

## **Madhat Kakei and the Black Square**

Text: Daniel Birnbaum

“‘Shade is not the sun’s opposite / Shade is the second light’, writes the Syrian poet Adonis in ‘The Sun Itself’, his homage to Kakei, who has devoted decades to painting layer upon layer of light and shadow to create a pictorial universe that combines Western concepts of monochromatic painting with totally different abstract traditions.”

These are works by Iraqi artist Madhat Kakei. Recently we installed a selection of his paintings at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm. They were created during the last twenty-five years, and we juxtaposed them with abstract works by some of the best-known artists who have created abstract paintings during this very period – Gerhard Richter, Rosemarie Trockel and Günther Förg among them. What do these paintings share?

“Shade is not the sun’s opposite / Shade is the second light”, writes the Syrian poet Adonis in “The Sun Itself”, his homage to Kakei, who has devoted decades to painting layer upon layer of light and shadow to create a pictorial universe that combines Western concepts of monochromatic painting with totally different abstract traditions. As we all know, the idea of nonfigurative imagery is not a modernist invention, but it was certainly injected with new meaning by the early 20th-century avant-garde artists. Aniconism, the prohibition of imagery, and the notion that it is impossible to depict the Almighty is of course a tradition that reached further back in history. Kakei is acutely aware of this, as are many of the poets who have been drawn to his paintings, which, on closer scrutiny, are never truly monochromatic but instead suggest an infinity of colors. Madhat Kakei, Tomas Tranströmer suggests, paints what the eye cannot see: “Consciousness has its spaces / to which we are taken blindfolded”.

Born in Iraq in 1954, Madhat Kakei studied art in Bagdad and Madrid. In the mid-1980s, he moved to Sweden and became a Swedish citizen. In recent years, his art has been shown in numerous international exhibitions. He called his 2013 exhibition in Amman, the capital of Jordan, Return to the Sun. The title evokes associations to a pivotal moment in Russian avant-garde history, the opera Victory over the Sun, created exactly one hundred years previously. The stage curtain was adorned with Malevich’s black square, Modernism’s perhaps most poignant emblem, which appeared for the first time in this theatrical milieu.

Today, a century later, painters all over the world still revisit this non-figurative square. They seem to extract new layers of significance from it, in a seemingly never-ending process of revivals and returns. For how long will this continue, for how long will that colorless canvas remain an inspirational battery for new generations of artists with their novel aspirations? The short answer must be: as long as it remains canonical. A work that doesn’t have this inspirational function and is no longer present in creation of new art or new readings of art does not belong to any canon. As Madhat Kakei’s abstract cabinet at Moderna Museet made clear, Malevich’s victory over the sun still energizes a canon that is no longer limited to what we still refer to as the West.

*This text was published in conjunction with Madhat Kakei's exhibition at Moderna Museet 2015.*