

Bridget Riley Drawings

From the Artist's Studio

JUNE 23 TO OCTOBER 8, 2023

LARGE PRINT LABELS

The
Morgan
Library &
Museum

Study for Raising of Lazarus

1949–52

Conté crayon

Tonal Study for Raising of Lazarus

1949–52

Conté crayon and gouache

Color Study for Raising of Lazarus

1949–52

Oil

This set of studies depicts a scene that appears frequently in art history: Jesus's raising of Lazarus from the dead, from the Gospel of John. Riley did not work from a particular art-historical source for her version, however, which is set in an underground catacomb. Each study presents a crowd of onlookers surrounding Lazarus, whose supine body is almost imperceptible. A schematic Jesus stands over him, arm outstretched. In the first drawing, her focus is on line; in the second, tone, designated by areas of black Conté crayon and white gouache. In the final study, she translated these tonal gradations into passages of color that relate only tenuously to the scene. Riley never completed a painting based on these studies.

Standing and Seated Figures

1949–52

Conté crayon

Color Study of Betty Riley

Early 1950s

Oil on prepared paper

Tonal Study of Betty Riley

Early 1950s

Conté crayon

Girl Looking Down with Standing Nude

Early 1950s

Graphite and Conté crayon

Figure Lying Down

1949–52

Conté crayon

Head Studies

1946–48

Graphite

Louise

Early 1950s

Conté crayon

Older Woman Looking Down

Mid-1950s

Conté crayon

Girl Reading

1958

Pastel

Self-Portrait

1956

Conté crayon

Blue Landscape

1959

Oil on canvas

In the late 1950s, Riley found guidance in the Post-Impressionist art of Georges Seurat (1859–1891). She later wrote, “After having been taught drawing extensively, I felt at a loss in approaching color. From his work I learned something about the interrelationship of color and tone as well as the advantages and limits of a strictly methodical approach.”

Blue Landscape is the first of several paintings she made using Seurat’s pointillist technique, in which individual dots of color are juxtaposed to form an image. Although Riley ultimately distanced herself from the scientific rigor of Seurat’s method in favor of a more intuitive approach, his work is central to her understanding of painting as a vehicle of pure sensation rooted in the experience of close observation.

Line Study for Blue Landscape

1959

Graphite

Color Study for Blue Landscape

1959

Crayon

Tonal Study for Blue Landscape

1959

Pastel

Trees on a Riverbank at Molecey's Mill

1952–55

Conté crayon

Working in Lincolnshire, England, Riley framed out five landscapes around Molecey's Mill, a ramshackle eighteenth-century complex that her family purchased there in 1952. At the time, she was a disillusioned student at the Royal College of Art, London. In studies such as these, Riley found herself returning to the drawing lessons of Sam Rabin, her former teacher at Goldsmiths. Through close and active looking, she sought to create drawings that did not merely copy her subject but reconstructed what she saw using line and tone.

Trees on a Riverbank at Molecey's Mill

1952–55

Conté crayon

The River at Molecey's Mill

1952–55

Wax crayon

Throughout her life, Riley has drawn inspiration from the countryside and its riot of optical sensation. She wrote of her childhood in Cornwall, a county on England's south coast, "My mother made a habit of looking, and she taught me to look. She would always point things out: the colors of shadows, the way water moves, how changes in the shape of a cloud are responsible for different colors in the sea, the dapples and reflections that come up from pools inside caves."

Recollections of Scotland (2)

1959

Conté crayon and pastel

In 1959 Riley and her sister, Sally, drove up and down the coasts of Scotland. While this drawing commemorating the trip is still legible as a landscape, it is highly abstracted. In a prelude of her work of the 1960s, Riley economized the landscape to just a handful of marks with a stark division of black and white.

Study for Kiss

1961

Graphite and gouache on graph paper

Although it shares little (apart from its palette) with the optical paintings that immediately followed it, Riley considers *Kiss* a breakthrough: “*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 realized 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.”

Three works:

Untitled

1960

Graphite and gouache

Study for Movement in Squares

1961

Graphite and gouache on card

It is important to Riley that her paintings are handmade, but their surfaces are typically pristine and smooth. This is true of *Movement in Squares* (1961), which appeared in Riley's first solo show, held in 1962 at Gallery One, London. By contrast, pencil is visible beneath the imperfectly applied black gouache in this study, and pinholes on each corner reveal that she hung it up in her studio as a reference.

Riley described the evolution of the composition: "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 drew the whole of *Movement in Squares* without 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."

