiked with turquoises and brighter reds, rise and fall in successive formations. Sudden interjections of blocks of ochre gather momentum and turn in a great arc towards the blues of the sky.

Then, a last great wall of the paintings of Montagne Sainte-Victoire seen from Les Lauves. The dramatic grandeur increases. The spatial cord of verticality is held in place. The plain rises to a horizontal supporting the mountain. The phenomenal presence of Montagne Sainte-Victoire is

thus enhanced. In each painting a sense of shock is retained, even as it is rephrased. In one (1902–04, Philadelphia Museum of Art), the canvas is divided into three horizontal zones, a low-keyed modulation of violets, blues, greens, coloured greys and blacks with, it seems, an occasional crimson glaze, lead up to bright ochres in close harmonies, interlaced with sharp accents of brilliant emeralds and near blacks. Brushed passages, chopped and chipped into small inflected planes are tipped one against the other but still hold a continuity. Atop, occupying the same plane in pictorial depth as the vast sunlit expanse below, rises the gigantic enigmatic shape of Montagne Sainte-Victoire, accompanied by clouds and embedded in the sky. The clouds and their shadows allow Cézanne to take his modulations up into the sky. A large patch of lilac goes to the right of the peak, accompanied by smaller patches of green-ochre, a green-blue and a violet-blue. Lighter blue-whites, pinks and turquoise-blues modulate between sky and peak. Stronger and larger patches of reds, roses and violets are moved across the breast of the mountain, while to the left, the shadowed flank of the range supports strong blues, greens and violets. In return, blues and violets are brought down into the plain below.

On this last wall hangs *The Large Bathers* (1894–1905) (p.217) from the National Gallery, London. In this painting the concept of the exhibition – to approach Cézanne's œuvre through the theme of his landscape paintings – meets its greatest challenge. But so brilliantly has the artist's development been charted that acceptance of this 'difficult' painting is eased. Familiarity with the rocks, stones and mountains of Cézanne's landscapes, with his rhythms of diagonals, with his movements of colour from below to above, with his repetition of horizontals, with the shallow modulated depth of his pictorial space and with the verticality of its structure, leads to our reading this canvas in the same way that those in the preceding galleries have been read. Darkness is taken up into a sky framed by powerful diagonals. Deep strong blues of many hues, greens and greys, act as a foil for clouds carrying opalescent whites, pinks and yellows. These take on the role of Montagne Sainte-Victoire in the landscapes. The clouds close the painting, recessional reading is sealed off, only an enigmatic but compelling presence remains. The figures below in a rhythm of diagonals and counter-diagonals are treated as though they are the rocks above the Château Noir. Yellow-ochres in a wide modulation leave the foreground and, passing through the bathers, continue up into the foliage. Delicate lilacs, as reflected lights from above, caress the bodies. The pearly whites of the clouds reappear in the draperies.

The deep blues of the sky draw the contours of the figures. Beautiful subsidiary rhythms of rounded shapes and curves describe arcs, clusters of foliage, heads and clouds. Increasingly, as one looks, the entire composition appears as a summation of Cézanne's landscape painting. His realisation of these sensations paves the way to an acceptance of an enduring vision of nature as a totality embracing us on equal terms with the trees, the earth, the clouds and the sky, defined essentially by the same enigmatic phenomena, colour – colour as light; colour as depth; colour as the thing seen. As Cézanne told Joachim Gasquet, 'colour is the place where our brain and the universe meet'.[11]

The Artist's Eye: Seurat [1992]

Visiting the centennial exhibition of Seurat's work at the Grand Palais in Paris is an extraordinary experience for several reasons. Firstly, despite the fact that he left the smallest body of work of any great 19th-century painter, the impression given by the exhibition is that it is huge, if not colossal. Secondly, it is extraordinary for the rigour of the discipline, and the delicacy of the sensibility which was a tool of that discipline; and thirdly for the nature of Seurat's aims, as distinct from the nature of his achievement. The contradictions are startling, and all the more so because they not only coexist but seem to be dependent one upon another. As a result, the works excite and surprise, are beautiful and mysterious.

The first two rooms are devoted to drawings. Seurat is about the age of twenty when he begins to make those fastidious black studies in conté which Signac called 'the most beautiful painter's drawings in existence'. Precisely weighed and evaluated tones are massed or dispersed across the surface to give rise to forms which may or may not be specific, or to lines which emerge by contrast – only to sink back into impenetrability again.

There is an almost overpowering sense of the mysterious: in the shadowed face in *The Lamp* (1882–83); in the vast dark foreground to the buildings in *Houses* (1881–82); in the reflected half-light of *The Railway*



Georges Seurat:
Houses
1881–82



Tonal Landscape Study
1959

(1881–82); in the soft feathery drawing of *The Stacks* (1882–83) which conjures up not only the stacks but even wisps of straw. What is this mysterious presence which recurs so insistently? Curiously enough, although its treatment may differ from subject to subject or from manifestation to manifestation, one has an unmistakeable sense of the mystery being singular and constant. Superficially it can be explained to some extent by what is depicted, by the choice of solitary figures, empty landscapes, desolate buildings, low light, or darkness itself.* But the heart of this mystery, it seems to me, lies more in its employment of our powers of perception. We cannot *quite* see. Within the myriad subtle distinctions of close tones, or through the magic weaving of conté marks, we cannot sometimes be sure of the identity or even of the actual forms we are looking at. To put it another way, by confronting us with an experience just beyond our visual grasp, with something unfathomable, the *im-perceptible* in short, Seurat asks: *What is it that we are looking at?*

There is no mystification. He takes the opposite approach, that of clarity and force of will. Nothing is fudged or evaded. Every tonal differentiation, every formal limit, every spatial position in these extraordinary areas has been exactly organised – and yet the mystery only

*It could even be said that, as a sort of rationalisation of his instinct, he deliberately selected mysterious subjects.

deepens. Through precisely constructing the unfathomable, he brings the question to the forefront of our attention: What is it that we are looking at? Seurat is walking a tightrope. Only an artist of his delicacy and determination, and fired by a sense of intellectual adventure, could hope to keep his head.

And it is little short of thrilling to realise that so sure is Seurat of what he is doing that he *can* eliminate all that is not essential. (It is not difficult to imagine how other artists might have grasped at this or that incidental in such a situation.) At the same time he is *adding*, creating a richer if more exacting field from which he can fabricate even more complex mysteries with greater precision. Take *Forest at Pontaubert* (1881): there he uses only tonal colour and simple gradation. Close up, the painting seems to be quite flat, a little curtain of sparkles drawn across a formless density. But, to one's surprise, from further away another dimension appears. Hidden depths open up, soft volumes emerge.

This new importance of viewing distance increases Seurat's scope. At a few feet from *Young Peasant in Blue* (1881–82) for instance, a vertical field of green brushstrokes rises straight up the canvas. The blue strokes for the jacket occupy the same plane as does the almost blank circular face. But step back a little, and slowly the space of the painting reveals itself. The body takes on volume, the figure emerges from its ground, the head becomes round, features appear. Suddenly a monumental image is there.

The apparitional quality is even more pronounced in *Peasant Women at Work* (1882–83) again made from beautifully bold, criss-cross brush marks, which in effect are as stable as the later non-directional 'point' will be. Here already are the five colour sources of his method which Félix Fénéon listed later: the 'solar orange' for sunlight, and its 'complementary', strong blue in the shade; greens and yellows as the 'local colours' of the vegetation; fleeting reds and violets as 'ambient complementary colours'; a small portion of 'reflections projected by neighbouring objects', and a great deal of those inflected half-lights explained as 'the feeble portion of coloured light that penetrates beyond the surface and is reflected after having been modified by partial absorption'. So it is in fact one of the earliest canvases in the exhibition to show Seurat applying his colour theories. Alternating light and dark bands of these colours are stacked up the picture plane with breathtaking flatness. There is, from near-to, no recession whatsoever. But from across the room the painting assumes a grand scale. Foreground, middleground, background fall into place in some secret correspondence with the rhythmic labour of the two peasants.

This elastic pictorial space produced by scrupulously organised colour and variable viewing distances is crucial. It facilitates a relationship between two extremes – the amorphous fabric and the monumental space it can generate. The Divisionist method breaks down and absorbs familiar distinctions of form and identity. By this it provides a conduit through which Seurat's particular and enigmatic sense of form and volume is evoked.

But it is obviously an extremely delicate process and one which can only happen where a perfect correspondence has been achieved. Wherever these extremes of Seurat's vision are brought into open conflict the entire structure which he is fabricating becomes jumbled, and jars. When they are well ordered perceptually, then there is a beautiful flow between the two which provides both a unity and a context in which his vision fulfils itself.

This may account for some paradoxical aspects of *Bathers at Asnières* (1883–84). I have always loved this painting. It is one of Seurat's most radiantly beautiful works, although it is surprisingly uneasy – on its own terms. The actual canvas, like those of *La Grande Jatte* and *Les Poseuses*, is not in the exhibition. But the preparatory material is extremely revealing. There is a wall of beautiful drawings. They show how each form was conceived separately. Such analysis in isolation may be helpful in evolving purity of form. But it also increases the problem of relating the individual figures in the painting to one another and to their surroundings.



Georges Seurat: *Une Baignade, Asnières* 1883–84

It is clearly very difficult to absorb such pronounced identities and definitions into any structure, let alone one of the kind which Seurat was evolving.* In the painting this accounts for some quite noticeable ruptures. For example, the extraordinary halo of lights and darks around the central figure of the boy – the blue of the river being deepened to a strong tone against his arm, while on the other side of his body it is bleached to almost white to throw his shadowed back into relief. This 'irradiation', as it is called,** has been known to painters for a long time, and perhaps Seurat was carried away by his love for this phenomenon (one can see that he applied it to many edges in the painting). But the schism seems to have a somewhat different origin: the discrepancy between impalpable sensations and classic solids was already there in the colour studies he did at Asnières.

In *La Grande Jatte* (1884–85), however, these pitfalls have been overcome. The spatial organisation of *Peasant Women at Work* is developed into a coherent system. 'Ma méthode', as he called it, is now formulated. The basic principle is contrast, and this is applied to all the elements. He differentiates between additive and subtractive colour mixtures, that is to say between colour in light and colour in pigment, and chooses the former as his guide.

Seurat uses the three primaries of light: red-orange, green, and blue-violet for his canvas. Such honing-in demanded a greater precision in colour application, and so the tiny pointillist touch arrives. The preparatory work, which stands in for the great painting itself (now in the Art Institute of Chicago), makes it quite easy to follow the evolution from the freely hatched brush-stroke, still used to lay in the underpainting,† to the dot, that uninflected and non-referential mark. It is easy to see that the manner in which it draws no attention to itself while carrying out a task discretely would have appealed to Seurat.

The array of studies for this painting is formidable. The landscape

* There is something about the grouping of the figures which reminds me of huge pieces of sculpture loosely assembled in some museum or maybe in the cast room of an art school.

** Leonardo described this value contrast and advised painters to use it for strengthening the relief of figures in the picture plane. Seurat quoted David Sutter writing in *Les Phénomènes de la Vision*: 'Observe a white wall standing out against the sky: you will see a white line lighter than the surface of the wall and a blue or grey line darker than the mass of the sky. This line of irradation remains unnoticed by the majority of painters but nevertheless it is of the greatest importance to copy it exactly'. Later on, following Seurat, Picasso and Braque used it in Cubism – they loved what they referred to as 'his beautiful edges'.

† I copied *Le Pont de Courbevoie*, 1886-87, and there I found that under the multitude of fine points lay a blocking-structure of broad cross-hatched strokes.

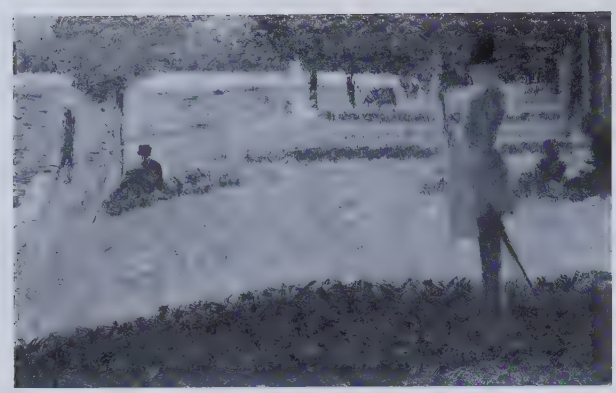
of *La Grande Jatte* is examined over and over again, each time with a slight shift in perception. But unlike the preparatory work for the *Bathers* the study of each particular perception remains consistent throughout. In *The Saint-Cyrien* (1884) the expanse of the river bank is laid out in a monumental sweep. The scale of landscape and people is equally vast but every millimetre is accounted for as the space unfolds.

Now that the preparation process has become unified, he seems to be able to select any specific aspect for further penetration and to re-integrate the information without running the risk of exposing the whole to disruption. In *The Couple* (1884), for instance, he studies only the green and violet side of the light spectrum, leaving out the orange. The green goes from a blue-green to a yellow-green and the violet from magenta to purple. These colour shifts and the mid-tone pitch of the canvas produce a most beautiful luminosity. But so masterly is his sense of unity now that he can add the red-orange later, in the final study of *La Grande Jatte*, with the absolute ease of apparent inevitability. In short, all points to a profound change having taken place, one which affects his approach on every level.

The general direction of his preparatory work shows that it is no longer exclusively devoted to the study of nature, and that it increasingly serves as a body of material amenable to his purpose.* And what is his purpose? According to Signac it was, in Seurat's own words: 'To start anew what they have done'. That is to say, what the Impressionists have done.

In no way could the preoccupation with light and colour as such, with all its attendant ramifications of reflected light and ambient colour, be at fault. It was the accidental, instinctive, restless ebb and flow of visual experience with which the Impressionist insights were associated that posed the problem. Seurat certainly did not imagine that the elusive or fugitive could ever be eliminated from phenomena, but it was part of his programme that these should be analysed in their own terms and reconstituted as pictorial elements.

* There is even evidence that during the work on *La Grande Jatte* he began to extend his painting sessions into the night, taking advantage of gaslight. This only serves to emphasise the question of what his purpose was if it could be pursued even in the absence of daylight which one would have thought essential to it.



Georges Seurat:
Study for
La Grande Jatte
1884–85

For instance, the law of simultaneous contrast, by its very definition, implicitly acknowledges the instantaneous. So in the final analysis one could say that it was in the attitude to perception that the divergence came. For Monet perception was the essential vehicle and supreme arbitrator of his art. He accepted its complexities unhesitatingly, even without reflection, and went along with them.

For Seurat's purpose perception itself had to be examined, methodically objectified and built up into a technique. However, it is a limitation of examination *per se* that it only examines that which *can* be examined. For an artist those fleeting sensations which pass unrecognised by the intellect are just as important as those which become conscious. They intermingle and operate together.

The theoretical basis of his method was a compilation of other people's findings – Blanc, Sutter, Rood, Chevreul, Delacroix.* But perception is indivisible.

* It is worth considering the character of the theories Seurat employed. His scientific sources are either interested amateurs somewhere between art and science (Blanc and Sutter), professional specialists making their knowledge available to artists (Rood), or scientific originals who by chance encountered the magic of colour (Chevreul). It is a fairly exotic compilation of insights with no systematic order attached to it. There is no 'science of colour' as such, and there can never be. As colour is a universal quality, such a science would have to be an equally universal discipline, and what purpose would that serve anyway? Only the painters' métier seems to be able to encompass all the many aspects of colour in practical terms.

There was of course Delacroix whose paintings Seurat had studied carefully, but, though Delacroix anticipated most of these scientific insights, his vision was unavoidably unique and could not be directly applied by anybody else. He saw nature through the great artists of the past – Veronese and Rubens in particular – and found, to his great excitement, that pictorial imagination was supported by perceptual observation. This was obviously not Seurat's way of setting about things. He wanted certainty, and what is so amazing is that he actually achieved it, though not in a scientific sense but in a painterly one. With only a few, general, loose and incongruous insights, he set out to establish a coherent, firm and intransigent pictorial reality. Shortly after finishing *La Grande Jatte* he wrote to Signac: 'Don't understand anything any more. All blobs – tiresome work.' In the end the evidence was visual rather than cognitive.

As with the drawings earlier, it is once again the technicalities of nothing which provide the clue. By the time Seurat paints *La Grande Jatte*, these have evolved to an extraordinary degree. Penetration turns into a veil. Nothing appears to be hidden. It is four o'clock in the afternoon. The sun floods the island, there are pools and bars of shadow, but it is undeniable broad daylight and everything is seen. What a grand moment to choose for mystery – with eyes wide open.

It's as though Seurat turned a searchlight on nothing, and exposed it – not as a fraud but as a fact. There it is. But what is it? Every corner of the canvas has been weighed, judged and accounted for. Our eyes travel with ease over the precisely constructed surfaces and planes, over the huge expanses of brightnesses and darknesses, sensing volume and depth. Interval follows event; measure, rhythm and cadence all play their part faultlessly in Seurat's impeccable structure. But the more we can penetrate, the more we wonder what it is that eludes us. Our reason can, for the main part, identify all the objects in the picture. There may be a few curiosities, like the shape of the edge of a red umbrella against sunlit grass behind the tall lady standing on the right, or our actual disbelief in the size of the little man with the top hat sitting with his cane in the shade towards the left of the painting, but these simple oddities are trifling in comparison with the compelling quality of mystery which pervades the painting.

The achievement defies the intention. This is the stupefying greatness of *La Grande Jatte*. Seurat concentrates all his efforts on organising, in the full light of consciousness, a coherent perceptual structure, and as a consequence he extracts and focuses upon precisely that which normally escapes attention. The elusive is made present. The fugitive caught and stilled. But in doing so he arouses the somnambulist element in perception. Instead of enlisting the services of our sight as they are habitually balanced, he draws out the unknown in an extreme, unexpected manner. Such an intent scrutiny of phenomena, and the painting out of perception, step by step, as though it had been mapped, build up together a perfect hallucination. The unfathomable appears in the guise of total visibility. His astonishing achievement is to have exposed the enigma of reality as within reach of perception.

But, if so, why is this same paradox not felt in the work of Monet? It could be because Monet goes *with* perception, looking along its sightlines as it were, whereas Seurat looks *into* perception and shows it to be the activity which produces what it sees. He fabricates the answer to the question 'What is it that we are looking at?' by holding up a sort of mirror; and what we see is ourselves looking.

The magic of such a startling encounter is obviously difficult to maintain. For *Les Poseuses* (1888) there are significantly less studies, and already they show the method becoming self-sufficient. The colour, no longer a compilation of carefully considered portions, is regarded as one single *mélange* of minute dots to be subjected to shifting emphasis throughout the canvas. In a kind of post-*Grande Jatte* sophistication this broad treatment of optical mixture allows his immense sensuous delicacy to come through in the wonderful little nude studies. But the rigour of Seurat's convictions prevents him from adopting this line of development. Certainty becomes the dominant drive. Even in the marines, beautiful though some of them are, one can see the vital tension between knowledge and sensation, which is the mainspring of his vision, being slowly eroded. What was observed was required to mesh exactly with method. The rich incalculability of perception dropped away.

