

## THE ART NEWSPAPER RUSSIA

### Alexander Yulikov: "I believe I am doing meditative art"

The major Russian contemporary artist recently received a grant award from the Barnett and Annalee Newman Foundation in New York. The artist shared his thoughts on this recognition of his achievements and his own path in abstract art.

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*Alexander Yulikov. Photo: A.Yulikov's archive*

## **Tell us how you received such a prestigious award**

This grant award, which is assigned for merit and not for the creation of works, came as a complete surprise to me. I did not know anything about the Barnett and Annalee Newman Foundation, and was even more surprised to know that the foundation is headed by Frank Stella (American artist, works in the style of post-painting abstraction and minimalism - TANR). I have never met him personally, but Stella likely became aware of my work from my website. Photos, unfortunately, do not convey the scale, texture, relief of my paintings. Nevertheless, Frank Stella praised them highly. His letter says: "You were chosen because the foundation determined that your work embodied the spirit of individualism and independence that Barnett Newman exhibited throughout his own career." For more than my half a century in Russian art (the artist was born in 1943 - TANR), the few of Russian art historians and critics who commented and reviewed my work also highlighted my "individualism" and "independence". But I always feel that these qualities are perceived here [in Russia], rather, as a disadvantage, and I do not fit in, I am not relevant, not modern, not interesting and I am marginal. And also - that I am doing something American, and in America there are tons of such things. Nevertheless, it was precisely for the fact that I am not like American and other artists that I was awarded the prize. And as far as I know, I am the only Russian artist to whom the Barnett and Annalee Newman Foundation has given the award.



*Alexander Yulikov and his works at the exhibition "Geometrism. 1950s - 2010s" in the New Tretyakov Gallery (November 13, 2019 - January 12, 2020) Photo: artist's archive*

**Your work is well represented in the American Zimmerli Museum of Rutgers University, in the famous collection of Soviet nonconformism by Norton Dodge. Perhaps Stella saw your work there?**

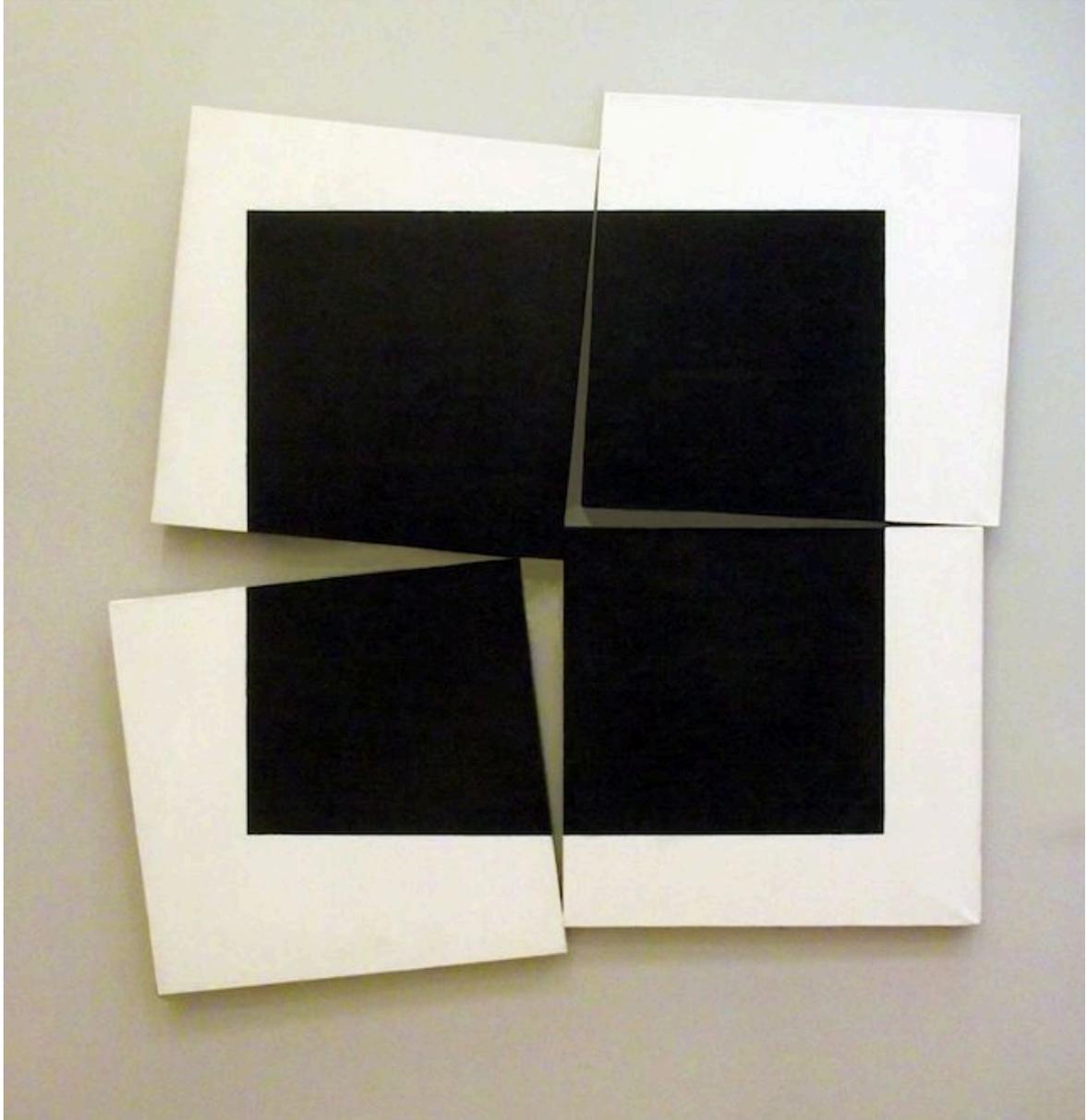
Yes, there are 56 of my works of different years, in the Zimmerli Museum. Only the Tretyakov Gallery has more — 76 of my works. However, I doubt Stella was in the Zimmerli Museum. As for Norton Dodge himself (1927 - 2011 - TANR), he greatly appreciated my work and for about 20 years, when

