

Chapter Three
Pattern, rhythm, vibration and colour
Pip Dickens

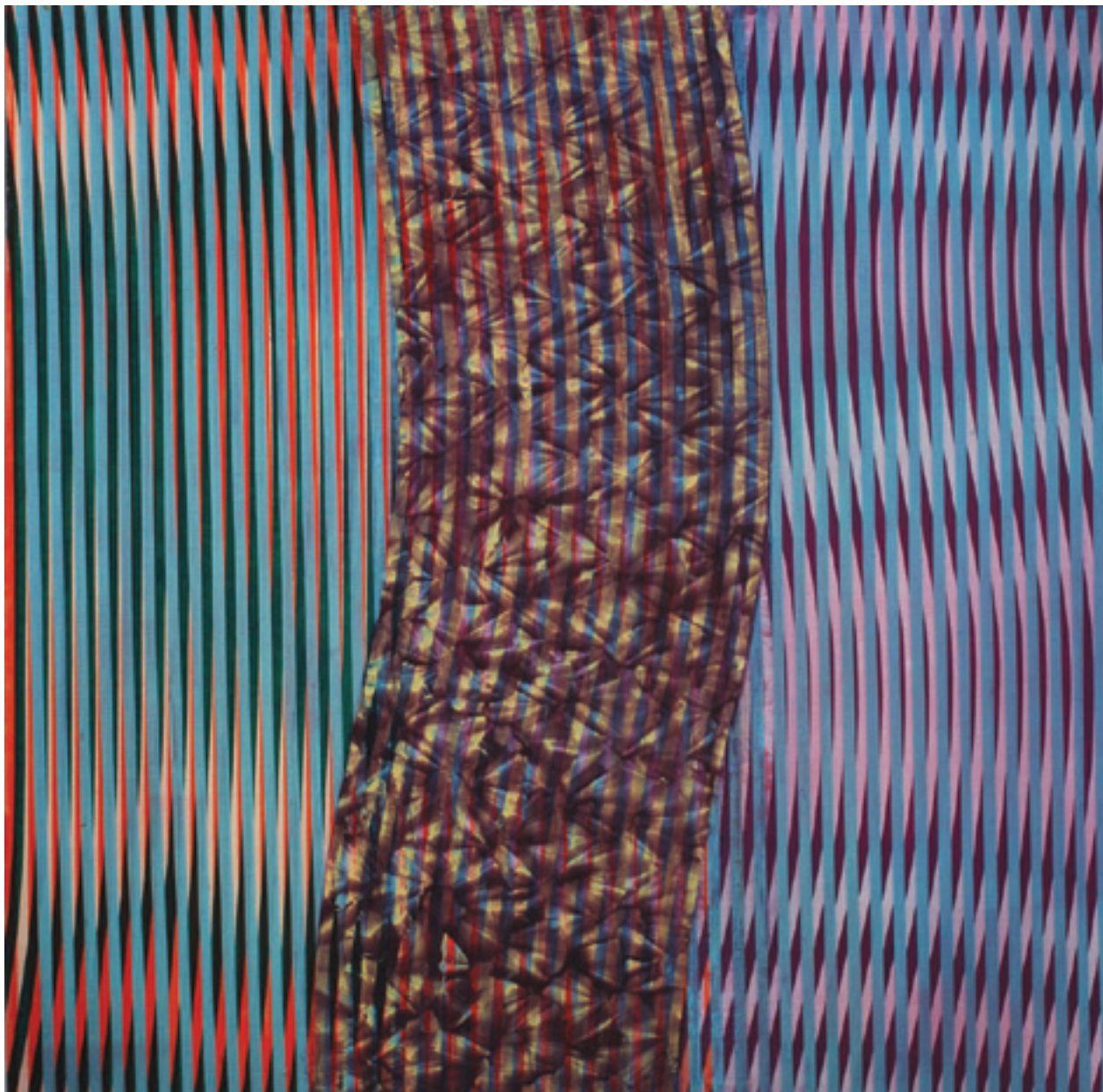


Figure 3.1 Dickens, *Moiré series – Venus Freak*, 2003, oil on canvas, 122 × 122 cm.
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The *katagami* stencil, while evidently a practical tool for the purpose of colouring and patterning a variety of substrates, including kimono fabric, has recently found itself an object of desire in the West. Collectors, including myself, are attracted by its many startling qualities: intricate, delicate and complex designs, many of which convey optically vibrant arrangements. Given the use of the stencils in busy textile workshops, where dyes and resist materials are pressed through them again and again, it is not surprising that few of them survive in good condition today. However, whatever the aesthetic or design quality of the stencil, its most valuable asset is the evidence it provides of the virtuosity of the craftsman – the hand skills of the artisan.

