

Under Suprematism I understand the supremacy of pure feeling in creative art.

To the Suprematist the visual phenomena of the objective world are in themselves, meaningless, the significant thing is feeling, as such, quite apart from the environment in which it is called forth.

The so-called "materialization" of a feeling in the conscious mind really means a materialization of the reflection of that feeling through the medium of some realistic conception. Such a realistic conception is without value in suprematist art. . . . And not only in suprematist art but in art generally, because the enduring, true value of a work of art (to whatever school it may belong) resides solely in the expressed.

Academic naturalism, the naturalism of the Impressionists, Cézanne, all these, in a way, are nothing more than dialectic methods. The sense determine the true value of an art work.

An objective representation, having objectivity as its aim, such, has nothing to do with art, and yet the use of objective representation does not preclude the possibility of its being of high artistic value.

Hence, to the Suprematist, the appropriate method is one which gives fullest possible expression to the feeling, without the familiar appearance of objects.

Objectivity, in itself, is meaningless to the Suprematist, and is worthless.

Feeling is the determining factor in the representation—at Suprematism.



Mark Kelner: Signs of Identity

The avant-garde artist explains the cultural implications of consumerism and propaganda in this unique series

THE ART OF MARK KELNER causes onlookers to think twice about the signs they are accustomed to seeing. Raised in Rockville, Maryland, he is the son of Russian immigrants who fled the Soviet regime at the time of his birth. He began making art based on the cultural signifiers he saw around him, namely branded logos. Kelner's latest exhibition, "Solaris: Shelter for the Next Cold War," featured political art, such as the redacted pages of the Mueller Report, and attracted guests from across the country. Despite the Russian symbology he features, Kelner's art is primarily a reflection of growing up in America. His work deconstructs the commercialized messages fed to us in the billboards we drive past and the advertisements we hear in the background. He cleverly draws parallels between the messaging of government propaganda and storefront logos. His pieces provide a rich critique of thematic Americana in an era of cultural disarray, making observers question the fabric of their surroundings.

The Khollected: What first made you want to become an artist?

Mark Kelner: There wasn't a time when I wasn't creative, though it was tremendously difficult finding the right outlet for it as a young person. From music to writing, I was always interested in storytelling, but I wasn't particularly focused on art making. I grew up in immigrant culture, my parents having arrived in America from the Soviet Union six weeks before I was born. I bring that up because it frames a very particular narrative as to what is often expected from first generation American kids. That is, "success," and how it is defined in a very material culture, i.e. money. As such, I never grew up thinking that art can ever be a profession, an understanding of self, or anything but a distraction. In a way, I was born into a creative family. At the same time, I think my dad was trying to protect me from the inevitable disappointment that usually accompanies an artist's life. What he didn't count on was that the very vibrancy of the writers, musicians, and community I had

Opposite: Kelner in his studio. Photo by Kyle Haffermann

grown up with intersected with the physical environment surrounding me, and would eventually become the muse of a professional art practice. The impetus comes from the need to share, and equally, a need to be heard.

How did your parents' experiences escaping the Soviet Union shape your understanding of the world?

It's complicated. On the one hand, there's a complete ambivalence regarding this incredible deck of cards that I've been dealt that inoculates the often unhappy life of someone born into a totalitarian system of control. For instance, my parents fled the institutional anti-Semitism of the Soviet Union. The word "Jew" was officially written on their passports as a means of identifying their nationality. As such, the opportunities presented to them were extremely limited and for the sake of a coming child, they chose to leave and forge a new life in a new world where none of that mattered. On the other hand, growing up in said suburban environment, their focus for me was always one toward assimilation. Ignorance would be bliss. I wasn't really encouraged to learn Russian, but I had to find a way to communicate with, say, my grandparents who got to America later and shared tales of their lives. I've always been conscious of these contradictions and a fragmented history. I grew up aware of critical and creative censorship, of activists on hunger strikes and of labor camps. I've come to understand that out of suffering, some of the world's most important and relevant art has been made. But I've always tried to separate the goings on of Russia politically from the cultural heritage to which I feel connected. However, on my watch, I also realize that that

dichotomy is slipping from two disparate narratives into one. It's cliché to say history is on repeat, but at the same time, it's hard not to be cynical considering the powers that be.

Which artists piqued your interest when you were younger?