Study for Blaze

1962

Graphite and gouache

Scale Study for Shift

1963

Graphite and ink

This study features sets of lines that resemble the staff used in musical notation. Music is a powerful metaphor for Riley, who uses terms such as rhythm, pacing, tempo, and theme and variation to describe her work. “One listens to music in order to hear,” she has said. “It would seem to me to be an ideal achievement in abstract paintings, if one were to look in order to see.”

Dislocated Images (Study for Off)

1963

Ink, graphite, and collage

Preparatory Drawing for Shift

1963

Graphite and ink

Explaining her use of fundamental geometric shapes, such as the square, circle, oval, and triangle (seen here), Riley wrote, “I found that through drawing I could analyze and study them. What could a triangle, for example, do and, equally important, *not* do? I put the triangle through ‘its paces.’”

Study for Hidden Squares

1961

Ink on graph paper

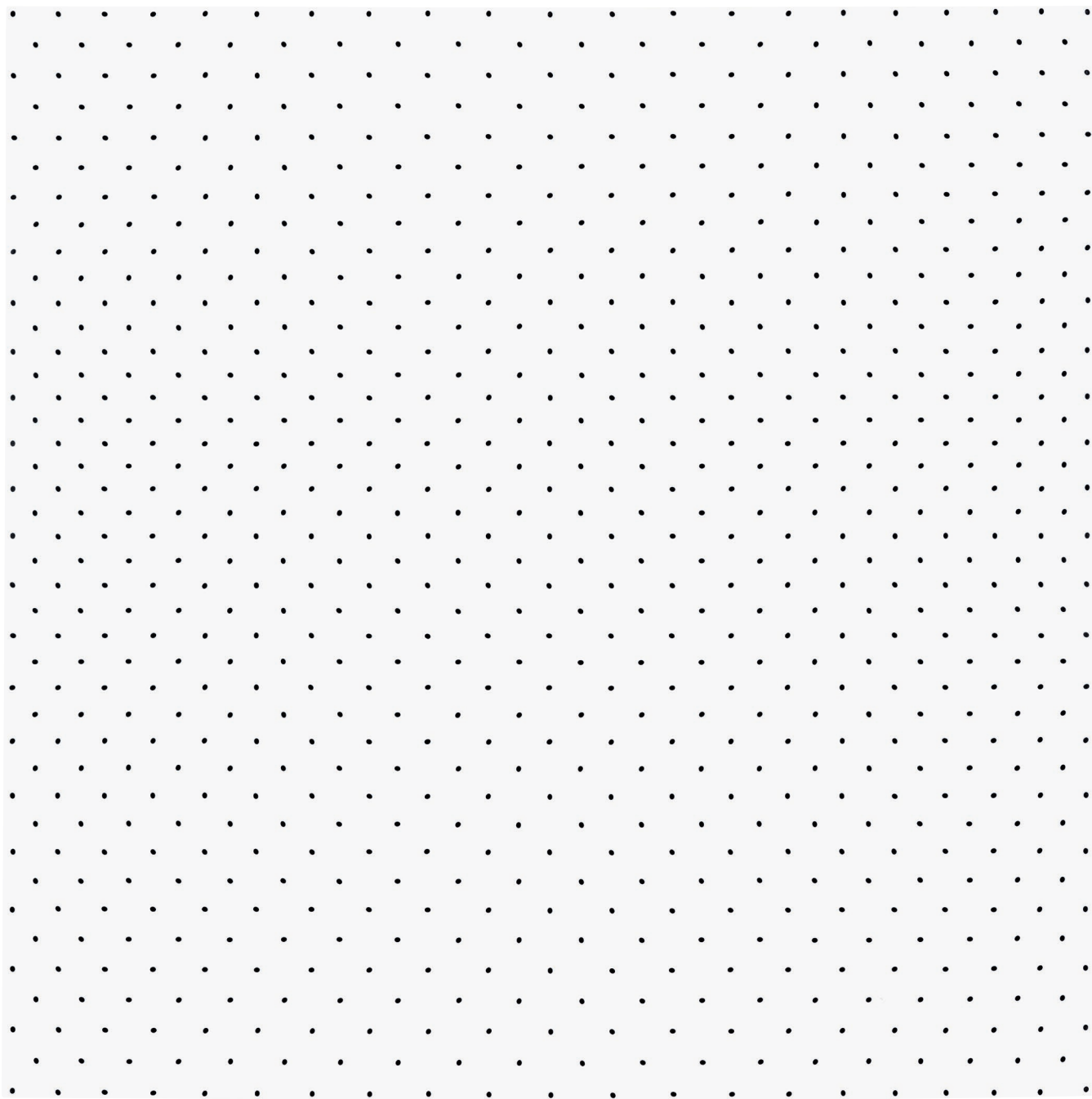
Riley's interest in pointillism led her to explore the idea of a hidden image. She said, "I started from a field of small circles in which I 'buried' some squares. . . . The small circles were repeated evenly over the surface. From this regular pulse, the image—the squares—emerged." This study is one of several Riley made in preparation for the painting *Hidden Squares*. She noted that she hung them up next to one another in her studio to determine the appropriate scale and disposition of the painting's geometric components.