The Leverhulme Trust Award collaboration with Monty Adkins has used the *katagami* stencil as a symbol of how we can best investigate the synergy between music and painting. By drawing on the stencil's qualities (and that of the stencil's maker), themes emerged that directed us towards specific approaches in developing new works and the elements contained in those works.

It is important to emphasise how the stencil has developed a symbolic role (and why I have linked it directly to Richard Sennett's writing on craftsmanship) because elements of the stencil's aesthetic properties have also been absorbed and explored within preliminary works. The stencil, therefore, has played two distinct roles in this project: an important *visual reference*, and a symbol of *good making skills*.

It is also useful to reiterate the 'imperative to protect performance' mentioned in the previous chapter, because continuity – skill of control – of the handmade mark is an important component within painting: be it through rehearsal (repeated many times), through experimentation (trial and error) or through the action of painting where a skill of rhythmic control may be called into play. The same is true of musical performance and composition.

In this chapter I introduce three series of visual artworks: my own *Moiré* series, paintings by Bridget Riley¹ and photo-booth

collages by Liz Rideal.² All these works evidence these skills consciously, without relegating repetition to the banality of design or 'wallpaper'. Rather, these are highly original approaches due to the physical engagement of the artist through innovation; the skill of repetition and rehearsal; and the 'X' factor which, ultimately, is the role that an artwork plays *while in production*: the work creates a 'dialogue', or response to, actions imposed upon it during its development. Each of these artists demonstrates a very distinct and individual approach to pattern, rhythm, vibration and colour. Moreover, each evidences different levels of use of technology and hand skills.

In Chapter 2, I introduced Sennett's comments about skills and the corollary between those of the Japanese *katagami* cutter, revealing the importance of time, physical coordination and ritual in order to hone skills. In the nineteenth century the publisher Andrew White Tuer also signified the importance of practice and repetition in Japanese skills in order to become expert:

The Japanese, who has naturally a fine sense of colour and form, is taught draftsmanship in the same manner as he is taught writing – that is, copies are 'set' which are laboriously transcribed over and over again until the pupil can draw, say, a chrysanthemum of conventional shape, almost as easily as you and I ... can scribble *a b c*.³

Pip Dickens: *Moiré* series of paintings

In my *Moiré* series of works (2001–3), formal aspects of Op Art – colour and movement – are given an uncomfortable 'nudge' in order to produce paintings that are not quite the perfect geometrical constructs demanded of the genre (see Figures 3.1 and 3.2). These constructs are in the process of shifting, or rearranging themselves. They teeter on the verge of a satisfactory final visual 'conclusion', or appear interrupted – frozen in motion and not quite at their optimum position. Elements are discordant, which, in turn, suggests motion



Figure 3.2 Dickens, *Moiré* series – *Blue Caribbean Vibration*, 2003, oil on canvas, 152 x 152 cm.
Collection of artist, © Pip Dickens

and vibration. The emphasis is put on the viewer to be compelled to have ‘closure’ – to want, or try to, ‘rectify’ the image or imagine the image completing its cycle.

These oil paintings are made up of layers of individual ‘sets’ of colour stripes – a slow process requiring drying time between each layer, with one layer being painted over the other. As a result, each layer negates, or enhances, the colour or shapes that precede it. Even though there is the possibility to predict what might happen between each layer during the painting’s facture, in reality the slightest differentiation of a line’s articulation or hue results in a quite marked shift. In short, this was an exercise in negotiation: individual layers reacting harmoniously or discordantly with historical layers.

The notion of prescribed, predetermined outcomes was negated in favour of exploiting a process that would reveal its own surprises, dependent on what lay beneath it. The *Moiré* series of paintings is a comment about how contemporary perceptions can never quite divorce themselves from, or override history. Elements of history may be overwritten, but shifts in perception often bring them back to the surface at different times and in different ways.