Scorsese, the consummate film artist. Which, in turn, opened the door to the French New Wave, the Italians – all style, all the time. The lens of movies filtered an understanding of and approach to photography, towards the lyrical world of Vittorio Storaro who shot for both Bertolucci and Coppola. Framing, light, color, movement all in sync and in support of a story never gets old. Concerning visual artists, my entrée was in discovering the poster designers who made the very one-sheets of the films I wanted to see. Jean-Michel Folon was an incredible watercolorist who made surrealist visions illustrating the central idea of a particular film. Jacques Kapralik used caricature and dynamic color to express the themes of often black and white films. Saul Bass essentially redefined the lines between fine art, graphic design and the ascension of the logo as an independent identity, which years later, aptly fit into his own style of art making.

You describe growing up witnessing "strip mall culture" while bike riding in your hometown of Rockville, Maryland. Reinterpretations of various company logos can be seen in your pieces. What do you think these particular logos are emblematic of in American culture?

An interesting thing happened to me in Europe this summer. Four days in Prague yielded something both obvious and profound. I discovered that I actually like being trapped in the world's worst tourist traps. For someone who trafficks in kitsch, this is hallowed ground far beyond the people watching, the overcrowding, the culture shock, and bad taste. Stick around long enough and patterns emerge. Oftentimes, young people show up wearing cheap t-shirts advertising the logos of Levi's, Coca-Cola, Supreme, and Marlboro, among others. It's not to say they're supportive of those brands. But rather, consciously or not, they recognize them as symbols of a national, American identity. As this relates to my own fascination with these logos as signage advertising happiness to whomever buys in, I'm equally interested in exploring how these designs, these shapes, and these colors define "Americanness." Reflecting back on strip mall

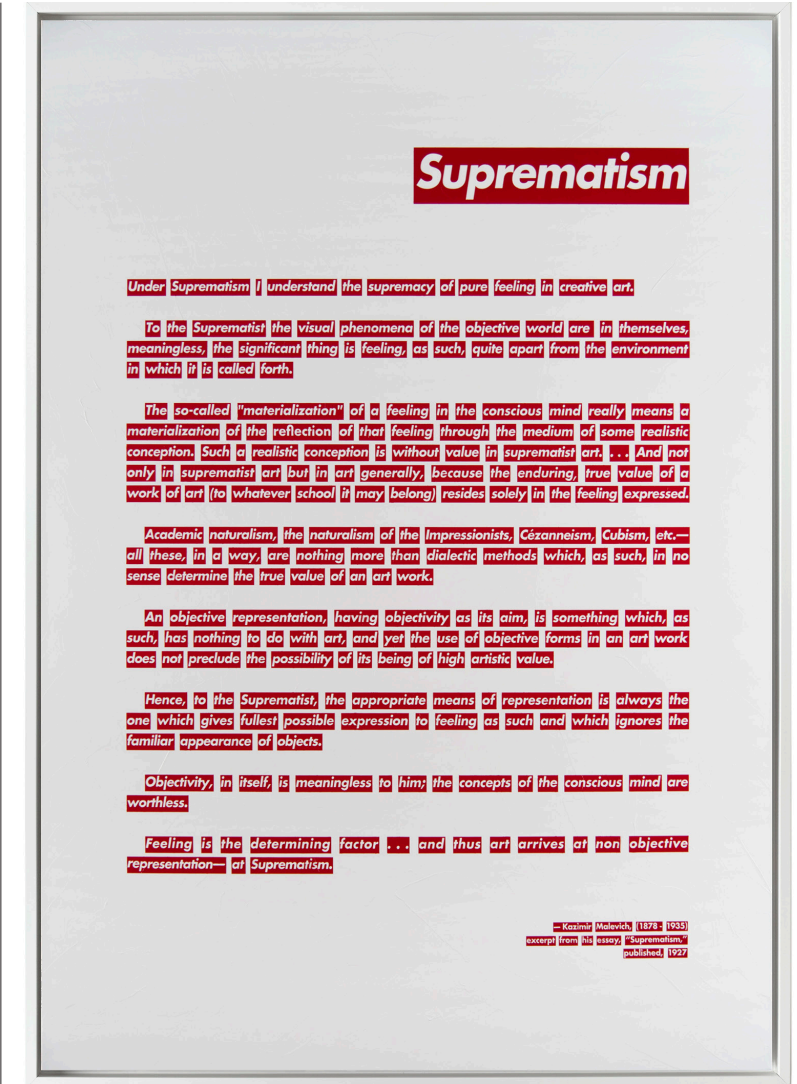
↓ A detail from "Solaris: Shelter for the Next Cold War." Photo by Kyle Haffermann



