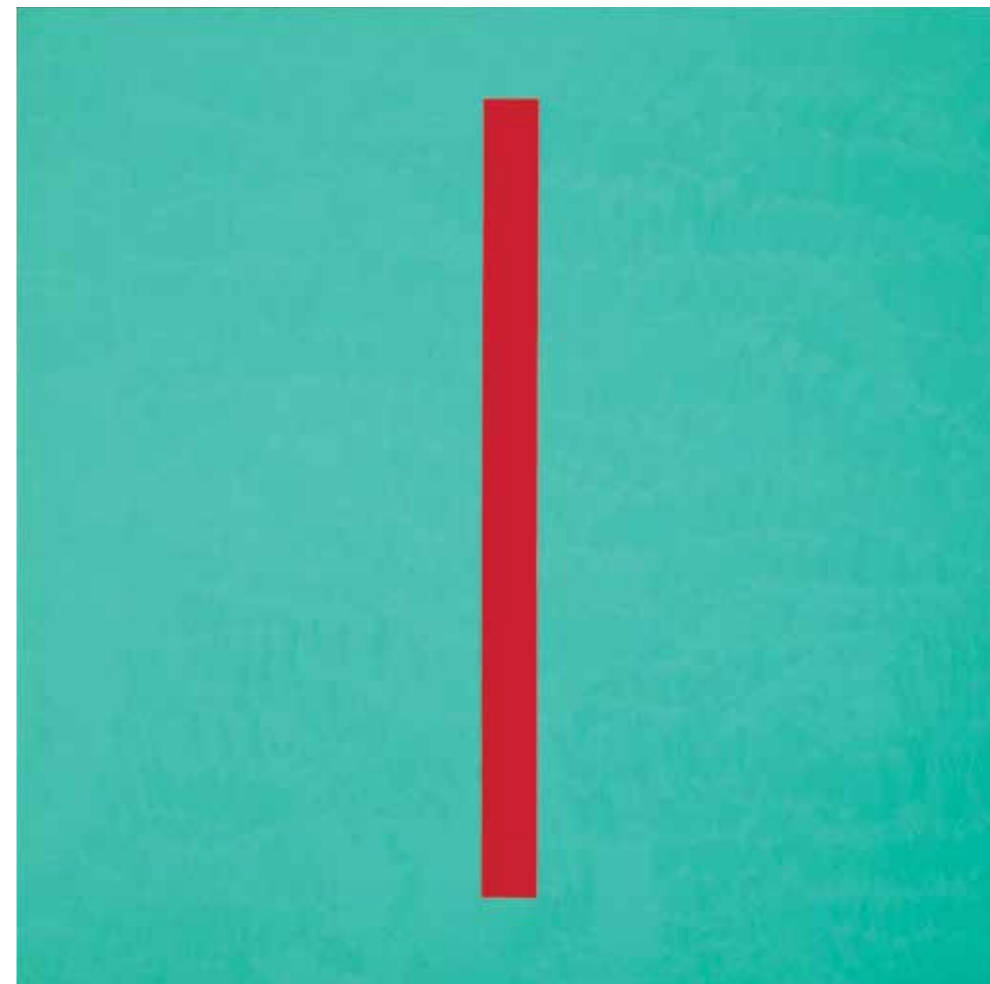


GEOMETRIES

A new display at QAG showcases works from the Collection by both Australian and international contemporary artists who play with colour and form to create often mesmerising optical effects. 'Geometries' features works from the 1950s to the present day that stir the senses and engage the viewer in both mind and body, write **Peter McKay** and **Ellie Buttrose**.



'Geometries' is a new QAGOMA Collection display drawing together works that address the eyes with dazzling demonstrations of colour and form. Using deceptively simple strategies — structuring relationships between the most elementary components of shape, scale and relative sequencing, for the most part described in pure, flat and vibrant colours — the artists behind these arrangements excel in creating mesmerising optical effects. Contemporary in their lively spirit, and sometimes surprisingly classical in their sense of order and proportion, these works are certain to stir the senses.

