

# On VIEW

by Meghan Forbes

In *VIEW*s, a series of new works by Anton Ginzburg, the artist speaks to contemporary and autobiographical issues of movement and migration through a language of abstraction. With his paintings on wooden panels of two distinct sizes, and ceramic polychrome columns, Ginzburg encourages the viewer to look closely at the rhythmic geometries of each *VIEW*, which are formed from lines and planes of color. The physical quality of these new works, in their shape and attention to the angle of vision, their internal geometry and direction of lines that echo the borders of the paintings themselves, evoke the seam—as a point of rupture and a place of coming together. It is this concept that is essential to understanding the works in *VIEW*s, their display at Helwaser Gallery, and the biography of the artist in relation to his practice.

Ginzburg—New York-based and Leningrad-born (in what is now St. Petersburg)—engages with the historical avant-gardes of Eastern Europe, while simultaneously grappling with his own hybrid identity and transnational subjectivity. He was initially educated in the Soviet system, and then in the West (specifically the United States, where he received his MFA from Bard College); Ginzburg’s constant navigation of the histories and cultures of these two sites is incorporated into his practice in the pulsating color planes, sharp angles, and surprising geometries of these works. In the places where colors meet and interact, new colors and new forms are generated at the seams, evoking the range of possibilities inherent in the movement and transition between one place and another. Undulating brush strokes emerge within a field that, at first glance, may seem to be a solid block of color. Close looking makes visible the presence of the artist’s own hand.

The tactility of the works in *VIEW*s belies and resists a connection to the notion of *faktura*, as it operated in the context of the historical Russian avant-garde. *Faktura* is often translated as “texture,” but it also encompasses the act of layering, be it of colors, words, sounds, that amounts to a construction. *VIEW\_3A\_05* (2018), executed in a range of blues, startles for flecks of black that glimmer past the horizon, interrupting an otherwise pure field of color. Ginzburg maintains this strategy in several other paintings in the series. In these hard-edged paintings, their play with repetition is interspersed by ruptures. The artist is also present in the scale of these works, which are based on their relation to the human body; there is a



Władysław Strzemiński  
*Architectural Composition 13c*, 1929  
Oil on Canvas. 38 × 23.6 inches.

pre-occupation with how they commune and communicate with the body of the viewer. There is a fascination with the materiality and objectness of a work of art on view which comes across in Ginzburg's practice, and its connection to social and political processes lays bare the biography of the artist.

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The Polish artist Władysław Strzemiński, who was born in Minsk in 1893 and received his artistic training in Russia prior to the First World War,<sup>1</sup> also saw an implicit interconnection between the act of painting and the material conditions in which the work was created. For Strzemiński, abstraction was itself a form of realism; “Realism is not a Platonic metaphysical absolute,” he claimed, “but the historically evolving process of the development of the human cognitive faculty.”<sup>2</sup> In an essay for the avant-garde magazine *Blok*, Strzemiński published his first theoretical statement outlining his conception of Unism (a theory of art articulated together with his partner Katarzyna Kobro), in which he states that, “The law of organic painting requires: *the greatest possible union of forms with the plane of the picture.*”<sup>3</sup> Strzemiński's articulation of Unism moved beyond formal considerations to express a utopic social vision, rooted in, and nevertheless divergent from, his earlier exposure to Soviet Constructivism.<sup>4</sup> Steven Mansbach has described Strzemiński's *Architectural Compositions*—a series of paintings created between 1926 and 1929—as “building sites for the erection of abstract entities” that sought to “creatively explore the pictorial limits and test the abstract implications of his

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1 As Christina Lodder records, Strzemiński and his partner, Katarzyna Kobro, “received their training in Russia's art schools and were stimulated by their exposure to the achievements of the country's most innovative artists, especially the work of Kazimir Malevich and Vladimir Tatlin. During the revolutionary period (1918-1921), the couple became members of the heroic avant-garde [...] Strzemiński quickly came to prominence within this milieu.” [Christina Lodder, “Katarzyna Kobro and Władysław Strzemiński in Russia,” in *Katarzyna Kobro & Władysław Strzemiński: Avant-Garde Prototypes* (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia and Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki, 2017), 104.]

