Patrick Hughes’s art piece *Beyeler* spotlights a gallery from the Fondation Beyeler Museum, located in Riehen, Switzerland, one of the world’s top destinations for modern art. It features paintings and sculpture by Louise Bourgeois, Joan Miro, Alberto Giacometti, Piet Mondrian, Henri Matisse, Alexander Calder, and others. Yet, for all the artistic genius featured in the work, Patrick Hughes’s interest lies not in the art itself, but in the way it interacts with the human brain. And for all of his own artistic genius, Hughes is not so much interested in the aesthetics or even the concept behind the work, but in the science of it. Concerned with optical and visual illusions, his work aims to deceive the mind and see things that are not really there. His art is simply the means for investigating the science of perception.

Towards this goal, Hughes creates what he calls reverspective paintings, which reverse the principles of perspective and deceive the mind into believing that a painting can actually move. To use his own words, Hughes creates art that “comes alive. Each plane of the picture shrinks or expands to accommodate the movement of the onlooker, in perfect harmony, like a good dance partner.”

To achieve this, Hughes creates, or rather sculpts, three-dimensional relief paintings by adding protruding sharp-edged shapes, frequently pyramid shaped, across a flat surface in a way that accommodates his subject, finally painting the entire jagged surface white. When viewed from the front, the structure appears flat. Hughes further disorients his viewer by painting the most prominent or dominant scenes on the flat or receding portions of the surface. The result is that of reversal of depth. The protruding shapes fade or recede into the background, while the flat portions become more prevalent and salient. In addition, the viewer’s position in relationship to the art, even a slight movement in either right or left direction, determines the view and provides an entirely different perspective. The work seems to be moving and even rotating, allowing for a continuously shifting aspect of the image, and even changing the relationship depicted items or scenes to each other. This is a disorienting jolt to both the eyes and the mind, and thus ensues an interactive dance of sorts between the viewer and the work. In addition to the relief technique, Hughes also uses diagonal lines and other painted cues leading the mind and its eye, in conjunction with the viewer’s perspective, to see changes, driving home the point that what we see is not necessarily what is.
Hughes’s ability and his techniques, which straddle art and science, have inspired research and experimentation among neuroscientists, philosophers, and psychologists, to identify exactly which parts of the human brain are involved in creating these illusions. Most poignantly, Dr. Thomas V. Papathomas, Laboratory of Vision Research and Department of Biomedical Engineering, Rutgers University, who conducted two experiments on the work of Patrick Hughes, has concluded that Hughes’s “rich perspective and other painted cues . . . conspire to elicit an illusory depth percept that is the reverse of the physical depth arrangement.”

**About the Artist**

Born in Birmingham, England, Patrick Hughes is considered one of Britain’s major contemporary painters. He studied at the James Graham College of Education and taught art at the City of Leeds Training College, a teacher training college. A self-proclaimed “Surrealism sympathizer,” and inspired by Rene Magritte, Marcel Duchamp, and Paul Klee, Hughes has stated that he had no interest in art as a subject until the age of 15, when he read about the theory of art.

Hughes had his first solo exhibit in 1961 in London’s Portal Gallery, in retrospect considered the first one-man show of the kind of art that would become known as Pop Art. His work has been exhibited throughout Europe, Asia, Canada, and the United States. It is also included in the collections of the Tate Modern, The British Library, the Victoria & Albert Museum, the British Council, the Gallery of Modern Art in Glasgow, Deutsche Bibliothek, Frankfurt, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, and Denver Art Museum, among others. Hughes is also a writer and philosopher having published three books on wordplay, including *More on Oxymoron* (1984). He was also awarded an Honorary Doctorate in Science from the University of London, School of Advanced Study, in recognition of his contributions to research and education.

Hughes lives in London with his wife, British historian Diane Atkinson, who has authored several books on the Suffragettes and about women in history.