Nevertheless, in the short span of his life Seurat completed his course, leaving an extraordinary body of work distinguished by a unique probity of vision, which will continue to fascinate people, and especially painters, as long as sight provides a fundamental access to the miraculous fact of existence.

An artist's early work is inevitably made up of a mixture of tendencies and interests, some of which are compatible and some of which are in conflict with each other. As the artist picks his way, rejecting and accepting as he goes, certain patterns of enquiry emerge. His failures are as valuable as his successes in that by misjudging one thing he confirms something else, even if at the time he does not know what that something else is. In that sense, although Mondrian may sometimes fail, he never makes mistakes, everything in his development is of use and contributes to that development.

There are two conflicting traits in his temperament, in the sense given to the word by Baudelaire and Cézanne – 'temperament' as an artist's own particular and ineradicable nature. One is a feeling for rhythm, which quickens to the pulse of life and seems somehow to be connected with his positive sense of the new; and the other, a love of order and balance, which is at the root of his search for unity and fullness. Both these traits can also have an obverse side: the lively quality may lead to an extreme dynamism and fragmentation, while the insistence on order can sometimes turn into a bland and almost schematic statement. These two temperamental qualities ebb and flow throughout the various preoccupations and styles of his development – one now in ascendancy, and then the other, until they slowly find a resolution in the late abstract works.

The early landscapes painted in Holland are predominantly tonal in treatment and have a low-key, moody character. Trees and buildings reflected in water produce self-contained symmetrical images which cut recession short and pull the field of vision up close. Evening light is frequently chosen and there is a marked interest in visual phenomena bordering on the apparitional. The tree in *Isolated Tree on the Gein in Late Evening* (1907–08), far from calling on natural similitude, looms over the dark shape of the river bank and its reflection like some ominous sign; and in *Five Tree Silhouettes Along the Gein with Moon* (1907–08) the five trees are treated as a spectral frieze spread flat against the light of the moon.

This up-closeness is carried further in a choice of subjects in which the sense of an unencompassable presence and an overpowering scale dominate. In his *Trialogue* (1910–12) Mondrian, under the guise of the

'abstract realist painter', says about *Molen (Mill): The Red Mill* (1911): 'Indeed I find this windmill very beautiful, particularly now that we are too close to view it in normal perspective and therefore cannot see it or draw it normally. From here, it is very difficult merely to reproduce what one sees.' The final painting conveys the sensation of something grand towering up above the spectator's viewpoint.

The recurrent subject of sea, sky and dunes provides a theme of vast, uncentred openness. The lack of differentiation in such motifs gives a singular prominence to the horizon line and its reverberations. By stacking and interlocking horizontal divisions of different weights and distances Mondrian creates a fluctuating, impalpable envelope of space.

From very early on there seems to have been a special attraction to trees and to the pictorial problem of how branches, sky and foliage or blossom interact and interpenetrate. Being essentially a subject that cannot be treated 'realistically', the tree offers a marvellous pretext for the fabrication of a rhythmic structure of shallow recessions and advances that have little or nothing to do with the void and solid of the original motif. The potential of this subject was to be most fully realised in Mondrian's Cubist work.

But before that Mondrian discovered colour. It first entered his world through Van Gogh and Divisionism. Both the vibrancy of autonomous brushwork and the abstract intensity of colour contrast must have appealed to his feeling for rhythm and dynamism. In *Avond (Evening): The Red Tree* (1908–10) the sensation of evening light has shed its moody aura and Mondrian fairly crackles the painting into life with equivalents of red and blue and short energetic brush marks. From there it is only a small shift to the liberation of colour from any descriptive or representational function. This Fauvist approach can be seen in *Mill in Sunlight: the Winkel Mill* (1908) of the same period. The dazzling heat and light of a midsummer day is recast in stabbing strokes and blotches of red and yellow shot through with pale blue and violet.

But Mondrian's development is not simply one of a young painter finding out what to paint and how to paint it. Like Van Gogh, he comes from a Dutch background deeply involved with religious matters, and in a similar way his fulfilment as an artist is inseparably connected with transforming these roots. The parallel is striking because it shows that even a cultural basis as alien and unsympathetic to artistic aspiration as fervent Protestantism is not necessarily an obstacle. It is a question of whether an artist is strong enough to turn this predicament to advantage.

Van Gogh was able to transform his religious zeal and empathy with the people working in the coal mines into preaching a virtual gospel of the power of the sun. Whereas Mondrian, who initially engaged in Theosophy and all sorts of attempts to reconcile philosophical speculation with Christianity, had to discover in the basic properties of painting the means that allowed him to fulfil his spiritual quest.

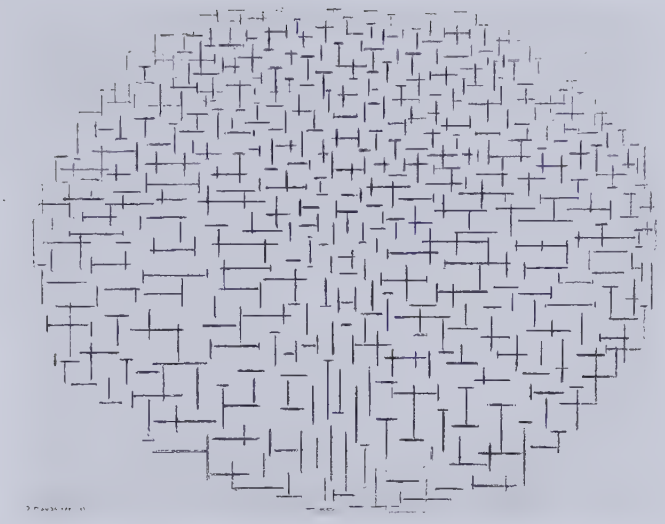
The crucial painting in this context is *Evolution* (1911). It is something of an embarrassment to many people who love Mondrian as an abstract purist; and for those who claim that Mondrian is a symbolist and not really an abstract artist at all, this painting serves as the basic reference point. In fact it deserves neither of these responses. It is a unique and revealing failure on an imaginative scale only comparable to Cézanne's early expressive work such as the *Eternal Feminine* and the *New Olympia*. No fashionable or well-behaved artist would ever dare risk something like this, it takes an unselfconscious and uncompromising imagination to go to such awkward lengths. Over and above the obvious pictorial shortcomings of the work the failure is objective. In *Evolution* Mondrian attempts to make a universal statement about life – a task on a dimension traditionally only accomplished through the agency of Biblical subjects and Antique mythology. The fact that this whole sphere of representation was no longer available had been an essential mainspring in the formation of Modern art in the 19th-century. Mondrian had to discover for himself that literary symbolism and personal invention could not make up for this loss. The creation of a common social language does not lie within the scope of an individual and the lack of such a basis has to be accepted by Modern painting.

It would have been almost impossible for a young artist to deal with this gigantic problem all on his own, particularly when living in a provincial context. Soon after *Evolution* was completed Mondrian left for Paris where, through the daring and brilliance of its pioneers, the Modern movement had already begun to make its response to this crisis. Just as Van Gogh had found liberation in the Divisionist approach to colour that 19th-century Paris offered him, so Mondrian, following a similar pattern of emancipation, found a key to spatial organisation through Cubism in 20th-century Paris. However, as some contemporary critics observed, his interpretation of Cubism was clearly very much his own. His work was recognised for being 'extremely original in conception' (Leo Faust) and for the mark that it bore of temperamental distinction, while his complete indifference to the Cubist 'laws of volume' (André Salmon) – that is to say the remarkable flatness of his paintings – drew the criticism of other reviewers.

In Paris Mondrian worked first from the lattice-like drawings of trees done in Holland and then from small diagrammatic notes he made of the planes of interior walls exposed in the demolition of large houses near his studio. These walls bore the remnants of the wallpaper and paint that had once decorated rooms on each floor and presented patches of colour placed haphazardly on a flat surface. Both motifs were treated close up, filling the visual field, and provided Mondrian with a loose, informal grid within which he could articulate planes of subdued colours: the warm-cold binaries of classic Cubism, his own lightly coloured greys, or muted shades of red, yellow and blue. Ultimately the two aspects of his Cubist paintings that were to prove most important to the development of his later abstract work were the dynamic relationships of these areas within the picture plane and the new role assigned to the spectator in assessing these relationships. That is to say, the way in which we 'read' the paintings is a constituent part of their formation.

Within a few years Mondrian had absorbed influences from three seminal movements of Modern art – Divisionism, Fauvism and Cubism. The impact was clearly very strong. To sort out this experience he needed time, and reduced exposure to the Parisian art scene. He returned to Holland for the summer 1914, and when the War broke out in August was unable to return to Paris until 1919 when it was over. This enforced break enabled him to take stock; to reflect on the various phases and changes that had taken place in his work, and gradually to find his own footing with greater certainty. In 1915 he made a distinction between the human spirit in its role as a builder within the realities of an artistic medium and the 'moody' quality of emotion with its expressive dependence on external reality: 'Emotion is more outward than spirit. Spirit constructs, composes; emotion expresses mood and the like. Spirit constructs most purely, with the simplest line and the most basic colour.'

In Holland Mondrian at first continued with the façade motifs, now based on the church at Domburg, but the dunes and the sea soon exerted their pull. We have a friend's account of strolling with Mondrian on the beach: 'On a walk beside the ocean, late in the evening, under a radiant, starry sky, he took a tiny sketchbook out of his pocket and made a scribbled drawing of a starry night. For days he worked over that suggestive little scribble. Every day he took a tiny step further away from reality and came a tiny step nearer to the spiritual evocation of it' (autumn 1914). This gradual shift from an emotional response to a spiritual realisation gave rise to the beautiful series of preparatory drawings leading up to



Piet Mondrian:
Compositie 10 in Zwart Wi
1915
(*Composition 10 in Black a*
White, 1915)
©2009 Mondrian/Holtzma
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Warrenton, VA USA

Compositie 10 in Zwart Wit (1915). In the final painting an immensity of sensation opens up; one feels oneself surrounded by sparkling stillness and the rhythmic movement of some boundless continuum. Here Mondrian's lines take on a wider range of functions, they act as breaks, points and accents. At one stage in the development of *Compositie 10 in Zwart Wit* Mondrian thought of adding colour, but in the end he decided against it. However, in the very next painting, *Composition* 1916, he did precisely that. A pervasive grey with red, yellow and blue patches – sometimes light, sometimes darker, but always adjusted – support and contradict the beats, crosses and intervals of the lines.

Slowly the work loosens its moorings in what Mondrian refers to as 'given in Nature' and begins to make its way autonomously. Colour planes are simply arranged on a white ground, grey lines are added to provide a context for the spatial movement of these planes without destroying their dynamism. The introduction of regular grids was strongly objected to by friends such as Van Doesburg for being repetitious and denying composition; but Mondrian defended them on the grounds that he reworks the regular division considerably, and in the case of the two *Chequerboard* paintings he maintained that he achieves contrast through the weight and disposition of his colour planes. However, he also had reservations about this direction, as he later admitted, for being too 'vague': 'The verticals and horizontals cancelled each other; the result was confused, the structure was lost.'[1]

During this period in Holland Mondrian wrote and published *The New Plastic in Painting* (1917) in which he sets forth his criteria. Part speculative thinking, part soliloquy, and part reverie, this book has done almost as much to confuse as to enlighten his followers. However, although it does not provide a complete framework with all its reference points in place, the expressions and definitions Mondrian uses offer important clues in themselves. One gets nearer to the nature of his endeavour by starting from these basic terms than by trying to grasp an overall system or find a comprehensive theory.

On his return to Paris in June 1919 the effects of this reflective and withdrawn period in Holland soon became apparent. Of *Composition A* (1920), on which he worked for the best part of a year, he said: 'I have now made a painting that pleases me more than all my previous work . . . It has been a long quest.' Although in the light of the classic period in the 1920s this work can be seen as transitional, it is more revealing in many ways than those highly accomplished paintings. The peculiar flatness of his pictorial space that had already been observed in his Cubist work is now developed and clarified. The colour planes take up different positions in space – some advance, some recede; and this is not a simple matter of a particular hue always taking up the same spatial position wherever present. It is a question of context. Take the three yellows for example: the yellow in the top right corner is on a different plane to the yellow in the centre, and both of these are again on different planes from the yellow in the lower right. Although one customarily thinks of yellow as a light colour, these three yellows have different visual weights – that is to say, the block in the top right appears slightly heavier than the central yellow, which in turn weighs visually more than the yellow rectangle in the lower right. These three yellows, therefore, do two principal things simultaneously: they take up different spatial planes and they exert pressures through their different weights. The same applies to the reds, the blues and blacks, and of course to the greys and whites (although there it is perhaps less easy to see). This brings about a field of forces in which the various weights and planes are building up dynamic relationships and tensions.

Such dynamism could easily lead to a sort of visual anarchy. But Mondrian practises a form of ordering that he later referred to as 'the equivalence of the dissimilar'. The disparate visual qualities – each in itself completely 'real', or as he would say 'determinate' – are balanced in such a way that they build a whole and yet retain their individuality.[2] 'I have just got that large work right', he writes to Van Doesburg about *Composition A*.

'I made that blue square on the right and changed that yellow one on the left to white; I painted over the grey, the black and the white. I wish you could have seen it like this.' And as the final result shows, he altered the painting again. In this way an 'equilibrated relationship' is achieved which, in his words, 'most purely expresses the universal, the harmony, the unity that are proper to the spirit.' So anxious was he to preserve the individual characteristics within this unity that he worried for quite a while about the intensity of the large red in the lower left of the painting: 'I am not absolutely sure that it ought to be so totally homogeneous. In theory it should be, but in practice ... ?' Eventually he decided to leave it alone.

Gradually it becomes clear that this abstract way of ordering forms the content of Mondrian's work. His paintings are not symbolic or transcend-ental, but perceptually accessible and plastic in the sense that he builds a structure of relationships that places us, as spectators, in an analogous 'equilibrium'. We are invited to participate in a visual interplay between weights, forces and tensions held together by a balance that is neither symmetrical nor systematic. In a remarkable essay of 1923, 'No Axiom but the Plastic Principle', Mondrian described this balancing between the individual elements and their dynamic unity as the plastic principle and purpose of his art in a period when, as he says: 'Everything is seen 'relatively' ... Moreover the relativity, the mutability of things creates in us a desire for the absolute, the immutable.' Far from resolving this conflict by offering a new 'absolute', he turns the in-built contradiction into a dynamic relationship that becomes something of an absolute in itself and which has to be rediscovered and re-established in each particular instance; that is to say: painting by painting. *Composition with Red, Blue, Black, Yellow and Grey* (1921) shows with what awesomely simple means Mondrian can achieve his objective. There is no explicit centre to the painting, and yet the peripheral events do not drift apart. With their differing characteristics they form a correlation of forces that hold the square in tension, being both open and defined at the same time.

As the body of Mondrian's mature work grew throughout the 1920s this plastic principle gave rise to a tremendous richness and variety. Quite apart from changes in the proportion of the rectangular canvases and the dramatic shift in orientation of the lozenge paintings, Mondrian pursues, alongside these changes, a number of themes in the almost serial manner he had sometimes employed in the past. He may explore the weights and tensions that can hold an empty centre as in the painting just described;

or the reverse, as in *Composition with Red, Black, Blue and Yellow* (1921), where the linear divisions cut across the central area and the visual forces are turned inside out, as it were. As a result the colour weights and planes, being well within the pictorial field, provoke relationships that concentrate or diffuse attention. Other areas of investigation include an even greater reduction of his already simplified means, such as just black bands of varying width with just white planes of varying proportion; or compositions with only one or two colour planes occupying the spatial compartments provided by the linear divisions.

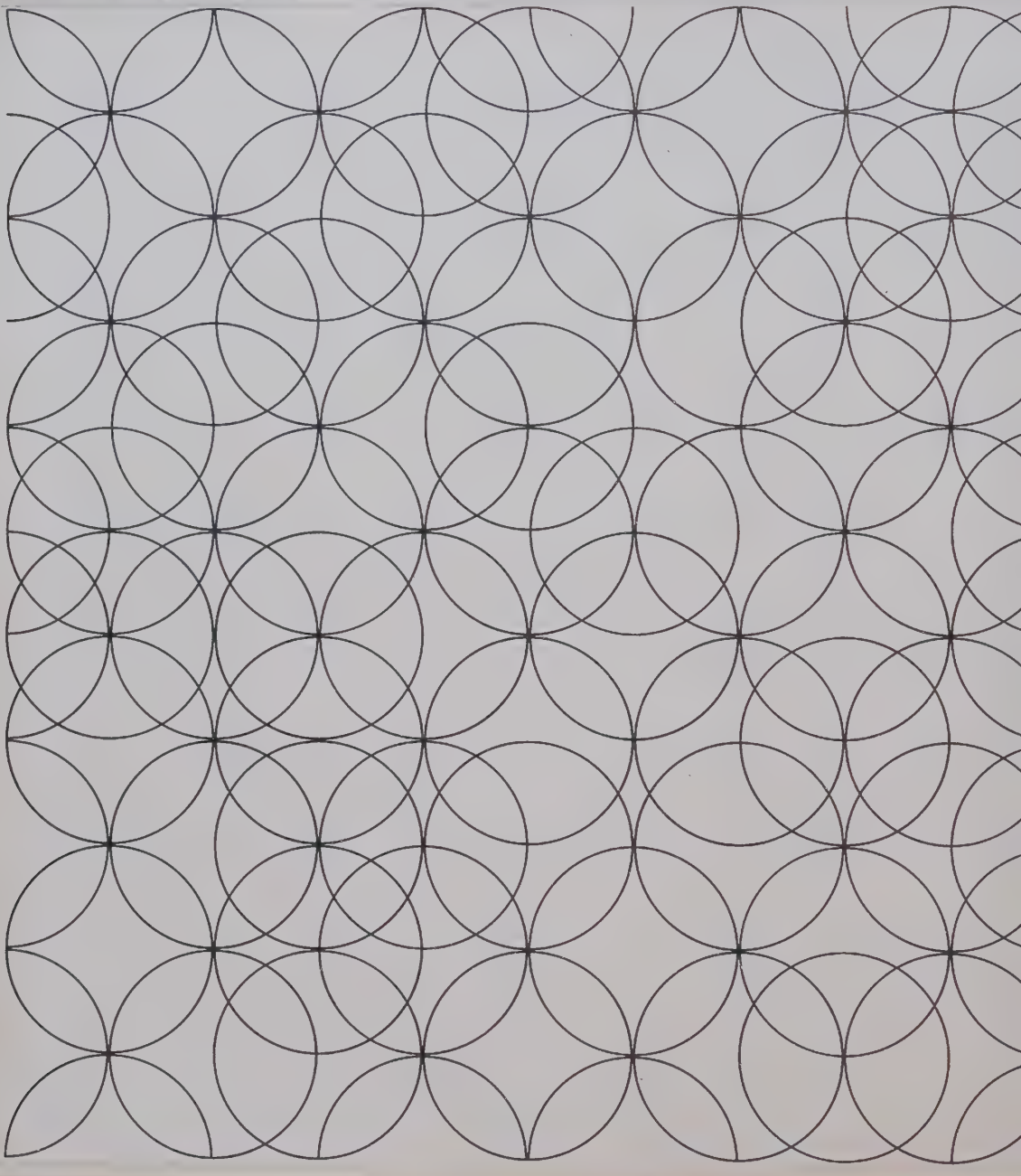
For a long time this period was regarded as the zenith of Mondrian's achievement. Certainly the monumental stability and grandeur reflects one side of his temperament. However, the other, the lively feeling for rhythm, was soon to assert itself and to increase dramatically the dynamic element in his work. In 1932 he made his first 'double line' paintings, among them *Composition with Double Line and Yellow.* The rapid repetition of the horizontal line adds a new and different quality of plane, a kind of outlined band, to the relationships in the painting – and one so subversive that it puts the stability and coherence of the painting at risk. But when, as in *Composition C (No. III) with Red, Yellow and Blue* (1935), he widens the interval between the two lines, the ambiguous duality of this new relationship is reduced and the plane thus created sits more easily with others in the painting. However, the friction of the 'double line' is there to stay, as Mondrian is obviously fascinated by its rhythmic potential and repetitive insistence. In the following year, 1936, he painted *Composition in White, Blue and Yellow.* There, a centralised black vertical cuts the pictorial field in half and is repeated to the left to form a 'double line', while a pair of horizontal 'double lines' (with slightly wider but equal intervals) crosses these verticals, setting up virtual flashing points at the intersections. But now Mondrian tackles directly those aspects of repetition which perhaps seemed most problematic to him: the accumulated intensity of the overall dynamism, which threatens to diminish the 'particular' at the expense of the 'universal'. By adding a large yellow plane and a small blue one he introduces a strong asymmetrical bias that checks the evenness of the rhythm.