2 Władysław Strzemiński, quoted in Meghan Forbes, “Władysław Strzemiński's Theory of Vision,” post, The Museum of Modern Art, May 30, 2018, trans. Klara Kemp-Welch and Wanda Kemp-Welch, [https://post.at.moma.org/content\\_items/1150-wladyslaw-strzeminski-s-theory-of-vision](https://post.at.moma.org/content_items/1150-wladyslaw-strzeminski-s-theory-of-vision), para. 23. For the original version in Polish, see Władysław Strzemiński, *Teoria widzenia*, ed. Iwona Luba (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1958; Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki, 2016; reprint).

3 Władysław Strzemiński, quoted in Ryszard Stanisławski, Janina Ładnowska, Jacek Ojrzynski, and Janusz Zagrodzki, eds., *Constructivism in Poland, 1923–1936: BLOK, Praesens, a.r.[Exhibition] Museum Folkwang, Essen, 12.5.–24.6.1973*, trans. Piotr Graff and Ewa Krasieńska (Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki, 1973), 82. Originally published as “B=2, powinno być” in *Blok 8–9* (November/December 1924). Emphasis is Strzemiński's.

4 But this model was interrupted by brutal reality. As Yve-Alain Bois has written, Unism nevertheless revealed its limits with the outbreak of the Second World War: “this impasse is more than formal: it is also political, in the broadest sense of the term, and concerns the utopian daydream that was one of unism's driving forces as it was of all the movements of the first modernist wave.” [Yve-Alain Bois, *Painting as Model* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 131.]



Karzyna Kobro  
*Spatial Composition (6)*, 1931  
Painted Steel. 25 × 9.8 × 6 inches.

Unist guiding philosophy.”<sup>5</sup> In one of these compositions, *13c* (1929), “Strzemiński utilizes three colors, each with slightly differing ‘faktur[a]’ and each taking on a different shape”; forms are created out of “building blocks of color.”<sup>6</sup> (Fig. 1) In the same vein, Ginzburg builds up his compositions through a dynamic use of color. In *VIEW\_3A\_06* (2018), a line of blue and green cuts a horizon across the plane. The intersecting lines within the work, together with the edges of the wood panel, generate a series of three triangles in earthen yellow and orange in the foreground. Where two colors meet, a third emerges. In the distance, another smaller triangle of light blue hovers, glinting in the sky as a totem.

Ginzburg underscores the importance of the seam as the place where things meet, and works outwards from the place of intersection. At Helwaser Gallery, this is the case so much so that the walls themselves have been painted into conversation with the colors in his paintings. Where Strzemiński and Kobro saw that the “painting possesses natural borders, the limits of the canvas, beyond which it cannot extend,”<sup>7</sup> Ginzburg sees the border as both a cut, and a juncture: the painting’s edge and the beginning of the wall beyond are but another seam, similar to the intersecting lines that create new shapes, or the solid planes of a sculpture, which comes up against the space that circumscribes it.

With regards to sculpture, Kobro and Strzemiński found the boundedness of painting (that “world unto itself”) to give way, so that “the organic law of sculpture is to unite with space, to be intimately related to space, to meld into and absorb space.”<sup>8</sup> Kobro is, in particular, known today for her polychrome sculptures, in which, as Yve-Alain Bois writes, she actualizes “the use of polychromy to destroy the ‘optical unity,’ which would separate the sculpture from space.”<sup>9</sup> (Fig. 2) Both Kobro’s work, and Ginzburg’s polychrome columns, instruct a way of being in space, and in interacting organically with the sculptural object. Furthermore, Bois describes Kobro’s sculptures and Strzemiński’s architectural compositions as both employing

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<sup>5</sup> Władysław Strzemiński quoted in Steven Mansbach, “Strzemiński’s Architectural Compositions,” in *A Polish Avant-Garde: Katarzyna Kobro and Władysław Strzemiński*, eds. Jarosław Suchan and Karolina Ziebinska-Lewandowska (Paris: Skira, Centre Pompidou, 2018), 45.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Katarzyna Kobro and Władysław Strzemiński, “Composing Space/Calculating Space-Time Rhythms,” *October*, no. 156 (Spring 2016): 14.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Yve-Alain Bois, “Kobro and Strzemiński Revisited,” *October*, no. 156 (Spring 2016): 9.

