

## *Video Transcript*

Bridget Riley | In Conversation with Sir John Leighton

### *Duration:*

12:25

### *Speakers:*

Bridget Riley and Sir John Leighton

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## *Transcript*

### *Bridget Riley:*

Probably every painter has a long conversation with their work and the longer that you live of course, you know the conversation goes on stretching far back, so. It's a reconnoitre for me. I see my work differently, as time goes by, I've realized, to my unbelievable delight that it communicates that my own dialogue with my work is reflected in how other people actually look at it, and the closest to me is the most wonderful thing, when I find out how many.

### *John Leighton:*

The exhibition covers almost seven decades of production and there's a large group of drawings and paintings which were made when you were a student. At Cheltenham Ladies College, at Goldsmiths College of Art and I think many people will be surprised by that. The range of experimentation and concentration on drawing in these works. Could you say something about maybe the importance of drawing and technique for you as a basis for your work?

### *Bridget Riley:*

Yes. Before I started to draw though, I have to look. I actually didn't think about being an artist at all. I didn't think about art either. I sought to find a context in which somehow I could exercise something in me which I didn't know what it was, but it was about looking, and where to do it. It just seemed that the only place I could go was to an art school.

### *John Leighton:*

You talked a little bit of the difference between a traditional approach which might start with a subject in nature and then move gradually away from that and you talked a little bit about how, in a sense, your approach now is the reverse, and that your starting point

might be formal qualities: volume, shape, composition, rhythm; and I think you say you put those through their paces.

*Bridget Riley:*

Pictorial elements are the agents to which you can put these things through their paces. You need something to do something with. You can't explore without an agent. My line, I think, is actually if my agent, or was for a very, very long time. It could be a drawn line, as it was. With drawn lines I worked on making movement in squares, and drawn lines through some of those big paintings, many of the big paintings. The curve is a curved line. It's a line which has been bent in what I think is rather like the twists of a body. It takes different angles different positions.

*John Leighton:*

Contrapposto.

*Bridget Riley:*

Contrapposto, exactly.

But you need the pictorial elements; they are rightly called that. They are things that you need to build a picture with.

*John Leighton:*

Then you know an incredible amount about the history of art. But, which artists started to attract your attention in the early years?

*Bridget Riley:*

In the early years... well, Matisse always did, especially with drawing, that he could draw a line, and for no clear reason, it enclosed the volume, and it was nologic in this, because it was not...the line did not seem to explain a skull, but it was something else. And so that was actually I think now, of course, probably it was a perception.

*John Leighton:*

And Matisse made it all look so easy there.

*Bridget Riley:*

Made it all look so easy. Yes, absolutely. But he was never deceived me.

*John Leighton:*

And then one of the earliest rooms in the exhibition is called looking at Seurat, the great nineteenth century post-impressionist painter who many people will know as the inventor of the pointillist technique of painting in dots.

*Bridget Riley:*

Yes, yes.

*John Leighton:*

But this is an artist who has meant a great deal to you at different moments in your career.

*Bridget Riley:*

Yes, he has.

*John Leighton:*

Could you tell us something about what Seurat has meant to you?

*Bridget Riley:*

I was struggling with this unwieldy thing called colour, and I was applying it in little dabs and these little tabs were not organised, in any way. They had no internal logic. They had no *raison d'être* and the National Gallery had for years, Seurat's great painting *The Bathers*, which you could see as you came up the stairs on the right hand side through the window and the light and the beauty of the colour was something that I couldn't pass by. I started to copy a small landscape, which had a similar diagonal across the canvas which separated the bank river bank from the river from the water. I worked methodically as I thought he had reworking this *melange* and it was exactly what it was called. It's a *melange*, a mixture. An optical mixture. And his findings were of such enormous help to me, who's in exactly the same position down the line.

*John Leighton:*

Would it be fair to say that Seurat gave you a sense of structure and a sense of parallel to nature, where you could see there was obviously a relationship to that experienced world, but you were creating something, sensations alongside it.

*Bridget Riley:*

A parallel universe. I think I was. It was that. It was the key into another world.

*John Leighton:*

Yes you mentioned earlier that Seurat had a hard time, in a sense for being, seeming almost to be too scientific. And moments in your career, people felt it – unfairly - that your work is perhaps disciplined, cool, very rigorous. Yet at the same time, of course, there is a strong element of intuition and really deeply felt emotion in what you do. I wondered if you felt some kinship in Seurat who is in a sense, derided for unfairly, without people realizing the tension that there is between these two.

*Bridget Riley:*

Certainly at one point in my life, in rage, and strong feeling think that I would give this business up, this hateful business of painting, and I was bitterly disappointed in myself and I painted it in fury, a black canvas with what amounted to a sort of very expressionist handling of black paint. I came down the next morning and looked at it, and I realised that it was quite inexpressive of what I felt. It was just a lot of black paint. It said nothing. It conveyed nothing. And, I thought what is wrong with it. Why has it failed? It hasn't had an opposition. Nothing has opposed it. It let it was left to run. Like a flood of feeling, and it meant nothing. But if it had been opposed, this would show. It was black so it needed white, and just the opposite of these marks as a straight line. So I drew a straight line the office straight and I was a curved line and that brought a seam together.

*John Leighton:*

Huge emotion, huge passion but now very much channelled and controlled, and to become all the more powerful.

*Bridget Riley:*

The need for objective distance holding something at a distance so that you can see it better, so that you can in fact become closer, is it a discipline that I've welcomed, need and a tool. And also some failures which I had, I realized many years later that I suddenly could find a way of dealing with it. And that was true for a *Measure for Measure*, and that problem of the integral nature of a circle. The fact, you can't really break it. *Measure for Measure* paintings: the viewer, you me when I'm working I explore possible glances that you may have you may pick up this diagonal, that diagonal, another one. As you see one, another one comes up to replace it. So like your own looking it moves. It doesn't move. Is absolute still. But you by looking, you move it.

*John Leighton:*

Putting yourself now into the position of a viewer, as you look at the exhibition were there any surprises for you.

*Bridget Riley:*

All of them a pair of slightly different, because, I have: a) I hadn't seen them for quite a long time, many of them for many, many, many years, and I am a different person now, and different experiences of looking, different current preoccupations and they are the same, but then because of that I am looking at them they are different also. So this, which is, the amazing thing of perception itself in action.