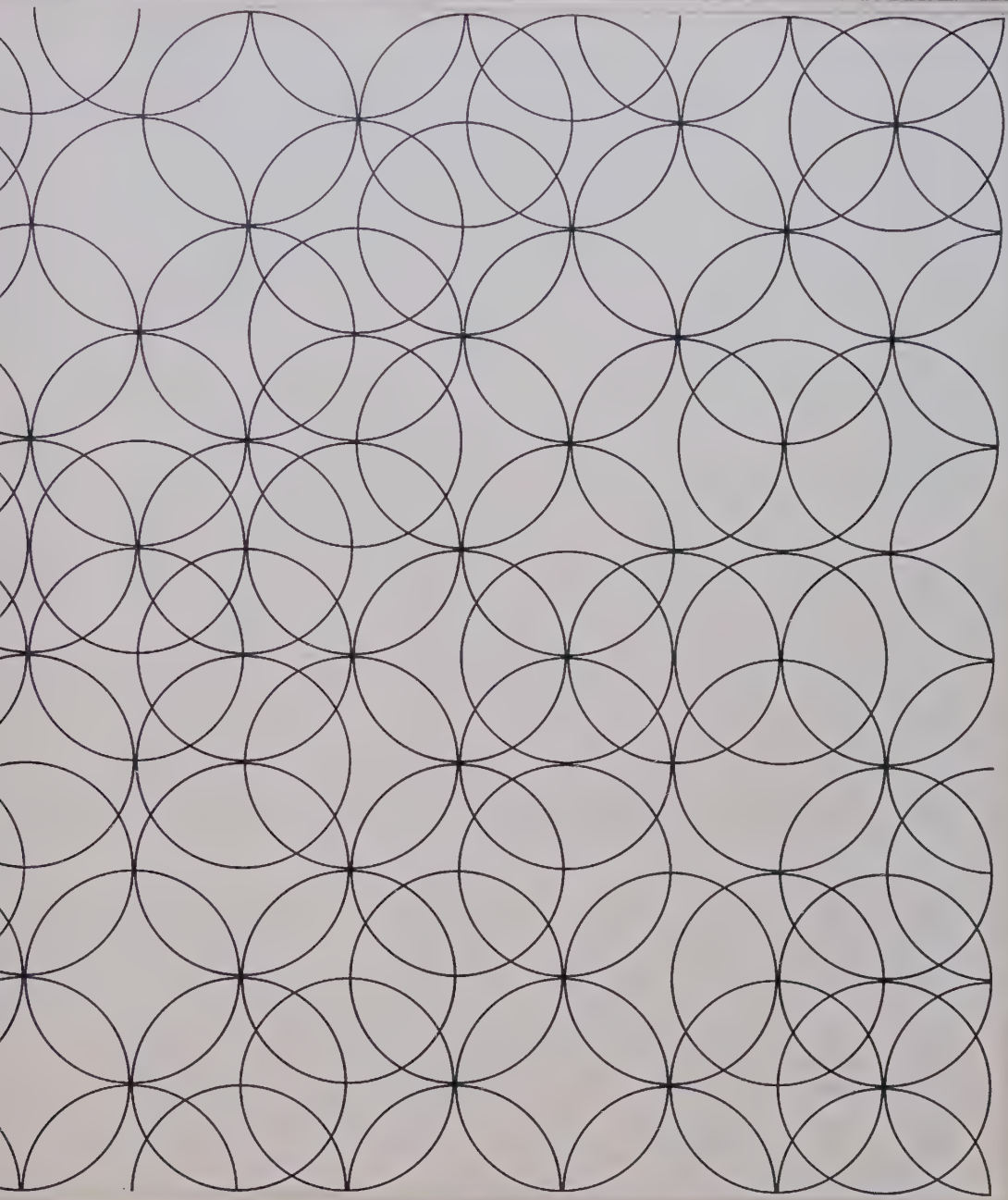
In 1937 – the year before he left France for England and New York – he made *Composition de Lignes et Couleur, III,* a most beautiful painting that reconciles the increasing role he was giving to rhythm with a new sense of scale and tectonic strength. Generated by various black verticals and their intervals the movement sweeps across the painting and is

brought to a complex, rhythmic close on the right. A subtle counter-movement of horizontal intervals modifies and harmonises the drive and tempo of the painting. As a finishing stroke an implied diagonal descending from the top left is pulled up for attention by the deep blue rectangle it carries, the only colour plane in the painting.

During the last few years of his life, spent in New York, Mondrian carried on with his explorations, which more and more amounted to a reversal of the priorities that had governed his work in the 1920s. In his writings and in conversation he insisted repeatedly on 'dynamic rhythm' and 'creative destruction' by which he meant the transformation of the actual elements – the basic colours and lines – into the 'purely plastic' agents of an expressive dynamism. His last completed painting, *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (1942–43), seems to sum up his entire endeavour in one amazing statement. Earlier tendencies such as those revealed in *Composition 10,* the lozenge and the *Chequerboard* paintings and others are integrated with interests that previously seemed to contradict and exclude them. The striving for constancy and immutability coexists with the love of rhythm and movement. It can be taken as a proof of Mondrian's rigorous and seemingly old-fashioned aspiration to achieve the 'equilibrium of the universal and the particular' that his paintings have not been rendered obsolete by history. However frail and modest their physical appearance may be, they shine among the best work of this century with a unique vitality and mysterious timelessness.

Overleaf:
Composition with Circles
(installation view, Kunsthalle Bern)
1998





Mondrian: the 'universal' and the 'particular' [1995]

What I should like to try to convey about Mondrian's work is extremely simple – simple, that is, for a painter and if it could be expressed visually. But, as he himself said, we have to use words because they can help – but they will always be approximate.

To take, first of all, the term Mondrian used for his entire endeavour, *Nieuwe Beelding*, which he translated from the Dutch as 'New Plastic'. Plastic is a word which causes great confusion and is very seldom used now in either discussion or writing about art. In English, it is generally taken to mean some malleable medium formed and shaped in a sculptural manner. But this is not so with the Dutch word *beelding*. Mondrian makes it quite clear in *The New Plastic in Painting* of 1917 that he refers to a form of making which lays a strong emphasis on construction: to put something *with* and *against* something. This aspect of his thinking seems to take him close to architecture but he makes an important distinction. Architectural form in principle absorbs its own constructive relationships within itself – in other words the resolution of its weights, tensions and pressures are hidden within its final appearance. It was part of Mondrian's insight that if the means were sufficiently purified, painting could not only reveal how it was built – how it, too, dealt with tensions, pressures and weights – but also that these 'plastic' relationships could become expressive in themselves. The whole argument becomes clearer if you recall the abstract work of Mondrian's contemporaries and compare it with his own.

Malevich comes from an iconic tradition: he is a maker of images. If you think of his *Black Square* (1915) on a white ground (which was first exhibited hung across the corner of a gallery, the position traditionally reserved for icons), he puts the image, the black square, into an empty space, into Nowhere. The problem with this approach only shows up when in other paintings he adds more forms such as rectangles or circles. Then this empty space becomes 'naturalistic' in the sense that the forms appear stacked one behind the other, to hold conversations, as it were, to behave as though they were a crowd of people. This is not a criticism of Malevich, for what he achieved is amazing. He is the ultimate image-maker: a square is a square is a square.

Kandinsky, on the other hand, around 1911, does away with the objective identity of his forms in his early abstract *Compositions*. He dissolves their particularity and floats them in a flowing space. As long as he keeps to this continuity of form and space, all seems to be going well. But as soon as he tries to sort this out, to develop it, things tend to go wrong. Many of his paintings of the 1920s show that he can be definite about his forms – but *not* about the space they create. In his later paintings, the forms often become arid and over-decorated, congealing into curious configurations, while the space hardens into a void. He is mainly concerned with a concept of the innate expressive qualities of his elements – his forms, lines and colours – and not so much with how they are behaving on the canvas. There, they inevitably start to relate and cross-relate, throwing up unexpected tensions.

Mondrian is not at all interested in that type of expressive quality, in the *Gestalt* characteristics of his means, but very much in what is going on visually in his painting. This is a central aspect of his 'realism'. Whenever anyone puts some colours, some lines, some forms onto a flat surface, they look as though they were taking up different positions in space. All painters know this: it is always confusing and chaotic at first and has to be sorted out. There are weights, pressures, tensions, all kinds of conflicting forces, and it is Mondrian's great achievement that he tackled these head on. With his elements he built coherent visual realities, using pictorial forces and contrasts as an integral part of his order.

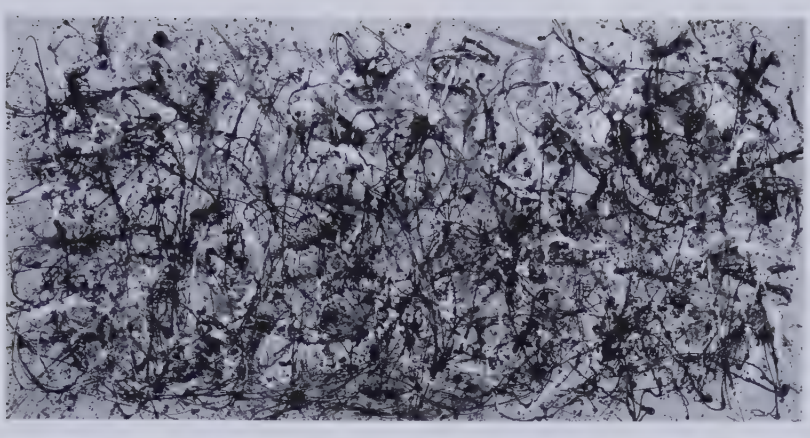
In this respect, if one can put Abstraction as such on hold, Mondrian works in principle as any painter would who follows in Giotto's footsteps. Giotto's great contribution (so much venerated by Matisse) was to build a painting as a place in its own right through the distinction of spaces, the massing of forms, the creation of areas of repose and friction. His depiction of humanist realities grew quite naturally out of his organising of pictorial realities as *the* primary task. There are no rules for this sort of building: the forms of organisation can be as diverse as are those of Masaccio, Titian, Poussin, Rembrandt or Cézanne – as long as each pictorial world draws its power and conviction from having been *built*.

But if Mondrian is so fundamentally part of this tradition, why is his position so special? Yve-Alain Bois titles his catalogue essay on Mondrian 'The Iconoclast'.[1] However, the truth of the matter, it seems to me, is rather the opposite. Mondrian did not ever commit or carry out any sort of iconoclasm but responded to one that had already taken place, and that on a vast cultural scale. There was no longer a common objective

vocabulary in either realistic or symbolic terms. The lack of such a universal foundation is an established fact underpinning the whole of the Modern movement. Look how hard Mondrian (and for that matter Kandinsky and Malevich too, in their different ways) tried to discover in philosophy and Theosophy a common language to substitute for this loss – the fact that he could not, speaks for itself. He realised that one cannot personally invent a mythology or find a meaningful symbolism on one's own. Those who find this strange must be light years behind Mondrian in any awareness of the modern predicament. It is fundamental to Mondrian's 'realism' to accept this situation as a truth and to build a pictorial order which reflects it. That is to say, there is no absolute, there is no ultimate solution, no pre-established harmony or unity. Mondrian's continual references in his writings to the 'universal' and the 'particular' centre on their *relationship*, and he builds a pictorial order to manifest this relatedness.

It all becomes clearer if one takes his basic terms 'dynamic equilibrium' and 'equivalence of the dissimilar' as straightforward pictorial criteria, instead of trying to find a clue to his speculative thought in Theosophy or German Idealism. On a very high abstract level a sort of double action takes place in his work. The particular elements – form, line, colour – are not resolved into an absolute statement, into an absorbing totality or into a system of any kind; nor are these elements taken as absolutes in themselves, as self-sufficient, 'concrete' entities. Instead they are related in such a way that they no longer function as separate items or retain any identity they had outside the painting. That is to say, they are no longer just red, yellow and blue or geometric forms and lines. They have been subjected to pressures and opposing tensions, brought about by themselves and among themselves. In sorting out and articulating this dynamism, Mondrian transforms their actuality into weights, spaces, planes and places within the order of each specific painting. This transformation into expressive plastic factors is the result of what he refers to as 'destruction', regarding it as an essential part of his work. His understanding is probably best explained by his violent rejection of Theo van Doesburg's notion of 'concrete art'. To Mondrian the pictorial elements, far from being concrete in themselves, become *plastic* only by surrendering their separateness to an abstract order of relationships – and this without losing their individuality.

The range and relevance of Mondrian's achievement is clearly shown by a structural problem which proves how keenly aware he was of what is at stake in Abstract painting. There is a profound divergence in



Jackson Pollock: *Autumn Rhythm (Number 30, 1950)* 1950

his work, linking the formative abstract work with the very late paintings: on the one hand the tendency towards a regular rhythmic pulse which he regards as structurally 'confused' and 'too vague', and, on the other, firm, almost schematically resolved constellations which conflict with his ideal of the 'dynamic rhythm of life'. This polarity obviously reflects the tension of the relationship between the 'universal' and the 'particular', as he put it. But it is also echoed in other advanced forms of pictorial organisation in Modern art. However much, for example, we love Cézanne's late watercolours, it cannot be ignored that he himself did not rate them very highly, probably for the very same reason that they appeal to present-day taste: their continuous rhythm and even distribution of plastic weight. In his paintings Cézanne strove to 'realise' more particular places and contrasting relationships. The problem recurs in Cubism around 1911–12, when the newly developed structure suddenly seems to become too frenetic and both Picasso and Braque introduce counter-weights: bigger planes, colours, material distinctions. Similarly, in his beautiful painting *Autumn Rhythm* (1950), Jackson Pollock begins to emphasise the 'universal', as Mondrian understood it, at the expense of the 'particular'. He must have felt this quite strongly because, soon after, he broke up the rhythmic spell in *Blue Poles* (1952) with great powerful blades of colour.

The unique achievement of Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie Woogie* seems to be that, through the most amazing compositional feat, he managed to relate so many different and apparently mutually exclusive pictorial realities: rhythm and interval, extreme dynamism and stability, incident and friction, repetition and contrast, and so on – that is to say, connecting the 'universal' and the 'particular' inseparably.

Painting Now [1996]

If I had been giving a talk entitled 'Painting Now' thirty years ago, I would have found myself describing a very different situation from the one in which painting finds itself today. At that time it was very much in evidence and I would have simply tried to cover its various styles and manifestations. But now the situation has completely changed and one could be forgiven for asking: Whatever happened to painting? Where is painting? Is there any painting? And if there isn't, does it matter?

The conspicuous lack of painting is certainly not because the art world has shrunk in any way. On the contrary it has grown, developed and been converted into a machine for the production of art and its promotion. This machine is a very great deal more powerful and efficient than its forerunner in the 1960s ever was. Many, but fortunately not all, of the people involved in running the art machine – administrators, dealers, critics and artists – are in the 'art game' and are no longer interested in painting. It doesn't seem to fit into the present scheme of things. So – is it painting itself, that immensely cultivated activity, which is out of step? Or is it the notion of work – from which it is inseparable – that is at fault?

To go back a little, it was very much part of the attitude of painters in the Modern tradition that while one could and should talk and think about painting, drawing and sculpture one could not talk expressly about art itself. This attitude was widely held from the time of the great French 19th-century artists right down to the early 1950s when I was a student. To attempt to talk about art was regarded as trying to discuss the undiscussable. Amateurs might entertain themselves with this subject, and theoreticians too, but it was seen as an academic preoccupation, quite irrelevant to the much more serious concerns of practising artists. And these concerns were essentially to do with how to work – the establishing, building up and refining of an artist's *métier.*

Just how deeply felt these attitudes to the craftsman in the artist were can be seen, for instance, in Jack D. Flam's collection of Matisse's writings and statements, which he published under the title of *Matisse on Art.* But in this collection Matisse talks only about emotion, expression and painting. There is no statement or discussion of art.

There are good reasons for this reluctance to approach art in a direct manner. When Samuel Beckett was a young man in the early Thirties and trying to find a basis from which he could develop he wrote an essay called *Beckett: Proust* (1931) in which he examined Proust's views on creative work, and he quotes Proust's artistic credo as declared in *Time Regained*: 'The task and duty of a writer (not an artist, a writer) are those of a translator.'[1] This could also be said of a composer, a painter or anyone practising an artistic *métier*. An artist is someone with a text which he or she wants to decipher.

Beckett interprets Proust as being convinced that such a text cannot be created or invented but only discovered within the artist by himself and that it is, as it were, almost a law of his own nature. It is his most precious possession and, as Proust explains, the source of his innermost happiness. However, as can be seen from the practice of the great artists, although the text may be strong and durable and able to support a lifetime's work it cannot be taken for granted and there is no guarantee of permanent possession. It may be mislaid or even lost, and retrieval is very difficult. It may lie dormant and be discovered late in life after long struggle, as with Mondrian or Proust himself.

Why it should be that some people have this sort of text while others do not, and what 'meaning' it has, is not something which lends itself to argument. Nor is it up to the artist to decide how important it is, or what value it has for other people. To ascertain this is perhaps even beyond the capacities of his own time.

But although art, that is to say, this text of an artist, cannot be learned or taught – painting *can*. The compelling and urgent task of a poet, a painter etc. is to translate their text and it is *this* task which can be thought about, examined and discussed. The person who succeeds as an artist is not someone with an important subject, a significant or visionary message, but someone who has trained themselves to translate, who has acquired a habit of working, who knows their métier. Whatever may – or may not – have happened at art school, the museums and art galleries can be relied upon as the great durable book of painting. Of course, one has to be willing to look, to find out. Without being willing nothing can begin to happen.