“a constant proportional system” to articulate distinct planes, “conceived as materializations of the axes of the space of our experience.”<sup>10</sup> For this exhibition, two polychrome columns have been inserted into the gallery, which the viewer must circumnavigate, instructing a choreography of the body that accommodates the punctuation of the pillars, the fixed limits of the painted walls, and the space in between.

The Russian Futurist, Mikhail Matyushin, whom Ginzburg has claimed as an influence, put forth the notion of “expanded viewing,” which he developed in the 1920s and 30s in his Visiology Center in Leningrad. As Natalia Baschmakoff writes, “For Matyushin the changes in color and form, which he could observe in the laboratory conditions at GINKhUK (State Institute of Artistic Culture), were not merely perceptual but real. [...] Matyushin’s understanding of colour perception also included experiments with differently shaped forms in various spatial situations and moving with different speed.”<sup>11</sup> It is a notion of colors in space that potentially corresponds to Strzemiński and Kobro’s—and the artists would have perhaps known Matyushin from their time in the same circles in revolution-era Russia.<sup>12</sup> Ginzburg’s own expansive vision for the triangulation of color and space in conversation with a viewing subject, reflects his engagement with the historical avant-garde.

Ginzburg’s columns, which are constructed of polychromatic glazed ceramic modules, gesture beyond the confines of their fixed space, and a pre-determined stance of the viewer vis-a-vis their placement. Kobro and Strzemiński argue that “color, coming in contact with space, emanates the force of its energy into it. The influence of color in space could be said to stretch all the way to infinity. Color subdues space and radiates into it.”<sup>13</sup> This evokes a sensation of relations that likewise permeate the works in *VIEWS*, triggering a notion of multiple potentialities, precisely in those places where one plane abuts the next, in the modules of the columns, divided into different fields of color.

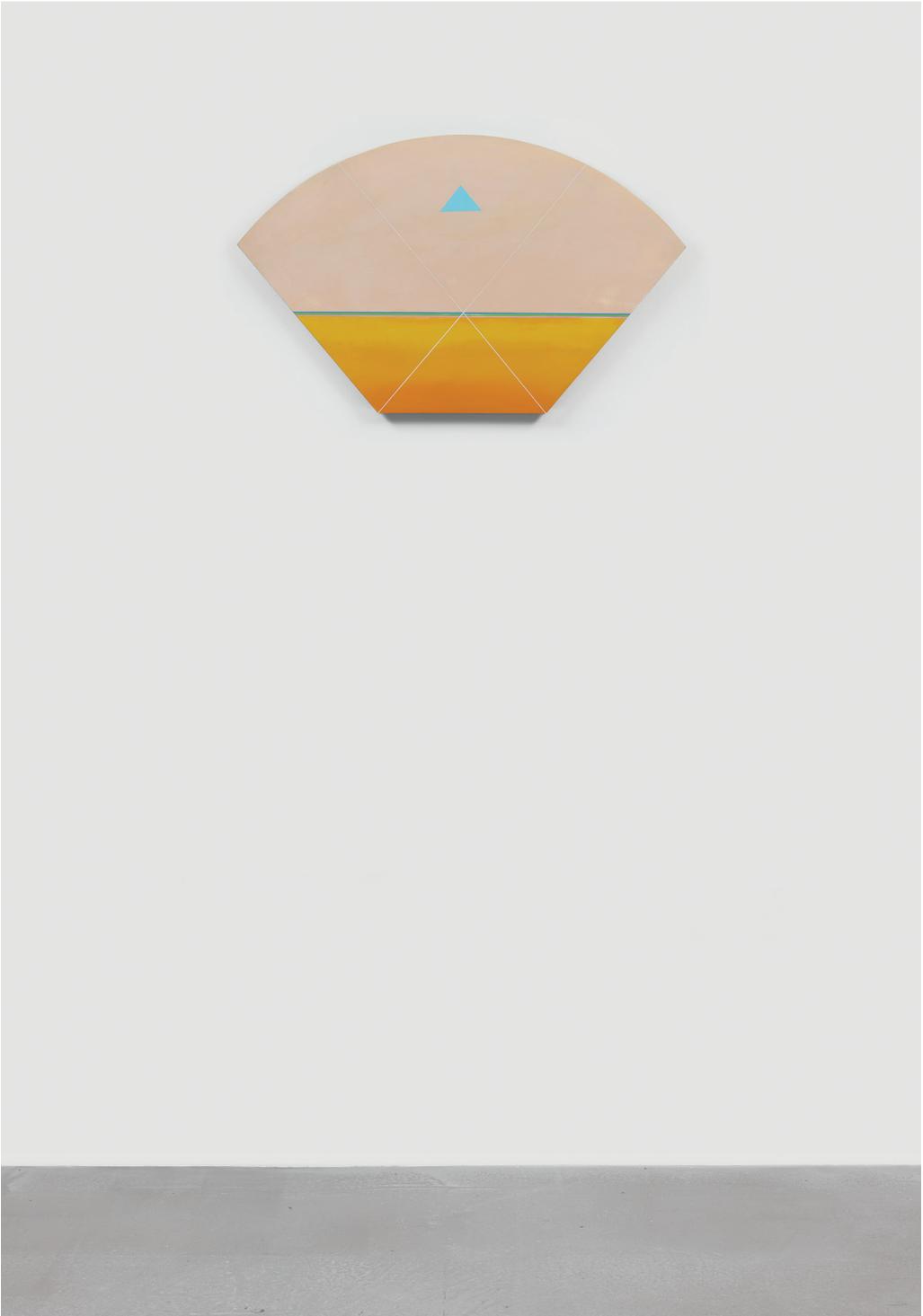
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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 8