the Soviet Union was still in existence, he acquired my art through intermediaries. I met him in 1989 in New York, when I first visited the US. I was staying with my friend, the artist Alexander Kosolapov, and Norton came to see the work that I had brought with me, and immediately bought ten large prints. From then on, every time I visited, we reconnected and he bought my work. Dodge was a great man. He assembled the largest and most representative collection of Russian unofficial art of the second half of the twentieth century outside Russia. His energy, passion, love for Russian art impressed me so much. Perhaps this American collector has done more for our art than anyone else in the world.

**Your abstractions echo what the Americans did in the 1970s and 1980s. When did you get to know the work of Barnett Newman, Frank Stella and other abstract artists?**

In the 1960s and 1970s, I saw their work in magazines like *Artforum*, *ARTnews*, and *Art in America*. My friend, the artist Alexander Melamid, gave me those magazines. Although reproductions do not convey the scale of these paintings. I truly became acquainted with their work when I first came to the US [in 1989], and since then I have been visiting this country annually, going to museums and exhibitions in Boston, Washington, New York. Abstraction is central to 20th century American art, and I am well acquainted with the works of its greatest representatives: Ellsworth Kelly, Barnett Newman,

Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Frank Stella. When I saw these paintings in person, I was particularly impressed by their size. In New York, at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), there is a wonderful painting by Newman, *Vir heroicus sublimis*, measuring 242.3 cm by 541.7 cm, a huge red canvas. A huge wave of color literally knocks you off your feet! And in the museum's catalog it's just a little red rectangle - and no impression. In the same place, in MoMA, for the first time I saw in person the work of Frank Stella from his "Black Series", also rather big - 230.5 cm by 337.2 cm. So I know these works well, and mine have something in common with them, but they are different from them much more than similar.



*Alexander Yulikov. "Black square". Dynamic composition.1983, Version 2007. Oil on canvas. 132 x 137 cm. Photo: Artist's archive*

**Then, explain please how your concept of abstraction is unique**

In 1970, I began to paint abstract monochrome paintings, most often white, where the image is created by the difference in texture or relief. Later critics

began to classify these works as minimalism. They even called me "white crow" ("black sheep" *TN*), literally and figuratively. Since that time, I have been doing geometric abstraction, where the picture plane disintegrates, destroyed and shifted. It consists of several fragments connected at different "random" angles, and the image remains unified with "correct" verticals and horizontals. The edges in some works are "irregular" or "ruined". Many of my paintings are square or have a square as the main motive. In the mid-1980s, I began to paint "long paintings" consisting of several identical parts (most often nine), such as "From yellow to white, from white to red" (1989), 80 cm by 540 cm, which is in the Russian Museum (The Russian Museum, a major art museum in St. Petersburg, Russia " *TN*). In the graphic series, the image is created by tears, cuts and punctures in the paper, or "folds".

By the 1970s, I had developed my interpretation of space and time. I created my own "visual poetics", where a picture consists of several elements: a picture plane dynamically located in space, or a relief that is fragmented by the edges of a picture, a drawing that repeats the relief's shapes, but shifted in relation to them. The surface of the painting is covered with an expressive "moving" stroke. In general, the tactility of the surface is one of the main means of expression for me. I build the picture space not inward, but from the picture plane outward, to the viewer. The main thing in my work is the conflict of strict, rational geometric forms with expression, dynamics, spontaneity, destruction, imbalance, and fragmentation of the composition.



