

This essay was written to accompany a profile of BR in
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The essay was illustrated by four prints: *The Kings Tomb* (P 114), *Radio* (P068), *November* (P051) and *Structure* (P050). The print *Alhambra* (P045) [above] was illustrated on the cover of this issue.



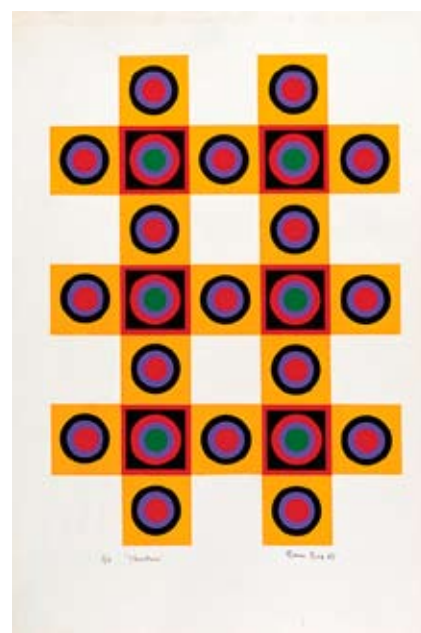
The Kings Tomb (P 114)



Radio (P068)



November (P051)



Structure (P050)

Profile of Brian Rice By Sara Hudston

Brian Rice was one of the most fashionable young abstract artists in Sixties' London. His colourful, emblematic prints captured the zeitgeist and were hired frequently by film-makers and advertisers eager to portray modern interiors. The iconic ads for White Horse Whisky – 'you can take a White Horse anywhere' - featured a Brian Rice work on the wall. The Geffrye Museum in London selected one of his screenprints for its series of domestic interiors through the ages. By the mid-Seventies, Rice had risen to Chairman of the Printmakers' Council. Then in 1977 he abruptly turned away from the metropolitan art scene, stopped producing prints or paintings and retreated to a remote sheep farm in Dorset. In the Eighties he went through a profound artistic change and finally resurrected his career in the mid-Nineties. A full retrospective exhibition of his work is now touring galleries in the South of England.

Brian Rice was born in Yeovil, Somerset in 1936 and grew up in the neighbouring rural villages of Tintinhull and Montacute. As a pupil at Yeovil Grammar School his penchant for orderly patterns was revealed early in his talent for drawing maps and diagrams. His parents and teachers thought he should train as draughtsman, but one of his aunts encouraged him to become an architect. At 17 Rice was still too young to attend architectural college, so he spent a year at Yeovil School of Art. This decision proved hugely influential for it was here that he learned the rudiments of lithography, lino-cutting, lino-block printing on to fabric, and wood-engraving. After gaining a National Diploma in Design, he gave up all thoughts of architecture.

Before Rice could study art further he had to fulfil two years' National Service. Based in Aldershot, he was able to practise lithography at Farnham, but he did not become really enthusiastic about printmaking until he went to Goldsmiths College in 1958 on a year's postgraduate teacher training course. At Goldsmiths he was taught lithography by Bernard Cheese and also studied relief printing and screenprinting.

In 1961 Rice moved back to Somerset and produced a handful of lithographs inspired by a trip through Europe and down to the Sahara Desert. These included *Spanish Landscape I* and *II*, whose sweeping shapes and earthy colours were quite different to the primary colours and geometric forms he chose after returning to London in 1962.

Rice's first London prints were linocuts made in 1963 and exhibited at the Shelley Gallery in Camden – this was to be his only show featuring prints alone. They were based on symbols from Japanese banners and were not editioned until 1999 when they became a suite of screenprints. For the next few years Rice lacked his own facilities and had to pay others to print screenprints for him. Nevertheless, prints were exhibited in his shows at the New Vision Gallery during 1964 and 65. Prints such as *Red Assembly* and *Structure* were cool, urban and fiercely coloured, a real departure in visual and cultural terms from his earlier *Spanish Landscapes*. Rice has always denied being a Pop artist, but the optical effects in pieces such as *Sector No. 2* with its fan of juddering swirls placed him firmly in the Op art genre.

In accordance with Bauhaus ideals and strongly influenced by Russian Constructivism, Rice carried his art over into his living space and decorated his small flat with frighteningly strict patterns of stripes and circles. The idea was to develop a consistent overall approach to art that could be applied to his entire living environment. "Even now I am very orderly, even down to the exact placing of things," he explained. "I like arranging things around me; designing room settings, laying out fields, planning gardens. I have very specific ideas about how things should look."