In contrast, to ‘infer’ multiple layers but, in fact, produce a single design on the surface of the canvas suggesting layers beneath would have involved less time, less risk and less paint. But this would have missed altogether the point about the very specific methodology of approach – paint and how it is applied and manipulated is paramount within my practice. It is the qualities within paint, the mediums and methods of application (brushes, tools, fingers, etc.) that drive my practice – it is a physical ‘contact’ process. The aim is to achieve – as with any artist – an object of desire. Moreover, the qualities of paint, the mark, texture, translucence, brilliance of colour, weight, refraction and so on play a crucial part in what the painting is seeking to convey to an audience. As the painter Hans Hofmann wrote:

In the process of colouring (painting) the surface of the canvas (the picture plane)

should receive the greatest possible richness in light-emanation-effect and, at the same time, it should retain the transparency of a jewel. The light and form should control illusory oscillation into space and out of space ... The pictorially decorative effect is achieved through musical contrasts and rhythmic relations conditioned in space ... for every medium contains its own rhythmic laws and thus its strict limitations through which it is distinguished as the specific way of expression that it is.⁴

The significance of the *Moiré* series, therefore is two-fold. First, there is the overall impression of a painting as an optical puzzle, revealing rhythm and movement in the (static) second dimension. Second, it shows how a painting also contains its own history of facture – much resides beneath the surface; although obscured, the history of the painting is still discernable.

Other artists who use optical illusions embrace a wide range of methodologies – from kinetic sculptures or mobiles to paintings that are flat – with colour and line being highly significant. Many celebrated Op Art paintings have been produced in a ‘flattened’ illusory manner; for example, the paintings of Victor Vasarely or Bridget Riley. However, there is more to this prescriptive (designed) approach than can really be appreciated when standing in front of the completed works, which are optically demanding in themselves. The purity of visual drama presented belies a huge methodology and dialogue by the artist – of rehearsal and rhythm of enquiry in order to produce the works. The important point is that this takes place *outside* the resultant painting.

Bridget Riley: paintings

In Will Self’s article ‘Read between the lines: are Bridget Riley’s paintings really fine art?’ (a response to Riley’s *Circles Colour Structure: Studies 1970/71* exhibition at Karsten Schubert Gallery, London, 2008/9), he posits that Riley’s paintings are ‘beautiful creations, but should they be regarded as fine

art – or merely framed wallpaper?’ The title of the article is provocative, but Self (himself a collector of Riley’s paper works) makes a valid point about Riley departing from the physical ritual and manipulation of paint. Self writes:

Riley’s theory throttled her practice. Consider Riley’s use of assistants to paint her canvases ... In a conversation with Lynne Cooke in 2005, she reiterates the well-known riffs: how from the get-go, in 1961, she provocatively turned away from the handmade aesthetic of the American Abstract Expressionists, enlisting assistants to paint for her, and enacting a ‘little rebellion’ against ‘handling’ by using household paint and washing the paintings with bleach.⁵

He continues:

Because the truth about Bridget Riley is that she’s a decorative artist masquerading as a fine artist, and her paintings are the perfect decorations for Modernist habitations and workspaces. Far from Blake or Turner being the English painters with which she stands comparison, she’s really the 20th-century counterpart to William Morris. In a curious inversion of Morris’s own creative and political trajectory, instead of trying to elevate artisans to the status of artists, Riley has simply elevated her own craft work to the status of fine art.⁶

Whatever your opinion of Self’s article, the point he makes about Riley’s relationship with painting (as a painter) is undeniable: once the painter stops interacting with the process of making, the nature of the work is entirely changed.

This departure from intimacy with the canvas did, indeed, make way for a dramatic shift in Riley’s methods of research and production. Riley, over many years, has developed an approach to creating paintings that involves many stages of enquiry and rehearsal. She uses, for example, collages – pre-emptive paper cuts and shapes made with scissors – which she then takes to her studio

where she works, alone, making tracings as she goes:

Now those [paper cuts] are done for me, to my instructions you know, as to how many I need and which types of forms and so on. So I then set off to my East End studio with those, and work by myself in relating them. Then I may find that a number of images come up, and I make tracings of them as I go, so that I have actual recall, so at the end of say three days or something I may have, if it’s gone well, four separate tracings which tell me various points and stages that I have reached. Those are painted out for me. And I look at those, and I maybe go on again, or maybe I work on one of them further. That gives me a wider range of possibilities.⁷

She does not hand them over to assistants, saying ‘Paint that, deliver that’. As she tells her interviewer, John Tusa, on BBC Radio 3:

No, no, it’s enormously to do with stages. In fact I’m sometimes teased by them [assistants] when they find that it’s revision C of revision A of a revision of a drawing from the previous year, and this little trail of revisions are all noted down. They give me a body of work which I can explore.⁸

Her assistants do not volunteer suggestions, so the decision process is wholly Riley’s. It seems that the structure of Riley’s practice is more akin to an architect’s office where ‘revision numbers’ are how developing and past works are referred to. Perhaps it is what Riley describes as her ‘straightforward and logical’ methodology that can sometimes be misconstrued as somewhat distant from the canvas – an almost ‘surgical’ approach to the paint’s application, with assistants completing the operation once Riley has worked her magic.