It is important to look at the best – and it is not immodest or lacking in respect to do so. The great paintings are the clearest; they have been made by those who made the greatest effort to overcome confusion and to arrive at clarity.[2] These artists have had to sort things out on a broad and practical level, and it is understanding this sorting out – and what it is

that has been sorted out – that is so valuable to other painters. Despite differences in artistic temperament, style and period, it is from those great paintings that one can learn about planes, colours, tones, the building of places and the creation of space, about the massing of line and form, about pictorial weights and forces etc. – in short, the whole dictionary of plastic expression, the craft, the métier of the painter.

If a would-be artist has no form of exercising, no means of practising, no sphere for 'doing' – no way of acquiring a language with which to make a translation of the kind of text which Beckett describes – then, aside from the tragic and shameful implications of such a situation, this person inevitably starts to look around for some indication of what they *should* be doing as an artist. And it is at this point that a fundamental confusion arises. What should come from within now comes from outside. The would-be artist goes searching for art instead of learning how to be a translator.

Unfortunately this confusion is at present much in evidence throughout the art world in the West. Symptoms of it are easily observed. Take for example, the person who thinks that they can go ahead and be an artist straight off, and that there's no need to bother with any form of translation. Why not express yourself directly? But there are no forms of expression which are immediately available except those which have already become stock in trade. Pictorial conventions have a way of forming almost overnight, and the problems arise if one is unaware that one is using them. One begins to imitate the 'look' of art – whether applied with a mop, a brush, a squeegee or a tin with holes in the bottom – and unwittingly uses these techniques as formulae, that is to say without understanding their original purpose and context.

But methods and techniques used like this become stultifying. Expressive forms and attitudes that once served a specific need are treated as a sort of camouflage to hide fundamental inadequacies. As Stravinsky said in his lectures on the *Poetics of Music* which he gave at Harvard in the winter of 1939–40: 'that which is without tradition is plagiarism'.[3]

A variant of this problem – unfortunately with a very large following – is a special sort of conformism. But while the previous attitude is rooted in ignorance and innocence the second is streetwise. It relies upon what has already been accepted as 'art' and therefore is immediately identifiable as such. Beckett has described this as 'living at the expense of the conquered countries'.[4] Essentially parasitical it cares little or nothing for the health of art and will not invest any effort or take any risks in

preserving its traditions. It is a mark of this sort of conformism that it sports a few touches of past radicalism. However, its main objective is deathly – it is to be acceptable, to pass muster, to find a niche, a position in the scene. The French expression for this sort of work which is not really work at all is '*juste milieu*'.

Here belong the toy abstracts, the back-projected imagery, the painting that 'looks good', and all those acres of dragged, mauled, scraped and mutilated paint – all that relies on imitation and accepted good taste. Radicalism itself is transformed into a fashionable mode of conformism. Touch and gesture become creatures of habit, riddled with delusion and self-consciousness. The ultimate monochrome painting, requiring thirty coats of the same colour, turns out to be a matter of quasi-religious obeisance rather than of aesthetic judgement.

But deplorable though the disappearance of painting certainly is, it is only a phase in its renewal. It would be a mistake to think that when painting is not widely appreciated it necessarily means that it is in a bad way. Painting usually gets into more trouble when it seems easy to do; when its points of reference are all in place and when everyone 'knows' what they are up to. In such situations the results may not be bad but they are not good either. Real confusion does have one advantage: it makes one determined to try and get things right and – more to the point – it can stimulate young artists to sort out the mess preceding generations have landed them in.

A lot of good paintings have been made in the belief that painting was in danger and had to be rescued, rediscovered, or re-invented. Painting has to be *made*; it doesn't just happen on its own. It's not like a natural thing – a plant that will grow and develop. It has to be created each time and if things fundamental to this making are missing it can't work effectively.

Piero della Francesca, Delacroix and Matisse all seem to have felt this, each in their different ways. Piero clearly believed that the achievements of the Early Renaissance had to be rescued. He believed that the principles of void and solid which Giotto and Masaccio had discovered were being ignored or neglected. In his own work he not only succeeded in taking the development and refinement of perspective and geometry to new high levels of achievement, but even more amazingly, he integrated these principles with the plastic space of the Ancients. So anxious was Piero that this should not be forgotten that he wrote a number of books on painting and perspective and seems to have become every bit as concerned as Cézanne did later when other people failed to value these things.

Nor was this all; he set himself to work on a series of problems dealing with form, structure, the rhythm of planes, light and dark, and colour harmonies of breathtaking delicacy, as can be seen in his paintings and frescoes. There can be little doubt that the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel would not look quite as it does if Michelangelo had not been able to draw upon the pictorial wealth which Piero had rescued and preserved.

For Delacroix it was the excitement of rediscovery. He was convinced that painting had gone astray and lost sight of its basic principles, so he went hunting in the Louvre – scrutinising, analysing and searching the paintings he saw there. In Rubens – and later in Veronese – he found what he was looking for: clean fresh colour used for the building of a painting. He was intoxicated by these discoveries and talked delightedly about them. One of his friends, Charles Blanc, propagated his ideas and later published an account of his insights.[5]

Although classified as a Romantic, Delacroix would have no truck with Romantic notions of artistic freedom and revolutionising the arts. Nevertheless he was appalled by the dismal grey veil of chiaroscuro which engulfed French official painting and was determined to lift it. The astonishing thing is that this is exactly what he did – and virtually on his own. Alongside his visits to the Louvre he pursued his enquiries outside in nature. His approach was empirical, a compound of perception, analysis and speculation. Eventually he was able to formulate his observations into the four cardinal principles of colour painting: *l'enchaînement* or the mutual dependence of all colours; the importance of the mid-tone; the complimentary structure of colour; and the perceptual induction of colour.

On these insights Monet, Renoir, Cézanne and the others were to build their plein-air paintings. Unfortunately many of Delacroix' most influential paintings have suffered with time, but for a number of crucial years they were, by all accounts, a radiant source of inspiration. In the frescoes of St Sulpice, on which he worked for the last twelve years of his life, he painted out his credo. Monet declared these to be the birthplace of 'peinture claire'[6] and they became a pilgrimage centre for all the great 19th-century colourists – including Van Gogh. The last entry in Delacroix's journal written shortly before he died reads: 'It is the first merit of a painting to be a feast for the eyes.'[7]

In our own century Matisse – in a daring and at the same time dispassionate way – set about re-inventing painting. Right at the beginning – during his Fauvist period – he told Apollinaire: 'When difficulties stopped

me in my work I said to myself: "I have colours, a canvas, and I must express myself with purity, even though I do it in the briefest manner by putting down, for instance, four or five spots of colour, or by drawing four or five lines which have a plastic expression."' [8]

Although this is a strong starting point it cannot in itself carry one very far – there will be things missing. It was part of Matisse's strength that he had no inhibitions about adding what he needed as he went along. For instance, as he began to find certain shortcomings in Fauvism he developed his drawing, which enabled him to make such beautiful canvases as *Dance* and *Music*. And later, when he was dissatisfied with his pictorial space and wanted to open it up, he introduced tone, realising that space demanded a relationship between tone and colour. As he said to Tériade in the early 1930s: 'One does not put one's house in order by getting rid of what one does not have, because that only creates a void and a void is neither order or purity.' [9]

Matisse's legacy is not one of style nor of the particularity of his sensations but lies in his way of setting about painting. His work lays bare the situation of the modern painter. Re-inventing painting is not just Matisse's problem. It is the one issue which is at the root of every painter's endeavour today. It's a radical position, and because it is genuine, that is to say a fact, a reality of painting *now*, it can be approached – as Matisse approached it – in terms of the realities of painting itself.

Supposing, then, that one's career as a modern painter lies in learning painting over again and re-inventing it for oneself, how does one embark on this career? What is one going to need for such an adventure? It's not as though one can draw up a list and 'go shopping'. You do not know beforehand what you are going to need, any more than Matisse did. You don't know that you are going to need tone, for instance. You get the feeling that something is missing but precisely what this something is you do not know. *That* is what you have to find out. This finding out cannot be done intellectually; you can only find out by working, by getting involved – and then you will get the right signals. However, even getting involved is not at all easy now. One has to find some sort of basis even to make a start.

It has long been said that painting is finished; that its resources have been exhausted. But it only appears like this from a certain point of view. The amazing events that took place – primarily in painting – around 1910 were seen as a radical break with the past, as a great departure, and for a long time this impulse, the promise of Modern art, provided inspiration, energy and excitement for an enormous number of people –

not only for painters but also for other artists, composers, poets, sculptors etc. and, of course, for people interested in the arts.

But an impetus like this cannot go on forever without becoming stale or repetitive – as for example in the umpteenth Ultimate Painting. And there have been huge and devastating interruptions: the two World Wars with their inevitable train of disasters and upheavals have cut right across cultural and artistic life; distorting our relation to that crucial past and delaying clear perception of it. It is only now becoming possible to see that the view of Modern art as one long string of radical breaks and departures is not only ludicrous but damaging. It's like standing on a station platform and continually shouting 'This is *it* – the next train to a new destination!'

A wholly different attitude to the past is needed if one is to find in it a working basis for painting. Instead of treating Modern art as though it were an everlasting spring, the proverbial Fountain of Youth, it is important to recognise that something already *has* been accomplished and to see what it is that has been achieved. This is in fact what the painters of the three major movements of the early part of the 20th-century, Fauvism, Cubism and Abstract painting, did before. They treated their immediate predecessors, the Post-Impressionists, in a new way. Fully aware that there was no longer any tradition worth the name – that is to say no viable methods or practices which could be simply continued – they had to go and search in the past to find echoes, correspondences, to identify and dig out the relevant issues hidden in the different styles used by those previous painters. And by doing this they established a new relationship to the past, forged links and formed connections which had to be sought and won rather than being simply given and taken.[10]

This building up of insights may be perhaps how genuine traditions begin. It has virtually nothing to do with stylistic differences because it homes in on a few fundamental facts. Unfortunately it seems that one of the most critical of these facts or insights is still not sufficiently recognised. Modern painting is about building a way of looking – it has less to do with *what* exactly you are seeing than with *how* you are made to look at it. In a Matisse or a Picasso the subject matter is usually fairly straightforward – portraits, interiors, still-lifes – in fact the traditional imagery of painting. It is not in itself fantastic or made-up like the subject matter in a Max Ernst, a de Chirico or an Yves Tanguy. And this ordinariness of imagery is not confined to figurative painting alone. Mondrian in his abstract painting also uses familiar imagery – lines, rectangles, squares, and red, yellow, blue, black and white.



High Sky 2 1992

It is revealing that the most sophisticated inventions in Modern painting have been developed from the simplest of subject matter. That is to say from traditional iconography and the familiar shapes of geometry. In a Fauve interior, a Cubist still life or an Abstract composition by Mondrian these commonplace realities have been transformed into pictorial realities – the paintings then emerge as their own worlds, as being imaginative places in their own right. This quality has been brought about by working out different sorts of spaces, by contrasting areas of friction and repose, tones and colours, lines and directions. It is through the organisation of these pictorial properties that ways of looking, which might be described as original ways of looking, are built.

The fabric which facilitates this kind of rigorous and sometimes disturbing pictorial engineering is remarkably delicate and subtle. The distinction of planes through colour and tone is of prime importance to this fabric and the positioning and adjustment of these planes is a matter which requires care and precision. In the development from Cézanne to Mondrian pictorial space certainly has become shallower. That is to say the movement between the furthest plane and the nearest plane is less than in many paintings made prior to Cézanne. But perceptual depth has not disappeared altogether. Literal flatness is a very crude and misleading concept which only really emerged in painting since the Second World War. On the painted surface the planal shifts are still very much there and, if anything, play an even more important role than before. Perhaps just because it has been 'narrowed' or 'condensed' the movement between near and far upon which the opening up of pictorial space depends, has become an area of intense investigation and one upon which a great deal of creative energy has been concentrated.

The quality and nature of the play of these planes has become part of the painter's expressive means. Space for a painter is now inseparably connected with perception in time. Whether its fluctuations are abrupt and rapid or grand and slow, and what rhythms can be employed, becomes important in structuring these planes. Perhaps one can find more of the slower and more majestic paces in Cézanne, Matisse and Mondrian – but each also sometimes uses quicker, more dynamic movements. Picasso seems to favour the sharper staccato-type rhythms but he occasionally makes use of slower movements as well.

If one regards these achievements not just as a historical event in the past but as a basis for the present, one can discover points of departure which are different from the ones taken by the earlier artists, and that

certain parameters which have been historically established can now be reconsidered, or even perhaps be challenged. It is not a question of there being only one route from there to here, as it were, or that the last stop on this route is inevitably the most advanced. Alternative directions may have been overlooked or obscured and these may be worth exploring.

For instance, we are all familiar with the uniform image – the all-over painting with its even distribution of plastic weight. It probably originates in Analytic Cubism and there is no doubt that it provides a solution to the problem of unifying a painting, whether it is figurative or abstract, and it is true that it has a powerful impact. However, just because of this strength it is also restricted and restricting. If pictorial space is to move and develop then this uniformity has to loosen its grip.

Why should there not be a two-sidedness in a painting? If one thinks back to the structure suggested by themes such as the Adoration or the Annunciation one can see how useful the device of having two sides in a painting could be. But these oppositions and divisions are not confined to subject matter alone. Titian's *Bacchus and Ariadne* and his *Death of Actæon* in the National Gallery show to what an extent the principle of one thing against another helps in the building up of different 'places' in a painting: one spatial character against another, one direction against another, tones and colours set against each other; active against passive; receptive against dynamic and so on.

A wonderful example of this kind of 'place building' is Matisse's *Harmony in Yellow* which he did in Nice in 1928. The first thing you see is the splendid yellow. It holds all your attention for a moment. The moment may in fact be only a split second but this split second is sufficient to arrest and delay perception. A similar device is used in the sky of Titian's *Bacchus and Ariadne*. There the shock of the blue holds you at a distance and then only allows entry into the painting in a carefully controlled way.

Matisse's painting, even more then Titian's, has very distinct parts and places. The deep blue ogee wallpaper motifs float, larger than life, like figments from a dream through the right and left wings of the painting. Their scale, although always immense, changes slightly and so shifts the planes in these two wings to take up different positions in space – on the left brought up close in the foreground, and on the right in the furthest distance of the painting. Although their character is one of reverie, these two sides frame and firmly hold the heart of the painting: the central area where different kinds of perceptual experiences are juxtaposed.



Henri Matisse:
Harmony in Yellow
1928

The window, so important in referring to the world outside and marking off the interior as a particular place, is shown curtained and presented in a different style – almost a Fauve sensation. The blues of the airy billowing curtains are cool and light. The parallel lines fall vertically.

In its pictorial characteristics this place is very different from the space built up by the decorative treatment of the wallpaper. A different place again is made in the lower right, where the horizontals are emphasised and a draughtboard is shown tilted nearly flat. A yellow square surrounds the square motif. The handling of the draughtboard with the little cup and saucer seems to have wandered in from a Nabis canvas – so feathery and light is its touch. But the most extraordinary of these contrasting features is the diagonal which rises from the bottom left to the top right. Unlike both the vertical and horizontal passages, each of which, in their different ways, use very shallow planal shifts, this arabesque recedes dramatically as it rises. It climbs up steadily in convex and concave arcs from the folds of the yellow drapery through the curves of the jug and tray to the dark tress of the girl's hair.

One might think that this would be a real spanner in the works, being so totally at variance with all the other spatial organisations in the painting, but this is not the case at all. Tied in with this unexpected recessive space is a parallel surprise – the painting of the polished tray, which acts as the turning

point in the composition. Here – in the reflections, shines and transparencies of the still life – one suddenly finds an evocative treatment of paint that is almost Manet-like. It is part of the way in which Matisse directs us to look that the peachy-coloured flowers – which in literal terms would form a dominant part of this still life – here do not. In the dividing up of his painting into areas of different character and structure, Matisse has attributed the flowers to the light bright Fauve curtain and not to the Manet still life, and treated them accordingly.

These three differences in style and character are in immediate contrast to the horizontal figure of the drowsy girl. Her face is one of Matisse's masks – formal, composed, expressionless – her dress, hair and the bed she's lying on are in the decorative style of the ambient wallpaper motifs which are 'her country, her terrain', her frame of mind, her accoutrements – her symbols if you like.

To accommodate such different places Matisse has built a strong scaffold – verticals in the centre, horizontals in the lower part and the hidden diagonal at their intersection. With these three expressive elements firmly locked into position the pictorial space is divided into its main compartments. Matisse integrates and relates what he has separated: bold flat areas with light and delicate handling; decorative abstraction with evocative realism; pure perception with reverie.

When Matisse painted this masterpiece he had been practising as an artist for over thirty-five years. To rediscover, to learn and to exercise the properties of painting takes time and for a young painter this is naturally a very great drawback. On the other hand it is clear that going for a 'quick result' also has its disadvantages. This, in fact, is turning out to be one of today's biggest hazards – not only in painting but in other art forms as well.

I do not mean to imply by this that long and laborious work is in itself a virtue – far from it. But to employ the New Media in order to obtain rewarding results is more difficult than it first appears. It means going against the grain and resisting the temptation of instant art. There is a special appeal in the idea that something exhibitable and therefore acceptable can be produced quickly and easily. A lot of corners can be cut, but something immediately achieved cannot help being conventional – even if the packaging is novel. The results can be neither fresh nor original. One's first thoughts are usually those which are banal, commonplace or familiar. Force of habit is hard to overcome and technical manipulation alone does not necessarily help to break down this barrier.

Painting on the other hand is an ancient – an archaic – form of art. It takes and needs time and this is its great advantage. An artist needs enough time to reflect, to revise, to explore various directions, to make changes, to lay foundations. You have to build up a working routine – you have to be able to surprise yourself and, above all, to make mistakes. And if you are a painter then you are fortunate because the practice of painting allows for all of this.

The most astonishing thing about painting is its unbelievable simplicity. In principle anyone can take a few colours and a flat surface and have a go. This ease of access is of course very deceptive and double-edged. It makes painting very vulnerable – more so than any other art form – to all kinds of abuse, distortion and mishandling. Nevertheless this lack of a threshold barrier also has a great advantage: it opens painting to a unique range of invention and development.

At the beginning of this century when that astounding burst of creative vitality and daring broke out in France, Italy, Holland, Germany and Russia, it was painting that led the way and showed the resources of its métier to be broader, richer and more flexible than those of music, literature, sculpture, drama or architecture. No other art form was able to so totally revise and re-invent the very structure of its own making – not only once but many times over.

Of course no one *has* to paint – there is no obligation whatsoever to choose this particular form of visual expression, and quite clearly there are a considerable number of options. But if it is painting you decide upon, then you choose a huge rich sphere of activity full of possibilities and also, of course, of problems. However, it is the problems that provide the substance. The deeper a painter can penetrate the nature of pictorial problems, the more fully they are understood and embraced, the further he or she can go – and the more original the solution.

Unfortunately, over the last thirty years earnest efforts have been made to iron out these problems, to take them out of painting. These efforts have been devastatingly successful and they inadvertently have encouraged a new kind of Naive Art. Painting without its problems can no longer be painting. It depends upon them for its existence. From the viewpoint of the modern painter the true tradition lies less in a succession of solutions than in recognising that the problems of picture-making can never be solved as such. And it is just this that constitutes painting's continuing vitality.