<sup>11</sup> Natalia Baschmakoff, “From the ‘Transparent Stone Age’ to the ‘Space of the Chalice-Cupola’. Perceptual Utopias in the Russian Avant-Garde (1910s-1960s),” in *Utopia: The Avant-Garde, Modernism and (Im)possible Life*, eds. David Ayers, Benedikt Hjartarson, Tomi Huttunen, and Harri Veivo (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 209.

<sup>12</sup> For instance, Strzemiński studied at SVOMAS (First Free State Art Workshops), where Matyushin taught the course in color.

<sup>13</sup> Kobro and Strzemiński, 34.



Anton Ginzburg  
*VIEW\_ 3A\_02*, 2018  
Pigment and acrylic on wood  
25.5 × 36 inches



Anton Ginzburg

*Stargaze: Orion*, 2016

Stainless steel, patinated bronze, paint. 267 × 96 × 132 inches (678 × 244 × 335 cm).

Public Sculpture for U.S. Embassy in Moscow. Commissioned by Art in Embassies, U.S. Department of State in 2014. Sculpture completed in 2016, and installed in 2018.

In *VIEWS*, a permeation of color into space constitutes the abstract works. This is expressed in both the columns and the planes of the paintings. They gesture insistently at the transactions that preceded the ultimate outcome of mounting the wood panel paintings on the wall, as well as fitting the ceramic modules onto their metal bases. As David Joselit has argued, the painting belongs intrinsically to “networks of distribution and exhibition,” and in response to Martin Kippenberger and his works of the 1990s, Joselit suggests that by now the “individual painting should explicitly *visualize* such networks.”<sup>14</sup> A consideration of the complex and often tenuous networks that bring contemporary art into the gallery is not only a process of writing exhibition history, but is in essence a utilization of abstraction. It can be said, of course, that the inherently non-representational cannot in and of itself tell the nuanced story of migration, education, negotiation, and labor that brought Ginzburg’s paintings onto the walls—and got the walls painted and the columns built, by another set of workers with their own set of histories. But the potential alienation of abstraction urges, at the same time, for closer looking, which might in turn summon contemplation and questions that point towards these larger narratives. An insistence on the capacity for the abstract to be political is a part of the historical avant-garde legacy that is situated in the ethos of Ginzburg’s painting and sculpture. It is through this engagement that his work becomes an activation of the historical avant-garde, and comes into dialogue with contemporary abstract practices of self-identification.