During the mid-Sixties Rice's prints attracted the attention of a flashy young American dealer called Eugene Schuster, who started buying his work in bulk. Schuster's ideas about selling art were ahead of his time. "I see no reason why art cannot be marketed in the same way as other consumer items," he told an interviewer in 1967.

Schuster gave Rice a contract with his London Arts Gallery to produce a quota of about 11 prints a year. The pieces were printed at Advanced Graphics by Chris Bettambeau and Bob Saitch and were sold to many collections in the UK and USA. While the deal provided Rice with a reliable income, he was not always happy with the images, or the hands-off way of producing them. In 1968 he produced seven lithographs at the Curwen Press for another US publisher, EH Newman, but only five were editioned after a disagreement over the colours.

By 1970 Rice was fed up with mass-producing prints and Schuster was losing patience with Rice's work. He was using a system based on the three primary colours in measured mixes to create up to 64 different colour areas within a triangular painting. "Those paintings were immensely complicated and not very practical to make into prints. I did one print and they paid me £1,000 for it, it cost £1,000 to print and they couldn't sell it. No-one knew how to frame it and they kept bashing the corners as they carried it around. That was the last thing I did for LGA."

Already tiring of London, Rice bought a house in Lyme Regis on the strength of a commission for which he was never paid. He discovered through the Printmakers' Council that the dealer in question had failed to reimburse more than 30 other artists, and as a result he became more involved with the PMC. From 1974-77 he was Chairman. "There was a great spirit in the PMC at the time. We found and rented the office at 31 Clerkenwell Close and raised money through discos and jumble sales for Sylvie Turner to produce the first *Handbook of Printmaking Supplies*."

Rice finally left London in 1978 when he bought a sheep farm, severing his links with the PMC and removing prints from more than 20 London galleries. He admits his action was the result of a crisis of confidence: "I thought 'what is the point of making a lot of bloody stuff nobody wants to buy?' Here was an opportunity to do something practical, to grow food. It was nice to produce something people actually wanted."

From 1979-1981 Rice produced no prints or paintings, although he continued to teach at Brighton, where he had been working part-time since 1966. Labouring on his farm he dug up shards of Bronze Age and medieval pottery. A professional survey stimulated his interest in archaeology and he slowly began to paint again, using patterns borrowed from the marks left on the landscape by prehistoric settlements. In 1984 he began an intensive ten-year programme of restoration on a dilapidated house on the Devon/Dorset/Somerset borders.

Rice did not make any prints until 1995 when a sabbatical from Brighton enabled him to explore new materials for relief printing, working out of his own studio. His engravings on Perspex, plastic and wood and his linocuts on vinyl, chipboard and MDF all utilised images of the Green Man, a powerful but somewhat folksy symbol of rebirth and new life sometimes found in medieval churches. That same year he started exhibiting again and published a lithograph called *The King's Tomb* using shapes and symbols taken from prehistoric rock engravings.

Since *The King's Tomb* Rice has made five screenprints, all featuring prehistoric patterns. These started as wood or linocuts; Rice cut the key block, took a print from it and then transferred it on to a screen. "This process gives me more flexibility when playing around with colour and texture and removes the physical drudgery of printing editions of relief prints."

In 1998 Rice began a suite of wood engravings based on the decorated megaliths found in prehistoric burial mounds in Eire and Brittany. Six have been exhibited in open shows, including last year's RA Summer Show.

Rice's work falls into two distinct periods that could be summarised as Sixties' urban extroversion and Nineties' rural introspection. When Rice was at Goldsmiths in the Sixties he wrote a dissertation about his home village, which he prefaced with a quotation from Thomas Hardy. Describing Angel Clare in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, Hardy wrote: "Early association with country solitudes had bred in him an unconquerable, and almost unreasonable, aversion to modern town life, and shut him out from such success as he might have aspired to by following a mundane calling in the impracticability of the spiritual one."

Rice commented: “The whole thing about being a country boy going to the city and then returning to his native countryside has great resonance.”

It is remarkable that Rice’s career parabola from country lad to fashionable metropolitan and back again should have been outlined so early and followed so faithfully. Given his interests and achievements, Rice’s career can be summed up in a deliberate misquotation from Hardy as “the return to the native”.

*Brian Rice’s Retrospective Exhibition features a selection of his 140 prints. It opened at the University of Brighton Gallery and is booked for Plymouth City Art Gallery, Bridport Arts Centre and Exeter City Arts Gallery.