In the world at large there are and always have been problems which are bigger and more urgent then those of painting. But perhaps the problems

of painting now are not so far removed from the critical issues of today as their particularity as an art form might lead one initially to think. It seems to me that the current confusion over painting is somehow aligned to the more fundamental crisis of work in general in the West. In both cases a rethinking of what work means to us and why we value it – if indeed we do – is needed.

For well over two hundred years the idea of work in our societies has been modelled on the industrial concept of production. These demands, the demands of producing something easily and economically, have shaped our understanding of work and leisure, our ways of organising time and living together, our views of success and failure. So prevalent and so powerfully entrenched is this concept that in the end it seems that even art has been affected, with the unprecedented notion that this thing called 'art' can be efficiently produced.

But just now when it seems that the power of production has reached a global dimension, the tacit agreement that work and production are one and the same has begun to crumble. Many people feel – and increasingly so – that a lot of things which should be attended to are simply being neglected or ignored, and mainly because they cannot be subsumed under the category of work as production. At some point in time there will surely have to be some sort of reassessment of that activity we know as work and its rehabilitation into the scheme of things.

This is a colossal problem, considering all the social implications involved, and no one, no individual – nor it seems any government – can pretend to have any sort of answer; let alone an artist. The scale alone simply reduces one to silence. Nevertheless, the sheer scale does not in itself invalidate your own endeavour in the studio. Painting is in a sense absolute work – 'work for work's sake' as Van Gogh said.[11]

As a painter you will experience both the excitement and the difficulties of organising your material, selecting the elements you are going to use, preparing and mounting a creative campaign, as it were, and adjusting your objectives as you go along.

These are the kind of pleasures and anxieties that belong to work in any form. But as someone whose job or task it is to decipher and translate a text unknown even to yourself you are asked to exercise an extra faculty. You will have to learn to listen, because it is through a special sort of listening, a sort of 'listening-in', that one learns how to speak. Or as Brancusi said: 'It is not doing the work that is so difficult – it is getting yourself in the frame of mind in which you can do it.'[12]

Nauman's Formalism [1999]

As I walked into the first room of Nauman's retrospective exhibition at the Hayward Gallery in London, I immediately felt an astonishing shock of recognition, and with it the pleasure and excitement that comes from such an experience. My own work is so very different from Nauman's that any form of recognition was a surprise, and yet in many pieces he was using formalist devices which were familiar to me. This was particularly true of those which seemed to me to be the most successful.

Some of the earliest pieces in the show were especially interesting. *Walking in an Exaggerated Manner Around the Perimeter of a Square* from 1967/68 is a silent black and white film. It shows Nauman wearing a white top and black trousers, walking barefoot around the perimeter of a square which is painted or taped on the floor. The exaggerated manner is a gentle contraposto in which the hips swing from side to side. The demarcation line between the black and white clothes emphasises this movement. But it is out of the walking around the square that the formal structure of the piece is built. Nauman both reverses and inverts his walk; that is to say he walks slowly forward, heel to toe, in one direction (anti-clockwise) and backwards, toe to heel, in the other (clockwise), forwards again but in the second direction (clockwise) and backwards in the first direction (anti-clockwise). The walk consists simply and solely of these four actions.

The piece is further compounded by another device which is layered in or woven through the walk. This comes from positioning the camera off-centre and so including the spectator. Therefore only part of the square on the floor is shown, introducing a tension between the walking figure being either inside or outside the frame. This visibility or invisibility as being either partial or complete becomes another variant. Nauman's performance is one of 'drawing', of articulating depth and flatness in the picture plane as a whole.

Slow Angle Walk (Beckett Walk), 1968, is even more sophisticated. It is a black and white video with sound and again has an off-centre perspective. But this time the camera is turned through 90 degrees from the vertical to the horizontal position. This has the effect of abstracting the space and flattening the recession. The junction between wall and floor planes becomes a single vertical in space. The line on the floor which runs

diagonally from the back of the room to the spectator is turned flat. A certain spatial ambiguity remains however and as the performance unfolds this seems to duplicate that of the walk itself.

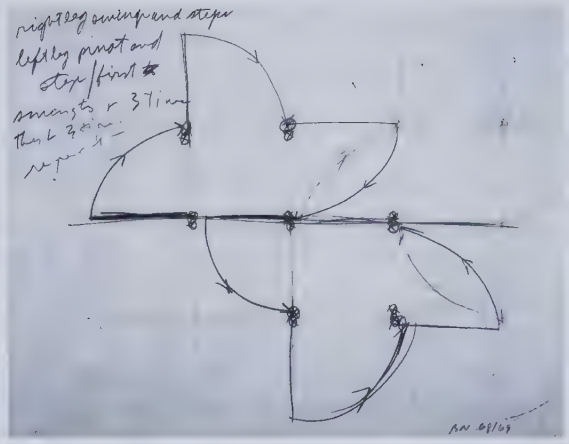
Nauman holds almost the same posture throughout. Hands clasped behind, the back and one leg forming a straight line, the other held out stiffly at an angle. The figure then moves, or 'walks', by slowly rocking this entire posture forwards and backwards, or turning it around. The choreography is almost circular (see diagram) and this has the effect of infinitely delaying any move forward.

There are altogether four 'steps' so to speak in the piece. Two movements come from the lever-like swing of the body up and down from horizontal to vertical and back. Two from the shifting of the weight from right to left leg and back. Each one of these movements combined with each of the three others in turn makes four formal units and completes the cycle. The 'walk' returns to its beginning, it has gone nowhere, despite the fact that four steps have been taken. These could conceivably have gone in a straight line but that, presumably, would not have been consistent with the logic of the piece. The solution is brilliant. The steps must continue forward but by turning the standing leg 90 degrees as the body swings up and down and the weight is changed, an arc is described. It seems as though Nauman, as an artist, squares a circle.

The sensation is of a figure-form spinning slowly in space. Advancing along the diagonal line which nearly follows the angle of the camera focus, it gradually grows larger until parts of the figure are outside the frame. Then all are completely out, only to re-enter and step by step recede back along the diagonal getting smaller and smaller to the farthest point in the room. The shallow, granular quality of the video adds to the abstraction. The sound track registers only an intermittent asynchronised footfall.

This beautiful formal choreography, although essential, is only a basis and it is part of its success that you lose the structure completely. In the end, what you 'see', or rather the experience which is offered is in the true sense ceremonial. Far from simply fulfilling its obvious function every action defines and articulates the time and the space in which it happens. The extraordinary plastic form which Nauman 'draws' in space with his body (along with the tensions of execution) is at one and the same time both figurative and non-realistic. It describes depth and yet is read flat. This double reading heightens the sense of artifice.

Revolving Upside Down from 1968 is similar to *Beckett Walk* in holding one position. Light plays an important part; the figure moves



Bruce Nauman:
Untitled (Study for
'Slow Angle Walk'),
also known as
Beckett Walk Diagram II,
1968–69

diagonally up from a shadowed corner of the room into full light and on, out of the light beam, out of the frame, and then reverses the whole movement back again. The camera is placed upside down and this breaks down familiar reading and forces the spectator to look with the artist along the sight-lines which have been created. The figure wears white which emphasises the sensation of weightlessness. But as the camera is placed upside down and the entire image is inverted (seemingly suspended from the floor-as-ceiling) the feeling of gravitational pull is increased.

The posture is again back straight, hands clasped behind, standing on one leg with the other stretched out, body vertical, body forward, leg in front, leg behind. The figure completes a full circle in each position by shifting the standing leg slowly around 360 degrees. Changing the weight bearing leg starts the reversal of all four steps of the choreography. The difficulty of execution adds to the perceptual tension of the piece.

Many of the later works in the exhibition are clearly more concerned with subject matter, but the power of their presence is firmly rooted in rigorously formal articulation. Dislocation becomes increasingly important as method. It is often a disjunction in time (asynchronism) or a displacement in space (inversion and reversal of images). By combining such devices in the presentation itself (installation), our perception is de-centralised. We share in a complexity of sensations rather than being simply receptors of plain information.

Raw Material – O.K. O.K. O.K. 1990, and its companion piece *Raw Material with Continuous Shift – MMMM* of the following year, 1991, are both colour videos and sound installations. The Raw Material of the title

seems to point to the treatment of subject matter as 'x'. A given (something) to be used by the artist as pure material for his work. Self-portraits have traditionally often been used in this way, even to the extent of sometimes being a last resource in terms of subject matter.

Both installations concentrate visually on the rotation of a head and in both this same head, which is the artist himself, appears three times. Small on two video monitors stacked one above the other, and large as an image projected on the wall. Seeing all three at once forces comparative viewing. The rotating heads appear on one video the right way up and on the other upside down (inverted). The image on the lower of the two videos is also the one projected. But which ever way it may be shown on the video it will be shown the other way up on the wall. Three of the four possible combinations are therefore used. Within this framework each installation is structured as a series of contrasts. In *O.K. O.K. O.K.* the eyes are wide open and staring. The rotation of the head is wild and jerky. Sometimes both video images are turning rapidly in the same direction and then suddenly one will switch into reverse, adding considerably to the abrupt jerkiness. The sound – a repetitious track of 'OK, OK, OK' – is shouted out loud, sometimes in sync and sometimes not. The colours on the two monitors shift and oppose one another. They may both be very strong, reds contrasting with greens or yellows with blues or even a pale tint with strong hues, and the pairings change throughout.

In *MMMM* the eyes remain shut, the mouth closed and rotation of the head is virtually continuous. In both video images it turns only in opposite directions. The sound – a steady hum – remains constant. The colour is lower in key and its contrast reduced to shades of green-blues, pink-violets and greys.

The power of this piece depends on every factor employed (scale, orientation, direction, speed, time, colour, the physical expression of features and voice) being broken down one by one and their components analysed and isolated (inevitably a process of abstraction) and these new purified elements re-related in the only way possible – that is in formal structures and devices. It's not unlike the transformation of common experience through the high formality of the sonnet except, and it's an important exception, that Nauman doesn't draw on any given structure but builds his own poetic form. It is one which is deliberately without beginning, middle or end and in which the distribution of weights and emphasis is even, somewhat reminiscent of all-over painting.

Anthro/Socio (Rinde facing camera) of 1991 was, for me, the most impressive piece of the whole exhibition. A colour and sound video installation which occupies a huge cube like space, at least 8 metres square. The devices of *Raw Material* are now tripled and developed. Three video images showing Rinde's face in a frontal position are projected on to the wall at a floor-to-ceiling scale. With each of these a pair of monitors shows the same face, of course much smaller. There are therefore three sets of images. Each of these sets are related through inversion, either two images are identical (the right way up) and the other inverted (upside down) or two are upside down and one the right way up. This results in nine different combinations being displayed simultaneously. The intelligence and humour in Rinde's face ensures that the work is not experienced as either menacing or threatening.

He also speaks, or rather chants a kind of blank verse: Help me / Hurt me / Sociology. Feed me / Eat me / Anthropology. Feed me / Help me / Eat me / Hurt me. There are only three sound tapes, but none of these are synchronised with their images. There is also a further displacement between the actual source of the sound which in fact is in the monitors and its apparent source which through the domination of their huge scale seems to come from the projected images on the walls. The three different verses of the texts form a kind of libretto which are repeated in a 'layered' chant. There is no precise congruence at any point. Some of the sounds – certain vowels, consonants and cadences – give higher or lower pitches and even a slight melodic curve to the whole.

The audio form perfectly complements, echoes and redoubles the effects of the visual imagery. The spectator becomes enveloped and taken to the brink of being overwhelmed by an almost impenetrable multi-layered complex of information (sensation) which goes beyond techniques of dislocation and, turning into true polyphony, reaches a grand scale rather like a madrigal resounding in the space of a cathedral.

In Conversation with Lynne Cooke [2005]

Can we start at the beginning, so to speak, Bridget, by talking about your process? You have always made sketches and studies of various kinds. For example, the black and white gouaches from the early 1960s explored compositions that might then become finished paintings; more recently, you have produced one-to-one scale cartoons that are fully fledged final designs. Would you elaborate on your way of working, from the initial studies onwards?

Because my work is based on enquiry, studies are my chief method of exploration and my way into paintings. That is to say, when I start I don't have an aim or an image in mind for how the painting is going to look. I explore the potential of an element, and then gradually several elements. As I moved on, I introduced colours, different forms of structure and so on. When I started to do studies at the beginning of the 1960s, few other artists made preparatory works. Most people felt that they were not spontaneous or sufficiently informal: it was thought that any form of preparedness was somehow a bit inartistic. But I felt that – I didn't just feel, I *knew* – from all the evidence of what was to be seen in museums that drawing and preparatory work had always played a large part in an artist's practice. So, I persevered in various ways with whatever elements I was then studying.

Could you say a little more about how an idea progresses from a first glimmering through to a final study?

Well, I can't do things on the backs of envelopes. I need to be precise. For instance, suppose I choose a triangle. A triangle is three angles and three sides. First of all I have to put that down, and then work with what can be done with three angles and three sides. In order to do anything I have to be deliberate; that has been a good discipline. Because if you are deliberate, you may make a mistake – in fact, you almost certainly *will* make mistakes – but you can at least see them, or have a better chance of seeing them. If something is deliberate you can adjust or change it. But if it's woolly, just a grope, you don't have much chance when working with it.

In your studio you employ a number of assistants to carry out different tasks, including making the final painting. You started this practice very early on, in the 1960s, as soon as you could afford to hire people …

Before I could afford it! (Laughs.)[1]

Why was it important to have someone else's hand in your work? Did it matter whose hand it was that executed the final painting? Today, assistants you have trained, who have worked for you for many years, carry out the final paintings. How did you evolve what was for that time such an unusual mode of working?

In starting one's life as an artist there can be a point in time when you feel that you know what has happened in the immediate past and, maybe also, in the more distant past. And you feel that you know what your contemporaries are doing. You are poised, as it were, in a kind of awareness of the situation you're in and the time you're in. For quite a long time I'd been, consciously and unconsciously, educating myself by going often to museums, reading a great deal and generally getting more in touch with the period in which I was living. In painting, it seemed that those factors that determine its ability to convey appearance that in the past had been so wonderfully used in the service of rendering likeness – such as the rich variety of handling, the viscosity, the thickness and thinness of the medium – no longer seemed essential. The real purpose of painting now was to convey sensations. As making moved further and further away from trying to master external reality, it seemed to me an inevitable step to lay my own hands aside and ask someone else to paint the work out.[2] It didn't need to be one particular person; it could be anybody – anybody whom I had trained to apply the paint without emphasis and with no trace of handling.

In England at that time there was a certain love of amateurism. Amateurism was seen to be part of the hallmark of sincerity. Being not commercial, it seemed to ensure a certain kind of purity. But along with that went things that were badly made, and generally ticky tacky. I was not going to have what we thought of in England at that time as a piece of 'fine art'. And so I had considerable pleasure in making a hardboard panel, using household paint and even washing the painting with a little Ajax if it got dirty. That little rebellion against handling was one gesture alongside others I was making then.

Over the years, my assistants have been extremely good; very tactful, understanding and capable. The thing that I chiefly ask them is that they don't tell me what they think: I don't want their views. Being sensitive, they know quite well that when one is in any kind of uncertainty, as one inevitably is when working, that one is extremely open to suggestion, and one can so easily be – not exactly misled – but one can find oneself responding to something that one doesn't actually want to respond to. Their tolerance has been crucial. Also crucial is the fact that they help me establish distance. The way that I work means that I am, inevitably, my own spectator. Since the spectator who looks at my work is part of the work itself, it helps very greatly to be as objective as I possibly can. For me, distance can be established by just going into another studio, or by an interval of time, or by the detachment that results from not having painted out a big cartoon myself.

Nevertheless I want my works to be perceived as made things. And I like them to be well made: I've never wanted any kind of mechanised look. The people who help me enjoy the process of making the paintings. Even though I don't think it's true, one of them once said something very nice: 'We do the nice part, you do the hard work.' Good friends, they have helped in endless ways, from being fine cooks to coming to the rescue when I need help.

Above all, the freedom that they make possible has made me sharpen my focus. By paring away so many of the little jobs, props and sidetracks, I was left with very, very stark facts. I was pushed into tight corners – which was demanding but good.

Your rebellion against the kind of fetishised touch, or handling, that you identified with the Englishness of painting in the late 1950s and early 1960s seems to have set your work apart from that of most of your British contemporaries. Nevertheless, as a young artist you did have support. After two solo shows at Gallery One in London in the early 1960s , you joined the Robert Fraser Gallery, then the pre-eminent gallery for the most venturesome and most questioning art of the day. Nonetheless, it was in the United States where public recognition of your work really burgeoned. The impetus was a museum exhibition, The Responsive Eye, *which contextualised your work in a larger, more international sphere.*[3] *Presented at the Museum of Modern Art in 1965, this exhibition brought you recognition in two guises. The less-welcome kind involved a kind of populist embrace; the second, and much more important, derived from the fact that the exhibition included work by*

slightly older artists such as Joseph Albers and Ad Reinhardt, together with other artists of your generation with whom you seem to have shared more than you did with your peers in England. I understand that you felt a connection – a sense of shared purpose and camaraderie – with a number of these artists. Was there something about the North American situation that was particularly productive for you? Or were you stimulated by simply getting beyond the boundaries of 'Little England'?

The Responsive Eye was a very mixed show. Its formation was very difficult; and it had a very difficult birth. William Seitz, the curator, was in some ways a classic curator of Modern art. He was truly open and international in his views; for him, art was one of the forms of expression that transcended national boundaries. And he had been instrumental – if not actually one of the leading figures – in discovering late Monet. Late Monet was thought to have gone totally to pieces. Many of those great big canvases – I believe that some of them had shrapnel tears in them from the war – were still in his studio in Giverny in northern France. Seitz was one of the people who went and collected them for an exhibition in New York and Los Angeles in 1960.[4]

Monet was the great pioneer of sight, of looking, of the eye, of the importance of vision. Cézanne criticised him by saying, 'Monet is nothing but an eye, but what an eye!' For years and years that was often thought to be Monet's great weakness – that he was *only* a looker. Seitz, however, was interested in the whole field of perception – of the role of vision, and the struggle for the emancipation of that runs right through the development of Modern art. And so he initially planned that exhibition to start with Impressionist painting in France and then to relate that to abstract painting in the contemporary world; that is, he planned to pitch perception in nature, or with nature, against perception with, or in, the artefact. That was a very, very interesting brief. But he soon found that he had a huge field: there were artists from South America, there were artists from all over Europe, and there were artists from North America. In a sense, there were at least four or five possible exhibitions. But there was not enough time to sort out all these differences into a series of exhibitions, which would have clarified the various intentions of the different groups of artists. What happened instead was that an enormous exhibition went up on the walls. Some people were pleased to be in it; many people were dismayed by it. Nobody quite knew what the exhibition was about, and it became

something of a scandal at the time. The original intentions behind it were not only proper, but valid. I would not be at all surprised if, in the near future, some of its potential reappears. Enough time has now gone by for people to see it more clearly and to make better judgements.