Recently, in a conversation with the contemporary Mexican-American artist Marela Zacarias—who has turned from public figurative mural paintings to sculptural abstraction in the past years—the curator Omar Lopez Chahoud pointed to the “social conscience in the process of making abstraction.”<sup>15</sup> In turn, Zacarias described her artistic process that draws from a range of sources—from Native American art to Mayan textiles and those of the Mediterranean Sea—as “trying to create [an abstract] language I can use to retell a narrative, to tell stories that are hidden or marginalized or forgotten.”<sup>16</sup> Ginzburg, likewise, in a recent interview with Maxim Burov, underscores the geographic and temporal in-betweenness of his

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<sup>14</sup> David Joselit, “Painting Beside Itself,” *October*, no. 130 (Fall 2009): 125. Emphasis is the author’s.

<sup>15</sup> Omar Lopez Chahoud, “Omar Lopez Chahoud in conversation with Marela Zacarias (Mexico/US) August, 2018,” *Sapar Contemporary*, accessed November 28, 2019, <http://www.saparcontemporary.com/marela-interview>, para. 13.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, para. 14.

influences, stating: “As someone born in Leningrad (now Saint Petersburg), I am familiar and indebted to the Leningrad line of Formalism (GINHUK and OPOYAZ). [But... w]hile it is true that I am studying Formalist methodology that emerged in the beginning of the twentieth century, I am searching for ways of applying and making it relevant for the present. Over the last hundred years, Formalist tradition has passed through many refractions and international interpretations (think, for instance, of American Minimalism or the Brazilian Tropicalia movements). All of these iterations should be taken into account, not just the historical Russian Formalist art and thought.”<sup>17</sup>

Coincidentally, both Zacarias and Ginzburg, each with hybrid American identities, have been commissioned to create installations for consulates and embassies. In the case of Zacarias, her work is located in the American Consulate in Monterey, Mexico, and for Ginzburg, at the US Embassy in Moscow. Ginzburg’s *Stargaze: Orion* (2016)—a 24-foot stainless steel outdoor sculpture—is intended to place the scale of the human body into conversation with the cosmos, perhaps aspiring towards that “infinity” Kobro and Strzemiński see as the sculpture’s domain. Commissioned under President Barack Obama, its construction was halted by the evacuation of the embassy in 2017 under the current US president, but has since been installed in May 2018. Once again, the history of how a work of art comes to occupy space is the story of a network; it requires a reckoning with the inextricable web of bureaucracy that extends from the hegemony of state power to affect the individual bodies of the producers, as well as the visitors to the consulate. Perhaps vulnerable, and seeking a visa, they might find some solace in the imagination of a more delimited space.

The works in *VIEWS*, in their abstraction and new forms, are intended by Ginzburg to make visible a mediation between East and West, historical and contemporary, in an “expanded” field of appropriation and synthesis. Their deeply material nature inscribes the artist onto the surface of the paintings. The works themselves, per-

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<sup>17</sup> Anton Ginzburg, quoted in Maxim Burov, “Anton Ginzburg Discusses His Work, Views on Modernism, and the Synthesis of the Arts,” trans. Anastasia Osipova, Anton Ginzburg, accessed March 13, 2019, <http://antonginzburg.com/publications/press/on-neo-modernism>, para. 4. For the original interview in Russian, see <https://www.colta.ru/articles/art/19278-tema-formy-dlya-menya-yavlyaetsya-tsentralnoy>.

haps, do not readily offer a narrative of the post-Soviet condition and migration in the biography of Ginzburg and the development of his artistic practice. Yet, their simultaneous exhibition of continuity and rupture (in their shape, material composition, and color palette), summon the “interrupted trajectory,” in Ginzburg’s words, of an Eastern European avant-garde. For the viewer to make these connections, close looking is required. “What is significant for me in a work of visual art is its formal grammar and whether or not it succeeds in expressing its own materiality through an economy of expressive means,” claims Ginzburg.<sup>18</sup> And as Strzemiński called for, there is a “labor of thinking, in co-operation with the direct activity of seeing” for the materiality of abstraction to take on this expression.<sup>19</sup> It is a form of work that rewards the viewer in confronting these expanded *VIEWS*. ♦

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., para. 15.

<sup>19</sup> Strzemiński, “Theory of Vision,” para. 18.