

INTERNATIONAL ARTS

Pushing Forward an Abstract Art Drive That Began a Century Ago

By KEVIN HOLDEN PLATT JULY 16, 2015

Zaha Hadid was born in Baghdad in 1950 and has become one of the world's most renowned avant-garde architects from her studio in London. But she says that another city first ignited her creativity: St. Petersburg.

In that city for the opening at the State Hermitage Museum of a retrospective of her work, Ms. Hadid said that a small band of Russian Suprematist artists inspired her double life in art and architecture.

Running through Sept. 27, the exhibition features 55 of Ms. Hadid's paintings, which she said aim to push forward the avant-garde art movement that began a century ago in St. Petersburg. The show also displays dozens of models of experimental buildings that Ms. Hadid has constructed around the world, which also draw on the influence of the Suprematists.

The Hermitage retrospective is the artist's first in Russia, and she designed the layout herself, with stark angles and clean lines. Mikhail Piotrovsky, the director of the museum, said in a telephone interview that the paintings on display "develop in a perfect way the art initiated by the Suprematists," who strove to create worlds without gravity.

Ms. Hadid's paintings capture cities exploding with change. The large (about 4 feet by 3 feet) "Malevich's Tektonik" depicts a Suprematist skyscraper orbiting above London, while paintings from "The Peak" series freeze-frame sections of a cosmopolis streaking across a Hong Kong sky.

Kazimir Malevich, the founder of Suprematism, painted simple geometric shapes that float across works like "Suprematist Composition: Aeroplane Flying." Malevich and his followers in abstract art, including El Lissitzky and Nikolai Suetin, wanted their paintings to trigger a "supreme," or spiritual, reaction in the viewer, hence the name of the movement.

When Ms. Hadid was awarded the Pritzker Architecture Prize in 2004, in a ceremony at the Hermitage, the jury cited her advances in experimental building design and her cutting-edge canvases, saying she “has shifted the geometry of buildings.” Accepting the prize, Ms. Hadid credited the Suprematists with opening up a new world of creative freedom. Those painter-revolutionaries, she asserted, were the first artists to “make the amazing leap” into capturing pure imagination on canvas.

Achim Borchardt-Hume, who curated the “Malevich” exhibition at Tate Modern in London last year, said the Suprematists emerged in the early 20th century as Europe’s great powers developed the Zeppelin, tanks and chemical weapons to destroy each other. The Suprematists, he said, “were the first to push for a new world,” a post-war utopia marked by a pure cultural freedom.

Ms. Hadid said in a telephone interview that she first came across Malevich’s works while studying at London’s Architectural Association in the 1970s and became transfixed. In the planes of color that drift across his canvases, she said, she saw “floating worlds, galaxies, even the entire universe.”

Soon after, she began painting a new cosmos filled with Suprematist ideas: “The World (89 Degrees),” in the Hermitage show, aims to depict the curved space-time discovered by Einstein and worshipped by the Suprematists. At the same time, she said, she started a quest to transform her paintings into three-dimensional architecture projects that would, “through ingenious engineering and structure, make a building appear to float.”

Replicas, including models and drawings, of Ms. Hadid’s expanding array of “floating” structures, built over the past 20 years, are scattered throughout the show. They include the arcing cloud-shaped Serpentine Sackler Gallery, which opened in London two years ago and seems to barely touch the ground, and the Guangzhou Opera House in China, unveiled in 2010, which resembles a crystalline space station.

While the Suprematists briefly flourished after the October Revolution of 1917, they faced attacks as Stalin moved to ban their work. “Suprematist works were marked as decadent, as not being in line with the socialist revolution,” said Bart Rutten, curator at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, which holds one of the world’s largest collections of Malevich’s artworks.

Even after Stalin's death in 1953, the Soviet minister of culture ordered museums to burn all Suprematist works, said Mathias Rastorfer, who as head of the Gmurzynska Gallery in Zurich has exhibited some of the surviving paintings.

Some museum curators hid the works of the avant-garde. Malevich left some of his paintings with the German organizers of the Great Berlin Art Exhibition of 1927, which trained an international spotlight on his work for the first time. Malevich was ordered to return to Leningrad mid-way through the exhibition, but he "always wanted to return to the West, to Germany," said Mr. Rutten. The artist was briefly imprisoned over his contacts with foreigners and his "bourgeois" artworks. He died in 1935.

Across the Soviet Union, avant-garde artists were forced underground, said Ksenia Malich, who curated the Hadid retrospective in St. Petersburg.

Back in Berlin, the German museum director and the architect entrusted with safeguarding Malevich's trove hid the paintings from the Nazis. Following repeated entreaties by New York's Museum of Modern Art and Amsterdam's Stedelijk, they eventually began lending parts of the collection.

It was these exiled remnants of the Suprematist movement that Ms. Hadid discovered, and for decades she has helped engineer a renaissance of the Russian avant-garde — including an exhibition that Thomas Krens commissioned Ms. Hadid to design at the Guggenheim Museum in New York in 1992.

Mr. Krens, who ran the Guggenheim Foundation from 1988 to 2008 and is now its director emeritus, said in an interview that Ms. Hadid unified the spiraling interior of the Frank Lloyd Wright-designed museum with the Suprematist artworks at the center of the show.

Many of Ms. Hadid's designs, he said, can be seen as brilliant concepts that meld art and architecture in new ways. "Zaha Hadid is a utopian visionary, with tendencies to imagine another world," he said.

Today, he added, "Zaha heads the technological renaissance in architecture."

Mr. Krens said Ms. Hadid's exhibition in St. Petersburg represents a triumph not only for her own breakthroughs in art and architecture, but also for the Suprematist movement that Moscow attempted to crush.