

Stephen Wickham

By **Christopher Heathcote**

<https://heathcoteartcritic.substack.com/p/darkness-at-noon>

Five Walls Gallery, 1st Fl, 119 Hopkins St, Footscray, until 27 June;
www.fivewalls.com.au

There seemed an unease weighing over Stephen Wickham's show when I visited Five Walls Gallery. It was, perhaps, a matter of timing. I had just read in that morning's press about Kharkiv art museum, that crown jewel filled with the Ukraine's cultural history, which had been devastated by fire after a Russian drone strike. Still this attack confirmed the sobering point underpinning Wickham's thought-provoking exhibition; how an artistic style may be steeped in a cultural, religious and political 'schism' which occurred in times past, and has never really healed.

For decades now Wickham's geometric abstracts have been steeped in his off-beat take on the modernist art of Eastern Europe states and beyond. But few people, even among his fellow artists, grasp the mixed ethnicity of his sources. To most it is 1920s avant-garde Russian Art, with two of the foremost Ukrainian innovators—Kyiv's celebrated modern painter Kazimir Malevich and Kharkiv's talented son Vladimir Tatlin—being taken for native Russians. Like most of the renowned artists they were not Russian-born, the simple fact being that St Petersburg and Moscow, were alluring cultural magnets which drew in creative talent from distant parts; much as Vienna and Paris did over to the west.

It was Charles Green, the academic and Australian critic for Art Forum, who initially drew Wickham's oeuvre to my attention, explaining at length he did not (like certain local painters) run off showy imitations of Malevich et al. On the contrary, this artist is fascinated by what happens to faith symbols when cultures clash, or are taken up by painters not of the faith, or occupy an increasingly secular world hostile to their values, or, Green quietly added, all of these.

Take the crucifix in Wickham's abstracts. It's never true. The proportions of cross shaft-to-transepts will be wrong, or else they're not fixed at a 90 degree angle, or the cross will be overlaid with other shapes, or it is just not positioned upright. Sure enough, of the thirteen crucifixes visible in the seven

paintings displayed at Five Walls Gallery, just one Greek Cross and three Latin Crosses are correct; and even then, all four are tilted chaotically as if they had been walloped by an explosive blast.

Then there will be the palette. In this exhibition Wickham uses tones of building and construction, those colours of brick, rusted steel, concrete, as well as builder's sand, grey dust, and carbonised black. Yet they are also the colours of devastation, having become all too familiar from those newscasts where journalists stand amid smoking ruins and talk of Ukrainian casualties. Dare one add, there's no suggested blood in these compositions, the absence of sanguine reds underlining how this art shudders at conflict which continues into an age of Drone blitzes, of AI warfare.

Any doubts the viewer has over references to troubles in the Ukraine—and also longer term Russian hostilities—are settled by how the artist uses the 'Project Space' within the gallery. Last month I pointed to how through their physical installation Brent Harris presented some of his drawings as an integrated meaningful group, not a mere line of exhibits. Wickham does similar by composing his paintings upon the walls in a purposeful design.

If individually his geometric works are seemingly small, they fill the contained wall-space well, reaching around the spectator, asserting themselves in a recognisable allusion to an Iconostasis. This is that wall within an Eastern Orthodox church, covered with Icons, behind which is the sacred chamber with altar (an Iconostasis is equivalent to the Rood Screen in a medieval English church). But here, and now, these distorted abstracts suggest a damaged screen used by a flagging community in uncertain times. Max Delaney, who once manned the desk for a Wickham show, told me there can be a tragic presence to these mute abstractions. I see now what he meant.

Displayed alone on an architectural pillar is an homage to the suprematist painter Ivan Kliun (illus. below). It is cunningly placed so you see it only when exiting the gallery's 'Project Space', a small parting glimpse of inventive delight as you head for the street door and all those worldly troubles outside which are too much with us.



Stephen Wickham - Remembered
Painting, from Ivan Kliun's lost
notebook (2023)