

MICHAEL KIDNER

FROM ROTHKO TO RILEY

30 April – 31 May 2025

Private View: Tuesday, 29 April, 6–8 pm

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Flowers Gallery is pleased to present '*from Rothko to Riley*' – a retrospective exhibition of early works by the late British artist Michael Kidner opening on 30 April and on view until 31 May 2025.

A pioneer of Optical Art, Michael Kidner is recognised as a foundational figure in British abstraction, devoting much of his career to developing work of a constructive nature. Both rational and playful, he combined visual responses to the principles of mathematics, science and chaos theories with an abiding interest in the irrational and unpredictable nature of the human condition.

Bringing together works from 1956 to 1970, the exhibition traces Kidner's evolution from his early *After Image* series, influenced by Abstract Expressionism and Mark Rothko's colour fields, to his later explorations of wave patterns and optical effects, rooted in chaos theory and mathematical principles.



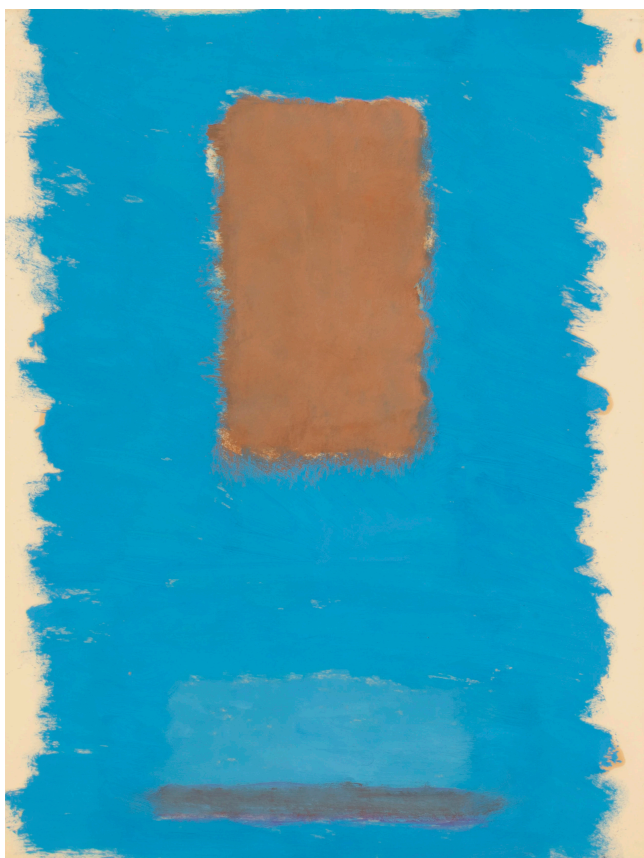
Butterfly Wings, 1966, Oil on canvas, 168 x 183 cm

from Rothko to Riley situates Kidner's art in dialogue with two significant artists of postwar abstraction: Mark Rothko and Bridget Riley. These two names bookend Kidner's formal progression, from his early immersion in the emotive language of colour field painting to his later embrace of perceptual systems and optical phenomena. The exhibition title underscores both the continuity and radical transformation in his approach to painting over five decades.

The exhibition opens with a series of early paintings from the mid-1950s, in which Kidner explored luminous planes of colour evocative of Rothko's spiritual abstractions. These works capture Kidner's attunement to the psychological effects of colour, atmosphere, and spatial ambiguity.

By the early 1960s, he began to explore the newly emerging language of Op Art. Engaging with theories of perception, wave mechanics, and pattern disruption, he developed a unique visual vocabulary characterised by vibrating lines, moiré effects, and pulsating grids. Works from this period demonstrate his interest in visual instability and rhythmic structures, producing images that appear to shimmer or shift in the viewer's gaze.

from Rothko to Riley also foregrounds the physical and optical experience of looking, something Kidner believed to be fundamental to painting. For him, art was not a vehicle for fixed meaning but a zone of enquiry - one that could reconcile the cerebral and the sensory. The exhibition offers a lens through which to reconsider the broader trajectory of abstraction and the enduring vitality of visual experimentation.



'Homage to Rothko', 1956, Oil on paper, 50.8 x 38.2 cm



'Homage to Rothko', 1956, Oil and gouache on paper, 50.8 x 38.2 cm

ABOUT MICHAEL KIDNER (RA) (1917-2009)

A pioneer of Optical Art, Michael Kidner devoted much of his career to developing work of a constructive nature. Both rational and playful, his art has combined visual responses to the principles of mathematics, science and chaos theories with an abiding interest in the irrational and unpredictable nature of the human condition. Kidner was described by American art historian and critic Irving Sandler as "arguably the first Op Artist in Britain", following his investigations of the optical effects of light, colour and systemic structure during the 1960s. Optics presented Kidner with a challenge in his pursuit of a pure form of imagery, seeking a phenomenological approach to the fluctuating effects of light and colour within the space set by the canvas. He has said: "Unless you read a painting as a feeling then you don't get anything at all."

Born in Northamptonshire, Kidner studied History and Anthropology at Cambridge University. Subsequently, he studied Landscape Architecture in Ohio, before joining the Canadian army during WWII. After the war, Kidner returned to the United Kingdom, and embarked on a career as an artist. His work was first displayed in New York in 1965, in *The Responsive Eye at the Museum of Modern Art*, a group exhibition which subsequently toured the United States; and in a solo show two years later at Betty Parsons Gallery, New York in 1967. During the 1960s, Kidner was associated with the Systems group of artists and was included in an Arts Council touring exhibition of Systems art in 1972–73 that originated at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in London, some of which was displayed at Tate Britain in 2017. A retrospective at the Serpentine Gallery, London in 1984 introduced a new generation of British artists to his work, and he was elected as a Royal Academician in 2004. His work has recently been acquired by the British Academy, UK, and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Buenos Aires, Argentina; and is represented in the public collections of Arts Council England, British Council, Government Art Collection, and Tate, UK; Museum of Modern Art, New York; Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, Lisbon; and Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź, Poland.

Exhibition Opening Hours: Monday - Saturday, 11 am - 6 pm

PRESS ENQUIRIES

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