Perennial QAGOMA favourite *Big Blue* 1981–82 by British artist Bridget Riley is the centrepiece of 'Geometries'. Often associated with the Op (optical) art movement of the 1960s, Riley is a master of perception. She has dedicated her career to exploring the interaction between colour and form, and her works are highly attuned to the dynamic effect of this relationship. Although Riley's work is resolutely abstract, *Big Blue* was inspired by her experience travelling to Egypt, basking in the Mediterranean light and visiting the ancient tombs in Luxor. Here she was 'astounded at the consolidated effect of the "fabric of colour" in the well-preserved frieze paintings. A restricted palette, although 4000 years old, was fresh and perfectly harmonised, a marvellous condensation of light itself'.¹

‘Dumbrell’s muted palette . . . creates a strange shifting push-pull effect with her subtly angled crossing verticals, which seem to perpetually cross from the foreground to the background’

Left Lesley Dumbrell / *Stridor* 1972 / Gift of the Queensland Art Gallery Society 1974 / © QAG

Page 38 Bridget Riley / *Big Blue* 1981–82 / Purchased 1984 / © Bridget Riley 2019. All rights reserved

Page 39 Max Gimblett / *Light green/red – to Dora* 1978 / Purchased 2006. The Queensland Government’s Gallery of Modern Art Acquisitions Fund



While the colour scheme of Max Gimblett's *Light Green/Red - To Dora* 1978 exhibits some similarities to *Big Blue* (in that they both use red to create strong contrasts, for example), Gimblett's is a significantly more reductive exercise in pairing only two tones in two shapes. The New Zealand artist painted these works in response to new directions in colour-field and geometric abstraction emerging in the United States during the late 1940s and early 50s, particularly the work of Robert Motherwell, Ad Reinhardt and Barnett Newman. Spanning just over two square metres, *Light Green/Red - to Dora* (Gimblett's mother) provides a visceral optical experience that, with great economy, engages both mind and body. The impressive turquoise field immerses the viewer in pure colour, punctuated, or perhaps punctured, by a vertical red rectangle that compels the viewer to stand in the centre of the work.

Australian painters Wilma Tabacco and Lesley Dumbrell are both known for their pursuit of especially lively abstract styles. Unlike many Op painters of the era, Tabacco paints with a rich, almost glowing, traditional oil medium instead of fast-drying flat-finish synthetic paints. This makes the tightly spaced thin vertical stripes of *Hellza poppin* 2004 intensely luminous, heightening and enlivening the complex and rhythmic moiré

effect that she constructs. *Hellzapoppin* was a popular Broadway revue that ran from 1938 to 1941. The show was a comedy hodgepodge of music and topical slapstick — the opening scene featured Hitler speaking in a Yiddish accent — and its irrepressibly energetic circus atmosphere included dwarfs, clowns, trained pigeons and audience participation. Various sequels followed, including a 1941 movie that featured some of the best-known Lindy hop dance scenes of the swing era. Tabacco's *Hellza poppin* clearly makes reference to this high-energy music and improvisational dance, here translated into bright fluctuations of pink, yellow and blue.²

Lesley Dumbrell, a recognised pioneer of the Australian women's art movement of the 1970s and a leading exponent of abstraction in Australia, also refers to sound in her work *Stridor* 1972: 'stridor' meaning a harsh, grating noise or the wheezing of an obstructed windpipe. Here, Dumbrell works with a muted palette — unusual given the predilection for bright tones and high contrast employed by many Op painters — and this creates a strange shifting (perhaps rattling) push-pull effect with her subtly angled crossing verticals, which seem to perpetually cross from the foreground to the background. Although Dumbrell is better known for her jazzy system paintings of the late 1970s, as well as the more playful linear

Left Wilma Tabacco / *Hellza poppin* 2004 / Gift of William Nuttall and Annette Reeves through the Queensland Art Gallery Foundation 2008. Donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program

Right Lincoln Austin / *Out of sight* (installation view) 2013 / Purchased 2014, Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art Foundation / Photograph: Natasha Harth

and shape paintings of the 1980s that share an aesthetic with the ubiquitous Memphis design group, *Stridor* is an accomplished early work.

While most of the works in 'Geometries' create a sense of movement, Lincoln Austin's light box *Out of Sight* 2013 take this further. By incorporating a system similar to that of a lenticular print, the Queensland-based artist has created a geometric composition of intersecting circles and ellipses that shift in relation to the viewer's position. By offering no more than a glimpse of the work from any given angle, Austin encourages his audience to dart around the cool metallic form of *Out of Sight* in a sort of sight-responsive dance.

With works by a host of other artists, including Joseph Stanislaus Ostojka-Kotkowski, Kerrie Poliness, Sandra Leveson and John Vickery, 'Geometries' is an exhibit with an eye out for patterns of perception.

Peter McKay is Curatorial Manager, Australian Art. Ellie Buttrose is Associate Curator, International Contemporary Art.

Endnotes

- 1 Jenny Harper in *Bridget Riley: An Australian Context* [exhibition catalogue], Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 1985, pp.10–11.
- 2 Julie Ewington, QAGOMA Collection essay [unpublished], 2008.

'Geometries' is on display in the QAG Watermall and Gallery 5 from 8 June.

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