

GAGOSIAN GALLERY



Where Malevich Has Left Us Today

by Robert C. Morgan



"Mystic Suprematism," 1920–27. Oil on canvas. 393/8 x 235/8". Collection of the Heirs of Kazimir Malevich. Courtesy Gagolian Gallery.

At the outset of Modernism, geometric shapes in painting and sculpture were being foregrounded by the Western avant-garde—in Russia with the Suprematists and Constructivists, in Holland with the De Stijl movement, and in Germany with the Bauhaus. Other important sources can be found in the early mystical color experiments by Frantisek Kupka and Hilma af Klint. Among those who worked in geometric abstraction at this time, a certain balance and visual tension was perpetuated between spiritual (mystic) expression and social utopia as evidenced by the containment of form within these artists' works. Much of this was based on the notion that balance and tension were complementary to one another and that a proper dosage of each was necessary in order for a painting to function both socially and spiritually. This idealism was shared reciprocally by painters, sculptors, and architects alike.

Kazimir Malevich (1878 – 1935) was one of the first painters to engage fully in geometric abstraction. In the Suprematist paintings, the interior form within the frame is brought into a clear relationship with the architectural space around it. Malevich's early black-on-white Suprematist paintings reveal the frame as a structural component within the ground of the painting. In developing his revolutionary aesthetic, the artist moved between complex configurations of floating abstract shapes, such as those in the paintings of 1914-16, toward a more diffuse, nearly minimal style of abstraction in 1917-18, namely, his white-on-white

paintings. Throughout this period of his career, roughly 1913-19, Malevich's concept of Suprematism would vacillate between two approaches—the complex aggregations of floating, usually rectilinear shapes, and the more absolute primary shapes without reference to motion. In either case, his forms were involved in a significant ideological struggle contingent on retaining a strong physical adherence to pictorial space. His purpose in working within this space was to maintain and to maximize an interior focus on the concept of pure form. This, of course, would be in opposition to the neoplasticism of Mondrian, in which form suggests an extension of what is happening within the visible space beyond the edges of the frame. For Malevich, form was more about its containment within the edges. The visual tension that results from this approach compacts the signifying power of form in a way that triggers a profound emotional response. Therefore, as Malevich made clear in his essays on Suprematism, “form equals feeling.”



“Suprematism,” 18th Construction, 1915. Oil on canvas. 207/8 x 207/8”. Collection of the Heirs of Kazimir Malevich. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery.

Malevich was not oblivious to the emotional quality of color. While this factor is often avoided in discussions about Malevich's Suprematism, I feel it is essential to his work. “Black Square,” which begins as a sketch in 1913, then becomes a painting in 1915, and is repeated in different formats throughout the artist's career, is not only a symbol of iconic negation (possibly as a refutation of the omnipresent Russian Orthodox icons seen in homes throughout the provincial villages), but also, on a formalist level, an opaque field that absorbs all color, and metonymically—in association with the Russian formalist poets Khlebnikov and Kruchonykh—a silent field that absorbs all language. On the contrary, whiteness—as seen in the paintings from 1917-18—symbolized what Malevich called “the desert”—the place of a journey, a spiritual vision, and a transcendence—where color ultimately gives way to pure light.

If we can fast-forward the history of Modernism—specifically the *raison d'être* involving geometric form in painting—to recent times, the results may be quite startling, as perceived in the recent exhibition at the uptown Gagosian Gallery, titled “Malevich and the American Legacy.” It is curious that this exhibition arrives after a haunting stillness of three decades when geometric abstraction played a considerably lesser, if not defunct role in the global art world. Until the past season, geometric abstraction would have been seen as the dark side of the “cutting edge.” (The French term “*avant-garde*” was replaced in the late 1980s by its American English counterpart, “cutting edge.”) However, the first usage of the term “*avant-garde*” was not in art, but attributed to the French infantry during the Napoleonic Wars. By coincidence, the invention of the bayonet served to prepare the French infantry for ground battle, therefore serving as the premier metaphor of the term “cutting-edge.” In the history of Modernism, the concept of the “spiritual” as employed in Malevich's Suprematism has been more or less displaced by irony, as suggested in works by Ed Ruscha, Steven Parrino, Charles Ray, John Baldessari, and Banks Violette. Today the Suprematist paradigm of Malevich is no longer perceived as a viable alternative to the chaos and contradiction of the Russian Revolution or to the transcendence of material reality. Sculptor Richard Serra, for example, typically states his opposition to Malevich's spirituality by emphasizing materiality. Paintings that once represented architectonic forms and alluded to optimism or idealism are no longer considered “advanced.” The light contained in “Composition: White on White”—which Malevich considered the apotheosis of his achievement, painted one year after the October Revolution—might now

be likened to the pixelated light on a plasma screen or a recent holographic light projection by James Turrell.

So what will become of abstract painting and its future affinities? The work of Malevich will undoubtedly and somewhat mysteriously continue to generate energy and faith in the possibility that the tactile signs of human beings are still very much with us, and that we, in fact, depend on them in a functional and intentional way. Is there a future to the geometry of form? The future is contingent on the idea that painting is fundamentally as tactile a medium as it has been since early Paleolithic times. By tactile, I mean the opposite of a self-conscious detachment or a withdrawal from the rigors of form. Abstract form is necessarily a tactile expression. It is not media and media is not abstract form. In another mode, one might substitute the word "media" for "representation." Even so, there is a profound and fundamental difference between form in painting and representation through media. It is essentially the difference between Modernism and postmodernism as a generalist *modus operandi* in the practice of art. This is not to deny the possibility that geometric abstraction might regenerate as another type of form, maybe a conceptual form, as a "tactile idea" as shown in the early paintings on aluminum by Robert Ryman or the metallic, shaped canvases by Frank Stella, or the more recent dense, monochrome paintings by Mark Grotjahn. If the structure of painting is sufficiently understood, yet liberated from its academic confines, as Malevich made clear, then painting will retain the potential to become more than a purely mediumistic expression.

I do not believe that Malevich or the other practitioners of the early Russian avant-garde have left us in a cul-de-sac. Quite the opposite. There will always be room to move, as the Gagosian exhibition makes reasonably clear. Painting carries within its own means the potential to transform itself. I would suggest that this is the kind of visual power that Malevich dreamt his work might possess. After seeing the Suprematist exhibition on two occasions at the Guggenheim in 2003, I was convinced that these paintings had opened a door beyond iconic representation and, through the expression of tactile values, have returned abstract painting to the realm of intimacy. In this instance, I refer to intimacy less in terms of the reduction of scale than in the way form might communicate through the content of its abstract directness. Now, a century later, there is the potential of transforming iconic representation once again through the application of new materials and advanced technical processes. The fact that Malevich eventually moved his Suprematist vocabulary off the canvas into maximal architectural forms is equally fascinating, but this is the subject of another essay, still in progress.