culture, especially from a kid's point-of-view, what's evident to me is that perpetually seeing the same sign throughout the years is a powerful, propagandistic and perverse way of re-defining artifice as nature and signage as landscape. At the same time, I'm also a guy who's aware that there are just over 14,000 McDonalds in the USA and they're everywhere all at once. The golden arches, in addition to other representations of ubiquitous mass, say, oil and gas station logos, are emblematic of industrial consumption 24/7 – and what can be more American than that?

Describe how you came to formulate your painting of Kazimir Malevich's "Suprematist" manifesto using the logo of Supreme?

I've been wanting to do something incorporating Supreme for a long time. Everything felt forced, and as much as I like the parallel play of white letters on a red background, which is the same vocabulary the Bolsheviks used to sell their Revolution via banners, I'm glad I waited. I spent about two years focused on a series of work that commemorated the centennial of Malevich's "Black Square," 1915, which essentially was the world's first piece of abstract art. By eliminating the horizon line from his painting, Malevich, in effect, declared that there are no more portraits, no more landscapes, only "feelings" that can be expressed exclusively in non-objective, non-representational forms. His geometric compositions became a language and then a theory of critical thinking and very much a parable for new art in a new age. World War I was raging, Russia's revolution was on the horizon and here's an artist who chose to break down and deconstruct a figurative painting style that he was rather comfortable with in creation of "the Zero:" nothing and everything. In turn, when Malevich first exhibited the piece, he hung it on the traditional corner of a room, where the wall meets the ceiling, and replaced a Russian Orthodox icon with his own creation. A fistfight broke out among the artists present and over 100 years removed from this exhibit opening, debates about whether the "Black Square" is indeed, sacred, spiritual, and/or profound, linger on. With my latest piece, "Suprematism," using the same visual vocabulary as the famed Supreme logo, I remake an excerpt from Malevich's essay of the same title. Originally written in Russian, then translated into German, and then translated into English from the German, the rendered text is somewhat broken in its content. The irony here is what sold me to go



after making the piece. Malevich may preach on about "the supremacy of pure feeling in creative art" and "thus art arrives at non-objective representation," but my choice was to do the exact opposite. Every word of his that I remake, repurpose, and of sorts, reclaim, I objectify and commodify to look like a sleek cousin of the Supreme logo. The wordplay here between "Suprematism" and "Supreme" is just a stepping stone, using humor to get into more serious issues of late-stage capitalism, the mechanisms of materialism, fear, desire, to say nothing of the competing identities and contradictions that I'm still unpacking. It's still so new! But I'd argue that what's core here is the fine line of art masquerading as fashion and fashion pretending to be art.

The influence of Malevich's work can be seen in your pieces. What about his style of abstraction and non-access objectivity is most stimulating to your creativity?

↑ **Suprematism** from the series, "Centennial of the Square" acrylic on canvas 65 x 45 inches 2020 "Lots of competing identities and contradictions here. Certainly Russian-American duality is peppered throughout, as are ideas about objectification and commodification. Intersections of advertising and ideology. Art masquerading as fashion and fashion pretending to be art."



↑ **CVS**
from the series,
“Signs & Wonders”
diptych
acrylic on canvas
26 x 40 inches,
each
52 x 40 inches,
together
2019
“A newly built CVS
has become a bell-
weather for urban
gentrification.
This is certain-
ly true of my own
changing neighbor-
hood in Washington,
DC. The piece takes
established ready-
made signage (the
left from LA; the
right from DC) so
as to reflect the
idea of desire and
consumption 24/7.
It never ends and
it’s seemingly ev-
er-present.”

It’s important to assess that the Russian avant-garde was the most significant Russian export to world culture in the 20th Century. Without Malevich and his students, art history would look very different today. All told, his influence looms large, but what I find most appealing, isn’t his abstraction or style. But rather, I’ve appropriated his symbols to a revolutionary moment captured in time and space. It’s a way of acknowledging something new and original, which I then would mine as material to create something new and original myself. It’s not so much that he’s an overt influence on my practice. Instead, I chose to ‘want’ to create my own “Black Square.” Not a version of *his*, though that might be a reference point. My issue was that there was a need to challenge oneself, to speak not in Malevich’s language, but to define and refine one for you and you alone. Years ago, I found a point of entry by identifying Malevich’s geometric shapes as visual texts or, say, *letters*, so that I could actually write words with them. I would sit and collage in my kitchen trying to figure out what looks like a “M,” what looks like a “C,” etc. That was the breakthrough, and the words that I chose to write helped me figure out what the direction of this budding art life was going to be.

