

GUNTER CHRISTMANN *RED/GREEN CROSS* 1966

Gunter Christmann once said of his journey as a painter, 'I started off as a constructivist, but my idea of art changed'.¹ He began painting in 1962, by which time he was settled in Sydney after leaving his native Germany in 1959. Opting out of academic training from 1966 to teach himself abstraction, he was spurred on by two sources of influence. One was the early twentieth-century aesthetic of De Stijl and Constructivism; the other a contemporary hard-edge style informed by the formalist theories of Clement Greenburg, champion of American abstraction, which was changing the face of Australian art.

Both sources were evident in the paintings that earned Christmann his first solo exhibition at Central Street Gallery, Sydney, in 1966. The centrepiece was *Red/Green Cross*, 1966, featuring an eye-catching abstract scheme typical of his formative work. Two green bars transverse a vivid pinkish-red square to produce an aslant cross. Christmann's arrangement is built using a constructivist ethos of clean lines and strong diagonals, not least a motif forever linked to Malevich—though as Terry Smith was quick to point out in reviewing the exhibition, the results were very different.²

Colour is the key. The new abstraction of the 1960s was defined as much by a dazzling palette as by flatness and angular shapes. Chromatic groupings were bold and bright, and typically more varied than the primaries and monochromes of Constructivism or Suprematism. Christmann had a natural instinct for colour and studied relational theory as a strategy for composition. He knowingly applied these skills in *Red/Green Cross*, selecting two hues set opposite each other on the colour wheel.³ In combination they generate a visual push and pull that interacts with the formal elements of the picture and the perception of the viewer. The angle of the cross evokes a tilting structure freefalling into space. However, the tension between its cool emerald bars

and the warm crimson ground limits the illusion of movement or depth. In a related painting, *Untitled Composition*, 1966 (p. 60), the same colour way is inverted to render a circle motionless, poised in the upper right corner in direct reference to Malevich's application of this very motif. We expect the brilliant glow of Christmann's bright pink disc to propel the shape into the foreground, but it remains tethered to the painted support by the contrasting shade of close tonality. Here colour serves to achieve flatness, a precept of Greenburgian formalism, as distinct from the airborne geometries of the constructivists which, as one writer put it, 'would spring free as the revolution itself'.⁴

Christmann stated that in works such as these the historical avant-garde played a greater role than the vanguard of his time.⁵ Arguably, each served him well and held similar draws: a radical break with artistic precedents, rigorous systematic methodologies, and the organisation of materials through objective process rather than personal expression. The latter had lost its promise for Christmann by the time his work gained wide acclaim in 'The Field' exhibition of 1968. 'I finally reached the point where I thought it had to have both, or as much emotional content as well as constructive', he said of his approach.⁶ With a versatility and inventiveness that would define the five decades of his career, Christmann set out on an intuitive course, allowing each picture to find its own order.

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