

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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ART REVIEW

It All Started With a Simple Square



Todd Heisler/The New York Times

“Malevich and the American Legacy” at Gagosian Gallery features work by Kazimir Malevich and contemporary and Modern American artists. On the fifth floor, from left: Malevich’s “Suprematist Composition: Airplane Flying,” Frank Stella’s “Ouray II” and Donald Judd’s “Untitled.”

By KAREN ROSENBERG

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“Each generation must paint its own black square,” the first director of the Museum of Modern Art, Alfred H. Barr Jr., once said. He was referring to Kazimir Malevich, the Russian polymath (1879-1935) who founded the movement known as Suprematism and, in doing so, gave art a visual and philosophical reset button.

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Malevich's "Suprematism, 18th Construction" (1915).

Mr. Barr awarded Malevich's Suprematism a prime spot on his famous 1936 flowchart, as a direct link between Cubism and geometric abstract art. "Malevich and the American Legacy," the latest how-did-they-get-this-stuff? historical exhibition at the Gagosian Gallery, takes that family tree a few generations further.

The show surrounds major Malevich canvases — one just acquired by the Art Institute of Chicago, another on loan from the Museum of Modern Art, four more in the possession of the artist's heirs — with geometric works by Ellsworth Kelly, Donald Judd, Dan Flavin and many others. (Some of those are museum pieces too, from [MoMA](#), Storm King, Nelson-Atkins and the Nasher Sculpture Center; others are from the artists' personal collections.)

Everything is expertly installed, by Andrea Crane and Ealan Wingate, turning the sometimes awkward three-floor space of the gallery's uptown branch into a series of intimate chapels. You're reminded that Malevich displayed his "Black Square" in the position traditionally reserved for icon paintings in Russian homes.

But this isn't a museum, recent shows of Manzoni, Monet and Rauschenberg notwithstanding. There are no wall labels, for one thing, so if you haven't brushed up on your Malevich, it's easy to go through this exhibition without picking up much more than simple geometry. That would be a mistake; as Judd aptly perceived, Malevich "has no doctrine about geometry itself."

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The catalog — square-shaped, naturally — is helpful here. It includes the source of Judd's aperçu, a 1974 *Art in America* article titled "Malevich: Independent Form, Color, Surface," as well as essays by Yve-Alain Bois and other scholars. All of this makes it clear that American artists took to heart not just Malevich's radically simplified forms, but also the puritanical spirit in which he conceived them.

Americans first came to know Malevich through Barr's "Cubism and Modern Art" survey in 1936 — the impetus for that chart — and the opening of the Guggenheim (then called the Museum of Non-Objective Painting) three years later. By that time other proponents of geometric abstraction — notably, Mondrian — had already made a strong impression.

The cold war didn't help. Malevich seemed to pop up in the work of Mr. Kelly, Barnett Newman and Ad Reinhardt, but those similarities were antagonistic (Newman) or merely coincidental (Mr. Kelly). It wasn't until 1973, when the Guggenheim gave Malevich his first United States retrospective, that Americans embraced him in earnest. As Judd wrote the following year, "It's obvious now that the forms and colors in the paintings that Malevich began painting in 1915 are the first instances of form and color."

As Mr. Bois points out, American artists have had a tendency to seize on the conceptual side of Malevich — ignoring his earlier Cubo-Futurist canvases and the late figurative work he produced under government pressure. Even when considering the Suprematist works, the Americans have typically isolated the most austere examples — the black-and-white squares, as opposed to the more colorful arrangements of floating, irregular quadrilaterals at Gagosian.

This means that there's a bit of a mismatch between the show's Maleviches and the works that constitute his "legacy." It's most pronounced on the sixth floor, where the drifting shapes in four Malevich paintings are weighed down by a gloomy plum-and-brown Rothko, a blocky Newman obelisk and Richard Serra's tightly wedged lead corner piece. Only the James Turrell, a holographic parallelogram installed in a side room, picks up on the fugitive quality of Malevich's forms.

On the other floors, though, the Americans' selective interpretations look fantastic. In a fifth-floor gallery, MoMA's much-loved "Suprematist Composition: Airplane Flying" (1915) by

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Malevich soars to new heights in the company of Charles Ray's framed pool of ink and Judd's spaced boxes of rusted steel backed with colored Plexiglas. (Malevich-Judd is, by far, the show's strongest pairing — an exhibition unto itself.)

Down the hall is another Judd — this one a translucent chartreuse box — and Cy Twombly's funny little drawing "To Malevitch." Then comes a room of Minimal and post-Minimal sculpture by [Sol LeWitt](#), Walter de Maria and Banks Violette. Mr. Violette, the show's youngest artist, holds his own with a scaffold-backed black square that conjures Malevich's stage sets for "Victory Over the Sun."

What's missing from these rooms, for the most part, is American painting. There's plenty to be found on the fourth floor, where Robert Ryman, Reinhardt, Newman and Brice Marden iterate Malevich's geometries with their own philosophies of abstraction. Here too is a powerful troika of Mr. Serra, Mr. Kelly and Agnes Martin, as well as the show's only pre-Suprematist Malevich (the Cubist "Desk and Room," from 1913).

Some of the tributes are tongue-in-cheek. Ed Ruscha's rectangles of bleach on colored linen look at first like Suprematist abstractions, but are really threats. (One title reads, "You Will Eat Hot Lead.") And in John Baldessari's cheeky collaged-over photograph "Two Stares Making a Point but Blocked by a Plane (for Malevich)," a white square obscures the climactic moment of a film still.

Could you envision "Malevich and the American Legacy" at a museum, say MoMA or the Guggenheim? Maybe. It would certainly have to take a longer look at Malevich than the works at Gagolian allow, adding the missing Squares and perhaps some more Cubo-Futurist paintings along the lines of the Guggenheim's "Morning in the Village After Snowstorm."

Still, the gallery lives up to its reputation for making art look as good as — and sometimes better than — it does at museums. Mr. Serra once said: "Malevich's black square = spirituality. My black square = materiality." Here, where Suprematism meets capitalism, Malevich looks more versatile than ever.

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“Malevich and the American Legacy” continues through April 30 at Gagosian Gallery, 980 Madison Avenue, between 76th and 77th Streets; (212) 744-2313, gagosian.com.