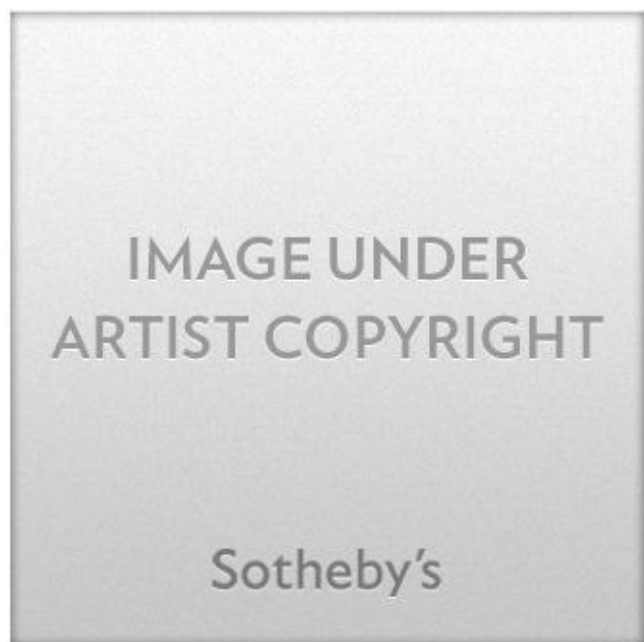


Sotheby's

Contemporary Art Evening Auction

London | 01 Jul 2008, 07:00 PM | L08022



LOT 5

PROPERTY FROM THE HOH COLLECTION, GERMANY

BRIDGET RILEY

B.1931

CHANT 2

signed, titled, dated 1967 and variously annotated on the reverse; signed and dated '67 on the left side edge

emulsion on canvas

231.5 by 231cm.

91 by 90 3/4 in.

ESTIMATE €2,000,000-3,000,000 GBP

Lot Sold: 2,561,250 GBP

PROVENANCE

Rowan Gallery, London

Sale: Christie's, New York, Contemporary Art, 19 November 1992, Lot 360

Acquired directly from the above by the present owner

EXHIBITED

Venice, British Pavillion, XXXIV Biennale Internazionale dell' Arte, 1968

Rotterdam, Museum Boymans van Beuningen, Bridget Riley, 1969

London, Serpentine Gallery, Bridget Riley: Paintings from the 1960s and 70s, 1999, p. 93, no. 24, illustrated in colour
Düsseldorf, Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen, Bridget Riley: Selected Paintings 1961-1999, 1999, p. 79, illustrated in colour

London, Tate Gallery, Bridget Riley, 2003, p. 97, no. 22, illustrated in colour

LITERATURE

Exhibition Catalogue, Nuremberg, Kunsthalle & travelling, Bridget Riley: Paintings 1982-1992, 1992, pl. 8, illustrated in colour

Exhibition Catalogue, Sydney, Museum of Contemporary Art; Wellington, City Gallery, Bridget Riley: Paintings and Drawings 1961–2004, 2004, p. 10, illustrated in colour

Robert Kudielka, Robert Kudielka on Bridget Riley: "Essays and interviews 1972–2003", London 2005, p.115, illustrated in colour

CATALOGUE NOTE

Described by Paul Moorhouse as Bridget Riley's "first essay in pure colour", Chant 2 is the masterpiece of the late 1960s (Paul Moorhouse in: Exhibition Catalogue, London, Tate Gallery, Bridget Riley, 2003, p. 18). One of only three colour paintings exhibited at the Venice Biennale of 1968, it is the first work in which she eradicated black from her palette. With Chant 2 Riley advanced her formal optical investigations to explore the effects of natural phenomena: with colour she broke the essentially graphic rigour of her black, grey and white paintings to create a visual experience that envelops the viewer in total emotional and cognitive sensation. The Venice show was such an outstanding critical success that it won Riley the prestigious International Painting prize, making her the first woman ever to have this accolade conferred upon her. Pivotal to this acclaim was the debut of her large scale colour works, Chant 2, Late Morning, now housed in the permanent collection of Tate, London, and Cataract 3, in the British Council Collection. Of her three pioneering colour works, Chant 2 is the only such work available to the market.

