

Conversations with the Black Square

Revisiting the art and theory of Kazimir Malevich through the sculpture of Gill Gatfield.

- December 2013

"I HAVE fished myself out of the rubbishy slough of academic art," Kazimir Malevich announced in 1915. The Russian artist had made a decision to break away from popular trends in taste and style to develop, what some might say was, the first absolute example of abstract art. By borrowing elements from minimalism and cubism, the artist experimented with simple forms and limited colour to evoke and provoke new aesthetic intrigue. This movement Malevich coined as 'Suprematism', meaning art that emotes heightened feelings of purity achieved by rejecting representational art.

Providing meaning through pure geometric forms with minimal use of colour was the starting point for New Zealand Sculptor Gill Gatfield in her latest body of work exhibited at the Langford120 gallery in North Melbourne. The exhibition, titled *Squaring Up*, commemorates the 100th anniversary of Malevich's signature painting *Black Square*, by calling upon 10 local and international artists to respond to this work in their own practice.

Langford120 directors Dr Wilma Tabacco and Dr Irene Barberis are long time supporters of contemporary abstract art. Known for their 'new gallery model', in which the quality of the art they exhibit is more important than its salability or trend value, Tabacco and Barberis main focus is to assist mid-career artists by showcasing their work and help to further develop the artist's profile.

Both well-established artists themselves, the directors collaboration with Gatfield was a natural meeting of like minds. With their combined affinity with contemporary abstract art, and a muse like Malevich, Langford120 served as an ideal venue to tackle Suprematist theory and toy with concepts of formalism, scale, gravity, time and space.

Abstract art is typically challenging, particularly if the audience has no prior understanding of contemporary art. Without this context the reading of the works can fall flat, leaving the artwork to be judged solely on its material worth. For example, Malevich's *Black Square* is merely just that, black paint in a square shape upon canvas and could be viewed as nothing more. "But of course this is not the case." Says Tabacco, "This art is an abstract way of thinking – way and above the real world."



Gatfield's *Multiple Choice*, 2013 & *Black Velvet*, 2013.

Abstract art fundamentally challenges traditional notions of ‘what art is’ by removing the need for figural compositions and creating new ways to emote meaning and express ideas, Tabacco explains.

Yet, an artist can tread a fine line between abstract dialogue and empty intellectualism when, as Gatfield puts it, “the writing [about the work] becomes the art form.” Thankfully, Gatfield’s work in *Squaring Up* does not disappoint. Seductive in its simplicity and fresh in its ability to convey complex readings succinctly, the artist’s materials and techniques create conceptually rich pieces that suggest emotional and psychological analyses.

With strong sociopolitical themes that go beyond the discourse of art, touching on issues relating to gender, race, identity, culture and ownership, Gatfield’s practice would be better described as conceptual-abstract art. More than just sculpture, her mediums are interdisciplinary, often combining elements of painting and earth matter to produce highly crafted work, each piece finished with precision.

Featuring in *Squaring Up* is Gatfield’s *Black Velvet*, 2013 a striking large-scale wall mounted black panel with a gaping cavity, carefully sliced from its centre. A deep sense of unease is propelled from its darkness, while projecting an unsettling level of command and control. Unpacking the work’s narrative takes the observer on a journey through cultural references, sensuality, social norms and moral conflicts. The artist’s intent, “to convey much, in the manner of less,” is infinitely clear.

Other works include *Black Gold* and *Terra Nullius*, 2013 Gatfield’s first pieces to incorporate blocks of native Australian grass. They are essentially living artworks; each grass patch stitched to the canvas, and require regular watering. These sensory “organic abstractions” or “plump paintings,” as the artist refers to them, beg to be touched; a privilege Gatfield openly encourages.

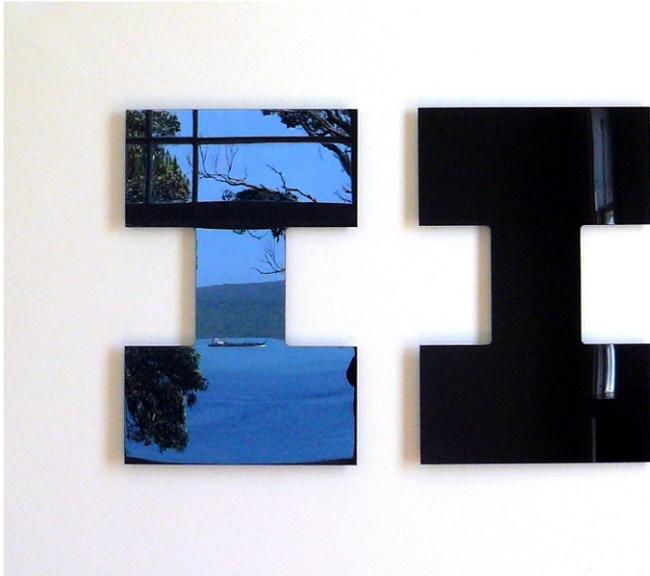


The forbidden touch: a viewer lightly stroking *Terra Nullius*, 2013 along side *Black Gold*, 2013.

The title of each artwork provides a starting point for its initial reading; a jumping board from which the viewer can delve into various levels of signification. *Black Gold*, for instance immediately makes reference to nature and the commodification of natural resources. It further comments on arts ability to follow money just like other business commodities, such as oil and coal, and the precious value of natural assets.

Similarly, *Terra Nullius* (from old Latin which translated means ‘land belonging to no one’) historically was used as a moral and legal justification by governments and new settlers to claim and take territory presumed ‘un-owned’, nodding towards the contentious debates around indigenous land rights in Australasia.

A black and white cross, titled *Multiple Choice*, 2013, is also featured and again references ownership and land negotiations. Mounted on the ground, this piece can be read as the 'x' that was used to signify a universal signature, the mark of many binding contracts. Upon closer inspection the sleek polished black granite and Italian Carrara marble of the x both reflect and absorb the viewer's image. The object and observer are connected on its surface, making this work inclusive, personal and a reflection of cultural history. Again this is seen in *I + I*, 2012 where the reflection of light and mirroring effect of the symbols interrupts the pristine orderliness of the work's deep black surface.



I + I. Tempered glass and ink. Gill Gatfield, 2012.

Far from “conceptual one-liners,” Gatfield’s work is heavily charged with multiple layers of social and political commentary. “Their meanings are not defined; the meaning is still making itself,” the artist asserts. It is this open-ended quality that captures the provocative intent of Suprematism’s fundamental principle: that art is both idea and object. Drawing from this, Gatfield creates contemplative work that conveys current issues and ideas. Her work in this exhibition is an apt contemporary response to Malevich’s *Black Square* and displays her own virtuosity. As one audience member quipped on opening night, the exhibition can simply be described as “a glove that

perfectly fits.”

Squaring Up coincides with the release of *Abstract Figure: Gill Gatfield* a monograph of the artist’s sculpture practice and theory, published by Kikorangi Press.

Gallery Langford120 is at 120 Langford Street, North Melbourne.

Squaring Up runs until **December 20th**

Curated by Stephan Wickham and Wilma Tabacco this exhibition includes work by Pam Aitken, Susan Andrews, Louise Blyton, Lynne Eastaway, Gill Gatfield, Kendal Heyes, P.J. Hickman, Wilma Tobacco, Fran Van Riemsdyk and Stephen Wickham.

<http://www.langford120.com.au/>

*All photos courtesy of Gill Gatfield and Langford120.

Author – Jennifer Choat