Angle Study for Static (II)

1966

Ballpoint pen on tracing paper

This study, unusual for being done in red, explores the effect of staccato lines set at slight angles and distributed at regular intervals. In corresponding paintings, which measure over seven feet squared, small black ellipses are similarly angled to give the effect of what Riley has called “visual prickles.” “It’s a quality: as velvet is smooth, so this is a sparkling texture—visually. . . . 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 [between them].”



Static 1, 1966. Synthetic emulsion on board, 90 × 90 in. (228.6 × 228.6 cm). Private collection. © Bridget Riley 2023. All rights reserved. Photo: Anna Arca, courtesy Bridget Riley Archive.

Study for Shuttle

1964

Gouache on graph paper

Untitled Study

1963

Graphite and ink

Study for Intake

1964

Casein paint and graphite

Study for White Discs

1964

Gouache

Study for Polarity

1964

Graphite and gouache

Untitled Study

1963

Graphite and gouache on graph paper

Study for Breathe

1965

Graphite and gouache

Untitled (Toward Horizontal Vibration)

1961

Graphite and gouache on graph paper

Untitled Study

1965

Graphite and gouache

In this heavily annotated study, Riley places diamonds of various sizes on shifting axes. She enhances the sense of movement by adding white in progressively larger ratios, producing an effect of reflected light. Sheets like this one are an essential part of Riley's practice, which is intuitive rather than scientific. She has said, "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." Once she has put the unit "through its paces" (as she would say), a painting is ready to be executed.

Untitled (Study for Cast)

1965

Graphite and gouache on graph paper

Final Study for Burn

1964

Graphite and gouache on graph paper

19 Grays, Cool Ground

1966

Gouache

19 Grays, Warm Ground

1966

Gouache

Untitled (Study for 19 Grays)

1966

Graphite and gouache

This tactile drawing belongs to a series of studies, screenprints, and paintings created between 1966 and 1968 in which Riley experimented with the possibilities contained within different gray tones. Using a compositional device she explored in contemporary works such as *Angle Study for "Static (II),"* on view nearby, she juxtaposed warm and cool grays in an effort to "oppose a structural movement with a tonal movement."

Untitled (Study for 19 Grays)

1966

Graphite and gouache

Study for Arrest 3

1965

Graphite and gouache on graph paper with collage

Turquoise and Red Grays

1967

Graphite and gouache on graph paper

This study and others nearby mark a transitional moment in Riley's art, between her earlier black-and-white and grayscale works and her subsequent chromatic compositions. She has described "a long thin line of color" as "the ideal element" for the investigation of color and light. Over the next decade, Riley would elaborate on the grammar of colored ribbons that she established here.

Scale Study for Cataract Series [Turquoise and Red Grays]

1967

Graphite and gouache on graph paper

Study for Cataract Series

1967

Graphite and gouache on graph paper

Colored Grays—Turquoise and Gray Separating Curves

1967

Graphite and gouache on graph paper

Rhomboids, Red and Blue to Green Scale

1969

Graphite and gouache on graph paper

Study for Late Morning

1967

Graphite and gouache on graph paper

Late Morning (1967–68) is Riley's first abstract painting that does not utilize black. Simple vertical stripes allowed her to focus her attention—and the spectator's—on the effects of subtle chromatic shifts. Along the length of this sheet, vertical red bands alternate with stripes that transition from blue to green, with notes identifying their hues and intervals. This body of work enabled Riley to explore how the interaction among elements, including the spaces between them, produces an overriding optical sensation.