Chant 2 thus marks a hugely formative and influential departure in Riley's visual and aesthetic development. It embodies the manifest exactness of scale, pitch and frequency that signifies the very best examples of her meticulous technique, and as an outstanding synthesis of colour, composition and form, it powerfully confronts themes of perception. Through apparently simple means and enlisting a palette of just two colours – red and blue – the artist generates an inspirational chromatic effect that overwhelms the senses. As Riley has subsequently commented, "I had to give visual sensation more rein – my black-and-white paintings had been about states of being, states of composure and disturbance, but when I introduced colour in 1967 this began to change. Colour inevitably leads you to the world outside...in the late 1960s I was beginning to find my way with a whole host of sensations to do with colour" (the artist in 1995 cited in: Exhibition Catalogue, London, Tate Gallery, Bridget Riley, 2003, p. 19).

Announcing that "Chant 2 (1967) is the archetype of Riley's initial, spare use of pure colour" Robert Kudielka has described the painting's composition in detail and how the red and blue vertical stripes alternate across the surface in two different combinations; blue surrounding red and red surrounding blue (Robert Kudielka, Robert Kudielka on Bridget Riley: "Essays and interviews 1972–2003", London 2005, p. 114). The width of the colour stripes increases towards the centre while the intervening white bands are constant. According to Kudielka, "When this ingeniously simple painting was shown at the Venice Biennale in 1968 it caused quite a stir because the composition seems to mysteriously open out in the centre to convey the sensation of an unplumbable depth radiating an intense, subtly

coloured light. No colour theory lies behind this, simply the basic observation that colours bordering on white can do one of two things: either directly bleed and fuse or induce contrasting colours. The blue-red-blue band flickers with yellow-orange at its edges. When put to work with a precise sense of scale and rhythm, these two opposing tendencies of colour energy avail a surprising wealth of pictorial possibilities" (Robert Kudielka, *Op Cit*, pp. 114–17).

While the stripe maximises the edge between two colours, the fluctuating bands focus visual energy towards the centre of the canvas. Early on in her exploration of colour, Riley made the discovery that the longer the edge between two colours, the more amplified the chromatic effect. Hence the monumental size of this canvas facilitates the heightening of this colour tension. Indeed, the artist has described the quality of "a long thin line of colour, essentially 'edge', without a large volume to carry", as "the ideal element to work with this elusive relationship between colour and light" (the artist cited in: Robert Kudielka, *Op Cit*, p. 188). Investigating the chromatic character of light, Riley has here built an atmospheric space that exists between the viewer and the canvas.

In addition, Riley has talked of scale as being fundamental to the effect of her paintings between 1967 and 1973: "In the same way that I had to sacrifice distinctive forms in order to release the energy of colour-light, it was necessary to increase the scale of the event in order to prevent focused looking" (the artist cited in: Robert Kudielka, *Op Cit*, p. 188). Indeed, the monumental scale allows the spectator to be absorbed by this indefinable experience whereby "the interaction of different colours is perceived as an impression of light" (Paul Moorhouse in: *Exhibition Catalogue*, Sydney, Museum of Contemporary Art; Wellington, City Gallery, *Bridget Riley: Paintings and drawings 1961–2004*, 2004, p. 19).

Riley was fascinated by colour from an early age and throughout the 1950s she made numerous studies from Georges Seurat, seeking to understand the mechanics behind the colour theory of the master of Pointillism. In her earlier works of the 1960s, however, she eradicated colour from her palette as she explored the fertile binary dialect of high-contrast black and white. She used black and white shapes and lines to test the boundaries of visual perception, making the surfaces of her canvas appear to shimmer, buckle, heave and twist in a spectrum of disorientating optical effects. Behind the scenes, however, she sought to incorporate colour into the evolved contrast structures of her early work, though these early prototypes never left the studio. Works such as *Cataract 3* in the British Council Collection included colour bands alongside black and white, however, it was not until *Chant 2* that Riley fully interrogated the full potential of pure colour.

Fundamental to Riley's unprecedented success at the thirty-fourth Venice Biennale, *Chant 2* is a truly significant masterwork that continues to instigate an incomparable visual experience and is a critical watershed in Bridget Riley's phenomenal output.