Michael Brady, in a 1998 article for *Critique* magazine, comments on the distinction between art and design:

In a 1974 interview, Milton Glaser noted that whereas a design must convey a given

body of information, the ‘essential function’ of art is to ‘intensify one’s perception of reality’. Sometimes, he said, these functions coincide, as in a medieval stained glass window, but in modern times they have diverged ... Art is judged in terms of beauty and truth, of insight and revelation, of almost prophetic clairvoyance – when it isn’t being judged as text, subtexts, and social constructs. Utility doesn’t fit this mindset. Practical success is not the hallmark of art ... Ultimately, a design must fulfil its primary job of packaging or illustration or instruction, and no amount of aesthetic glamour will substitute for its failure to do so.⁹

Riley’s work clearly sits in the definition of ‘beauty, truth, insight and revelation’. She says of her methodology:

Well, I think I work on two levels. That is to say that I occupy my conscious mind with things to do – lines to draw, movements to organise, rhythms to invent. In fact I keep myself occupied. But that allows other things to happen which I’m not controlling, and I think that the more that I exercise my conscious mind, the more open the other things may find that they can come through ... My rejection rate as it were is huge ... I have to proceed by trial and error – there’s no other way – so that of course I have to throw away a lot. Or I don’t throw it away because sometimes I find that if I look at it again I may find there is something – not that I can do with that, but that it will open another little bit of thought.¹⁰

Sennett’s assessment – ‘the importance of time, physical coordination and ritual in order to hone skills’ – is very relevant here. Riley’s studio practice upholds all these values: they are undertaken behind the scenes out of the view of the audience.

Conversely, in my *Moiré* series the quintessential value of why the works were painted the way they were was because risk takes place in the action of the one painting – there is no rehearsal. This is a matter of

personal choice – where the history of its making is something I wish to be present. The paintings’ illusory qualities appear to be sitting on the surface, yet the structure is fully open. Each painting is a physical structure of layer upon layer of physical processes, decisions, negotiations, articulations: ‘If you cut me I bleed’ – I have substance, depth and a physical presence, I am not merely ‘surface’. The sum of its parts is discernible, if not overtly observed. This is what gives the works a physical sense of ‘being’ – a phenomenon in itself. Through repetitious variation of curved lines and colour variation, the vibration and rhythm of each painting have a physical ‘weight’ and structural presence.

In contrast, Riley wishes her optically resonant works to be viewed unfettered by process – she wishes the audience to experience the end result. Through forethought and testing, her drive is toward clarity and precision. The history (production) of her paintings does not exist on the canvas but in separate objects – those earlier collages, arrangements, and the many preceding variations and revisions.

Riley’s paintings are studies in colour, line, rhythm and space (see Figure 3.3), wrought via a ritual of organisational stages – what Sennett described as ‘the imperative to protect performance’.

Liz Rideal: photo-booth collages

Rideal is an artist who, since 1985, has ‘painted’ with a commercial photo-booth that is no different to its ubiquitous, utilitarian cousins found in urban shopping centres around the world. Invented by Russian-born Anatol Josepho and first seen in the streets of New York in 1925, the photo-booth automatically delivers strips of multiple snapshots in minutes, for a nominal fee. Rideal’s long-term relationship with this most cumbersome of cameras has developed into the creation of remarkable and beautiful photographic works (see Figures 3.4 and 3.5). What is significant about Rideal’s work for this study is that her work reveals a craft and skill in understanding – and developing – a methodology of exploiting both the obvious and hidden qualities of the photo-booth.