Alexander Yulikov. "Pieta". 2005. Photo: Moscow Museum of Modern Art

**How did you come to abstraction, since you started in the 1960s with figurative work in expressionist aesthetics?**

Yes, I have a lot of figurative works that I have not stopped doing since the 1960s. They can be divided into several subjects: *Nude, Heads, Urban*

*Motives* inspired by New York, and *The Bible Stories*. The same applies to my graphics: etchings, silk-screen printing and drawings.

My first small abstract work, which I now have, I produced in 1957, when I was 14 years old. It is closest to Paul Klee, whom I wasn't aware of at the time, but then saw this similarity a half century later. I studied at the Moscow Secondary Art School at the USSR Academy of Arts. The school was located on Lavrushinsky Lane, directly opposite the Tretyakov Gallery. During that time, my father was sent to work to China and the whole family left for two years, so I stayed in Moscow and lived in the dormitory, on the top floor of the school's building. I was already very fond of Russian futurism, I knew by heart the Mayakovsky's poem "Cloud in Pants" and every day after my classes I went to the Tretyakov Gallery. There I met a young employee, and she let me into the storeroom where the then forbidden "formalism" art was kept - the works of Kazimir Malevich, Wassily Kandinsky, Natalia Goncharova, Mikhail Larionov, Marc Chagall and other artists of the Russian avant-garde. Even at school, I knew modernist art well, which was, you see, unusual in those years. I didn't look for my way - I had it.

**Since the 1970s, our critics have called you the only Russian minimalist. Do you agree with this definition of your art?**

Well, this is better than when they call me a post-suprematist, particularly in the title of my personal exhibition, at the Moscow Museum of Modern Art in

2017, "Alexander Yulikov. Postsuprematism. " It is possible, of course, to attribute the entire geometric abstraction to Malevich and Mondrian. When an art historian or critic examines my work, he looks for an analogy - hence the idea that Yulikov descended from Malevich. But I don't come from him. Moreover, I did not, as many believe, come from American art, although I relate to it, like I do to Malevich. Some of my work is addressed to Malevich, such as my "Black Square" (1983), consisting of four parts, one version of which is in the Zimmerli Museum, another in the Tretyakov Gallery, or as "Black Square in the manner of pointillism" (2007 ). But in general, artists do not reproduce by budding.



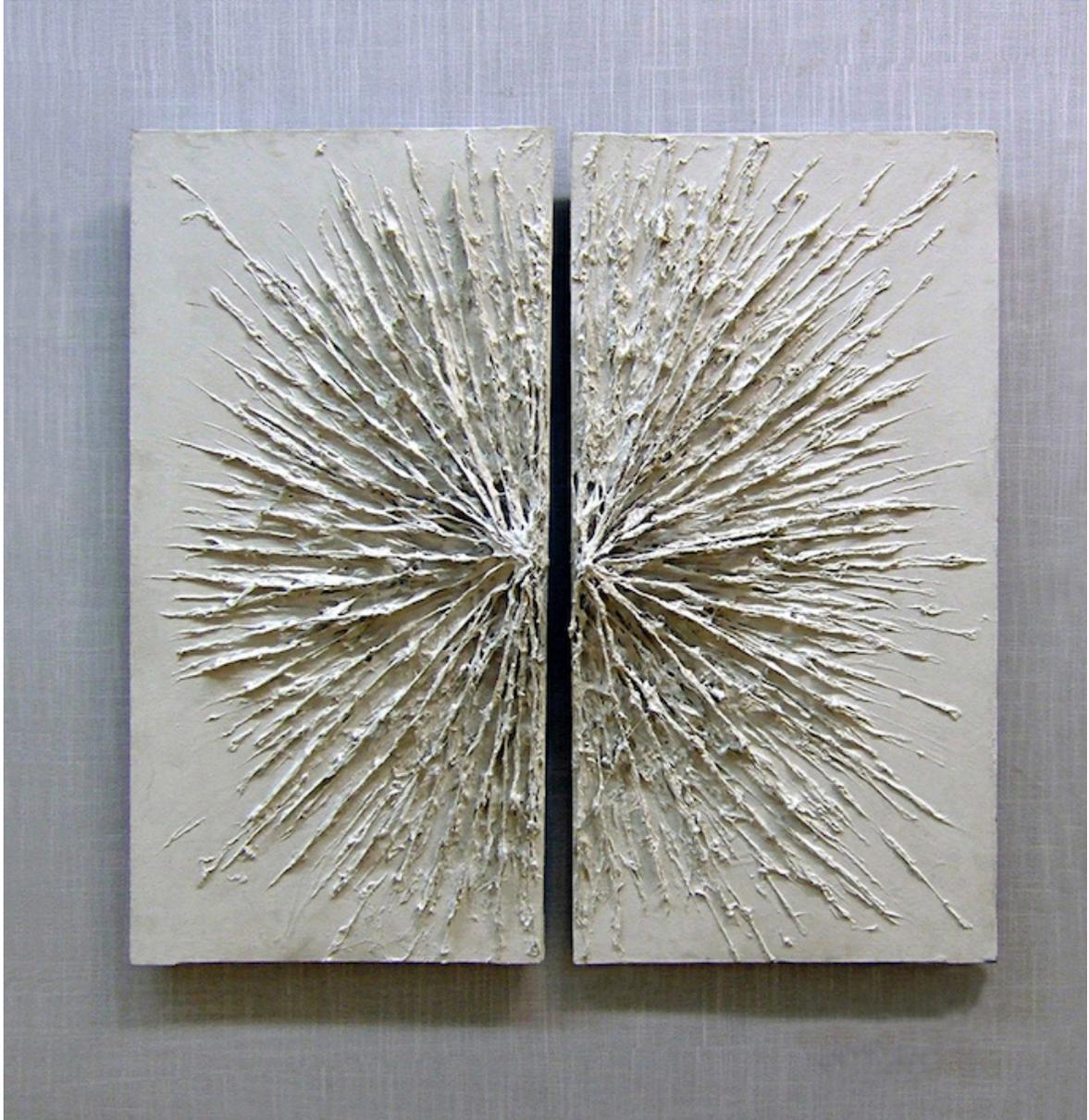
*Alexander Yulikov. "Hair cutting". 1976. Photo: Moscow Museum of Modern Art*

