

## The Trouble with Shapes

Shapes can be remarkably dangerous things. In 1915 the Russian artist Kazimir Malevich painted a small two and a half foot square canvas consisting of a black square hovering on a white background. That was it. With these remarkable simple means Suprematism was born and the pictorial plane was forever emancipated from the chains of representation. Or that was the claim that was made by the circle of artists joining this nascent avant-garde movement. For Stalin, 15 years later in 1930, the finer points of geometric abstraction were less enthralling. He ordered that Malevich be interrogated, and judging by the two month jail sentence for 'formalism' that was handed down, Stalin was apparently not impressed.

This is the trouble with shapes. For according to Malevich, the reduction in his paintings was paradoxically intended to increase the possibilities and the meanings of his art, to open it as he said to "the infinite space of the human skull". In reference to the painting "Black Square" itself, he said "it is from zero, in zero, that the true movement of being begins". One can only imagine how these claims would have went down with Malevich's bourgeois hating interrogators. The goals of the totalitarian state were firmly rooted in a collective social realism, in representing the struggle of the working classes, not the pseudo spiritual quest of self actualisation that Malevich was promoting. But of course the irony is that by persecuting this kind of art, this geometric reduction, the Stalinist state was tacitly recognising that all of Malevich's claims were indeed true, and more importantly to them, very worrying.

They were worried of course because if a simple square can be a signifier for such a massive and potentially universal concept — the liberation of the human mind — than what power does a set of specific political dogmas and doctrines have? If just by gazing at a black square, a shape that everyone around the world can recognise and is familiar with, the "true movement of being begins", then possibly the specifics of our own beliefs and institutions is a much more slippery concept. Why do we need the state to emancipate our lives when this two and half foot square will do the job? This is indeed a dangerous shape.

But a further complication arises that as far as we know the Stalinist state was not concerned with, and that is the relationship this painting has to language. The painting "Black Square" can be perfectly encapsulated, even compressed in sense, to the words in its title. One almost does not need the painting. The title says it all. Black Square. Got it. So not only does the painting demonstrate the ability of images — or shapes — to suggest much more than they represent, it also engages with the power of language itself, the power of a system of signs.

And this is where the images of Juan Bolivar operate; the place where the eye and the mind attempt to connect a shape with a word or a phrase, where a graphic meets a glyph. This innate desire to *know* the thing we are looking at, to *name* it, is a very basic human desire. Once we have a name for a thing we can perform some kind of operation on it and it becomes useful. Bolivar's work wilfully complicates this desire. It reminds us that in the 21st Century our graphics and our glyphs are now so layered, so nuanced that the moment we utter a things name, it will have shifted, it will have resisted the interrogation. The usefulness of this naming, our need to find out how we can benefit

from this collection of shapes, therefore gives way to the realisation that no set of signs and signifiers is ever stable, that we may end up in an ever more complicated spiralling of meaning.

Bolivar may start his paintings with the abstractions of a Malevich black square, or a Frank Stella striped triangle, but they become New York's ground zero with a match stick or a hang glider over a jail cell, that itself is a knowing reference to Peter Haley. There is nothing in the images of Bolivar that is purely abstract, without referent or context, it is all representational. Picasso was famously skeptical of abstraction, stating that "there is no abstract art. You must always start with something. Afterward you can remove all traces of reality". This is precisely the territory that Bolivar explores. His works vibrate within the question that Malevich demanded from his work; a simultaneous moment of recognition of the form, and the open ended possibility of this form to suggest an entire system beyond the singularity of its shape or its name.

It is important that Picasso said you *can* remove all traces of reality. He left it open ended, its up to you. And this is the game Bolivar delightfully plays. There is always a sense of humour and mischief within his works furthered by his use of titles. The titles often refer to the thing itself, but also open the possibilities to seemingly unrelated contexts. For example, in the 2008 show *Geometry Wars*, one painting is of a black, white, and grey lifeguard stand / watchtower. The title is "Baywatch". The painting demands that the viewer simultaneously hold in their mind the history of maritime military conflict as well as Pamela Anderson and David Hasslehof performing titillating life saving duties. It is with a wry shock that we realise the painting accurately reflects the modern barrage of media channels in which we do indeed hold these contradictory images (shapes) in our minds simultaneously.

For *High Voltage*, Bolivar deploys the same sense of graphic simultaneity and the compression of language found in his previous work. This time the works weave equally disparate elements of early 20th Century geometric modernism with the hard rock of the band AC/DC. The Fender guitar logo sits atop a Mondrian grid with the resulting image hovering between an amplifier cover and sublime geometric minimalism. In another painting a later figurative Malevich work reappears with a backwards baseball cap and a discarded bottle of Lucozade, standing like the members of the band. Indeed, the title of AC/DC's seventh studio album *Back in Black*, the second best selling album of all time, suggests a resurrection of the supposed finality of Malevich's "Black Square". Its back, and as inscrutable as ever, but this time its really loud. That the originality of the avant-garde should return as an commodified Australian rock and roll blues band is something even Malevich himself would have understood. Later in life, having faced the wrath of the state where his work was removed from public view, he began making teacups adorned with Suprematist shapes.

Bolivar fully understands this complication of signifiers. Via humour, historic awareness, and immense graphic acuity the work embraces a new hybridisation of meanings that is inescapable in the 21st Century. This is not work that simply references itself, or is drawn from the artists identity, or relies on a cryptic mythology. In fact, it could not be more grounded in the currency of everyday shapes, in our continual desire to trade, manipulate, and know the language of the forms that surround us. It is evidence of the fact that no painting is ever final, that no set of signs or beliefs is ever fixed. We are

continually evolving these troubling shapes and giving them new meanings and trading a laugh with one another when we find a particularly good combination.

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