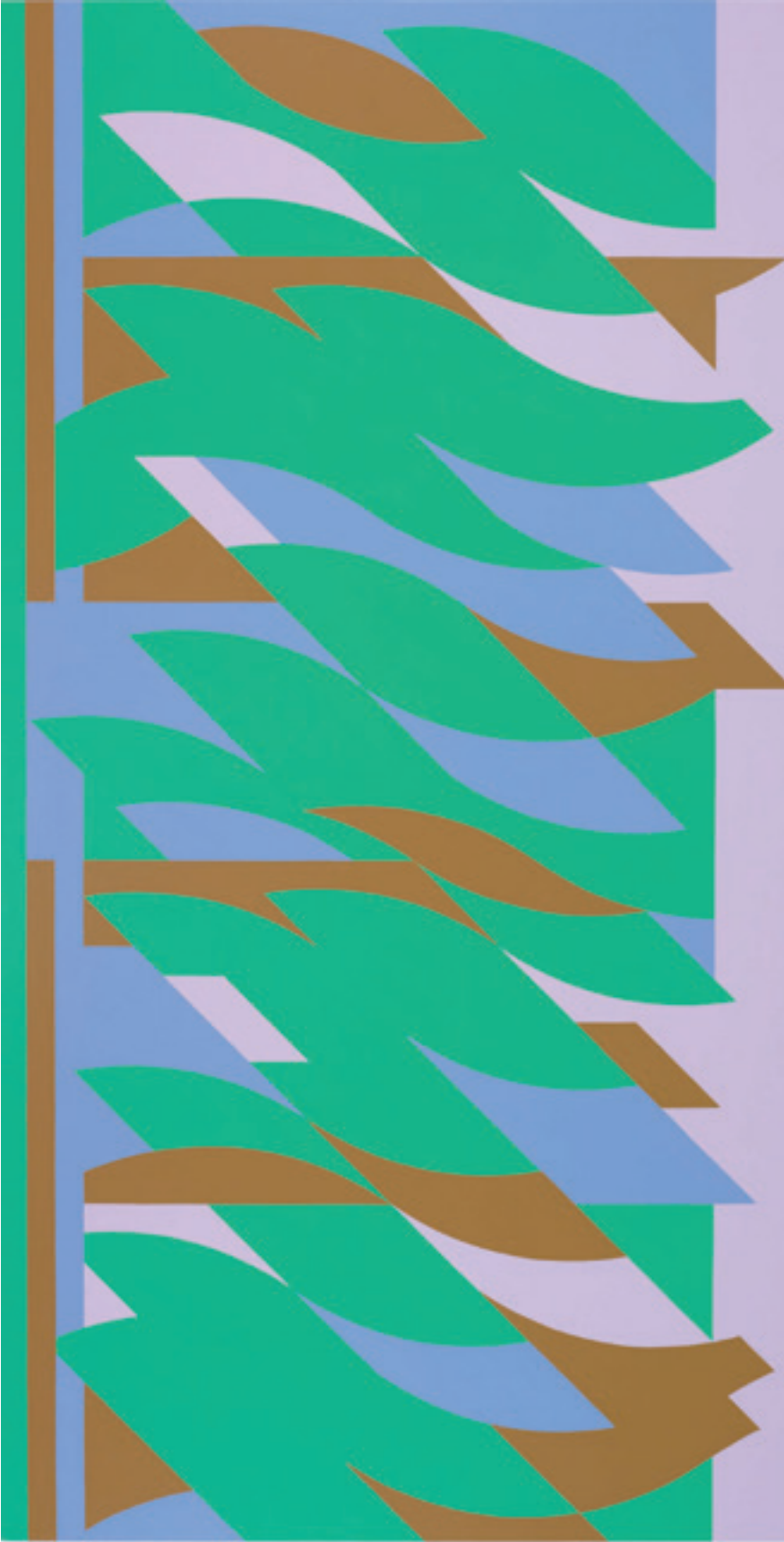


Figure 3.3 Riley, *Rhythm in Green*, 2009, oil on linen, 177 x 344 cm.
All rights reserved, courtesy Karsten Schubert, London, © Bridget Riley