**How do you relate to the art of American and European minimalists and how, in your opinion, are you different?**

In the early 1970s, when I began to do my monochrome white works, I did not know this term ("minimalism") and did not suspect the existence of such a movement, although you can see a lot in common between me and American minimalism and the German group "Zero". But I did what I did, not because I followed a certain style - it was the logic of the development of my art. The fundamental difference is that for me it is always very important

to combine geometry with expression. In my art, two principles collide:  
Apollonian and Dionysian, harmony and expression.

When the Pompidou Centre (Contemporary Art Museum in Paris, France —  
*TN*) asked me for a gift of my work of the 1970s, I sent them a photo of my  
"White relief composition" 1974, which consists of two halves of one painting  
100 cm by 100 cm. I created several options for combining these halves,  
swapping them ... The reaction was the following: "it cannot be the 1970s!"  
And then, I found photographs from April 1976, where five such white  
paintings are hanging at the exhibition in the studio of Leonid Sokov  
(Russian artist, who organized exhibitions of unofficial art in his Moscow  
studio in 1970s — *TN*) and I am standing in front of the work that I gave  
them. This painting opened the second phase of the show titled "Collection!  
Contemporary art in the USSR and Russia 1950"“2000: a unique gift to the  
museum " at the Pompidou Center in 2017, and at the same time my  
retrospective show was opened at the Moscow Museum of Modern Art, where  
there were 96 paintings and 31 graphic prints and drawings. Bernard Blistin,  
the Director of the Pompidou Center, visited this exhibition and wrote to  
Andrei Erofeev, the curator, that the show made a strong impression on him.



*Alexander Yulikov. "White relief composition". 1974. Photo: Center Pompidou*

**Let's go back to your Barnett Newman Foundation Prize. What does it mean to you as an artist, besides material support?**

Of course, material support is important and \$150,000 is a lot. But when you are almost 80, exhibitions, the opportunity to show what you could do in art

are way more essential. When my art retrospective opened, I naively thought that now everything would finally get off the ground, there will be other personal exhibitions - in the Tretyakov Gallery, the Russian Museum or the Hermitage. But so far nothing has happened. And that is why this award is important for me as an assessment of my work, especially by Frank Stella, one of the greatest artists of the 20th century.

The Foundation also bought my painting, which, along with other award winning artists, was donated to the Jewish Museum in New York. The artists were asked to choose the art work themselves. I selected a painting from the "Black Square" series, 2007.

### **What are you doing now?**

In my studio on Lubyanka street, where the ceilings are 3.5 m high, I can do three-meter works. I have already started one, for others I am preparing sketches. I have also returned to the "Heads" drawings.

In my retrospective show there was one hall of graphic works. Prior to that show, an exhibition of my graphics took place in the City Committee of Graphics on Malaya Gruzinskaya street, in the 1980s. By the way, Ilya Kabakov (A famous contemporary Russian—American conceptual artist — *TN*) came to see that show, stood in the doorway, carefully examined all my works and said: "Well, this is meditative art," and waved his hand. In general, I agree with him. Since the award of the prize I had the opportunity to

publish a monograph, I think to put an epigraph to it: "Well, this is meditative art ... Ilya Kabakov." It's a pity I cannot reproduce his hand gesture with these words.