

Jonathan Jones, "Edinburgh art festival review – from the sublime to the meaningless," *The Guardian*, July 26, 2019.

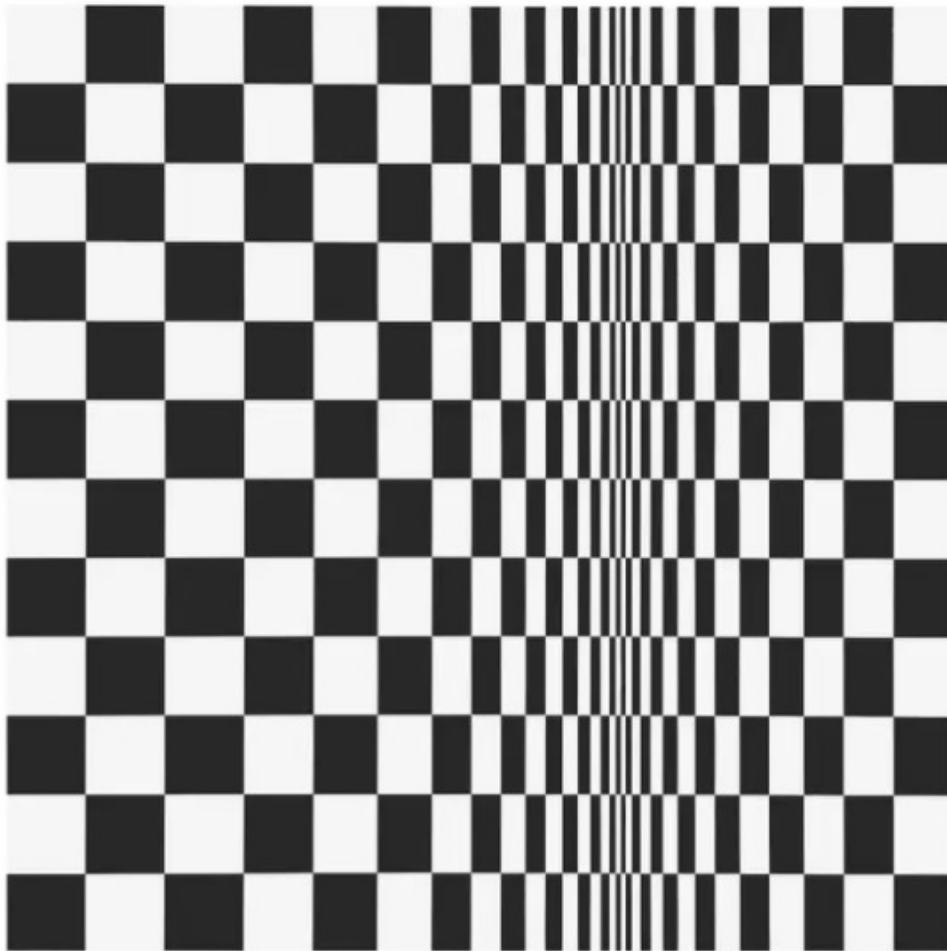


Edinburgh art festival review – from the sublime to the meaningless



A retrospective of Bridget Riley is truly dazzling, a history of collage makes the cut, but the rest of Edinburgh's annual art showcase is a mixed bag

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▲ Detail of *Movement in Squares*, 1961, by Bridget Riley. Photograph: Bridget Riley 2019

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Bridget Riley should be illegal. After a few minutes in her sensational retrospective at the Scottish National Gallery my perceptions were all over the place. Paintings were rocking and rolling through grand white salons, moving in waves, sending hills and troughs from their flat surfaces into three-dimensional space. One Riley makes you larger, one makes you small, and the rest of the Edinburgh art festival doesn't do anything at all.

