

LOS ANGELES

Blum & Poe

BLACK

In 1915, Russian artist Kazimir Malevich exhibited *Black Square* (1913), arguably the most renowned black painting in modern art history. Shocking audiences with its reticent form and color, Malevich's composition revealed itself to be much more—a revolutionary break from representational forms of art. A century after *Black Square*, Los Angeles's Blum & Poe gallery brought together three diverse artists that similarly treat black as a portal to myriad possibilities. Though black is often thought of as tantamount to nothingness, all three of these artists counter that perception by asserting the potential inherent in blackness.

Known for colorful, thickly impastoed canvases, Berlin-based Zhu Jinshi sees black not as a void, but, in accordance with Taoist precepts, the culmination of five colors: blue, red, green, white and yellow. In the gallery's first room, his massive installation, *Wall of Air* (2015), bisected the expanse of the space. The ominous work, made up of ten, approximately eight-by-seven-foot conjoined black canvases (though only eight were on view at Blum & Poe), rose up at a slight angle and leaned against sturdy metal racks on rolling casters. The partition has an almost pulsating surface that, though intimidating, paradoxically draws one closer for inspection. The craquelure in the thick paint are splintered like cracking skin. Throughout the run of the exhibition, in an outcome unexpected even to Zhu himself, an oily yellow substance leached out from the paintings and dripped and pooled on the gallery floor. The monolithic blockade ultimately displayed its vulnerabilities and, consequently, the impermanent nature of all things, no matter how formidable.

The second room was filled with paintings by Quentin Morris, who has been exclusively using black in his work for more than five decades. The timing of the artist's beginning his all-black aesthetic in 1963 is significant, that being the year Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his iconic "I Have a Dream" speech, and just one year before the Civil Rights Act of 1964 legally ended segregation in the United States. As a black man living in the US, where race issues remain fraught, Morris has sought to dispel unfavorable connotations surrounding the term "black."

Presented against the gallery's walls, which were also black, Morris's work, all untitled and created between 2014–16, almost appeared to be camouflaged. Approaching the work, however, revealed the paintings to be uniquely different from the dark walls. For each work, gesso was applied to a raw, circular canvas—Morris eschews frames and stretcher bars for the immediacy of the canvas upon the wall—after which acrylic and silkscreen ink were used to blot out the

white substrate. Weather and other conditions of Morris's Philadelphia basement studio also made an impact on the finished products, as some paintings bore a cracked pattern resulting from humidity. The paintings were hung in such a way that they were just short of being flush against the wall, allowing for physics to flex and curl the free edges. The expressionistic surfaces and shade variances interplayed with ambient light to reveal subtle yet significant differences that were as individual as one human being is from another.

In the gallery's final space, Kōji Enokura—a key member of the avant-garde Mono-ha movement from 1960s and '70s Japan—presented a selection of canvases variously treated with black pigment. Similar to Morris's works, Enokura's *Figure A – No. 1* (1982) bypasses backing panels and stretcher bars. A saturated cotton cloth was, instead, affixed directly to the wall and floor of the gallery, taking on the appearance of a rectangular cast shadow. In *Intervention No. 1* (1987), a large canvas stained all in black except for its left top corner has a wood beam half-doused in blue paint leaning against it, the latter seemingly a surrogate for the human body. Enokura explains in various exhibition catalogs from the 1980s that his aim was to document his own presence during uncertain times. These "black" works, in essence, act as tangible confirmations of the artist's sentient being. Indeed, it was clear that all of the exhibition's artists—Zhu, Morris and Enokura—do not view black as a void but, rather, as a powerful, physical presence.

JENNIFER S. LI

ZHU JINSHI

*Wall of Air*

2015

Canvas, frame, oil paint and metal rack, ten parts: 250.2 x 201.6 x 7.9 cm each.

Eight of ten parts exhibited.

Courtesy the artist and Blum &

Poe, Los Angeles/New York.