Your piece featuring the CVS logo provides commentary on the corporate aspects of social media culture. How did you formulate the idea for it?

CVS stands for Convenience, Value, and Service. Moreover, in gentrifying neighborhoods throughout Washington, DC, the establishment of a CVS has become a marker of sorts for coming development. On my block, I’ve lived

through this: first comes the store, then comes the condos. From the standpoint of highbrow semiotics, a lowbrow CVS means a lot more than just a pharmacy. It represents change. Even in the historically African-American U Street corridor where I make my home, this change can easily become an existential threat. The idea to formulate a piece based on the signage of CVS stemmed from wanting to explore this further. At the same time, what I learned from my last show, “Solaris: Shelter for the Next Cold War,” was how interactivity and connection between the audience and the artwork has been impacted by the proliferation of Instagram, among other social platforms. I was shocked to discover hundreds of tags from the exhibit peppered online almost weekly. I especially liked the very original ways visitors found to incorporate themselves – bodies and faces – into my installations. And it got me thinking about intention and spectatorship and this whole idea of seeing and being seen, documenting one’s experience with art, while concurrently creating a souvenir of sorts of that very encounter. As with “Suprematism,” I aimed to make a piece that can be two things at once. Its distortion blends two CVS signs, one from Los Angeles and one from DC, into a diptych. The LA sign advertises “Photo. Liquor. Beauty.” The DC sign says “24 Hours.” Put together, they spell out a very particular formula that serves the consumer culture of Instagram very well. It does so overtly by offering a how-to guide for better picture taking and, thereby, more likes. The very design of the piece was meant for interaction with aspiring influencers. However, while celebrating the triviality of it all, the bigger picture is what is being messaged becomes moot.

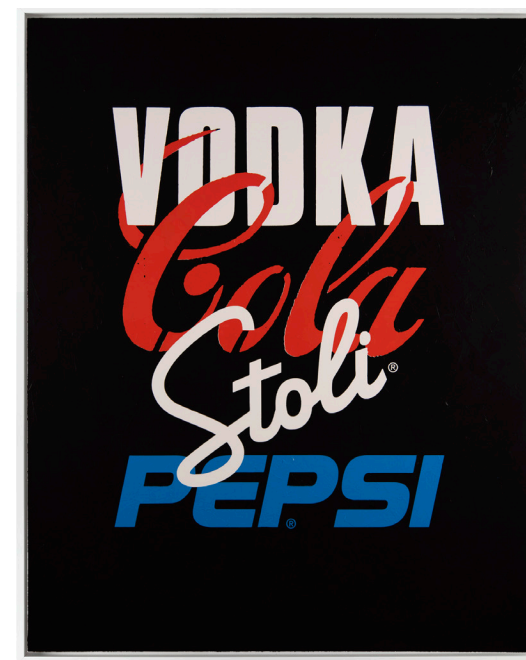
How long does it usually take between when you first develop an idea to it being fully executed?

Speed isn’t of the essence. Sometimes things take years to flesh out. Other times, the spark of an idea might be kismet, but needs months to kind of ripen. I’m always on the lookout and constantly taking notes, photos, in general, just paying attention and being open to what’s new and that hunting never stops. I try not to put too much pressure on myself, but, of course, it’s great when one problem is solved executing a work and that gives way to the next problem having to be solved. And in a way, that’s the job. Like a writer, there are plenty of drafts that a reader doesn’t see before a book is published. Like a lot of conceptualist artists, and I consider myself one with a pop-twinge, I

always strive to simplify, to reduce and the definition and representation of the idea is the work itself.

On your website you write that you aim to critique modern culture “even as the meaning of contemporary culture shifts almost too quickly to crystalize.” How do you approach making art about current events and trends in this hyper-fast climate?