The work of some artists in that exhibition, Ad Reinhardt or Robert Irwin, for example, deals with issues of perception, including the physiology as well as the extended time it takes to actually discern the formal structure of the work. Their paintings involve processes of looking very closely and very carefully. Many of these Americans – and there are others I can think of within that lineage – tended to feel they had made a break with European Modernism, not only with Impressionism but with early 20th-century abstraction. By contrast, you have always engaged with a Modernist tradition that ranges across Monet, Piet Mondrian and Paul Klee, among others. You have even curated exhibitions of some of these artists' works. Of course, at times you have also looked very closely at art from other cultures, or from the distant past. For example, your series known as 'the Egyptians' was influenced by a trip you took to Egypt, and in particular by the palette you saw in tomb paintings there. Another area of enquiry impacted on paintings made in the mid 1970s to which you gave Chinese titles, such as Shih-Li *(1975) and* Ch'i-Yun *(1974). They reflected your fascination with traditional scroll paintings that you saw in an exhibition at the British Museum in the early 1970s.*[5] *Nonetheless within that very broad visual tradition, you have a particularly deep knowledge of what we might call its Modernist heritage – of Mondrian, Klee, Pollock and so on. Could you say something about how the art of the past has impacted on your thinking and how it's informed your work?*

I think it goes back to when I was a student. To be quite honest, the art school I went to was not very strong in its teaching departments. I was very anxious to learn: I wanted to find out and I wanted to *do*. Yet it seemed to me, of perception, that I couldn't get anything real to work with. But there was one person who taught drawing.[6] Life drawing was just on the point of becoming something which no art school would offer on its curriculum: it was beginning to be seen as irrelevant. However, that hadn't quite happened then. I was very fortunate that this teacher, Sam Rabin, a classic draughtsman, was teaching in the school. He taught by example; that is to say, he demonstrated. He did a drawing on the side of your paper making clear the real nature of the pose – the angles,

weights and dispositions of the limbs and so you learned directly, through imitation. At first I was extremely uncertain about this approach. I remember walking up and down the railway station one evening as I was going home, thinking, 'Now what do I do? This person is the only person with something solid to offer, but he teaches through imitation. Will this damage my originality? On the other hand, who knows if I've got any anyway. It's worth testing. You don't know the value of something unless you risk it.' At the end of this debate with myself I decided to settle down and learn from imitation.

The whole experience was, I soon discovered, amazing. Basically, he taught in the tradition of the School of Paris – it was very, very old fashioned. But I reasoned, 'If this sort of drawing – classic draughtsmanship – is the kind of drawing that Seurat and Matisse both did when they were young, it obviously didn't destroy their originality.' So, I drew. Then, along with that came an understanding of tone. Then I hit colour, and I couldn't make head or tail of it. The only way that I could try to understand colour – and I knew I wasn't exactly advanced – was in relation to what is now called 'tonal colour'; that is, colour which is lightened and darkened so that its value and brilliance are subdued in a light-dark gradation. Through tone one can unite an entire visual field so that all its shapes, spaces and depths are related to each other. But that was so clearly a long way from what had been going on in modern painting for quite a number of years.

Through looking at books and visiting galleries and museums, I discovered a direction in Seurat.[7] He made thorough preparatory work for his paintings. He did tonal studies which he then translated into colour. So I thought, 'Well, I will copy a small Seurat, because that will help me to find out more.' By analysing a painting, I hoped to follow his thought; that is to say, not to make a transcription or a variation but simply to try and follow his mind as he worked. The painting I chose, *Le Pont de Courbevoie* (1886 – 87), is in London. Because it is not about figure, it was quite an easy one for someone of my skills then to copy. I didn't go down to the Courtauld Galleries where it hung because there is something very impertinent really, in sitting down and trying to copy something beautiful. It's very difficult to do *face à face*. I got quite a large reproduction of it and prepared a considerably larger canvas. His handling is impeccable but, with all respect, I wasn't interested in that; I was trying to find out where he put what colour, and why. In order to follow his train of thought, I needed a bigger brush mark and, hence, a larger surface to work on. In this spirit, I made my copy (1959).[8]

I developed a habit of looking at the past because artists seem to face the same fundamental problems even though they are working in different styles. When you have a problem as a painter, you first have to identify it, and having done that you can then think about how it has been treated by other artists.

It appears to me that, even today, you remain steadfastly committed to sorting out such problems. I know you've looked very, very closely not just at Seurat but Klee and Mondrian, among others. Surprisingly, it seems as if Matisse wasn't initially of immediate interest to you. I say, surprisingly, because Matisse today is generally considered the greatest colourist of the 20th-century.

Some years ago, however, you made a journey to Detroit to see an exhibition of Matisse's late papiers découpés.[9] *Since then, you have assiduously studied Matisse's art, even making repeated visits to exhibitions in far distant places. Today, critics responding to your recent work inevitably invoke Matisse. Why, in the mid 1970s, did you begin to focus on his late work?*

Because the *papiers découpés* are a kind of summation of all his various interests, I wanted to know more about them. I think the show at the Detroit Institute of the Arts was the first comprehensive exhibition devoted to them. In the two days I was in Detroit, I went from the airport to the museum, then to the hotel, then back to the museum and back to the airport. It was a key visit for me.

One of the many things of great interest to me was the way Matisse could move very easily between white grounds and fully coloured structured compositions. I myself had just been working into white grounds, which was, of course, what early Fauvist painting did. As Matisse got older the white grounds once again came to the fore. In a sense, he was going in a circle. The separate marks of the early Fauvist painters return, as it were, in the leaf-like forms and loose arabesques of the paper cut-outs.

Would you consider curating a show of Matisse's art? In the past you have curated a number of exhibitions; one, in 1997, devoted to Mondrian's work, and another in 2002 of Klee's paintings.[10] *When you curate a show of the work of an artist, do you reach a different kind of understanding from what you get from repeated visits to exhibitions of that artist's work? Are you looking for something particular from the experience of curating?*

I wouldn't *dare* curate a show of Matisse: I mean, the others were difficult enough! One learns along the way: as you make choices or handle something, you become a great deal more intimate with an artist's work – and that's wonderful. The experience of working with Klee's art was tremendous. Because he was also an enquirer, he was very important to me as far back as the 1950s. He was quite clear that looking into the formal elements – be they colour, line, depth or whatever – was the key to making. So his idea of abstraction actually was much, much wider than, for example, Mondrian's. I say this with great respect, because he, too, is a wonderful artist. Mondrian saw the conception of abstraction as almost self-sufficient, whereas Klee saw it as the true basis of picture-making, as something that could be continued into figuration or develop itself as an art form. Klee had a very wide view of the potential of painting; he always started from the pictorial elements, not from nature. He started from things he made; the work grew out of that. It could grow all the way into figuration or he could stop it at any point: it was very flexible. And he didn't want to form any sort of dogma.

My focus on your relationship to certain painters might give the impression that your interests are narrower than I think they are. In addition to writing about the work of many artists, including several of the ones we've been talking about, you have discussed in some detail film and video works by Bruce Nauman. I find that very interesting, not least because it confirms that in discussing issues of affinity between artists, one shouldn't think only about how formal resemblances link their practices. There are other ways to share artistic concerns and explore intellectual issues. Would you explain why Nauman's work has been a touchstone for you?

It was a great surprise to me. In 1998 Nauman had a very big exhibition at the Hayward Gallery.[11] When I walked into the first room, which contained very early pieces including the film in which he is walking around a square – *Walking in an Exaggerated Manner Around the Perimeter of a Square* (1967–68) – it struck a big echo. The kind of formal thinking in those pieces – when, for instance, he goes all the way around the square toe-to-heel, toe-to-heel, toe-to-heel, and then backwards, heel-to-toe, heel-to-toe, and so on – is exactly what I like, and what I knew about from my own work. He made those pieces in the late 1960s. As the video *Beckett Walk* showed, he loved Beckett, and I do too.[12] One of Beckett's most marvellous images is of a man on a beach in a raincoat. He

has sixteen stones in one pocket,[13] and he has to take each stone out one by one and lick it and then put it in the other pocket; take the next stone, lick it and put in the next pocket … The problem is to make quite sure that no stone gets licked twice and that each one is done in order, so that all the stones are treated fairly and properly. This image of a man sitting on a beach building up this kind of structure has always seemed to me to be a most beautiful, abstract work. And so I like Nauman's allusions very much.

He carries this forward into later works, like *Good Boy, Bad Boy* (1985), where there are two television presenters, a white woman and a black man, who deliver their lines with completely blank faces – just as presenters do – with no engagement with what they're saying. Each phrase goes through a declension, like a verb. The woman would probably say something like 'I'm a bad boy, you're a bad boy, he's a bad boy, she's a bad boy, we are bad boys, you are bad boys, they are bad boys.' It turns out that this is just a formal way of treating the nonsense that comes out of those kinds of presentation on television: it's exactly this deadpan juxtaposition. Out of cross referencing different or even opposing structures and patterns of thought comes something unexpected. That's what I very much like about his work.

When discussing Klee you have pointed out that in The Thinking Eye *(1961), he undertook a vast series of enquiries – epitomised in that great phrase 'Taking a line for a walk' – in which he looks at the different components or elements that make up drawing and painting. He explores these same issues in his own work in very playful ways, through an enormous number of techniques and materials. He is obviously never interested in verisimilitude; he never attempts to represent nature in a realistic way. Because he employs signs – literal signs, signs for figures, signs for abbreviated languages – you might conclude that the difference between figuration and abstraction is not important to him. While certain of these signs clearly conjure situations in the world, such as a man walking on a tightrope, others, such as a pattern of squares in different colours, don't have obvious references beyond the formal. It is only by means of its title, which alludes to a Moroccan landscape, that we understand that, for him, that work was not a pure abstraction.*

By contrast, in the 1960s, distinctions between figuration and abstraction were very tightly drawn: that face-off permitted no negotiation. Often, for ideological reasons, artists were either in one camp or the other. An abstract artist yourself, you have talked and written a lot about this subject, though of course, when looking at the art of the past, as you do, you necessarily

engage with figurative work. Do you think that the distinction drawn so sharply between figuration and abstraction in the 1960s really matters anymore? Are those hard and fast categories now somewhat confusing, even misleading?

I think they have been misunderstood and, because of that, they are probably misleading. Even though you can go back to manifestos, letters and other texts, you can't really be sure what artists in the past thought or meant beyond the evidence of their work. Some recent findings do, however, indicate that in its early days Abstract art was always seen as a beginning. It was neither a style nor an absolute statement. Unfortunately, dogmatism has entered into the discussion around abstraction, damaging the ideas and its possibilities. It's locked a number of artists into tight corners, prisons not of their own making. It seems that Malevich saw himself as a painter of sensation, as a continuation of Cézanne.[14] In thinking about how to paint pure sensation, he thought some sort of anonymous vehicle could best portray and serve sensation. Those very first squares – the white on white, and the black square – were thought to be so 'nothing' that they would actually convey sensation in its purest form. But, alas, they were soon received as 'objects', heroic icons and statements of absence. When, later, other painters tried to take abstraction a little further forward, the damage had been done. It became icon-making. Do you remember those monochrome canvases in red, yellow and blue, which Rodchenko painted in …

1921.

Yes, 1921 – very early. He thought that having done that it would then be possible to move on. Sadly, we've not been allowed to move – or, as artists, we have not *allowed* ourselves to move on – which is silly. Mondrian offers a wonderful counter example. In his very late work *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (1942–43), he paints the sensation that his own work generates: the little tiny squares in *Broadway Boogie Woogie* originate in the after images of the linear intersections that were beginning to crop up in his paintings. When you look at where the lines cross in the earlier paintings you see a stronger little mark in the middle – a darker square. At the end of his life, Mondrian was starting to move round this very interesting question: how can sensation be generated by the work itself? He elaborated on this in one perfect painting, *Broadway Boogie Woogie.*

You have talked often about the pleasures of perception in the world. Clearly your work is based in, on and around issues of perception. You obviously don't represent your perceptions. Nonetheless, your paintings do have a relationship to how you see things in the world because, through the forms of the painting, you find ways of creating equivalents that stimulate perceptual enquiries. Exceptionally, in the case of one painting (of which you made three closely related versions) – a painting titled Static 4 *(1966) – you discovered retrospectively that its genesis could be linked, in part, to a very specific experience. If I can paraphrase your account, it occurred on a very hot summer's day when you were driving up a mountain in France where the ground was covered with small flinty stones. As you got out of the car you were struck, unforgettably, by the effect of light playing off the stony surface. While you didn't consciously try to generate that experience when making this painting, nonetheless when it was done you recognised something akin to what you'd seen that memorable afternoon. Mostly, of course, that isn't the kind of relationship that exists between your works and sensations you have experienced in the world: individual works are not so tightly linked to particular memories. Nonetheless, your experiences in the world and your very particular ways of looking must inform everything you make?*

I think there are two aspects to that. When I was a child in Cornwall we had very little to occupy us … virtually no entertainment compared to what's available today. We had evacuated ourselves from the East Coast on account of the war. We were living in a cottage with an amazing landscape, wonderful hills, valleys and coastline. This extraordinarily beautiful, unspoilt countryside was more or less deserted. It was an idyllic moment. My mother made a habit of looking, and she taught me to look. She would always point things out: the colours of shadows, the way water moves, how changes in the shape of a cloud are responsible for different colours in the sea, the dapples and reflections that come up from pools inside caves. All beautiful things. It was a constant pleasure just to look. I started to see what happens when you look. For instance, if you walked a familiar walk towards the light into the sun, the landscape would turn into a kind of black, white and grey situation; all the colours would drain out of it. Walking that same stretch with the sun behind, all you saw before you became suffused with brilliantly lit local colours. There are countless very simple things like this that we all see. I tend to rely on these things as a source of pleasure.

When I'm working, at a certain point I need to feel that something convinces me, that something is good rather than bad. I wonder to myself how I know, why I know, and in what way I can decide that it's good or bad, other than it being a matter of taste. I came to realise that I could and did recognise something in a work, but what was it that I was recognising? I thought it must be some kind of reservoir, as it were, that is filled without my being aware of it, a sort of store of unidentified experiences. That became the way I could accept, say, the 'Curve' paintings: for the sensations they generate belong to all of us; those sensations of shine and shimmer are amongst our most common visual experiences. By recognising that what I had brought about in a purely abstract context was something that, in ordinary life, we share, though mostly unconsciously, it therefore became valid.

Comparing two very different paintings, the black and white Blaze 1 *(1962) with, for example,* Shih-Li *(1975), it seems that the titles function in quite different ways. With* Blaze, *the name conjures up something intense: one immediately gets the 'sense' of it, feels its applicability. The title doesn't explain the painting, but it's connected in a way that's immediately evident. The title of* Shih-Li *is not only more oblique, it seems to incorporate a kind of poetics.*

The scroll paintings in that exhibition of Chinese art at the British Museum, which you mentioned earlier, were made by scholar poets, painter poets. After seeing the exhibition, I bought a book about the criteria by which these works were assessed.[15] The Chinese had very, very exacting standards. They developed a way of judging based on the spirit, mood and feelings conveyed by the paintings. *Shih*, as I seem to remember, has to do with 'alive-ness'. The informality of the little brush marks means that they required great discernment. No matter how facile and vivid the brush marks might be, unless they were imbued with a basic truth, *Li*, the scroll painting was worthless. I liked the way in which the criteria were to do with states of being, and that the paintings conveyed frames of mind.

In the mid-1960s especially, viewers often had quite intense reactions to your work. Blaze *provides a good example. Some people still seem to be thrown by the intensity of the visual sensations generated by such paintings. Why do you think they feel disoriented or destabilised?*

Pure perception – untrammelled perception – is very surprising: startling, exciting, powerful and beautiful. It's a kind of primary experience. In normal life, one cannot build on these kinds of things, so one very quickly puts them into whatever conceptual envelope one can. There's a story about Vuillard. He said that when you go into a room and see, perhaps, a big dark shape, and a strong bright thing, and something sparkly, then that's what you should paint. It doesn't matter that the big black thing is a grand piano, that the bright thing is a Turkish carpet or that the blazing light is a window. That is neither here nor there: you paint what you see – what you *really* see for the split second before knowledge moves in. In his early life, Vuillard did sometimes manage to paint like that.

Of course, knowledge is our protection. Knowledge tells us that these things can all be reduced to proper, manageable entities in the world. Then they no longer are startling – or, if you like, pure. But to rely upon this purity of perception in a painting is fraught with difficulties for the artist. Unfortunately, manners, styles and habits quickly spring up, and the freshness of insight sinks into routine and so falsifies itself. One is in great danger of losing the very essence of what one is hoping to find. As an abstract painter, I start from the opposite end – from well-known, rather boring elements that in themselves hold no surprises. As I go on working, there may come a point – it is by no means certain, but it can happen – that I am taken by surprise, startled into recognising a pure sensation. That is when I know that I am on my way to making a painting.

The Flowering of the Abstract

Published in the *Illustrated London News*, no.7025, vol.271, December 1983, p.28, as part of a general inquiry 'From 1984 to 2020' marking the advent of Orwell's ominous year 1984.

1 Cf. **According to Sensation**, p.136.

The Colour Connection

Catalogue introduction to the exhibition *The Artist's Eye: Bridget Riley*, National Gallery, London, June–August 1989. After the end of her term as trustee of the National Gallery (1981–88) Riley was asked to select an exhibition from the Gallery's permanent collection. She chose seven paintings: Titian's *Bacchus and Ariadne* (1520–22), Veronese's *Adoration of the Kings* (1573), El Greco's *Expulsion of the Traders from the Temple* (c.1600), the *Allegory of Peace* (1629–30) – also called 'Peace and War' – by Rubens, Poussin's *Adoration of the Shepherds* (c.1637) and his *Triumph of Pan* (before 1636), and the late *Bathers* (exh. 1907) by Cézanne. The text has been adapted to the present purpose by reducing some of the historical information and references provided by the editor's contributions. The original catalogue was meant to provide some additional details which would have been mainly useful in the exhibition itself. Riley's involvement as trustee is discussed in her conversation with the Director of the National Gallery, Neil MacGregor, in *Dialogues on Art*, ²2003, pp.17–32.

1 See Arthur Lucas and Joyce Plesters, 'Titian's Bacchus and Ariadne', in *National Gallery Technical Bulletin*, vol.2, London 1978.

2 The astonishment of Monet's friends about his capacity to continue faultlessly to produce 'harmonies of vision', despite deteriorating eyesight, is documented in Georges Clemenceau's book *Claude Monet, Les Nymphéas*, Paris, 1928, pp.31–33. Riley's remark refers to Thiébault-Sisson's account of late Monet partially relying on his memory for *'l'ordonnance et la composition des motifs'* and checking colours by their order on the palette and by the name of tubes, in *'Un nouveau musée parisien: Le Nymphéas de Cl. Monet à l'Orangerie des Tuileries'*, *Revue de l'art ancien et moderne*, June–December 1927, pp.48f.

3 Catullus, *Carmina*, 64, v.249–264; Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 8, v.176–182.

4 From Gasquet's recollections of Cézanne, reprinted in P. M. Doran (ed.), *Conversations avec Cézanne*, p.112.

5 Cf. **Into Colour**, p.117f.

6 The particular incident is mentioned in René Piot, *Les Palettes de Delacroix*, Paris 1931. The key role of Veronese in Delacroix's understanding of pictorial colour has been emphasised by Charles Blanc in *Les artistes de mon temps*, Paris 1876, p.77: *'Tout ce que je sais, disait Delacroix, je le tiens de Paul Véronèse.'*

7 Cecil Gould, 'Observations on the Role of Decoration in the Formation of Veronese's Art', in *Essays presented to Rudolf Wittkower on his sixty-fifth birthday*, London 1967, p.127.

