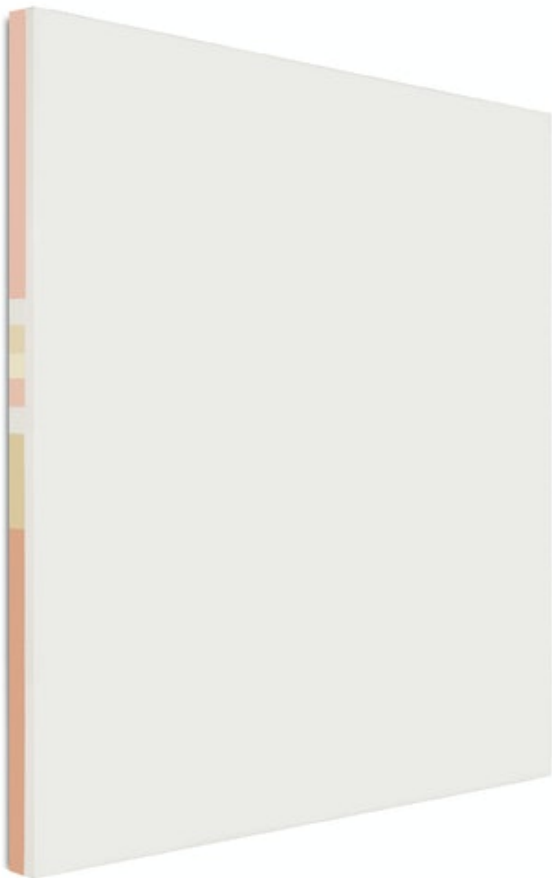


BROOKLYN RAIL

The *Ec-centric Gaze*

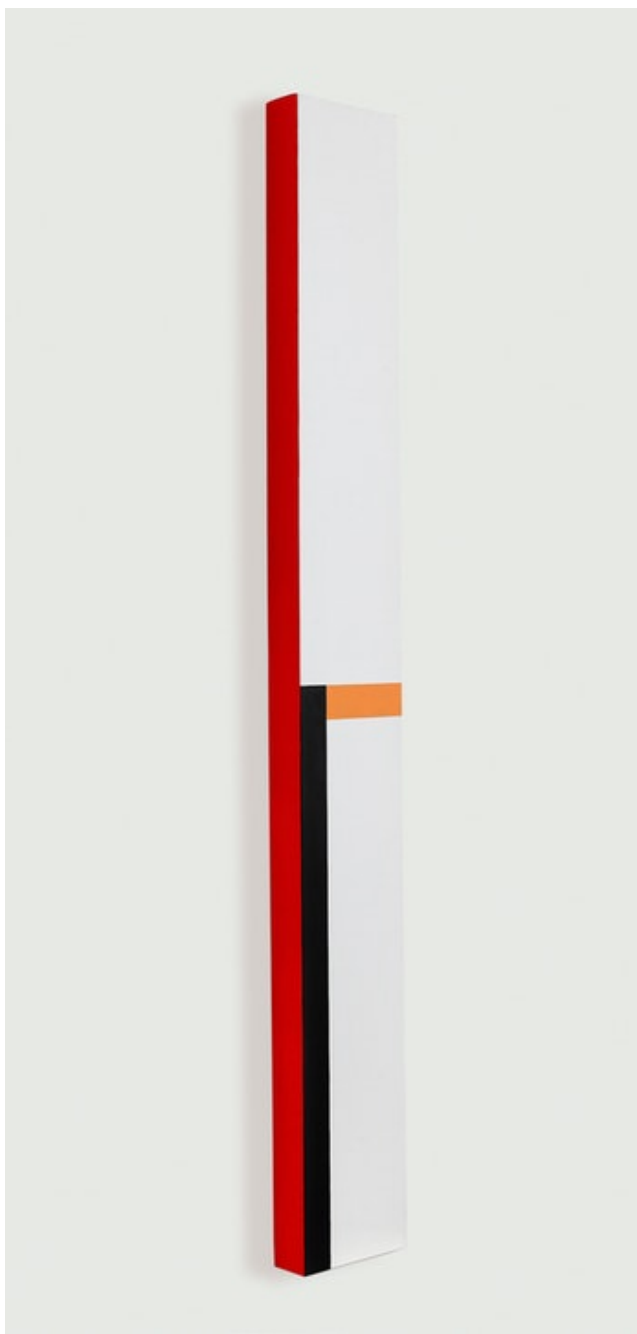
OCT 2020

By César Paternosto



Left: César Paternosto, *Tlön*, 1969. Acrylic emulsion on canvas, 48 x 48 x 3 inches. Right: *Uqbar*, 1975. Acrylic emulsion on canvas; 58 1/2 x 59 inches. Courtesy Cecilia de Torres Ltd., New York.

Early in 1969, in my first years in New York, I decided that I was going to leave the frontal surface of the painting blank, using only the sides of the stretchers to paint on. I was breaking away from what I felt painting had become by then: an altogether tired formalist marking of the frontal plane which no longer appeared to offer significant new options. But this iconoclastic act of wiping the frontal plane clean came up, as well, in the midst of the prevailing reductivist climate brought on by the Minimalist sculptors. Nevertheless, it involved a dialectical rejection of their ideology, namely that “sculpture outpowers painting,” for I was proposing a (critical) return to that exclusively Western cultural artifact, the easel painting.



César Paternosto, *Vertical, Lateral Red*, 2017. Oil on canvas, 67 x 8 x 2 3/4 inches. Courtesy MC/MC Gallery, Buenos Aires.

Contributor

César Paternosto is an artist and art writer now based in Spain. A solo exhibition of his work was on display at the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum in Madrid in 2017-18, and he has been included in exhibitions such as *High Times, Hard Times: New York Painting, 1967-1975* (2007). He is the author of *The Stone and the Thread: Andean Roots of Abstract Art* (1996).

Yet, by shifting the accent of the painted surface to the sides offered by the stretcher, I was radically questioning the frontal reading as the traditional—or ancestral—way of experiencing painting. From this point of view, the constituents of the visual structure, the "image" of the painting are, in a sense, hidden. They have to be found through an oblique, or lateral, or peripatetic approach to both sides, *successively*.

By the late '70s my work was fertilized by my encounter with the alterity of non-Western cultural horizons. Yet, it would take me long years to become fully aware of the meaning implied by shifting the emphasis of the painting to the side edges. I realized that the move away from the hegemonic center—Western easel painting—had anticipated my encounter or assimilation of the *other*. Or, to put it another way, an *eccentric* gaze towards the peoples and cultures long marginalized by the West. From which, not least, I learned that what we call "geometric abstraction" has been for millennia—or in some cases still is—a repertoire of forms *full of language*. And that more often than not, these forms have been conceived in the textile matrix. An art—textiles—that had emerged, ages ago from the mind and hands of women.

When I speak of the irruption of the other, I am thinking of the geometric forms in abstract art that developed outside Western civilization and that long preceded the modern version we are familiar with, which, in any case, is a late appearance in the world-wide context of art history. To clarify this concept, we must try to counter the formidable prevalence of the Western hierarchical "art/ornament" discourse, because that dichotomy has been the hindrance against perceiving that the so-called "ornament" is, in fact, the central art form of non-European cultures and of the pre-modern West. Once we do that, we have before our eyes a myriad of art forms, more often than not of geometric persuasion.