Red and Blue to Red and Turquoise Paired (Study for Late Morning 1)

1967

Graphite and gouache on graph paper

Study for Print (Untitled [Elongated Triangles 5])

1970

Graphite and gouache

Study for Print (Untitled [Elongated Triangles 1])

1970

Graphite and gouache

Untitled

1970

Graphite and gouache

Scale Study, Open Disks, Olive, Turquoise, Cerise

1970

Graphite and gouache

Untitled (Study for Rattle)

1973

Graphite and gouache

Final Study for Halcyon [Repaint]

1971

Graphite and gouache

Study for Entice

1974

Graphite and gouache

In the mid-1970s, Riley shifted her focus from vertical bands to undulating, twisting ribbons of color: “By using twisted curves I could bunch up color sensations in a way that went further than the lateral groupings. . . . When colors 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.”

***2 Color Twist—Ocher/Turquoise and Magenta/Green,
Series 34—Purple Added***

1979

Graphite and gouache

Study for Orphean Elegy 2

1978

Graphite and gouache

In this complex study, Riley eliminated the white ground and expanded her palette. Through a process of trial and error, she arrived at what she calls “the particular hues and shades that could best generate an envelope of colored light.” Though the drawing seems to live up to its title—which invokes Orpheus, a figure from Greek legend known for his otherworldly, beautiful music—Riley was not entirely satisfied with it: “I am getting into an area of such delicacy and refinement that I feel it cannot be right,” she told an interviewer in 1978. This statement emphasizes the exploratory nature of Riley’s practice and anticipates her return to vertical bands in the early 1980s.

Red, Green and Blue Twisted Curves

1979

Graphite and gouache

Green and Magenta in Two Color Twists

1979

Graphite and gouache

Egyptian Stripes with Revisions

1983

Graphite and gouache on graph paper with collage

During the winter of 1979–80, Riley traveled to Egypt. She was struck by the colors she encountered in tomb paintings on the West Bank of Luxor. “They blaze with color and life,” she observed. “There, in a veritable no-man’s land, the artists have brought about a feeling of sunlight, well-being, and pleasure.” In a series of canvases and wall paintings, Riley adopted a palette inspired by ancient Egyptian art—turquoise, blue, red, yellow, green, black, and white. The appended strips of painted paper in this study illuminate her working process.

Color Test (Extended)

1982

Graphite and gouache on two joined sheets of graph paper

In the early 1980s, Riley recommitted herself to straight vertical bands as the most direct vehicle for the exploration of chromatic relationships, though she retained the larger palette she had adopted in the previous decade—this study uses four colors plus black. Here, the white of the paper is activated in intervals, and Riley extended the sheet to better assess the impact of the pattern.

Study for Cornflower

1983

Graphite and gouache

Study 5 September

1985

Graphite and gouache

In 1985 Riley introduced a new element into her compositions: the “zig,” a rhomboid, or diagonal band, placed within a vertical stripe. Discussing this addition, she said, “I wanted *more*. A way of working which allowed me to get to grips with plastic issues. . . . 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 color and rhythm.”

Study August 18

1992

Graphite and gouache

Georges Seurat's pointillism was a touchstone for Riley when she introduced color into her work in the late 1950s, and the technique has had an enduring impact on her practice. Here, instead of painting individual points of color, as she did in *Blue Landscape* (1959), which can be seen on the other side of the gallery, she used colored "zigs" to elicit a comparable shimmering sensation that evokes, but in no way represents, a landscape.

October 24 Revision B

1986

Gouache

Toward Lagoon

1997

Graphite and gouache

New Curves—January 2 '99

1999

Graphite and gouache

New Curves [Revision of Evoë, July. Variant 1]

2002

Graphite and gouache

Ground Study for 28 August '98

1998

Graphite and gouache

Riley's practice is iterative, with each body of work building on the discoveries of the last. This is among the reasons she has retained the studies seen in this exhibition. In the late 1990s, she turned from a vocabulary of straight lines toward one of flowing curves. This study demonstrates how she constructed a new formal idiom upon elements of earlier works: vertical bands, zigs, and arcs.

31st September '06 Bassacs

2006

Graphite and gouache

Movement Taken from 21st October '00 Bassacs. Study B
2000

Graphite and gouache with collage

Beginning in the 1980s, collage became an important aspect of Riley's studio practice. She uses cut painted papers to experiment with compositions before committing them to paper or canvas. This method evokes the late paper cut-outs of Henri Matisse (1869–1954), an artist whom Riley admires, especially for his bold, abstract use of color. But where Matisse's cut-outs were completed works, collage is part of Riley's working process.



Riley in her London studio, ca. 1990. Photo: Bill Warhurst, courtesy Bridget Riley Archive.