8 This classic distinction between the two artists had already been formed within the Venetian tradition itself: Titian's accolade by Lodovico Dolce's *Dialogo della pittura* (1557), Veronese's a hundred years later by Carlo Ridolfi in *Maraviglie dell'arte* (1648).

9 Cf. **Into Colour**, pp.125f.

10 The connection between Rubens and Aguilonius has been researched by Charles Parkhurst: 'Aguilonius' Optics and Rubens' colour', in *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek 12*, 1961, pp.35–49; and 'Red-Yellow-Blue: a colour triad in 17th-century painting', in *Baltimore Museum of Art Annual*, vol.4, 1972, pp.29–33.

11 The famous letter to Chantelou, dated 24 November 1647, in which Poussin explains his notion of the 'modes' can be found in *Nicolas Poussin: Lettres et propos sur l'art*, ed. A. Blunt, Paris 1989, pp.133–37.

12 According to Gasquet, in *Conversations avec Cézanne*, pp.114f.

13 The complete quote reads: *'Imaginez, Poussin refait entièrement sur nature, voilà le classique que j'entends'* (*Conversations avec Cézanne*, p.80). The meaning is explained in another 'opinion' communicated by Emile Bernard: *'Il faut redevenir classique par la nature, c'est-à-dire par la sensation'* (*loc. cit.*, p.37).

14 The metaphor of the 'veil' relates to the 'loss of certainties' discussed in **The Experience of Painting**, p.144.

Colour for the Painter

Extended and revised version of a lecture Riley gave in 1993 at Darwin College, Cambridge, within a series of lectures devoted to the subject of colour. These were published under the title *Colour: Art & Science*, Trevor Lamb and Janine Bourriau (eds.), Cambridge University Press, 1995, with Riley's contribution on pp.31–64. Because of the obvious relationship of many descriptions and arguments to **The Colour Connection** and both the Seurat texts, **Seurat as Mentor** and **The Artist's Eye: Seurat**, the below notes have been restricted to actual quotations and less apparent cross references.

1 The following distinction between 'pictorial colour' and 'perceptual colour' extends and clarifies a difference that Riley first brought up in **The Experience of Painting**, p.143.

2 'Letter from Paul Cézanne to Émile Bernard, 23 December 1904', in P. M. Doran (ed.), *Conversations avec Cézanne*, 1978, p.44 ('*La lumière n'existe, donc pas pour le peintre*').

3 See Riley's distinction between Giorgione's innovation and Titian's new way of 'drawing' with colour in **The Colour Connection**, p.191.

4 Richard Kendall, *Monet by himself*, London, 1989, p.132.

5 For Veronese's access to Titian's treatment of colour see **The Colour Connection**, p.196–97.

6 On the origin of the concept of 'three primary colours' see note 10 of **The Colour Connection**.

7 'Letter B 12 from Vincent Van Gogh to Émile Bernard (End of July 1888)', in *The Complete Letters of Vincent Van Gogh*, vol. 3, London, 1978, pp.503–04.

8 Cf. **Something to Look At**, pp.154–55.

9 The relevance of Poussin's application of the Ancient Greek 'modes' of music to his paintings is discussed in **The Colour Connection**, note 9.

10 'Paul Cézanne: Mes Confidences', in *Conversations avec Cézanne*, p.102.

11 'Letter from Paul Cézanne to Camille Pissarro, 23 October 1866', in *Paul Cézanne: Letters*, John Rewald (ed.), New York, 1995, p.115.

12 Cézanne according to Maurice Denis (1907), in *Conversations avec Cézanne*, p.170.

13 The references to 'les plus grands Venitiens' are quite frequent, particularly in the exchanges of late Cézanne with Émile Bernard, cf. *Conversations avec Cézanne*, pp.43, 44, 57, 59 etc.

14 Charles Baudelaire, 'L'Œuvre et la vie de Delacroix' (1863), in *Œuvres completes*, ed. Claude Pichois, vol.II, Paris, p.746 ('*Delacroix était passionément amoureux de la passion, et froidement déterminé à chercher le moyens d'exprimer la passion de la manière la plus visible*').

15 Auguste Renoir according to Ambroise Vollard, *En écoutant Cézanne, Degas, Renoir*, 1995, p.272 ('*Les* Femmes d'Alger, *il n'y a pas de plus beau tableau au monde*').

16 Cf. the passages in **Interview with David Sylvester** (p.92f.) and **Into Colour** (p.122) where Riley describes a similar 'inversion of colour and tone' in her own paintings *Drift* and *Deny* (both 1966–67).

17 The highly deliberate colour scheme of this painting is revealed by Suzanne Damiron and Henriette Bessis, 'Journal de Pierre Andrieu (1821–92). Un document inédit, conservé à la Bibliothèque d'Art et d'Archeologie à Paris (Ms. 421)', in *Bulletin de la Société de l'histoire de l'art français*, 1975, pp.261–80. See also **Painting Now**, p.294.

18 Félix Fénéon, 'Définition du néo-impressionnisme' (1887), in *Félix Fénéon: Au-delà de l'impressionnisme*. Textes réunis et présentés par Françoise Cachin, Paris, 1966, pp.91–92.

19 Georges Clemenceau, *Claude Monet. Les Nymphéas*, Paris, 1928, p.101.

20 Quoted from *Pablo Picasso: A Retrospective*, William Rubin (ed.), New York, 1980, p.223.

Cézanne in Provence

This review of the exhibition *Cézanne in Provence* at the National Gallery of Art, Washington (January – May 2006) was commissioned and first published by *The Burlington Magazine*, vol.148, no.1242, September 2006, pp.621–29. Riley also saw the slightly modified French version of this show, *Cézanne en Provence*, at the Musée Granet in Aix-en-Provence (June – September 2006). The titles and dates of the paintings in this re-publication correspond to those given in the American exhibition catalogue, edited by Philip Connisbee and Denis Coutagne, with contributions of Françoise Cachin, Bruno Ely, Benedict Leca, Paul Smith, Véronique Serrano and Isabelle Cahn, National Gallery of Art, Washington 2006.

1 *Picasso: Propos sur l'art*, ed. Marie-Laure Bernadac and Androula Michael, Paris, 1988, p.104.
2 Paul Cézanne according to Joachim Gasquet, 'Ce qu'il m'a dit' (1921), in *Conversations avec Cézanne*, p.161.
3 Émile Zola, *Naïs Micoulin*, Paris, 1877. Quoted from *Cézanne in Provence*, p.337, note 39.
4 'Letter to Émile Zola, 24 May 1883', in John Rewald (ed.), *Paul Cézanne: Letters*, New York, 1995, p.209
5 'Letter to Émile Bernard', 15 April 1904, *ibid.*, p.301
6 'Letters to Émile Zola', 14 September 1878 and 20 November 1878, *ibid.*, p.168 and 172.
7 'Letter to Victor Chocquet', 11 May 1886, *ibid.*, p.225
8 Letter from Claude Monet to Théodore Duret, 1884; quoted from William Seitz, *Claude Monet. Seasons and Moments* (1960), Museum of Modern Art, New York, reprint 1969, p.19.
9 'Letter from Claude Monet to Alice Hoschedé, 29 January 1884', Quoted from Richard Kendall (ed.), *Monet by himself*, 1989, p.109.
10 'Letter to Camille Pissarro', 23 October 1866, see **Colour for the Painter** note 11.
11 Paul Cézanne according to Joachim Gasquet, in *Conversations avec Cézanne*, p.112.

The Artist's Eye: Seurat

This review of the Seurat centennial exhibition at the Grand Palais in Paris (April – August 1992) was commissioned by *Modern Painters* and published in the magazine's 1992 Summer issue, vol.4, no.2, pp.10–14. Apart from paying tribute to the artist who set her on her own path, it is an attempt to see the problem of Seurat's quest objectively – and at the same time to try and clarify her early fascination. The article is very densely written, showing Riley's powers of analysis at their most intense. In order to keep the abstract argument clear she made for once footnotes which accommodate interesting asides and substantial information. These have been kept with the text to distinguish them from the editor's notes. It did not seem necessary to account for Riley's references in detail, because all of them derive from two fundamental books on Seurat: John Rewald, *Seurat*, London 1990; and William Innes Homer, *Seurat and the Science of Painting*, Cambridge, Mass., 1970. For a more personal analysis of Seurat's 'method', linking her own beginnings to his achievement, see Riley's later essay **Seurat as Mentor**, p.61f.

Mondrian Perceived

Introduction to catalogue, *Mondrian: Nature to Abstraction*, Tate Gallery, London, July – November 1997, pp.9–18. Due to a closure caused by renovation, the Gemeentemuseum in The Hague had offered to lend to the Tate a selection of its extensive holdings of Mondrian's work, and Nicholas Serota, the Director of the Gallery, invited Riley to choose an exhibition (in collaboration with Sean Rainbird, the Assistant Keeper of the Modern Collection). The introduction was accompanied by a note crediting the source material: 'References throughout are made either to H. Holtzman and M. S. James, *The New Art – The New Life: The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian*, London 1986; or to A. Zander Rudenstine (ed.), *Piet Mondrian*, exhibition catalogue, The Hague/Washington/New York, 1995–96'. The titles of the works have been updated for the second edition at the suggestion of the Mondrian Estate, HCR International.

1 From J. J. Sweeney's posthumously published *Interview with Mondrian* (1943), in which the artist also emphasises the aspect of 'destruction', so essential to Riley's understanding of his work. See *The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian*, pp.356–57.
2 This relationship is the subject of the earlier piece **Mondrian: the 'universal' and the 'particular'**, pp.286f.

Mondrian: the 'universal' and the 'particular'

Paper given at a symposium held on 20 November 1995, during the Mondrian retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Published in *The Burlington Magazine*, vol.CXXXVIII, no.1124, November 1996, pp.751–53. As in 'Mondrian Perceived' Riley's references relate to either *The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian* or the exhibition catalogue.

1 Yve-Alain Bois, 'The Iconoclast', in *Piet Mondrian*, A. Zander Rudenstein (ed.), see note to **Mondrian Perceived**.

Painting Now

The 23rd William Townsend Memorial Lecture, Slade School of Art, London, 26 November 1996. Published in *The Burlington Magazine*, vol.CXXXIX, no.1134, September 1997, pp.616–22.

1 Samuel Beckett, *Proust*, London 1931, p.64 – The parenthesis in brackets is a commentary by Beckett. Cf. Marcel Proust, *À la recherché du temps perdu*, vol. 7 ('Le temps retrouvé'), Paris, 1992, p.187.
2 See also the 'lesson' at the end of the **Personal Interview**, pp.30–31, and the related note on p.50.
3 Igor Stravinsky, *The Poetics of Music*, Cambridge, Mass. 1994, p.57.
4 Samuel Beckett, '*Peintres de l'empêchement*' (1948), in *Disjecta*, Ruby Cohn (ed.), London 1983, p.137. In this essay Beckett argues the case for a '*peinture d'acceptation*', an art accepting its lack of staple reference points, which is related to Riley's understanding of the Modern artist's situation, as described in **The Artist and Society**, p.42, and **The Experience of Painting**, p.144.
5 Charles Blanc's most influential texts in forming the younger painters' idea of Delacroix's colour theories were his tribute 'Eugène Delacroix' in the *Gazette des Beaux Arts*, October 1864, reprinted in *Les Artistes de mon temps*, Paris 1876, pp.23–88, and his widely read *Grammaire des arts du dessin*, Paris 1870. Being a great admirer of Chevreul as well, he sometimes has, however, fused both these sources.
6 This connection was first established by Théodore Duret in his preface to the catalogue of Monet's exhibition at the gallery of the magazine *La Vie moderne* in 1880, reprinted under the title 'Claude Monet' in *Critique d'avant-garde*, Paris 1885, pp.91–105.
7 '*Le premier mérite d'un tableau est d'être une fête pour l'œil*' (22 June 1863), in Eugène Delacroix, *Journal, 1822–1863*, Paris 1982, p.808.
8 Flam (ed.), *Matisse on Art*, p.32.
9 *Loc. cit.*, p.66.
10 The idea of forging a tradition – as something to be discovered rather than to be received – is reminiscent of T. S. Eliot's early essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1919): 'Tradition is a matter of much wider significance. It cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour. It involves, in the first place, the historical sense, which we may call indispensable to anyone who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year; and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence.' In *Selected Essays*, London 1949, p.14. Riley designed the slide projection for the backcloth of T. S. Eliot's *Sweeney Agonistes* at the Eliot Memorial Performance in June 1965 at the Globe Theatre, London.
11 Letter to Theo, February 1886 (no.448): 'More and more I believe that *l'art pour l'art*, to work for work's sake, *l'énergie pour l'énergie*, is after all the principle of all great artists.' In *The Complete Letters of Vincent van Gogh*, London 1958, vol.2, p.484.
12 *La dation Brancusi: dessins et archives*, exhib. cat, Centre Pompidou, Paris, 2003, p.90 ('*Les choses ne sont pas dificiles a faire mais nous de nous metre en etat de les faire*' [*sic*]).

Nauman's Formalism

An edited version of this article appeared in *Flash Art International*, no.205 March April 1999, pp.88–91. Riley saw Bruce Nauman's exhibition at the Hayward Gallery (July–September 1998). She talked about herdiscovery to Giancarlo Ponti, editor of *Flash Art* who encouraged her to record her observations.

In Conversation with Lynne Cooke

Edited transcript of a public dialogue at the Cranbrook Art Museum, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, 24 September 2005. First published in the catalogue of the exhibition *Bridget Riley. Recent Paintings and Gouaches*, PaceWildenstein Galleries, New York, 2007/08, pp.16–23.

1 Riley began to employ assistants in 1961, that is, before her first solo exhibition. At that time she still worked at the J. Walter Thompson Advertising Agency to support her work in the studio. See **Biographical Notes**.

2 The decision to work with assistants and the deliberate refusal of 'amateurism' have been recurrent topics in interviews with the artist, cf. *Dialogues on Art*, [2] 2003, p.62f., and **Conversation with Isabel Carlisle**, p.161.

3 William C. Seitz, *The Responsive Eye*, exhibition catalogue of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1965. The exhibition travelled to the City Art Museum of St. Louis, the Seattle Art Museum, the Pasadena Art Museum and the Baltimore Museum of Art. The curatorial concept, which Riley tries to explain in her reply, is described in note 8 to **Conversation with Maurice de Sausmarez**.

4 Organised by Seitz, the exhibition *Claude Monet: Seasons and Moments* in 1960 was shown at the Museum of Modern Art, New York and at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

5 In 1972 Riley saw the exhibition *Chinese Paintings from the Collection of Mr and Mrs Earl Morse* at the British Museum, London. As she states later in this interview, she derived the specific concepts for her titles from a book she purchased after seeing the exhibition: George Rowley's *Principles of Chinese Painting*, Princeton, 1959.

6 For a fuller account of Riley's indebtedness to her teacher, Sam Rabin, see her essay **Seurat as Mentor**, pp.61–62.

7 See Maurice de Sausmarez, *Bridget Riley*, London, 1970, p.26f.

8 Cf. **Seurat as Mentor**, p.63f.

9 Riley saw the travelling exhibition *Henri Matisse: Paper Cut-Outs* in the winter of 1977–78 at the Detroit Institute of Arts. (Exhibition catalogue with texts by Jack Cowart, Jack D. Flam, Dominique Fourcade and John Hallmark Neff, co-published by St. Louis Art Museum, St. Louis, and Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, 1977.)

10 *Mondrian: Nature to Abstraction* was presented at the Tate Gallery, London, in 1997, and co-curated with Sean Rainbird and Hans Janssen. *Paul Klee: The Nature of Creation*, co-curated with Robert Kudielka, was presented at the Hayward Gallery London in 2002.

11 Originating in 1997 at the Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, *Bruce Nauman: Image/Text. 1966–1996*, travelled to the Hayward Gallery, London, in 1998. See **Nauman's Formalism**.

12 The full title of this 60-minutes video work is *Slow Angle Walk (Beckett Walk)*, 1968.

13 Samuel Beckett, *Molloy* (1951), transl. by the author in collaboration with Patrick Bowles, in Samuel Beckett, *Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*, London, 1966, pp.68–74.

14 Cf. the beginning of the second part of Kasimir Malevich's book, *Die gegenstandslose Welt* ('Bauhausbuch' 1927), facsimile reprint, Mainz-Berlin, 1980, p.65: '*Unter Suprematismus verstehe ich die Suprematie der reinen Empfindung* [the supremacy of pure sensation] *in der bildenden Kunst.*'

15 George Rowley, *Principles of Chinese Painting*, cf. note 4.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES



1931
Born in London

1939–45
Childhood in Cornwall. While her father is away in the armed forces during the war she lives with her mother, younger sister and aunt (a former student of Goldsmiths' College, London) in a cottage not far from the coast near Padstow. Irregular primary education by non-qualified or retired teachers who from time to time assemble children in the locality for lessons in subjects in which they have knowledge or interest. The beginning of Bridget Riley's interest in nature.

1946–48
Education at Cheltenham Ladies' College. Thanks to an understanding headmistress she is allowed to organise her own curriculum, and chooses only art lessons in addition to obligatory subjects. Her teacher, Colin Hayes, later tutor at the Royal College of Art, London, introduces her to the history of painting and encourages her to attend the life class at the local art school. The Van Gogh exhibition at the Tate Gallery in 1947 is her first encounter with the work of a Modern master.

1949–52
Studies at Goldsmiths' College, London. For her entrance examination she submits, among other things, a copy of Van Eyck's *Man with a Red Turban*. She devotes herself mainly to the life-drawing class of Sam Rabin, whom she still remembers with respect because he introduced her to the principles of pictorial abstraction: the autonomous construction of a body on a flat plane. Later she says: 'Life drawing was about the only thing I ever learned at art school.'

1952–55
Studies at the Royal College of Art. A period of great frustration, partly because it is her first experience of the art scene in London, partly because she slowly sees herself confronted with the unavoidable basic question of the modern painter: 'What should I paint, and how should I paint it?' Among her contemporaries are Frank Auerbach, Peter Blake, Robyn Denny, Richard Smith and Joe Tilson. She graduates with a BA degree.

1955–57
Continuation of a long period of unhappiness. She nurses her father after a serious car accident and suffers a breakdown. Works in a glassware shop, teaches children and eventually joins the J. Walter Thompson Advertising Agency where her job is principally to draw the subjects which form the basis of the photographer's work. In the winter of 1958 she sees the Whitechapel Art Gallery's large Pollock exhibition, which makes a powerful impact.

1958
Stimulated by the exhibition *The Developing Process* at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (March to April), a joint project on the creative process devised by Harry Thubron and Victor Pasmore, she takes part in Thubron's summer school in Suffolk, where she meets Maurice de Sausmarez, who becomes her friend and mentor for the next few years and who will write the first monograph on her work. The older painter and art scholar arouses her interest in Futurism and Divisionism and introduces her to primary documents of Modern art (Klee, Stravinsky). In the late autumn she copies Georges Seurat's *Le Pont de Courbevoie* (Courtauld Institute, London) from a reproduction.

