

Exhibition review: *'Abstraction-Creation- Post-War Geometric Abstract Art from Europe and South America'*, Austin Desmond Fine Art, Bloomsbury, London, 8<sup>th</sup> September – 6<sup>th</sup> October 2010

AUSTIN/DESMOND FINE ART

# ABSTRACTION- CREATION

Post-War Geometric Abstract Art from Europe and South America

PRIVATE VIEW  
TUES 7 SEPT: 18.30 -20.30

EXHIBITION  
8 SEPT - 6 OCT 2010  
A fully illustrated catalogue is available  
All works are available to view online

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It has been well documented that in recent decades, more art galleries and museums across Europe and the UK have become interested in art from Latin America. The creation of Tate's Latin American Acquisition Committee in 2002 demonstrates an increasing interest in artworks from this region. Further, an exhibition of geometric abstract art from Latin America of the Cisneros Fontanals Art Foundation toured to Germany, travelling from California to Spain where it enjoyed great success in both places earlier this year. The arrival of PINTA, the modern and contemporary Latin American Art Fair, to London in June 2010 has further put the UK on the map as place in which there is scholarly and commercial interest in art from Latin America. The University of Essex Collection of Latin American Art (UECLAA) was an important contributor to the public programme that ran throughout the fair.

Now, small and medium-sized galleries (both public and private) in the UK are becoming increasingly interested in exhibiting art from Latin America. One such gallery is Austin/Desmond Fine Art. Situated in Bloomsbury, London, it held an exhibition in autumn 2010 that showed geometric abstract, concrete and kinetic art from South America and Europe from the 1940s until the 1970s. *'Abstraction-Creation: Post-War Geometric Abstract Art from Europe and South America'* gathered together pivotal artworks by artists such as Carmelo Arden Quin, Sergio Camargo and Raul Lozza, while also looking at the art production by notable European artists such as Max Bill, Bridget Riley, Anthony Hill and Klaus Staudt, to only name a few. Furthermore, artworks by well-known concrete/neo-concrete artists from Brazil, such as Hélio Oiticica, Lygia Pape and Lygia Clark, were part of this comprehensive exhibition.

The term *Concrete Art* was first used by Theo van Doesburg in 1930. As proponent of concrete art in Europe, Doesburg founded the Abstraction-Creation movement and exhibited in this vein until his death in 1931. Later, it was Max Bill who continued with this concept. He exhibited at the first São Paulo Bienal in 1951 where he was awarded first prize for sculpture. In the same year, Bill helped found the School of Design in Ulm, Germany, where he taught a number of Brazilian artists. Concrete art was quickly taken up in Brazil and became a new and significant way of creating artworks and promoting a move away from traditional ways of producing and interpreting art. Concrete art and geometric abstraction rejected representational

and figurative painting and sculpture, and advocated a search for true meaning using geometric forms, shapes and colour.

Max Bill's artwork '*Rote Basis*' (Red Base, 1959) was displayed at Austin Desmond. Geometric shapes, painted in rich red, black, white and emerald green are arranged within clear shapes determined by their colour. A rectangle in the lower part of the canvas forms the basis of the composition while two rectangular areas of emerald green delineate each side of the canvas. The black and white colours in the centre of the painting create further figures. On the other hand, Raul Lozza's *Numero 278 (Perceptismo)* (1950), emphasises geometric shapes rather than colour. This oil on wood painting consists of three irregular forms in red, orange and olive that are offset against a black background. The protruding forms appear to jump out at the viewer; they are attached to the background rather than painted directly onto it. 'Perceptismo' was a one-man movement founded by Lozza himself. *Numero 278* is exhibited with an original issue of an eponymous magazine, which was written and edited by Lozza in 1950.

