

A Parallel Pink Universe

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About a year ago, Peter Schjeldahl made a shrewd remark. We were talking about Max Beckmann. Peter said that Beckmann was like the best painter in a parallel universe. I find that Bridget Riley's paintings manifest the same peculiarity, an anxious uneasiness in domestic settings. The simplest explanation for the alien ambience of an object in a room resides not in the object, but in the room—the parallel universe. The paintings look great. The room looks odd and askew, which may be an occasion for Riley's retreat from painting on a hard support to painting on the wall. I know of several collectors who have redesigned their rooms to make the paintings more comfortable, to soften the enormous pressure that Riley's paintings exert on the room. Max Beckmann's portrait of himself in a tuxedo installed at Harvard is an apt example. The room is all Beckmann. Harvard has disappeared.

Situating a painting in a room, however, is quite a different task from situating two-dozen paintings in a gallery. The galaxies of stripes, bands, triangles, and grids flying among one another in a gallery space virtually demand some sentient order, some dance of leitmotifs. Such a system must exist, of course, especially if Bridget Riley is doing the arranging. The footprints of the paintings rhyme, the tempos are in tune, and the order that I have imagined for this collection may be wrong, but it is an order that begins with the simplest configuration and resolves itself into a tight conceptual arch.

There are 23 paintings in this exhibition. *Pink Landscape* (1960) stands at the keystone of the arch, painted in the manner of Georges Seurat and taken from a set of Riley's works based on traditional idioms of modern painting. A leitmotif from *Pink Landscape* appears in each subsequent painting. Beneath the keystone there is a second tier of verticals, horizontals, tents, triangles, and discs in rigorous black, white, and gray of the sort that stole *The Responsive Eye* in 1965 at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. This tier is supported by a third tier of paintings with colored stripes and bands whose colors have been paled out into equal values. Riley's habit of tightening and softening the range of value in her paintings while complicating the design takes us simultaneously away from Seurat and back toward him.

This reminds me of an afternoon I spent with Ellsworth Kelly at his studio in Spencertown, New York. We looked at paintings until I needed a cigarette and we retired into the yard. Ellsworth preceded me and, as he stepped into the light, he shaded his eyes and squinted. Following him, I did the same.

“Ahh,” I said, “another squinter.”

“I see color,” Ellsworth said. “But, sometimes it’s like an assault.”

So I am left thinking about the master of color thrown back by its complexity and intensity. The same could be said of Riley, as well, I think, since the base of the arch I have imagined is a series of squares composed by a grid of mono-valued circles, whose colors vary in subtle, virtually invisible units. Each array simplifies; each array elaborates. These arrays, when overlaid, create an avatar of *Pink Landscape*, or something like it. This order of orders, then, demonstrates a suave algorithmic progression whose intellectual integrity blossoms wherever it might wish to go, which floats and never fades into its parallel universes.