

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

THE ART WORLD

SHAPES OF THINGS

After Kazimir Malevich.

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL

Kazimir Malevich was the first great artist to make art look like something your kid could do—if your kid had thought of doing it in war-isolated Moscow, in 1915, and was a genius. I recommend bringing a mind-set of naïve wonder to “Malevich and the American Legacy,” an invigorating show, at the uptown Gagosian gallery, of a half-dozen classic paintings by Malevich—four of them from 1915, when he promulgated the style and philosophy that he dubbed Suprematism—and nearly fifty works by twenty-five Americans, ranging in time from a 1949 Barnett Newman to a 2011 Mark Grotjahn. (Other artists on hand include Mark Rothko, Ad Reinhardt, Cy Twombly, Ellsworth Kelly, Agnes Martin, Frank Stella, Donald Judd, Dan Flavin, Carl Andre, and Ed Ruscha.) Like radio waves, Malevich’s crackling simplicities of geometric shapes on white grounds seem to have been picked up by the antennae of artists who may or may not have had him consciously in mind. The show proves that those messages are still beaming. Malevich feels freshly available, in ways that other past evangelists of abstraction don’t any longer—notably the best of them all, Piet Mondrian. Mondrian evolved his asymmetrical grids through a rigorous self-education in the formal orders of Cézanne and Cubism, and he grounded them in a physical self-awareness. A Mondrian dramatizes our bodies’ continual adjustments to the drag of gravity. Its excruciating balance registers in your gut, once you have looked hard enough. No subsequent abstractionist has even approached Mondrian’s taut perfection.

Malevich, seven years younger, nim-

bly but superficially absorbed the same stylistic precedents. Then he kicked free. “Suprematist Painting: Rectangle and Circle” (1915)—just an upright blue-black oblong with a slightly darker, small disk above and to one side, as if a dotted “i” were coming undone—is matter-of-factly material, a thing on the wall. (That



Malevich's "Mystic Suprematism" (1920-27).

painting and the other Suprematist works in the Gagosian show have been framed, contrary to Malevich’s original policy; they should not be.) The brushwork is juicy and brusque: filling in the shapes, fussing with the edges. But the forms are weightless, more like thoughts than like images. You don’t look at the picture so much as launch yourself into

its trackless empyrean. Beyond its obvious design flair, the work looks easy because it is. Malevich is monumental not for what he put into pictorial space but for what he took out: bodily experience, the fundamental theme of Western art since the Renaissance. His appeal to Americans isn’t surprising. Apart from a peculiarly Russian mystical tradition, which he exploited—evoking the compact spell of the icon, as a conduit of the divine—his work amounts to a cosmic “Song of the Open Road.” It conveys sheer, surging, untrammelled possibility. This quality seemed in synch with the Revolution of 1917. It wasn’t—which Malevich was painfully made aware of, first by his rivals in the Russian avant-garde and then, conclusively, by the regime of Joseph Stalin.

Malevich was born in Ukraine in 1879, the first of fourteen children of Polish-speaking Roman Catholic parents. (His father was a sugar-refinery administrator.) He imbibed elements of peasant culture, studied art in Kiev, and came to Moscow at the age of twenty-five, in 1904, moving there three years later. He was quickly at the heart of fertile developments in art, music, and theatre which exalted Russian folk motifs while keeping a weather eye on Western Europe. The artist came to fame in a movement, Cubo-Futurism, that absorbed the latest styles from France and Italy in a single gulp. In 1913, he designed the sets and costumes for “Victory Over the Sun,” a Cubo-Futurist opera that, in a conjectural restaging I once attended, was very loud and made no discernible sense. At Gagosian, a fascinating mess of a painting, “Desk and Room” (1913), finds Malevich running through the standard tropes of Cubism with palpable exasperation, as something new

seethes in maverick planes, disrupting the rational structure of a Picasso or a Braque. With communication between Moscow and the West cut off by the First World War, Malevich plotted an aesthetic insurrection. He might have delayed the debut of Suprematism past 1915, had not a colleague, Ivan Puni, walked in on his studio and discovered

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works that probably included the talismanic “Black Square,” with that shape centered on a white ground, on a square canvas. Malevich, fearing for his priority, mounted a show, and issued a Suprematist manifesto. He hung “Black Square” high at the corner of two walls, as icons were often displayed. The manifesto, like most of Malevich’s writing, is a mixture of religious tones and scientific ideas, by turns Edenic and utopian. He soon had numerous followers, whose quick mastery of the Suprematist look proved its cogent ease. In 1919, he began teaching at an art school in Vitebsk, which he then took over by forcing out its less radical director, Marc Chagall. Malevich also acquired antagonists, in the brilliant Constructivist circle of Vladimir Tatlin, Alexander Rodchenko, and several others, who advanced a machine-inspired aesthetic that was supposedly truer to the spirit and the needs of the Revolution than Suprematism. Malevich fell into step with imperatives of industrial practicality, developing architectural ideas and overseeing production of such items as Suprematist-patterned china. But, by the end of the nineteen-twenties, all parties of the avant-garde had been crushed by official diktat. Returning to figurative imagery in his painting did Malevich no good. In 1930, accused of “formalism” and suspected of espionage, he was interrogated and briefly imprisoned. He died, of cancer, in Leningrad in 1935, at the age of fifty-six. His ashes were buried under a grave marker bearing a black square.

Malevich’s artistic legacy owes to a stroke of luck: in 1927, he took seventy works to Germany for a retrospective, and left most of them there. Alfred H. Barr, Jr., snapped up some Suprematist gems in 1935, for New York’s Museum of Modern Art, but Malevich remained little acknowledged until well into the sixties. (MOMA’s “White on White,” from 1918, a cool white square tilted on a warm white ground, became famous more as a curiosity than as a touchstone.) The art historian Yve-Alain Bois, writing in the Gagosian catalogue, cautions against mistaking “pseudomorphosis”—similar or identical forms, arrived at independently—for evidence of influence. He cites Ellsworth Kelly’s monochrome

paintings on wood, “Black Square” and “White Square,” of 1953, which evidently conjured Malevich’s ghost by accident. Barnett Newman was more aware of the precedent for his stark abstractions, but without quite understanding it, Bois says. The historical consciousness of American artists stayed fixated on Parisian modernism until the rise of minimalism, when the time bomb of the Russian avant-garde finally began to detonate. Donald Judd later declared, “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”—by which I presume he meant that Malevich was the first to realize those categories independently of anything but themselves. Such exacting literal-mindedness had become the common sense of forward-looking American artists. It still is, more or less. The Gagosian show, elegantly installed by Andrea Crane and Ealan Wingate, suggests artistic bees abuzz at varied conceptual distances from a Malevichian hive. The happiest are the object-makers, such as Judd, with some of his box forms, Dan Flavin, with an array of colored fluorescent lights, and Richard Serra, with an ominous ton of mutually propped-up lead plates. The reductive logic that the minimalists recognized in Malevich was an ordeal for painters, differently endured in Frank Stella’s shaped canvases of stripes in copper or aluminum paint and Brice Marden’s abutted monochrome panels in oil and wax.

Ed Ruscha gives the show a witty coda with serene works, from 1999 and 2001, of stretched colored linens, with bleached-out blocks representing each of the words in the works’ ungentle titles: for example, “You Will Eat Hot Lead.” Another title, “I Will Wipe You Off the Face of This Earth,” pretty well characterizes Malevich’s lasting abrogation of the Western tradition of representing the directly experienced world. Attaining a sort of exit velocity, his pictures send imagination tumbling into heady infinity. ♦

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Slide show: Schjeldahl on Malevich.