Riley is 88 but her art has never felt younger than it does in this scintillating exhibition. It's the display her art has long deserved – one that does justice to her experimental spirit and dazzling intelligence over six decades, without losing sight of the 1960s utopianism that is her enduring legacy. It refuses to plod along in chronological order. Instead, it starts with a brilliant spin through her fascination with the dappled optical art of Georges Seurat. In 1960 she painted *Pink Landscape*, a rural vista that bursts into a vibrating light show of separated spots of blue, pink and gold. No sooner have your eyes acclimatised to this unreal pointillism that they're being taken for a ride by the black and white visual trickery of 1961's *Movement in Squares*, whose mind-boggling array of narrowing rectangles, like a phantasmagorical chess board, sucks you into what feels like a fold in the fabric of reality.



▲ *Pink Landscape*, 1960, by Bridget Riley. Photograph: Bridget Riley 2019

From there it's a rollercoaster of the mind – and why not? This is a festival. Let's go wild. Riley's black and white classics of the early 1960s melt into the stone-free walls of colour she painted later in the decade. As the pinks and greens remix in your head there's a staggering room full of drawings that reveals the intricate calculations behind her revolutionary effects.

This is art that invades your very being. In 1976, when she painted *Clepsydra*, a warping wavelength of red, green and purple, Riley was still on her trip when the rest of the world had come down. That, of course, is because her art owes nothing to narcotics. Its joy comes from a

pure embrace of visual experience. The paradox of this exhibition is that while you enjoy the sheer buzz coming off the walls you are never less than daunted by the discipline of this artist. Riley's big and open paintings have the austerity of Mondrian or Barnett Newman. Any effect has to be created by her spare and simple means of abstract line and colour. And within those self-set rules she creates visions of Xanadu.

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It's a cold shock to step out of Riley's visionary dreamland into the anything but utopian world of 2019. In a side street in Edinburgh's Old Town, New Yorker **Alfredo Jaar** has put up a neon sign that simply quotes Samuel Beckett: "I can't go on, I'll go on." This shrug of an artwork is depressing precisely because we know what he means. But is that all art can do – moan under the weight of it all?



▲ Oomph ... a tapestry from 'typical Essex woman' Julie Cope's Grand Tour by Grayson Perry, at Dovecot Studios.
Photograph: Murdo MacLeod/The Guardian

At least **Grayson Perry** puts some oomph into his satire. Dovecot Studios is showing a set of brightly coloured tapestries in which he tells the story of Julie Cope, a child of modern Britain, whose parents and their friends in 1970s Basildon are portrayed in rollicking Bruegel-like tableaus of kitsch facial hair and kipper ties. Everyone's got the same expression of manic desperation.

Perry and Riley make a fascinating contrast. They both speed up Edinburgh's sobriety with chromatic quaaludes. However, where Riley committed herself in 1960 to an art of sublime abstraction, Perry tells tales and makes gags about – as he says of his character Cope – "average" lives. That's why he's the one you know from TV. But in the end it's like going to a play that's not quite funny enough. You realise you are laughing for no reason.

There's even less reason to climb Calton Hill, a lofty crag on which Edinburgh's old astronomical observatory hangs, for the art of **James Richards**. It's a great idea to use

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this Acropolis of the north as the new home of art gallery Collective, but it needs some good art, and Richards does not provide it. His sonic installation inside a circular domed chamber resolutely refuses to mean anything, although as hi-fi it's impressive.



▲ Grunts, taps and breaths ... Hong Kong artist Samson Young and his Real Music installation at Talbot Rice Gallery.
Photograph: Murdo MacLeod/The Guardian