Another poignant example of a radical move away from subjective representation and the emphasis on geometry is that of Carmelo Arden Quin. This Uruguayan artist was one of the founding members of Grupo Madí. His *Circulo Verde* (1946) literally extends the frame across the gallery wall, creating a unique visual experience. Rather than confining the artwork within a rectangular frame, the whole becomes an object that is part of the world. The frame no longer mediates the artwork, it is part of it. Whole sections of this 'object' were removed, creating irregularities that are otherwise not found in paintings, photography or collages. The painting further consists of rectangles and circles in cool green, blue and earthen colours and cuttings of shapes that reveal the gallery wall behind it.

An exhibition of geometric abstract art could not overlook the importance of concrete/neo-concrete artists from Brazil such as Lygia Clark, Lygia Pape and Hélio Oiticica. Other artists such as Geraldo de Barros, Hermelindo Fiaminghi, Judith Lauand and Lothar Charoux were also represented. Lygia Clark's *Caranguejo* (Crab) is a small sculpture made of aluminium. It is comprised of several parts that are connected by hinges, which makes the artwork easy to manipulate. It is therefore a

changeable work of art that can be arranged in various ways by the viewer, a concept that Pape encouraged in her practice. Viewer participation became a more significant factor later in neo-concrete art. Nevertheless, an early move toward involving the spectator can be clearly detected in Clark's example. Oiticica is yet another example of a concrete artist who was later involved in the neo-concrete art movement in Brazil. His work of art included in 'Abstraction-Creation' is from the series *Metaesquema 154, Projecto No 433*. It comprises of oil on paper and is framed by a perspex box. The painting consists of white rectangles against a blue square, painted on bare cardboard. The shapes are not precisely equal in size; however, they follow a pattern of four rectangles that are arranged horizontally. The forms in this composition seem to be moving due to them being slightly offset against each other. This adds depth to the artwork while adhering to concrete principles.

Significant artworks by the notable kinetic artists Jesús Rafael Soto and Carlos Cruz Díez, both from Venezuela, were also represented. Both, *Physichromie No. 379* by Cruz Díez and *Pour Lenk Ambivalencia* by Soto engage the viewer with their ever-changing appearance depending on the movement of the spectator in relation to the artworks. For example,



Figure 1: Carmelo Arden Quin, *Circulo Verde*, 1946

standing in front of Soto's work of art and on close inspection, the background seems to recede. The squares mounted on metal extensions protrude from the painted wood. On inspecting Soto's work for a short period of time, these extensions seem to run farther into the room than the space that they do in fact take up. Meanwhile, Cruz Díez' *Physichromie No. 379*, presents the viewer with an engaging play of shapes and colours which change from a rich green to a warm purple as the spectator alters their position in relation to the artwork. The work seems to contain a vast number of forms that can be seen at any moment.

In Europe, artists also attempted to give the impression of movement in their work. Klaus Staudt's *Gleichmäßig Hell/Dunkel* ( 'Evenly Distributed Light/Dark') is one such example. This wood relief consists of carved cube shapes that are placed behind red Perspex. Through its three dimensional nature and the intense red of the Perspex, the artwork's component parts appear to move through the change of light and the change of the viewer's position in relation to it. Similarly, Francois Morellet's artwork, which ventures into Op art, creates a dynamic surface on the canvas. Through the repetition of simple rectangular bars that cross over at different converging points, Morellet creates an optical play that engages the spectator as they attempt to focus on the intricately arranged composition but they are forced to give up as the pattern gently overpowers the eye.

From offset rectangles, to mounted shapes on wood, and sculptures that invite the viewer to alter and manipulate their appearance, the sense of movement and energy is undeniable in this exhibition of concrete, kinetic and Op art. The exhibition's catalogue provides the viewer with an up to date glossary and contains a comprehensive list of biographies of each exhibiting artist. This sheds light on the respective interpretations of Bill's and Doesburg's ideas regarding geometric abstraction and concrete art. It is safe to say that this exhibition engrosses the spectator while providing an admittedly broad, yet relevant trajectory of modern art from Latin America and Europe.



Figure 2: Klaus Staudt, *Gleichmassig Hell/Dunkel*, 1972-73