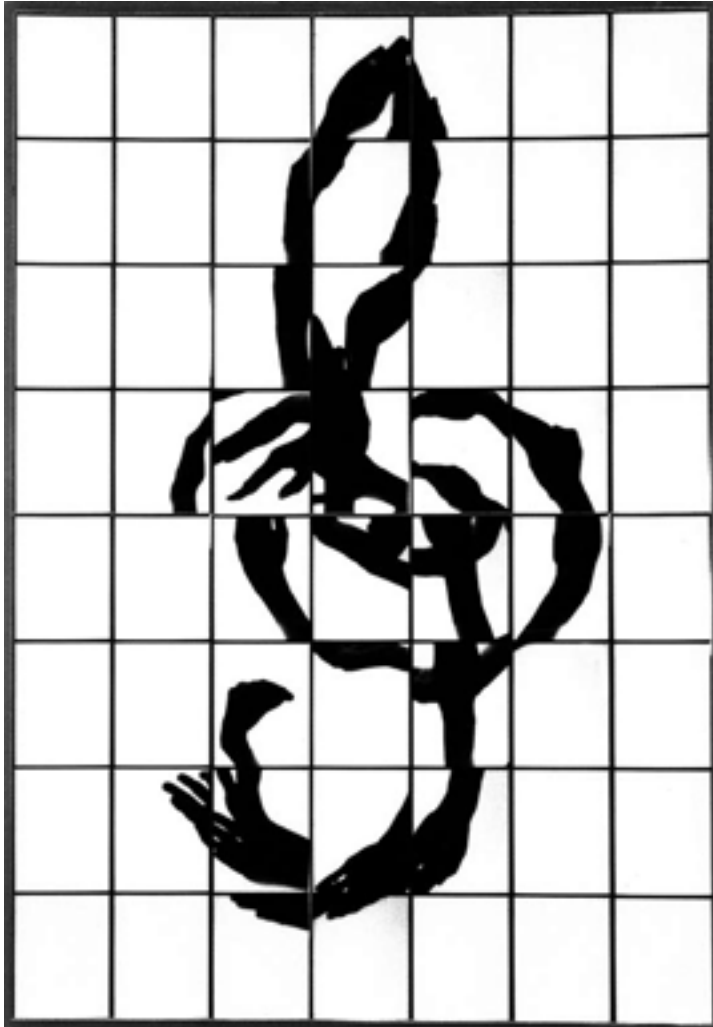


Figure 3.4 Rideal, *Treble Clef*, 1990, 14 strips of 4 uncut photo-booth photographs: cover image for The Photographers' Gallery exhibition catalogue.



Figure 3.5 Rideal, *Winter – the score*, 1990, photo-booth collage, 102.5 x 300 cm.
© Liz Rideal All rights reserved, courtesy Gallery 339, Philadelphia.

Cheap, easy and instant, the photo-booth – in Rideal’s hands – belies a much greater sophistication. Rideal uses the interior space of the photo-booth as her studio, making all the work in this finite space. It is a performance whereby she must create the desired result for each snapshot within a series of four, on cue to the buzzer or warning light. Each artwork is made up of very many other series of similar yet individual shots and thus there is the discipline of maintaining continuity, depending on the number of shots required to produce the final work.

Just as the Japanese *shima-bori* cutters prime and prepare themselves for the rigour of cutting huge sections of stripes into the *katagami* paper, so too Rideal must imagine, rehearse and prepare her next ‘performance’ on cue, once the machine is primed for action.

In David Chandler’s article ‘Simply a matter of complexity’ he correctly relates Rideal’s commitment to learning the skill of using a photo-booth to the very title of his article:

One of Rideal’s underlying concerns has been to explore the mechanics of picture making. Much of her work makes reference, or is analogous to elementary

drawing ... Although the subject matter for Liz Rideal’s photo-booth work has been intentionally simple and traditional; she has consistently chosen to exploit lyrical treatment of these subjects and the mechanical, utilitarian character of her raw material.¹¹

In a review of an exhibition of Rideal’s work inspired by Purcell’s *The Fairy Queen*, Hilary Robinson writes:

In the works on show at Portfolio [Gallery, Edinburgh], she uses photos of her hands and arms which, when stuck into a huge collage, make up a drawing of another object. She does this by making careful plans of the object she wishes to create, charting out what she needs to do in each frame on the four photo-strips ... here the hands dance a steady but idiosyncratic rhythm across the image in response to Purcell’s music playing in the background. Rideal’s hands shape themselves into a score written by Purcell’s hand and, as in music, passages of the image form complex patterns when studied closely.¹²

Those ‘usual suspects’ – pattern, rhythm and rehearsal – are ever-present in Rideal’s work. It seems to come as little surprise that her chosen subject matter – the fluid, hand-written score of Purcell (see Figure 3.6) – finds lyricism in another artist’s creative process. It is also evident that Rideal has a peculiar relationship with controlling and manipulating both machine and body in order to capture movement in a series of sequential, static photos, collaging them into series of even greater sequentiality and magnitude, like some gargantuan puzzle. This further stage requires the skills of scrutiny, editing, selection and further arrangement with hand and eye. The result is an artwork that heightens the viewer’s experience of rhythm and movement. These carefully choreographed snapshots – like notes when selected and skilfully combined in the correct way – confound any preconceptions about the limitations of a utilitarian device (a machine). It is just the same as the Japanese artisan and their knife.



