

<https://dda-nouvelle-aquitaine.org/david-malek>



David Malek

In the studio photograph that David Malek sent me yesterday, a series of five octagons inscribed with aluminum paint on a matte black background are shown. Five different canvas formats are like so many portraits of this perfectly centered eight-sided figure. This could be the representation of the idea that one makes of abstraction, like an extrapolation of a *cosa mentale*. With these reduced means – two colors or rather two opposing luminosities that bring out the geometric form – the series is probably the most « concentrated » of David's that I have seen so far. It is in line with the « binary » series – to use the artist's term – of canvases created in the last two years where a colored geometric figure stands out against a contrasting background. In this endeavor to reduce or focus the composition, David Malek seems to have abandoned what characterized many of his paintings made between 2013 and 2018: the representation of forms radiating from the center, subtle gradations of color which extend the motif to the edge of the painting or of grids dividing the canvas. One can see in the affirmation of this increasingly stripped down, refocused abstraction, a firm rejection of the personal and emotional expression with which one generally invests painting, and in particular the use of color. On the contrary, I would argue – following the example of Isabelle Graw on the subject of Ellsworth Kelly's¹ black and white paintings – that in this case it is more likely a revitalization of the medium through a stronger investment of its author's subjectivity. As if he had gained confidence in the capacity of painting to produce its own radiance – an inner radiance – and that it then became useless to represent its aura by gradations or centrifugal flashes; it became necessary to give it substance by playing more on the concentration of light, its effects of matter and of contrast. An « internalized » painting that David Malek says he produces « blindly », without knowing precisely what he is looking for or accomplishing, apart from the fact of making the idea of a painting appear before his eyes, of replicating on the canvas the experience or memory of an image, of a form imprinted furtively on his retina.

In a second email, I received the protocol that David Malek followed to make his octagons. He inscribed the 8-edged figure inside a circle whose diameter is equal to the width of the canvas. The thickness of the silver strip is calculated so as to leave a black negative space of an equivalent height in the center of the octagon and above it. A protocol in geometric terms, as is often the case in David Malek's work, which thus seems to relate to a pictorial tradition dating back to the 15th century – a time when Leon Battista Alberti theorized in his treatise *De Pictura* the importance of the painter's scientific posture, building his work on mathematical foundations and perfectly mastering geometry. In this sense, the series of octagons evokes for me – in a flat version – the repeated attempts of the Italian painter Paolo Uccello to represent a *mazzocchio*, a geometrical representation of a multifaceted Florentine hat. With the difference that – in the case of Malek and his contemporaries – geometric construction is not so much an attempt to model the things of the world as the reintegration into the picture space of things that the world already presents to us as abstract². In the manner of Ellsworth Kelly or Alain Biltreyst, and to recuperate their respective expressions, the forms brought into play are « already made » or « goings-on », abstractions presented in the street, on an album cover or on a screen. Within David Malek's paintings, these geometries return and subsist just as they persist in the productions on which the painter continues to gaze: the ancient architecture of ziggurats or medieval cathedrals, satellite images, science fiction films. The circles drawn in them are the outline of a planet in the darkness, the oblong shapes, inspired as much by the lingas of Indian tantric paintings as by a magic mirror in a Disney cartoon. By alternately summoning these references, David Malek's series emphasize the temporal and spatial density of these abstract forms that signal both a millennial past and a fantasized future.

Recently, it occurred to me that the images from which David Malek draws often emanate from powerful industries or authorities with significant productive capital, whether it be Hollywood studios with their sets and special effects, space agencies equipped with probes and supercomputers or, in another era, religious powers commissioning at great expense the construction of megaliths, temples or altars. With regard to the economy of the painter, working with few resources and in an artisanal way through a long process of applying coats of paint and sanding, is a method established as a way to rival these effective and « expensive » images.

In this way, it is easier to understand why he sometimes tries to mimic the particular brilliance of the screens on which the paintings are often viewed today, by using industrial enamel paints and why he uses the camera of a smartphone to test the contrasts of the colors. Or why it is necessary to produce several versions with the ambition to always improve the result. As they are integrated into the surface on the canvas, these forms emerge in another regime

of power – the one that has always been conferred on painting – and through which the energy of a handmade image transpires. And this is perhaps what the painter aspires to in this blind practice, the attraction for these ready-made and infinitely reproducible figures, as much as the search for the singular and irregular perfection that craftsmanship opposes to them. David Malek's paintings exist between the light of the authority or interface that diffuses them and the shadow of their slow labor. We do not know if the eye of the viewer looking at them is focused on the luminous contour of the form or on the yawning gap it leaves in the heart of the painting. But this central void makes his canvases like so many openings into color, passages leading from one abstract reference, from one status of the image, to another. It is not surprising then that the motif of a door (like the one Burt Lancaster desperately tries to open in the film *The Swimmer*) regularly appears in the paintings.

And the last painting David showed me is an octagon – blue this time. It mimics the outline of a monumental doorway of a former hospital that the painter passes by every day on his way to the studio.

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¹ Isabelle Graw, « Painting as 'Object-Tableau', Ellsworth Kelly at Haus der Kunst, Munich », in *The Love of Painting*, p.103

² In this regard, we speak of « found abstraction, » an expression coined by the American critic and curator Bob Nickas.