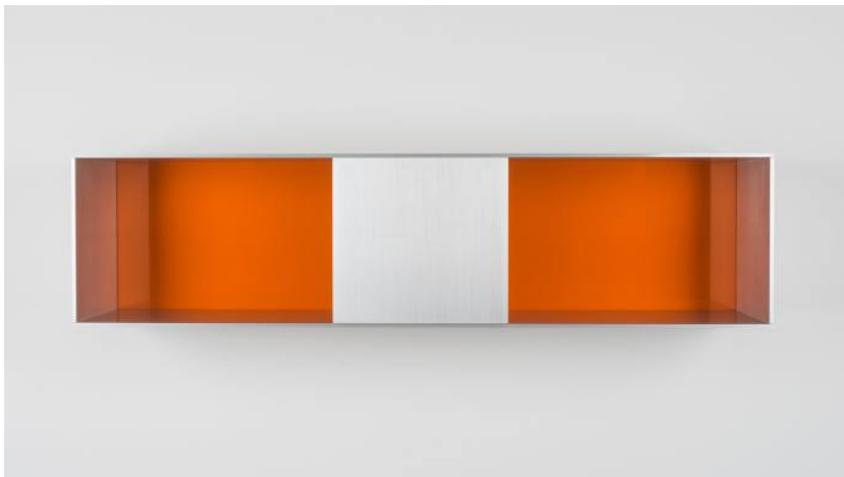


Collecting

Donald Judd and Kazimir Malevich: a magnificently odd couple

Galerie Gmurzynska's Zurich show explores the artists' formal similarities and spiritual differences



Donald Judd's 'Untitled' (1991)

Rachel Spence

“I think it’s good, but what would Malevich say?” replied Donald Judd when the gallerist Krystyna Gmurzynska asked him, in 1992, if he wished to show his works alongside the Russian Suprematist who died in 1935.

Such timidity was untypical of the American sculptor. A mandarin of 1960s minimalism — though he eschewed the term — Judd was as uncompromising as his sculptures. That he hesitated over exhibiting alongside Malevich betrays his reverence.

Fortunately Gmurzynska prevailed. In 1994, she exhibited works by Judd — who had bought drawings by Malevich and by Kurt Schwitters from her — and Malevich in her Cologne gallery.

It should have been a seminal moment for the American, who had written eloquently about the Russian’s 1955 exhibition at the Guggenheim museum. Sadly, however, Judd himself died weeks before the Cologne show opened.

Now, Judd and Malevich are together again in the gallery’s Zurich base. Their alliance has been worth the wait. Bringing together two paintings and 20 drawings by Malevich — some

are on private loan, others owned by the gallery and not all are for sale — with eight sculptures and seven pieces of furniture by Judd (some loaned by the Judd Foundation, some privately, not all for sale), it illustrates superbly why Judd found Malevich inspirational. Meanwhile, the catalogue, with texts by Judd and an essay by Evgenia Petrova, deputy director of the State Russian Museum, adds critical heft.



Kazimir Malevich's 'Men of the Future (Nakov PS -48 Avenirriens)' (c1932)

Curated by Flavin Judd, who is the sculptor's son and curator and co-president of the eponymous foundation, the show opens with "Painterly Realism of a Peasant Woman in Two Dimensions called Red Square" (1915). That clunky title does not do justice to the reductive triumph of this near-scarlet geometry. Offcentre, its sides sloping, painted with hasty strokes, it is the work of a painter who has not only just realised that abstraction is the conduit to cosmic truths, but who is also "busy, with a lot of ideas to be gotten down" as Judd, with typical laconic brilliance, described the Russian idealist.

There was nothing idealist about Judd. Born in 1928 into a country whose championship of individual freedom and consumerism made it the polar opposite of revolutionary Russia, he made art that denied all links with exterior subjects—including God and politics.

Yet Malevich reached him. One can imagine the flicker in Judd's bone-dry eye when he saw the Guggenheim show. At a time when Abstract Expressionists were emoting with ever-increasing melodrama, Malevich's pared-down utterances must have seemed a signpost to sanity. "They are the first instances of form and colour," wrote Judd in wonder at the Russian's gift for separating images from the symbolism that had previously tainted them.

Judd's desire for purity is illustrated by rigorous display in Gmurzynska's svelte new showcase on Talstrasse, opened now to supplement the chief gallery.

Rather than plonk Judd's red plywood sculpture "Untitled" (1990) next to Malevich's "Red Square", and make a simplistic association between colours, Flavin Judd positions the painting near to "Untitled" (1991) — an unpainted, plywood, three-dimensional oblong with an aluminium cylinder set into an upper curve. Further into the room crouches the red sculpture, which is similar to the unpainted one but with the surface curve left empty. Considered together, the trio underline Judd's perception, which he also imbues to Malevich, that colour and form are essentially separate. "A colour doesn't have a form or a form a colour," Judd observed in his essay on Malevich's Guggenheim paintings.

Such boundaries reflect Judd's loathing of wishy-washy spiritual thinking. He once wrote: "Four units in a row are only that. They are not part of infinity, either endless or above, or within. [...]."

Malevich disagreed. He saw outer space as an quasi-divine territory and made his geometries — such as the little pencil drawing (after 1916, on show here) of an ethereal wedge of oblongs overlaid by a triangle — to express transcendent forces that could liberate mankind.

Did Judd reconcile himself to Malevich's metaphysical leanings? Perhaps he never truly disavowed them. Not shown since the 1994 Gmurzynska exhibit, three slender horizontal aluminium wall-pieces (both "Untitled", 1991, part of Judd's Menziken series) are painted within in slabs of glass-bright ivy, amber and black. Their glowing rhythms recall the predella paintings beneath Renaissance altarpieces. Across the room, a ridged oblong in translucent chartreuse, "Untitled" (1991), has the evergreen sensuality of an Impressionist garden.

That Judd's rapport with Malevich was complex matters not a jot. The Russian's late figurative drawings, which make up the bulk of his offering here, whisper that art is a mysterious matter. Were they born because Stalin banned abstraction? Or was Malevich, as Petrova's essay suggests, yearning again for figuration? Certainly, they have little to do with Judd's oeuvre. Nevertheless, to see this magnificently odd couple displayed with such intelligent concision is unmissable. Meanwhile the catalogue is a collector's item in its own right.

To September 15, gmurzynska.com