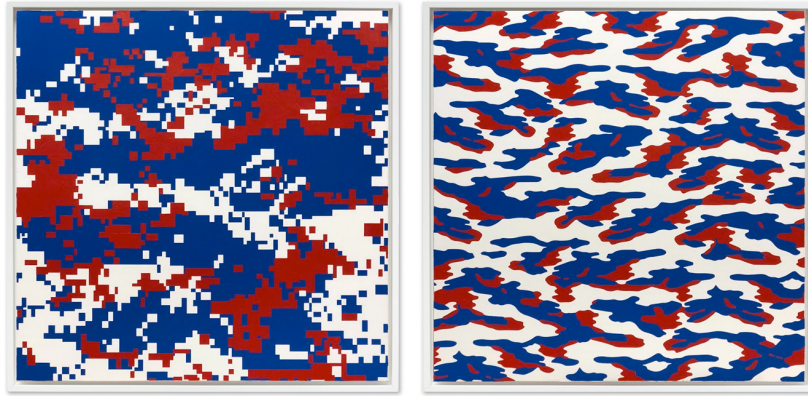
I really make an effort not to be topical, but we are living in historical times. I didn’t see Donald Trump on the horizon, which now makes that effort feel as an attempt in futility. But I’m disciplined and in the case of making something about the Mueller Report, I said yes. Yet, there’ve been a lot of other ideas, some good ones, to which I had to say no. It’s a very slippery slope to go down. My job isn’t journalism, or say, reacting to news. My job is to go slow and to digest the news in context with history, art history, literature, pop-culture, personal baggage, kitsch, cliché, and keeping it honest. My first series of work, started in 2011, was titled, “Moscow Made, American Born.” Donald Trump was still a TV host. And I can assure you, no one was paying attention to me. Most of my Russian-American duality pieces were made prior to his inauguration. But it was at the beginning of that epoch in late 2016, when I began to get calls from curators to come and exhibit in politically themed group shows, which later led to my first solo show at the Culture House, four blocks away from the U.S. Capitol. I’m certainly not trying to suggest that I was prescient in my critical thinking, rather my interest was always in false representation, failure and its repetition, and Donald Trump just happened to precisely encapsulate the themes I was already exploring. This is, perhaps, best expressed by “Harm to Ongoing Matter,” based on the Mueller Report, which showcased the entirety of 176 pages of redactions, reduced from a total of 488 pages published. It’s everything the public didn’t see in information expressed in black squares and rectangles – again rooted from Malevich. As an artist, I’m not out to make any kind of particular political point. Rather, concerning the content of the report and its hyper-focus on Russian interference into our elections, I’m simply trying to intersect contemporary American politics and the Russian avant-garde. The hope for the piece is that it’s remembered as a thoughtful and important work, (over 30 feet wide!), and not as a flash-in-the-pan or exploitative of a news cycle, or worse, already dated.



← **Vodka, Cola, Stoli, Pepsi**
from the series,
“Moscow Made, American Born”
acrylic on canvas
55 x 44 inches
2020
“A seemingly simple
cocktail reci-
pe, when repeated
slowly can become
a mantra. However,
this piece is also
rooted from histo-
ry, as framed by
the 1959 Kitchen
Debate between Vice
President Nixon
and Soviet Pre-
mier Khrushchev in
Moscow. In the end,
Russia got Pep-
si and America got
Stoli – the first
large commercial
transaction between
superpowers of the
Cold War.”

Describe how your “Militarized Self Portrait” and “Russian-American Flag” represents the duality of your identity?

I chose to use the lens of camouflage to comment on the relationship between the United States and Russia. The piece is a diptych and rather jarring in its geometry. Its left panel is indicative of a swatch of American camouflage, often referred to as “digicam.” It’s a pattern that’s become ubiquitous after the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. The right panel is a swatch pattern for the camouflage of Russia’s armed forces. Put together, there’s seemingly a very aggressive stance between them as these two disparate paintings kind of just stare at each other. There’s the suggestion of movement, but they’re obviously still. The colors of each nation’s flags are both the same – red, white, and blue. As part of the diptych’s design, I chose to use a hack in Photoshop that my studio mate, Genna Gurchich, uses regularly in his practice. Thus, the red and blue color values represented here are precisely the average shade and gradient between American and Russian red and American and Russian blue. Concerning the “Russian-American Flag,” the focus of a mixed duality is applied using symbols of Russian and American art history. In repurposing both Kazimir Malevich’s *Eight Red Rectangles* (1915), and the blue square of his *Suprematist Composition* (1916), into a double American flag design originally conceived by Jasper Johns, I create a new identity piece by the very expression of this mash up. It’s rooted in breaking down the visual icons, symbols, and ciphers that define both cultures and their



↑ **Militarized Self Portrait**
from the series, "Moscow Made, American Born"
diptych
acrylic on canvas
40 x 40 inches, each
40 x 80 inches,
together
2015

"This diptych denotes the two sides of a Russian-American identity representing the distinctive camouflage patterns worn by both the US and Russian militaries. The identical red, white and blue colors in the paintings are averages of the distinct shades and hues of each country's flag."