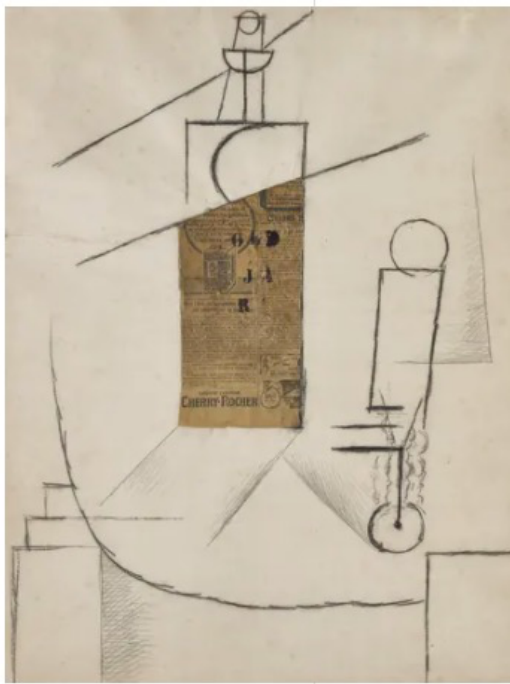
There's better sound art to be had at the Talbot Rice Gallery, where Hong Kong composer and artist **Samson Young** shows a film of Cologne's Flora Symphony Orchestra playing Tchaikovsky's Fifth. But instead of its lush cascades of emotion you hear grunts, taps and breaths from wart-like objects on the carpeted floor. Young has edited out the music, so that we hear instead the physical actions of the players – the quiet underlay of noise as they put their lips to wind instruments or pick up violins. The fascinating thing is that you can still make sense of the performance.

Young's art has a politics that's more focused than Jaar's miserable sign or Perry's scattergun hostility. A sequence of drawings follow a red line that marks the paths by which Hong Kong democracy protesters were recently dispersed. His work feels more urgent than **Nathan Coley**'s inane text pieces installed in Parliament Hall. And although **David Batchelor**'s found-colour art at the Ingleby Gallery is a witty enough game – his sculptures of paint-can lids with the contents stuck to them literally illustrate Frank Stella's demand for paint to look as good as it did in the can – his irony seems lacking in energy with those Riley ringing in your head.

Batchelor is a kind of collagist, a gatherer of lovely fragments. Perhaps he could have been squeezed into **Cut and Paste: 400 Years of Collage** at the Scottish National Gallery

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▲ Victoriana ... Bouteille et Verre sur un Table, 1912, by Pablo Picasso.
Photograph: Succession Picasso/DACS, London 2018

of Modern Art, a delightful attempt to blow up art history. Ever seen Monty Python's Terry Gilliam in the same exhibition as Picasso? Maybe you have – but how about exhibiting the Baroque artist Pietro da Cortona with Jamie Reid's Never Mind the Bollocks? Aha, I can hear the curator say, you didn't see that one coming. This exhibition is a mad collage of collages. It even includes an "artwork" by Charles Dickens. In about 1860 he and his friend William Macready plastered a folding screen with cut-out reproductions of art.

In other words, when Picasso stuck a piece of newspaper to his 1912 still life *Bottle and Glass on a Table*, cutting and pasting it to form the body of the bottle – with a booze advert in the paper adding to the representational wit – he

and his fellow cubist **Georges Braque** were not "inventing" collage, as histories of modern art have it. They were just doing what

Victorians had done before them. No wonder modern collage has so often feasted on Victoriana. Max Ernst's original cut-ups for his visual novels and Paul Eluard's picture of an elephant on the rampage in a Paris cafe go superbly well with the archaic early stuff here because these surrealist masterpieces were made by cannibalising old 19th century publications. That archaism survives in Peter Blake's 1962 masterpiece *The Toy Shop*, a pasted together treasury of childhood memories.

Cut and Paste is huge fun, but I don't buy its thesis. That is because what matters is the idea that pasting paper can be art. To call every Victorian paper toy a collage is like saying anyone who used a snow shovel before Duchamp nominated one as a readymade, invented the readymade.

Still, nostalgia is seductive. And out of old images might come a bit of the utopianism that glows in Riley's art. Glasgow dreamer Jim Lambie's *Sticky Fingers* is a psychedelic invocation of demon forces. He's collaged an intoxicating array of flowers from old paintings over a black and white photo. From out of the flowers peep Mick Jagger's feminine eyes. Lambie has been poking about in Riley's cabinet of colours, and he proves beauty can still mess with your head.

Various venues throughout Edinburgh until 25 August.

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2019/jul/26/edinburgh-art-festival-review-bridget-riley>