



Adam Reich

"Streetwise," by Thornton Willis.

## Thornton Willis

What we like to call "the Modernist grid" is really not modern at all. It is the application to painting of a structural pattern that is so ancient it can almost be thought of, in Platonic terms, as an Ideal Form. Thornton Willis' latest exhibition at Elizabeth Harris exploits the grid's primordial association with architecture. That correlation lends the power of order to Supremacist emphasis on the primacy of pure sensation and the role of color in visual excitement.

Willis is a New York painter and counted as a descendent of the New York School. Nevertheless, his recent series is a vivid, if unpremeditated, evocation of the concerns of Russian Supremacism and its parallel movement, Constructivism. Both currents were based on geometrics; both were tethered to architecture no less than to painting.

"Juggernaut" (2010), typical of the ensemble, is a bold, chromatically intense network of economical allusions to cityscapes. Its abstract configurations are minimal, yet still suggestive of dense

urban skylines. The structure is anchored in the distribution of 90-degree angles that neighbor, echo or slide past each other. These near-abutments create a restlessness, a sense of movement that comes from the obliteration of any difference between foreground and background. The painting reads as both a series of architectural silhouettes and a flat, linear pattern, with no way of deciding a frontier between the two. Malevich comes to mind in the dominant expanse of red and black, supported and punctuated by clear, deep cobalt and bright orange in tandem with angular fields of pink and yellow.

A grille frame is the basis, too, of myriad elemental crafts (weaving and basketmaking) and continues into the present in pixel-perfect web design. Its possibilities are boundless. For that reason, the jagged, linear progress within each painting resonates with a medley of allusions. The same set of vertices can suggest, at different moments of viewing, an ancient pottery design or the layout of a circuit board.

In Willis' smaller canvases and studies,

the process of painting, of building up a surface, takes on greater weight as a component of the motif. Lines are looser; edges more nervous and craggy. Despite the high-pitched complexion of these pieces, they are less severe than their larger, imposing cousins, softened by the traces of a probing and testing hand. What they cede in authority—the misleading impact of dimensions—they gain in tactility. In all, the exhibition is a handsome and dramatic performance. [Maureen Mullarkey] **Through April 23, Elizabeth Harris Gallery, 529 W. 20th St., 212-463-9666.**

## Malevich and The American Legacy

The history of Modernism is inconceivable without the art of Kazimir Malevich (1878-1935), but was it necessarily enriched by it? Malevich's role in establishing abstraction as a viable form of artistic expression is indisputable. His goal was to create pictures that embodied "the end and beginning where sensations are uncovered, where art emerges 'as such.'" This pursuit led to radically distilled images, most famously in "White on White" (1935), wherein a veering rectangle is virtually indistinguishable from the surrounding space. It was within austere arrangements of geometry that humankind, Malevich felt, would transcend the material world and achieve "the supremacy of pure feeling."

*Malevich and The American Legacy*, an exhibition at the uptown branch of Gagosian Gallery, is centered on six canvases by the self-described "zero of form." Organized in collaboration with the artist's heirs and with significant museum loans, *American Legacy* sets out to explore "aesthetic, conceptual, and spiritual correspondences" between the pioneering Russian abstractionist and a raft of American artists, among them, Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, Ellsworth Kelly, Frank Stella, Ed Ruscha, Brice Marden and Agnes Martin.

Donald Judd wrote that "the paintings Malevich began painting in 1915 are the first instances of form and color"—which means, I'm guessing, that we should consider them the first examples of pure



"Suprematism, 18th Construction," by Kazimir Malevich.

abstraction in Western painting. (Form and color have, after all, been around since our ancestors daubed fauna on the cave wall.) The centerpiece of *American Legacy* is Malevich's "Painterly Realism of a Football Player—Color Masses in the 4th Dimension" (1915). Given the title allusion, how pure could Malevich's art be?

Never mind: The Gagosian show cruises on straight lines, grids and squares—lots of squares. They can be seen bopping through Robert Ryman's surprisingly tensile series of paintings on aluminum, Richard Serra's Brutalist prop sculpture and John Baldessari's "Violent Space Series: Two Stars Making a Point but Blocked by a Plane (for Malevich)" (1976), a typically laconic iteration of Dadaist montage. In and amongst an impressively appointed array of machine-tooled artworks, Cy Twombly's scribbled homage to "Malevich" [sic] comes as a relief.

Malevich's Suprematism (as the style came to be known) was fueled in equal parts by Cubism, Christian iconography and, not least, the advent of the Communist state. The lesson Americans gleaned from Malevich—the Americans featured at Gagosian, anyway—is that tying puritanical form to aesthetic absolutism all but guarantees high-flown, worry-free decoration.

Suprematism, in other words, made the world safe for Minimalism, Conceptualism and any other art too refined to stimulate interest. As such, *The American Legacy* is an exhibition of blue-chip dead ends. It traces, with exquisite resolve and deadening certainty, the route from revolutionary foment to the academy of the marketplace. [Mario Naves]

**Through April 30, Gagosian Gallery, 980 Madison Ave., 212-744-2313.**

## Rafael Ferrer

Rafael Ferrer, whose work is the subject of an odds-and-sods, this-and-that exhibition at Adam Baumgold Gallery, is a tough nut to crack. What to make of an artist who veers from the thrift-shop conceptualism of "Pizarras," a series of mini-blackboards inscribed with cryptic messages in Spanish, to choc-a-bloc paintings that send up art history even as they indulge in polemics, to the "Paper Bag Faces," a group of irreverent, off-the-cuff pieces the artist has been pursuing for 40 years?

First off, you conclude that Ferrer is an ideal artist for Baumgold, a venue with a long and honorable history of exhibiting the intimate, the brainy and the eccentric. Second is that Ferrer is an artist of boundless curiosity, unstoppable energy and erratic focus. Artistically speaking, his cup runneth over even as it never fills up. Ferrer's art glances off a variety of often provocative sources—race, war, sex, colonialism, Freud, Guy Pene du