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INTERNATIONAL ARTS

At Malevich Exhibition, a Journey of Ideas

By PALKO KARASZ MARCH 16, 2015

LONDON — When the Russian avant-garde painter Kazimir Malevich first showed what was to become his signature work — a simple black square floating against a plain white background — some viewers cried blasphemy.

The work, known as "Black Square," was the centerpiece of "The Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings, '0.10'" in Petrograd in 1915. It was seen as scandalous both for its subject — a far cry from the figurative art of the period — and where it was placed in the gallery: hung across the corner of the room, close to the ceiling, in the spot reserved for religious icons in the traditional Russian household.

"Black Square" marked Malevich's declaration of independence from the prevailing norms and his embrace of Suprematism, based on the primacy of shapes and colors over depictions of the real world.

A hundred years later, visitors to the Whitechapel Gallery's "Adventures of the Black Square: Abstract Art and Society 1915-2015," in London will be spared the scandal. Instead, they are invited on a journey of Malevich's ideas through space and time with his contemporaries and distant disciples from Russia to Latin America. The exhibition, open until April 6, gathers works from 100 modern and contemporary artists.

"Our aim with the exhibition is to explore the politics of geometric abstraction," said Iwona Blazwick, director of the gallery. "It is a challenge to talk about something which is about pure line, pure color, pure form, without question."

The curators built the show around four themes: abstraction in utopian ideas, the study of architecture, communication, and the everyday. The artworks are shown chronologically, from Malevich's era to the present day.

"Black Quadrilateral," one of Malevich's black square paintings, opens the

show, underlining the idea that the artist's radical gesture can be seen as an end to centuries of painterly tradition, as much as the beginning of something new.

"I say to all: Abandon love, abandon aestheticism, abandon the baggage of wisdom, for in the new culture, your wisdom is ridiculous and insignificant," Malevich wrote in 1915. "We, Suprematists, throw open the way to you. Hurry! — For tomorrow you will not recognize us."

The exhibition shows how artists around the world have been inspired by and respond to this utopian ideal. As Russia emerged from revolution, Constructivists like Lyubov Popova and Gustav Klutsis saw color and form as a universal language for the communication of a new social order. Klutsis's "Design for Loudspeaker No. 5," from 1922, is a black, red and white angular depiction of a megaphone, announcing the potential of broadcasting to a mass audience.

"It was a form that transcended language, cultural specificity, geography, class most importantly, and it was a way of stepping out of the salon, away from the elites, to the masses," Ms. Blazwick said.

The influence traveled far. Lygia Clark, a Brazilian artist who was a student of Fernand Léger in France, was a co-founder of the Neo-Concretist movement in Rio de Janeiro, calling for greater sensuality in concrete art. Her "Bichos," or "Creatures," series from the 1960s consists of planes of metal that viewers — or participants, as she preferred to call them — were invited to arrange in different shapes.

Piet Mondrian's "Composition with Yellow, Blue and Red," Theo van Doesburg's design for the avant-garde refurbishment of Café Aubette in Strasbourg, France, and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy's photographic contributions to the Bauhaus School show how form and function came together in the wake of "Black Square."

The exhibition also gives pride of place to the avant-garde magazine. These periodicals, some of them published only once, are little-known examples of artists working as publishers. Behind abstract covers, they reproduced manifestos and artworks, acting as vectors of cross-pollination between artists and movements, across Europe and eventually the globe. The Emirati conceptual artist Hassan Sharif carried on this tradition in the 1980s, when he persuaded a newspaper editor in Dubai to run a weekly column in which he introduced Malevich and Mondrian to the local public.

Gunilla Klingberg, who lives and works in Sweden, explores the abstract by taking corporate logos and combining them into new geometric shapes. “Spar Loop” from 2000 uses a supermarket’s logo to create a circular shape, similar to a mandala, likening it to the sacred and opposing it to its origins from the consumer world.

Even as the exhibition reveals the range of the influence of “Black Square,” the Whitechapel Gallery reminds viewers of the rugged path the work has traveled through the last century and into the present day.

“The masses hated monochromes, and it continues to baffle people,” Ms. Blazwick said. “As human beings we look for ourselves in what we see, and we have an irrepressible anthropomorphic impulse when we look at something that looks like a mirror, something which is two-dimensional opposite us. We panic when we don’t see ourselves, I suspect, and for a lot of people, they think it’s an affront.”

Yet abstraction has gone away and come back, defying politics and fashion. The exhibition at the Whitechapel is the latest in a series of shows that demonstrated new fascination with the subject. A Malevich retrospective at Tate Modern last year proved popular, while other shows examined the Russian avant-garde’s reaction to World War I and stretched to the fringe of modernism.

“It’s marvelous to see Malevich now becoming mainstream,” said Christina Lodder, professor at the University of Kent and president of the Malevich Society. “When I started my research back in the ’70s, it was a struggle to do something of Russia because it was considered on the periphery, not part of European art.”

In displaying contemporary works, inspired by the beginnings of modernism, the exhibition shows a sense of nostalgia. The Iranian artist Nazgol Ansarinia reaches back even further, to times predating modernism, in her works drawing on Persian art. “22 September, 2012, front page” is a mosaic-like square collage, but coming through it is the front page of a newspaper.

But nostalgia at the Whitechapel Gallery isn’t without skepticism. The British photographer Hannah Starkey places lone women in the steel-and-glass corporate atriums of the city of London. These corporate interiors, reminiscent of Constructivism, suggest that modernist ideals have inspired but have also been corrupted.

Some prominent names, like Bridget Riley, are missing from the show. The

reason, Ms. Blazwick explained, is mainly that the aim was to display artists using geometric abstraction in connection with society.

Ultimately, Ms. Blazwick said, the show aims to change certain fixed ideas about abstraction. The Whitechapel Gallery's mission, she said, is to change the canon of art history and point out that abstraction transcends regimes, borders and even gender, from the Middle East to Latin America.

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