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Bridget Riley, Kashan, 1984, National Museum Wales, Cardiff

My name's Bryony White. I'm senior curator of modern contemporary art at Amgueddfa Cymru National Museum Wales. I'm responsible for the curation of works of art in all media from 1900s to the present day.

Today, I'm going to be talking about a painting by Bridget Riley. It's called Kashan. And was painted in 1984. And it's acrylic on a linen canvas.

The painting is a large, abstract geometric canvas. It's made up of a series of narrow, brightly coloured vertical stripes which are built up across the canvas.

The painting contains six colours - reddish pink, yellow, green, blue, turquoise, and lilac. The paint is applied very flatly and evenly, with no visible brush strokes.

If you stand in front of Kashan, you'll realise that the visual effect of this arrangement of colour and form is the emergence through viewing of a perceptual field, what Riley has described as the horizontal spread of coloured light. This field is created when groups of colours merge in the eye of the viewer.

And so then, if Kashan has a subject, it is colour, movement, light, and visual sensation. But its primary concern is also looking, and the visual effect which takes place during the act of looking. You might even say that your eye is as much a part of the medium of the work as the paint on the canvas is.

There are two different forms of movement at play in the canvas - the traditional, two-dimensional progression of the painting across the picture plane, but perhaps more importantly, the movement which occurs in the space between us, the viewer, and the canvas. It exists through our visual perception of colour and form as the canvas shifts and transforms before our eyes.

One of the first things you'll notice about Kashan is that it's a very large painting. It measures over two metres in height. So on such a large scale, the canvas can only be perceived as a whole. It doesn't allow for specific focal point.

Instead of individual areas of canvas, we instead encounter an entire field of colour. It's our holistic perception of the work that allows the visual effects of the colour juxtapositions to come into play.

Colour is perhaps the most important aspect to this work. And the clarity of tone is typical of Riley's paintings between 1980 and 1985. They reflect what is known as her Egyptian palette, which she developed following a visit to Egypt in 1979.

There, at the museum in Cairo, Riley was able to study the tombs of the pharaohs. And the colours that she observed - red, blue, yellow, turquoise, and green - were transformational for her work.

She was struck by how this very limited palette seemed to evoke light, even in the darkness of the tombs. And when she returned to her studio, she began to develop works using these colours.

Riley didn't always use colour in her paintings. She gained prominence in the early 1960s using a palette of just black and white arranged in geometric forms. These striking works have become synonymous with a movement known as op art, op standing for optical, or works which give an illusion of movement.

Black and white are inherently stable. So Riley knew precisely how they would interact when placed together. She was able to disrupt the stability and create movement by introducing complexity in the geometric forms she used.

You'll notice in Kashan that the opposite is true. It's the forms, the shapes, or the stripes that are the unchanging, stable element. It's the arrangement of colour that is varied and complex.

Colour itself is inherently unstable. And by this, I mean that our perception of a particular colour alters depending on what colour its placed next to. So each individual stripe of Kashan is interacting with its neighbour in some way whenever we view it.

Riley first began to discover these interactions in the late 1960s. They led to a fundamental change of focus for the source of her work. She found that she was able, through colour, to reflect the visual sensation she experienced in nature. And she's used colour in her work ever since.

You might wonder how an abstract work like this can be said to reflect nature. But remember what we said earlier about the size of the canvas, meaning that we experience the painting as a field of colour.

Just, for example, think about how you perceive objects in the outside world, a tree, for example. You don't ever view this tree in isolation. Your perception of it is completely mediated by what you see around it, what it's placed next to.

Likewise, your viewpoint doesn't remain static. It's always shifting and it's never fixed, whether this is through the blink of an eye or a change in weather conditions or atmosphere. It's this dynamism, this visual awareness of the whole field, that Riley is interested in.

So in some respects, maybe Kashan could be described as an abstract landscape. But if it can, it's not meant to be a visual representation of nature. It's meant to evoke something of the sensations of being in nature - the sensations of heat, light, and even sound.

So how did the various elements of Kashan work to create the whole? Although this is an abstract painting, it has an intriguing title, Kashan. However, like all of Riley's paintings, the title is not meant to refer to or be descriptive of a particular place or a thing.

The artist begins with an idea of colour and formal structure, and works from there. She gives titles to her paintings only when they're finished and the sensations created through viewing the work suggests something to her. She describes her titles as small bridges by which the spectator can enter the painting.

Kashan is in central Iran, which was famous in the 13th century for the production of pottery, tiles, and textiles. So here, the visual effects of these bright colours could evoke Kashan ceramics or silks or evoke the sensation of being in the heat of the shimmering Middle Eastern landscape.

For the structure of the painting, you'll see that Riley uses the simple, neutral form of the stripe. This is because it encourages the greatest level of optical mixing in the eye of the viewer.

So as a shape, a long, thin stripe is made up almost entirely of edges. There's very little central colour for you to fix your eye on. And so the appearance of each stripe is entirely mediated by the colour next to it. Colours appear darker or lighter. They advance and recede while the fusion at the edge of the stripes causes our eyes to perceive a whole new set of tones.

And this is really an effect that you only get when you stand in front of the painting. The vertical positioning of the stripes is also important to the work. We tend to perceive paintings horizontally. Our eyes much trouble around the canvas, but the general movement is across.

Vertical stripes disrupt this natural flow. And this causes an enhanced visual sensation when you're viewing the work.

You'll see that the colours are grouped and distributed in an uneven rhythm, though this is by no means random. And I use the word rhythm on purpose because this is another important factor in the way Riley creates her paintings. She's described how she structured the paintings in the group to which Kashan belongs in musical terms.

We can see how Riley establishes a rhythm across the canvas. She starts on the left-hand side with this initial group of blue, green, reddish pink, and turquoise. And then she develops this, adding in yellow. It moves on to a quieter passage with lots of lilac.

And then, by the centre of the canvas, this original theme with greens and reddish pinks has emerged again quite strong. And then it moves on again to this more quiet, lilac-based theme. And then by the end of the canvas, you have a reiteration of the original statement, the blue, turquoise, green, and reddish pink.

And so for Riley, how you would perceive a work like Kashan is analogous to how we perceive music, as an arrangement of abstract visual chords, harmonies, and variations. It's also difficult not to look at a work like Kashan and attribute sound or musical words to it. The canvas seems to buzz. It seems to hum. And so in many ways, the sensations it produces are not just visual.

Kashan was painted in 1984. But rather than being a response to that particular time, it really represents an evolution of Riley's own development of abstraction since the 1960s. In the 1950s, she became particularly interested in that pointillist technique of Georges Seurat. And she made copies of his paintings to work out where he placed his colours and how he created the effect he did.

I said at the beginning that this work was really about looking. And that's really what Riley's technique is about as well. And her use of colour is developed through experiment and instinct rather than theory or system.