Figure 3.6 One of two pages of original manuscript by Purcell, from the Royal College of Music, which Rideal re-interpreted in the *Score* series of photo-booth compositions.

Over the years, Rideal's photo-booth works have maintained this original rhythm and beautiful fluidity in the choice of other subject matter, which has been crammed into, and manipulated in her tiny 'studio' capsule: diaphanous fabrics, self-portraits of heads of billowing hair, plants and roots (see Figure 3.7). These transient performances, captured in what seems a series of spontaneous seconds, belie a craftsperson's knowledge of her subject, materials and processes that spans many years. She has rehearsed, she has an aim, but this is not design. Moreover, there is no safety net of a 'held' negative, only the machine-delivered photo-strips themselves.

Through the rhythm of movement–stasis–movement–stasis of their production, the resultant works become 'compositions' in their own right. Their huge significance and quality, however, is that the completed works reveal much, much more. They allow us to see through to the history of the entire act of making: the process, the performance and the instrument itself.

The elements of craftsmanship

By comparing three artist's works, it is clear that each has a very distinct approach to innovating, testing and actual production of works. Moreover the skills employed evidence a broad spectrum of approach – through direct-handed execution (Dickens), low 'technology' rehearsal (the paper collage revisions of Riley) through to high technology (Rideal utilising and manipulating a photo-booth and photo-strips). Each artist relies on skills to problem-solve and/or innovate methods, procedures and techniques that are fundamental elements of craftsmanship.

The artist Grayson Perry, in conversation with Richard Sennett and Laurie Taylor in a BBC Radio 4 discussion about craftsmanship, said he had to 'come out' as a craftsman because:

There was a slight taboo about it. There is still a frisson in the art world about craftsmanship, I think because so many artists lack it because of the over-privileging of 'the idea' in the art world ... I think they

are neglecting a large part of the vocabulary of a maker, of developing a skill ... my ideas come on the hoof whilst I am working, the actual physicality of working with something throws up ideas all the time.¹³

In the next chapter the balance between high technology and the artist's control over it is discussed in more detail, with an introduction to Adkins's practice as a composer, and our collaborative exchanges, which exploited technological sketches of intent or possibility. In addition, the importance of research within art practice to test and understand materials is illustrated through the work of the artist Paddy Hartley, whose practice incorporates both hands-on manipulation of fabric (and other materials) with controlled and knowledgeable exploitation of technology processes.

Notes

- 1 Bridget Riley was born in London in 1931 and spent most of her childhood in Cornwall. She studied at Goldsmiths College, 1949–52, and the Royal College of Art, 1952–5. In 1969 she was the first woman to win the International Prize for Painting, while representing Britain at the 34th Venice Biennale.
- 2 Liz Rideal (born 1954, England) is an artist who uses film and photography in her installations and is known for her photo-booth work.
- 3 A. Tuer, *The Book of Delightful and Strange Designs, Being One Hundred Facsimile Illustrations of the Art of the Japanese Stencil-Cutter* (London: Leadenhall, 1893), 20.
- 4 H. Hofmann, 'On the aims of art', trans. Ernst Stolz and Glenn Wessels, *The Fortnightly* 1:13 (26 February 1932), 7–11.
- 5 W. Self, 'Read between the lines: are Bridget Riley's paintings really fine art?' *The Independent*, 29 November 2008.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 Bridget Riley, interview by John Tusa, *The John Tusa Interviews*, BBC Radio 3, 5 January 2003, www.bbc.co.uk/radio3/johntusainterview/riley_transcript.shtml.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 M. Brady, 'Eyesite: art and design: what's the big difference?' *Critique Magazine* (1998), www.unc.edu/~jbrady/Essays/Art_Design.html