▼ **52 Star Flag**
from the series, "Signs & Wonders"
acrylic on canvas
17 x 28 inches
2019

"A rare, overt political work expressing the omnipresent politics of identity and representation. The extra stars for DC and Puerto Rico reflect the need and desire to be seen and heard in positions of power, culture, and as part of our nation's flag itself."

respective art histories, and building them back up as something illustrative of my own autobiography as someone who's the child of two cultures, and exposed to two dissimilar streams of history. What started as an exploration of identity has now, in the age of a reality TV presidency and the Russia-centric media coverage that follows him, become a broader take on that which divides us, and that which brings us together. The latter, becoming more and more fleeting as the disconnect has never been as wide as it has been in my lifetime.

Your work has provided commentary on the political events following the 2016 election involving the U.S. and Russia. Was there one event in particular that impacted the way you approached it?

While some of my work is politically rooted, I don't see myself as a political artist. However, "Solaris: Shelter for the Next Cold War" was very much a show about messaging and false representation and there was a site-specific installation created that was overt to the Inauguration. It was a truly shocking experience to watch and impacted a central work showcased that was very much a call and response exercise to it. The piece, titled "HUGE" reimagines the President's favorite, seemingly most often used, and most often satirized adjective of 2016. Reimagined here, it is a Soviet style banner which employs Cyrillic letters that spell out gibberish in Russian, however when



transliterated into English, phonetically take on a completely divergent meaning and context: one that fully expresses the President's own cultural proclivity to Russia, while at the same time, in the age of "alternative facts" is sadly topical. Framing the banner are about 50 photographs of the most clever and most ridiculous protest signs taken at both the women's and science protest marches that shortly followed the Inauguration. The juxtaposition of competing spheres of messaging in both government propaganda and personal branding, I feel, explores a particular social dynamic of inclusiveness, representation, and justice that is the very polar opposite to the President's battle cry of "America First," which was the core theme of his inaugural address.

Your political pieces are capturing a particular moment of history. Did you always aim for your work to reflect the current moment?

I didn't plan for this, as it's all happenstance. The focus was always on connecting both Russian and American symbols and the social systems they represent into something new and conceptually expressive. It's all very personal to me and I'm emotionally invested in what I put my name to. Over the past three years, I've been coming home, turning on the news and essentially seeing the same visual thing play out as headlines during the collusion investigations and scandal after scandal involving Russia. It's like watching your professional practice take on a life of its own after putting in a full day in the studio – and it's a bit surreal. But also, it provides a challenge and reminder that what I'm making is not graphic design, not political cartooning, not illustrations of a particular news event, or a badly rendered misuse of the Cyrillic alphabet. Instead, like a storyteller spinning a yarn, I'm serving up a bigger narrative that comes through when a viewer sees, say 20 of my pieces and not one or two.

The response to your recent DC exhibition "Solaris: Shelter For the Next Cold War" has been very positive, with over 11,000 people viewing it in its first four days, including Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. What was your intent in showing pieces like the redacted Mueller Report and Exxon in the same gallery?

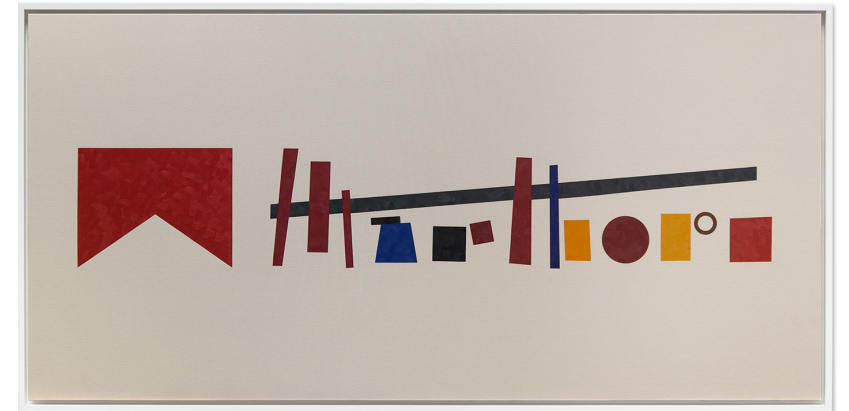
I was always open to making a piece about the Mueller Report, but when I saw the redactions, I knew I would remiss not addressing that quality of it directly. The intention was complimented by the logistics of Culture House who hosted

