

***Painting Abstraction: New Elements in Abstract Painting.* By Bob Nickas**

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David Malek

Science, mathematics, literature, astronomy, an investigation into the intensities of color and light, as well as art historical referents near and far, all figure in the art of David Malek. In of the the handful representational paintings the artist has ever made, *The Gay Science* (2006), he depict the cover of Friedrich Nietzsche's book, which argues for a synthesis of science and art, a proposition that Malek's paintings explore in repeated, ongoing experiments. It's not unusual for Malek, like a lab researcher, to run his "experiments" over and over, factoring in new data, previous results and further speculation. He has made, to date, two versions of the "shimmering wave," two the "dark star" and a pair of "moon" paintings; three "octahedrons," three "zero" paintings and no less than four "superblast" pictures. In each case, the new versions are superior to the ones that came before, and there is no way of knowing whether others will follow. One senses that Malek is always aiming to perfect the process without closing down options, that a finished painting occasions neither a completed idea nor an inevitable conclusion. The repetition in his work suggests that he is visually, and in terms of his curiosity, a phenomenological artist. His painting *Mazzocchio* (2007) takes as its source Paolo Uccello's perspectival of a disk in three-dimensional space. Uccello applied scientific methods to the study of perspective and vanishing points, which were central to the mapping of spatial relations within his paintings. Malek's version places the disk within an electric orange field that glows and vibrates from the center outward. The disk seemingly hovers between the fifteenth century and the present, between the Battle of San Romano (c. 1450) and the cooling tank of a nuclear reactor. With *Poincaré* (2006), based on the Poincaré conjecture, a math problem that attempts to predict the shape of the universe, Malek overlays spherical orange and white grid on a blue concentric field, creating an all-seeing geometric "eye." Yet another model, that of the C₆H₆ benzene ring, referring to a key chemical in the production of opium, serves as the basis for the icon/logotype in *Suspiria de Profundis* (2008), whose title comes from the second volume of Thomas De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*. Malek translates the visionary/emotional experience of De Quincey and the unconscious into rational, albeit chromatically psychedelic, geometry.

Malek's paintings often orient themselves on a central focus, with expanding grids, radiating bands and spoke, and close gradations of color and light. He works in enamel on wood, a support that enables him to subtly incise the surface, accentuating the progression light to dark with inward/outward concentric "ripples" and exploiting color-on-color vibrational effects. Optically, many of his images have an object-like presence. The large X in *White Diamond* (2008) reads as three-dimensional, its repeating facets seemingly receding into space. *Magister Ludi* (2008) has at its center a bright white orb with sixteen points emanating outward to the edges, or possibly directed from the outer edges inward. The background, an ominous blue gray, is both behind and subtly merged with the starburst, suggesting that illumination is always only visible in contrast to that which remains in darkness. The painting refers to Herman Hesse's final novel, *The Glass Bead Game*. Published in 1943, the book is set in the twenty-fifth century, its story told through the title protagonist, Magister Ludi — in latin "master of the game." The narrator, after joining an order that is devoted to intellectual inquiry but remains oblivious to the troubles of the outside world, and having mastered the game, rejects the idea of a search for knowledge that is disconnected from the trials of tribulations of the everyday. From our vantage point, the insularity of the order can be seen to parallel the alienation that the Internet fosters;

conversely, it also offers the potential for endless information. Malek's painting appears poised between enlightenment and doubt. Are we moving toward or, like the book's protagonist, away from the light? And is the painting's center a locus of "pure knowledge" or a void zone, a point into which we vanish? Similar structures in Malek's work, for example those in the "superblast" and "dark star" painting, represent abstract/unknowable events or phenomena such as the Big Bang or black holes — the creation or potential demise of the universe. His work plays off a future/past axis that, for the viewer standing in front of one of his glowing supernatural images, is an experience in which one is physically present. The brilliant orange forms in *Mirrored Octahedron* (2008), set against a deep black ground, are phosphorescent, pulsing with color and light as if they contained internal, molten sources of heat. *Red Giant (for Ivan Kliun)* (2007) radiates a similar visual energy. Kliun, a contemporary of Suprematist and Constructivist artists such as Malevich, Tatlin and Popova, painted the shimmering *Red Light, Spherical Composition* in 1923. More than eighty years later, Malek pays tribute to the lesser-known figure, intensifying his highly magnified ball of light, as if staring directly into the sun.

Castello da costruire nella foresta (2007), another homage to an artistic predecessor, while anomalous in Malek's overall body of work, still resonates with his larger project. The image is appropriated from a modest work made by Paul Klee in 1926 *Schloss im Wald zu bauen* (Castle to Be Built in the Forest). (Because the book in which he found it was in Italian, Malek kept the title as translated). While Malek's paintings are notable for their charged color, the reproduction was black-and-white, and so his version is rendered in grisaille, in tones of black, gray, and white, amplifying the graphic quality of the original. What's common to Malek's paintings and this work of Klee are concentric bands and color scales, but Malek's images have a centered focal point, while Klee's picture contains myriad focal points: the castle is seen from an overhead rather than a frontal point of view. "The central structure of Klee's picture," Malek says, "is a kind of concentric rectangle. This structure shares a similarity with Stella's *Black Paintings*, and the picture forms an interesting historical bridge between Klee's modernism, Stella's late-modernism and my own postmodern practice." Malek's "castle" — the double to Klee's — reverberates, as does his *Mazzocchio* in particular and his work in general, visually and temporally, offering a perceptual event for the viewer that is always active, never quiescent, and attuned to one's perception.