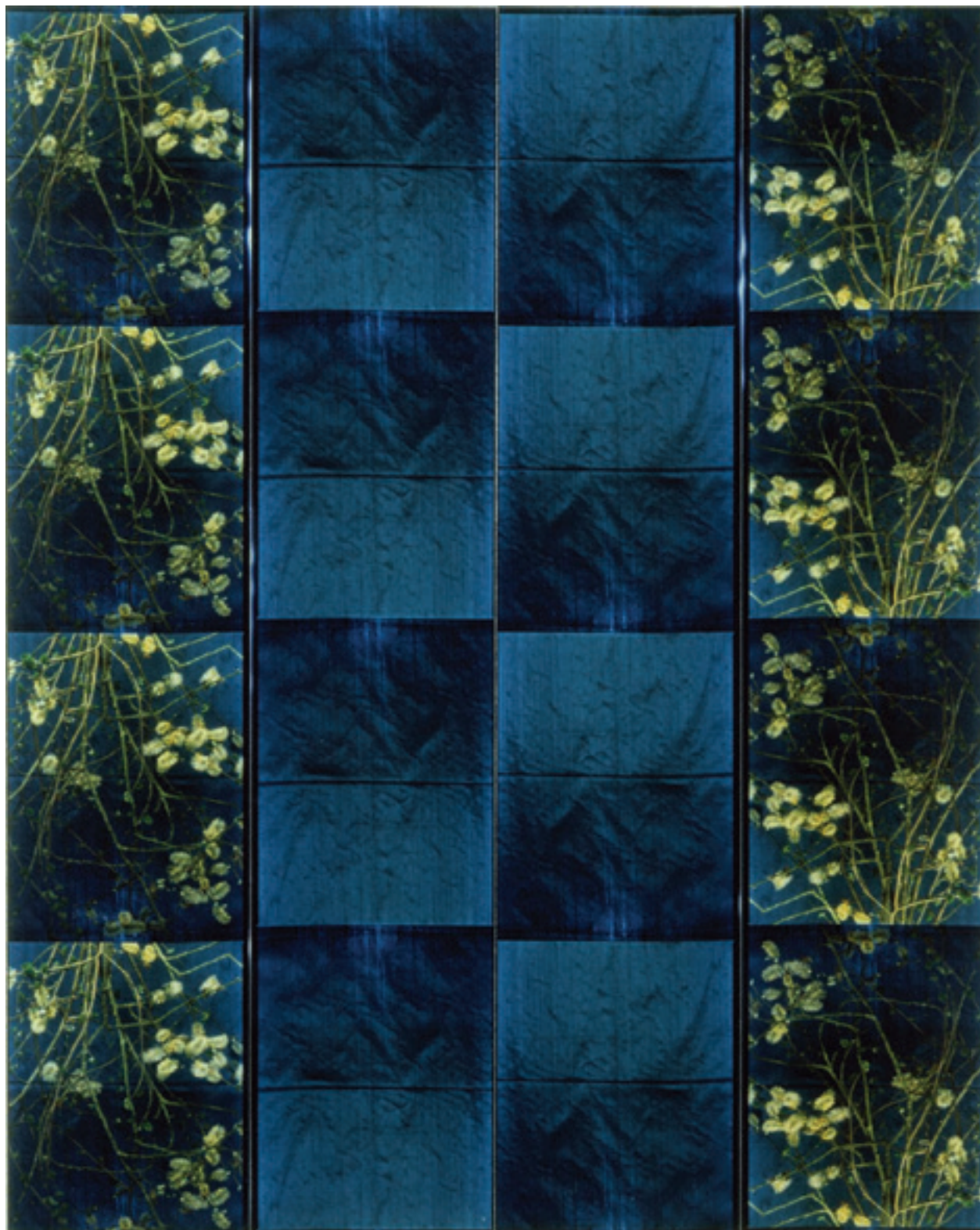


Figure 3.7 Rideal, *Kimono (Pussy Willow)*, 1999, C-type print, 130 × 100 cm, edition of three; from a series of photo-booth works influenced by Rideal's research trip to Japan in April 2000.

- 10 Bridget Riley, interview by John Tusa.
11 D. Chandler, 'Simply a matter of
complexity', in Liz Rideal: Photo-booth
Collages (London: Photographers' Gallery,
1990).
12 H. Robinson, The List, Art & Exhibitions,
22 February–7 March 1991.
13 Laurie Taylor, Grayson Perry and Richard
Sennett, Thinking Allowed, BBC Radio 4,
6 February 2008.