"Solaris" for a 10 week residency. A lucky feature of the gallery layout was a 32-foot wall that figured prominently in the creation of "Study for Harm to Ongoing Matter." Scaled over two large sheets of plotter paper and then mounted using push pins, the piece expresses a very particular DIY quality that evokes Washington's visually dynamic and musically fluid art making style. The goal for the work was always to showcase something for DC, by DC, and about DC. And in tracing out the black squares and the black rectangles, I was able to connect that graphically with both the punk rock flyers of DC's legendary local bands and the Russian avant-garde's pioneering efforts towards abstraction and feelings using the language of geometry. It's a piece about everything we're not allowed to see and by showing it in its full scale, the failure and repetition of it all comes through. Concerning, "XXX," the intention is based on a simple visual twist on the Exxon logo, coupled by a symbolic use of color. By adding an additional bar to what's already a very established brand identity and then editing out everything else, I'm thereby able to make a particular point about perversion and the fetishization of natural resources – about how America uses oil and natural gas to dominate the world and how the rest of world does the same to dominate America.

You portray Soviet propaganda in the style of advertisements for companies like Macy's. What kinds of overlap do you find in Russian propaganda and the messaging of corporate advertising?

The red star of Russia represents military might, psychological fear, a place where the worst thing is a knock at the door in the middle of the night and you're never heard from again. In America, the same red star is the logo of Macy's. Whereas red stars were used to communicate ideological power and control in the USSR, Macy's uses the same symbol to market housewares and discount prices in honor of President's Day, Memorial Day, the 4th of July, and of course, Thanksgiving. That day's iconic parade is another device of duality – used in Russia to extol supremacy and in America to promote a three-day sale. The "Psalms" triptych covers this paradoxical ground. The overlap is all about marketing and salesmanship, regardless of whether its ideas or jeans are being sold.

Would you like to continue making art about Russia or continue exploring other themes? I am itching to get out of Russia-themed work



↑ **Marlboro by Malevich**
from the series, "Centennial of the Square"
oil on canvas
38 x 78 inches
2015

"Intersecting the hazy line between high art and advertising, this piece uses the readymade shapes of Russian artist Kazimir Malevich's seminal Suprematism works as letters spelling out a quint-essential American product. The result is both alien and familiar as it represents two distinctive streams of history, and speaks to the relationship art and money."

and the last thing I want is to be labeled "Russian-American Artist." My hope is with "Solaris," I've really said everything that I could have wanted concerning Americanization, Otherness, the over saturation of messaging, and 'shelter' from it all. I'm excited to be on to new things – exploring how the Internet distorts our understanding of art history and the ubiquity of color and how art history itself is objectified to and commodified. I've had a long-term series titled "Signs and Wonders," that I can't wait to get back to that concerns itself with the distortion of established signage and logos as a metaphor for the breakdown of social controls.

Has the cultural landscape of Washington, DC as a city impacted your approach to making art?

DC is very much a city filled to the brim with competing identities. It's Federal City. I'm proud to say folks were federal workers. The gentrification over the past decade is impossible to unsee and I have ideas for a collaborative project concerning that subject percolating about. It's obviously an international capital. Diplomats are here. World Bank. IMF. There are way too many lawyers. But under it all, is this incredible community of anti-establishment creatives looking to do good, meaningful, and socially connective work. In so many ways, that's the tradition here that Dischord Records started and I very much grew up with. Along with that comes a very low-fi approach to DIY culture that applies fully to my own art making. Using simple tools and materials, some plywood and metal studs, "Solaris," as an immersive installation, was truly something for DC, by DC, and about DC and touched on a lot of those competing definitions of what makes Washington Washington. ■

This interview originally appeared in The Khollected Magazine, November 2019. Interview by Christopher Casey.