1960
First year of her independent work. In the summer she and Maurice de Sausmarez tour Italy, admiring the architecture. At the Venice Biennale, Riley sees the large exhibition of Futurism. In the hills surrounding Sienna she makes studies for *Pink Landscape*, a key painting in her early development. In the autumn, she breaks with de Sausmarez and suffers a personal and artistic crisis. From repeated attempts to make one final, entirely black painting, originate her first black and white works, which to begin with are oriented towards contemporary Hard Edge painting (e.g. *Kiss*, 1960/61) but very quickly take on the unmistakable traits of her own pictorial identity.

1961–64

Beginning of the black and white paintings which she continues until 1966. It is a period of intense work. Peter Sedgley, a painter of her own generation, remains her partner throughout the 1960s. In the summer, both visit the plateau of Vaucluse in the south of France where she acquires a derelict farm which in the 1970s is transformed into her new studio. In London, one evening on her way home from J. Walter Thompson (where she works part-time until 1962) she shelters from a downpour in a doorway – it turns out to be the entrance of Gallery One, whose director, Victor Musgrave, asks her in. She invites him to visit her studio to look at her work. In the following spring Musgrave holds her first solo exhibition.

1965

Increasing recognition culminates in the inclusion of her work in the exhibition *The Responsive Eye* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in January. Richard Feigen simultaneously opens a solo show of her work which is sold out before the opening night. Josef Albers calls her his 'daughter' and Ad Reinhardt acts as her escort, to protect her from 'wolves'. She has become a 'star', to whom even Dalí, together with his royal retinue and real leopards, pays tribute. But her success is double-edged. Fashion shop windows are full of 'Op' imitations of her work. With the help of Barnett Newman's lawyer she tries to take legal action against this commercial plagiarism, only to discover that in the USA there is no copyright protection for artists. Leading New York artists, realising the dangerous implications of this, start their own independent initiative. As a result in 1967 the first US copyright legislation is passed. Returning to London three weeks after the opening of *The Responsive Eye*, she has only one thought: 'It will take at least twenty years before anyone looks at my paintings seriously again.'

1965–67

Period of transition in which she introduces into her painting sequences of coloured greys, as opposed to the neutral greys she had used earlier. The exceptional subtlety of these pictures and their titles (*Arrest*; *Drift*; *Deny*) carry further the method of reversal by compounding it. In the summer of 1967 she visits Greece. In the same year, with *Chant* and *Late Morning*, she makes her breakthrough to pure colour. Along with the sculptor Phillip King she is chosen to represent Great Britain at the forthcoming Venice Biennale. That winter she meets Robert Kudielka for the first time.

1968

Wins the International Prize for painting at the 34th Venice Biennale. She is the first British contemporary painter and the first woman ever to achieve this distinction. It is also the last prize awarded by the Biennale in its old form. The prize-giving ceremony cannot take place due to student protests. Along with César, Marisol and others, she tries in vain to get into discussion with the students. In the autumn of the same year Peter Sedgley and Bridget Riley establish S.P.A.C.E., an organisation which provides artists with low-cost studios in large warehouse buildings. The project gets successfully underway with the move into St. Katherine's Dock in 1969 and still continues, with the support of the Arts Council of England, up to the present day.

1970–71

Large European retrospective which covers the period 1961–70 (including some work prior to 1961) and shows the development from the black and white works to the new colour paintings based on the interplay of only two or three colours. The exhibition opens at the Kunstverein Hannover and subsequently travels to Berne, Düsseldorf, Turin and finally London, where it is extended and presented at the Hayward Gallery. It attracts more than 40,000 visitors. Robert Melville, who had so far followed her development rather critically, begins his review in the New Statesman with: 'No painter, dead or alive, has ever made us more aware of our eyes than Bridget Riley.'

1971–73

Beginning of a period of radical artistic change. Her visits to museums and art galleries while accompanying her exhibition have made her more curious about the European tradition in painting. She undertakes numerous journeys with Robert Kudielka: to see Tiepolo and Riemenschneider in Würzburg; Grünewald in Colmar. She visits the Alte Pinakothek in Munich, where she is deeply impressed by Altdorfer and Rubens, and the Prado in Madrid for the great Spanish painters and, above all, Titian. In such remote places as the Baroque churches of Upper Swabia she unexpectedly finds echoes of the luminous colours she was using at the time. All paths lead irresistibly and recurrently back to the vexing question occupying her in the studio: How to approach colour? At first she tries to extend her means through formal changes, but with *Pæan* (1973) she changes the formal organisation altogether, a move that anticipates the freer, more open structure of her work in the 1980s. In the spring of 1973, while looking at Altdorfer's cycle of the Passion in the convent of St. Florian near Linz, news reaches her that her mother is suffering from an acute form of myeloma.

1974–77

During the next two years she divides her time between London and Cornwall, to which her parents have retired. She begins to read Proust, who influences her on many levels. She has her property in Vaucluse renovated, but does not use the newly-built studio until the beginning of the 1980s. With the 'curve' paintings, on which she worked exclusively between 1974 and 1978, her work takes a lyrical turn quite at odds with prevailing taste. Following the death of her mother in 1976 she concentrates on the preparation of another retrospective, and in this connection travels to Japan for three weeks at the end of March 1977, with a stopover in India (where she visits the cave temples of Elephanta, Ellora and Ajanta). Her attraction to classical Japanese culture is spontaneous and ranges from painting and formal gardens through to Nô-theatre and the hospitality of the Ryokans. The gallery owner Shimizu gains her entrance to almost all the important sites in and around Kyoto and Nara. In the Osaka Museum she is given permission to study the famous sketchbook of Ogata Korin with his studies of waves.

1978–80

A second retrospective exhibition, with just under one hundred paintings covering the years from 1959 to 1978, means that Riley travels extensively again. Opening in Buffalo (September 1978), it continues with two further stops in the USA, two in Australia, and reaches its final destination in Tokyo (January 1980). In December 1977 she sees the exhibition *Cézanne: The Late Work* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, visiting the show again in Paris the following year. In 1978 the exhibition *Monet's Years at Giverny: Beyond Impressionism* at the Metropolitan Museum, New York, engages her to such an extent that she goes to see it a second time in the autumn in St. Louis. En route to the Sydney showing of her own exhibition she visits Tahiti. While in Australia she makes expeditions to the Barrier Reef, Alice Springs and Ayers Rock. She returns home via Indonesia: in Bali she enjoys the rich greens of the country and the extravagant colours of its festivals, especially the Barong theatre; and in Java she is particularly impressed by the pure, cool abstraction of the great temple of Borobudur in the middle of the jungle. Her artistic development takes an unexpected turn in the winter of 1979–80, when she travels, mainly on her sister's initiative, to Egypt. There she is taken by the contrast between the cultivation in the Nile Valley and the monumental works of art on the edge of the desert. In the Cairo Museum she is surprised by the consistent use of a certain group of colours in the arts and crafts of ancient Egypt; and the tomb paintings on the West Bank of Luxor show her the full extent to which these colours could be developed. But it is only much later, after her return to London, that she recalls the particular palette and begins considering its potential for her own work.

The free reconstruction of the 'Egyptian palette' gives her for the first time a basic range of strong colours which, however, because of their intensity, demand a return to the simpler form of stripes. She begins to work regularly in her studio in Vaucluse and studies the use of colour by the French painters of classical Modernism. In 1981 she is appointed a trustee of the National Gallery in London. In 1983, for the first time in fifteen years, she visits Venice again to look at the paintings which form the basis of European colourism. She begins to give lectures on her work and accepts two commissions: in 1983 her wall paintings for the Royal Liverpool Hospital are completed. In the same year, the Ballet Rambert gives a first performance at the Edinburgh Festival of the ballet *Colour Moves* which the American choreographer Robert North created in response to her backcloth designs. In the winter of 1981–82 she travels to Southern India where she visits the major Hindu and Buddhist monuments. During the planning of the extension of the National Gallery in London her role as a trustee becomes controversial. Almost single-handedly, she brings about the rejection of a commercial project for the new building and clears the way for the present Sainsbury Wing. In 1984 she gradually begins to prepare for a radical revision of her work in her Vaucluse studio, and in the spring of 1986 her painting takes a new direction.

In 1986, on the occasion of her latest exhibition at the Sidney Janis Gallery in New York, she meets two postmodern 'appropriation' painters, Philip Taaffe and Ross Bleckner, who have made extensive use of her earlier work. She herself is moving into a new area. The breaking up of the vertical register of her paintings through the introduction of a dynamic diagonal disrupts the balance of her pictorial space and results in larger and smaller units in lozenge form. In order to be able to concentrate fully on the new work she sets up an additional studio in the East End of London. In summer 1989 the National Gallery invites Riley to select the latest in the series of *The Artist's Eye* exhibitions. She chooses seven large figure compositions by Titian, Veronese, El Greco, Rubens, Poussin and Cézanne from the museum's collection. They all have in common an organisation shaped by diagonals and are characterised, if in varying degrees, by complex colour orchestrations.

In spring 1992 a retrospective, *Paintings 1982–1992* opens at the Kunsthalle Nürnberg and travels to the Josef Albers Museum Bottrop, the Hayward Gallery, London, with the subtitle *According to Sensation* and the Ikon Gallery, Birmingham. It consists of paintings which cover the transition from the stripe formations to the dynamism of the lozenge structures. The success of the show coincides, particularly in England, with a series of exhibitions focusing on the art of the 1960s. Riley emerges as one of the very few artists of that period who were able subsequently to develop their work. The Tate Gallery in London puts on a Riley display, *Six Paintings 1963–1993*, drawn from its collection. As a result of the renewed interest in Riley's work BBC Radio 3 produces a series of five programmes in which Riley is in conversation with Neil MacGregor, E.H. Gombrich, Michael Craig-Martin, Andrew Graham-Dixon and Bryan Robertson. Broadcast in 1992, they are repeated the following year and published in book form in 1995. The same year she delivers her lecture, 'Colour for the Painter', at Darwin College in Cambridge. Riley is made Honorary Doctor of the Universities of Oxford (1993) and Cambridge (1995).

1995–97

Her painting *From Here* 1984 lends its title to an exhibition of three generations of British abstract painters organised by Karsten Schubert and Waddington Galleries in 1995. After a more than thirty-year absence from teaching, Riley accepts an invitation to join the staff of De Montfort University, Leicester, as Visiting Professor. In 1996 she gives the 23rd William Townsend Memorial Lecture at the Slade School of Fine Art, choosing 'Painting Now' as the subject. Visits to the Mondrian retrospective at the Gemeentemuseum in The Hague in the winter of 1994–95 lead to an intense re-engagement with the work and writings of Mondrian. In November 1995 she contributes a paper to a Mondrian symposium at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. The following year she is asked by the Tate Gallery to select a Mondrian exhibition from the collection the Gemeentemuseum. Installed by Riley and her co-curator, Sean Rainbird, the exhibition is the first comprehensive Mondrian show in England in forty years. Meanwhile her own work is showing signs of further change. Having slowly introduced colour harmonies equal to the prevailing contrast structure, she is now working with a new sensation of 'depth'. In spring 1997 she also begins to introduce circular or curvilinear forms into her developed rhomboid structures, to more easily facilitate the looping arc-like movements of the colour organisation. The renewed preoccupation with curves, and her interest in deep but not illusionistic pictorial space, lead to a large temporary wall drawing carried out for the *White Noise* exhibition at the Kunsthalle Bern in May 1998. The sensation of layered planes, previously achieved through complex colour relationships, is here the result of simple black and white drawing. The wall drawing has a major effect on her colour work. First results of this development are included in the exhibition *Bridget Riley: Works 1961–1998* shown at the Abbot Hall Art Gallery, Kendal (Cumbria) in winter 1998–99.

In the 1999 New Year's Honours, Riley is appointed Companion of Honour. In June the exhibition *Bridget Riley: Paintings from the 1960s and 70s* opens at the Serpentine Gallery, London; on this occasion the first edition of *The Eye's Mind: Bridget Riley, Collected Writings 1965–1999*, is published. In October the exhibition *Ausgewählte Bilder/Selected Paintings 1961–1999* is shown in the Kunstverein in Düsseldorf. It makes a connection between the early black and white painting *Kiss* and *Rêve* (1999) the first fully achieved painting using the new curvilinear rhythm. In spring 2000 her biggest architectural commission to date is completed: a hanging, curtain-like installation in the atrium of Citibank's European headquarters in London designed by Norman Foster and Partners. Extending over eighteen floors it consists of three planes of coloured aluminium plates suspended by steel cables. Although related to her rhomboid paintings, this open construction changes according to the viewpoint from which it is seen and the conditions of light in the office tower. In the summer a group of her new curve paintings and related works on paper is shown in London for the first time at Waddington Galleries, an exhibition organised by Karsten Schubert. In the autumn the Dia Center for the Arts in New York mounts a survey of her work under the title *Bridget Riley: Reconnaissance*. The exhibition is complemented by a show of recent paintings at PaceWildenstein, Both shows mark a major re-evaluation of her work in America. At the end of November she takes part in the international symposium 'Das Bild: Image, Picture, Painting' at the Berlin Academy of Arts.

In collaboration with Robert Kudielka Riley prepares a Paul Klee exhibition for the Hayward Gallery, London. She participates in the Santa Fe biennial, *Beau Monde: Toward it Redeemed Cosmopolitanism* 2001–02 curated by David Hickey, with the painting *Evoë 1* (2000). The exhibition *Paul Klee: The Nature of Creation* is shown at the the Hayward in the spring of 2002. In March, *Bridget Riley: New Work* opens at the Museum Haus Esters and the Kaiser Wilhelm Museum, Krefeld, the first museum show dedicated exclusively to the new curvilinear paintings. An extended German version of *The Eye's Mind: Bridget Riley* is published under the title *Malen um zu sehen*.

The year 2003 is dominated by the preparation and installation of Riley's retrospective exhibition at Tate Britain (June 26–September 28). Together with curator Paul Moorhouse she has selected 56 paintings from all periods since 1961 and a group of preparatory studies that give an insight into her working methods. For the exhibition she makes a special wall drawing *Composition with Circles 3* that links the early black and white work with her most recent paintings. The show is received to universal critical acclaim and draws 98,000 visitors. In September Riley is awarded the Præmium Imperiale for her lifetime's achievement as a painter. She travels to Tokyo for the official award ceremony and delivers a message of thanks on behalf of the other laureates (Mario Merz, Ken Loach, Claudio Abbado and Rem Koolhaas). During this trip she revisits some of the masterpieces of ancient Japanese art in Tokyo and Kyoto.

A new retrospective exhibition travels to Australia and New Zealand. It is first shown at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney and later at the City Gallery Wellington. In modified form the show is later presented at the Aargauer Kunsthaus in Aarau (Switzerland). A small survey is shown at the Cranbrook Art Museum in Bloomfield Hills (Michigan). Riley continues to develop her work steadily in the studio. Among the new works exhibited in autumn 2004 at PaceWildenstein in New York is *Painting with Two Verticals* where for the first time the dynamism of the curves is both countered and enhanced by vertical divisions. For the rebuilt home of the Academy of the Arts in Berlin (whose member she became in 2004) Riley made another wall drawing, *Composition with Circles 5* (2005). Her work continues to be included in the growing number of historical surveys covering the optical and kinetic tendencies in 20th-century art. The environment *Continuum* (1963), which was part of her second solo exhibition at Gallery One, London, is reconstructed for the exhibition *L'Œil moteur. Art optique et cinétique. 1951–1975* at the Musée d'Art Moderne et Contemporain, Strasbourg. In April 2005 Riley delivers the Seamus Heaney Lecture at the University of Dublin on the subject of 'Working'.

2006 is characterised by intense work in the studio which by the autumn leads to an unexpected new departure. Riley discovers that her preparatory work with cut-out papers allows her to open up the rectangular picture format, thereby making the white wall an integral part of the field. She explores the potential of this discovery in several studies and finally in *Wall Painting 1* which is first shown at Max Hetzler Galerie in Berlin and subsequently at PaceWildenstein, New York – a double show of new works in both the gallery's uptown and downtown branches. At the same time the Museum of Modern Art presents the exhibition *Georges Seurat. The Drawings* to which Riley contributes a catalogue essay, 'Seurat as Mentor' in which she acknowledges her indebtedness to the work of the French artist. The coincidence of the MoMA and PaceWildenstein exhibitions makes the critic of The New York Times express doubt at the conventional assessment of Riley work in current art history: 'More and more, however, Ms. Riley comes across less as an Op artist than as the last living Post-Impressionist.'

In June the largest Riley retrospective exhibition ever opens at the Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris in June. Fabrice Hergott, the director of the museum, called it a 'historic event' not only because it is the first comprehensive show of Riley's work in France, but more importantly, because it is a homage to the historical roots of her art. Selected by Anne Montfort in collaboration with the artist, the exhibition consists of 56 paintings and about 80 drawings covering her development from the early pointillist work in the 'method' of Seurat to the most recent curve paintings. For the long curved room of the museum Riley creates *Composition with Circles 6*, by far the largest work of this kind. Also included in the exhibition is *Wall Painting 1*. Apart from a substantial catalogue, the exhibition is accompanied by a French translation of her collected writings, *L'Ésprit de l'œil: Bridget Riley.*

2009

In the winter of 2008/09 Karsten Schubert shows *Circles, Colour, Structure: Studies 1971*, a previously never exhibited group of studies executed in 1970/71. The show subsequently travelled to Galerie Max Hetzler in Berlin. The critics were amazed by the freshness and vitality of the work: 'Bridget Riley is undoubtedly a classic whose early power of creation continues to the present day.' In the autumn of 2009 Bridget Riley is awarded the Kaiserring of the town of Goslar. First awarded in 1975 to Henry Moore it is Germany's most prestigious international art prize. It is accompanied by a retrospective exhibition at the Mönchehaus Museum. In July, Riley receives the Award of Companionship of De Montfort University, Leicester. The year ends with a UK touring exhibition of Riley paintings and studies from the Arts Council Collection; beginning at the Walker Art Gallery Liverpool it will travel to City Art Gallery Birmingham, Norwich Castle Museum and Southampton City Art Gallery (2009–2010). An exhibition of new paintings and wall paintings is held by Karsten Schubert and Timothy Taylor in London in the Autumn.

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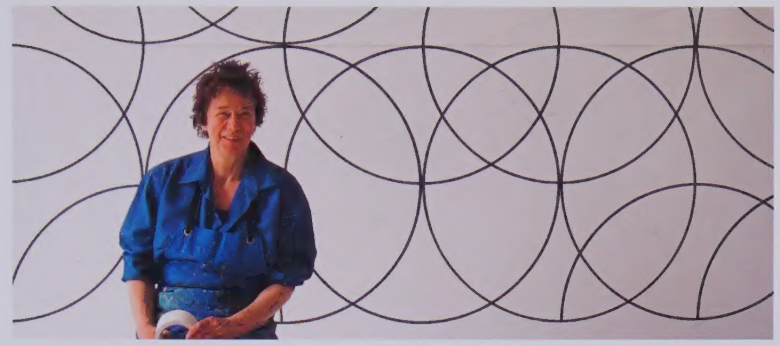
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