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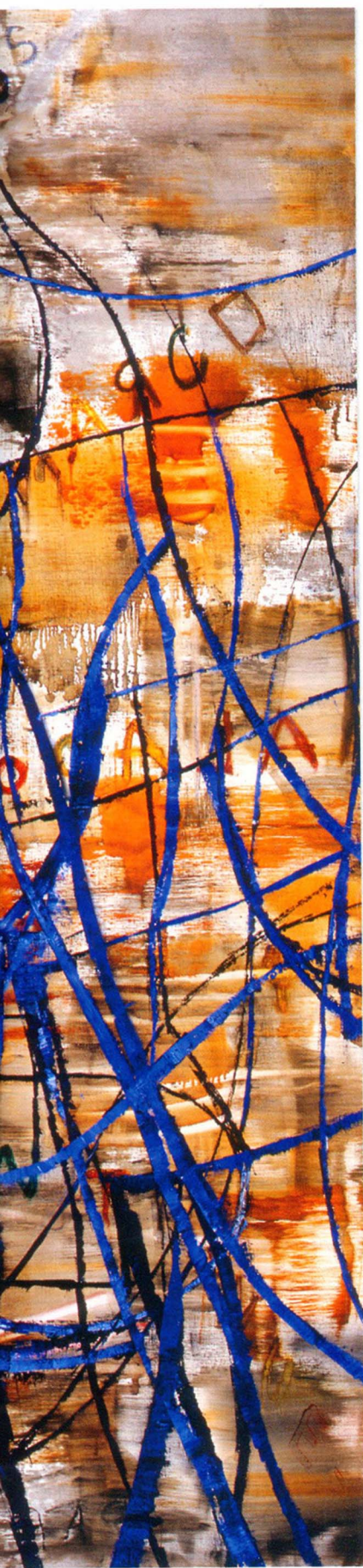
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INSIGHT

RICARDO MAZAL

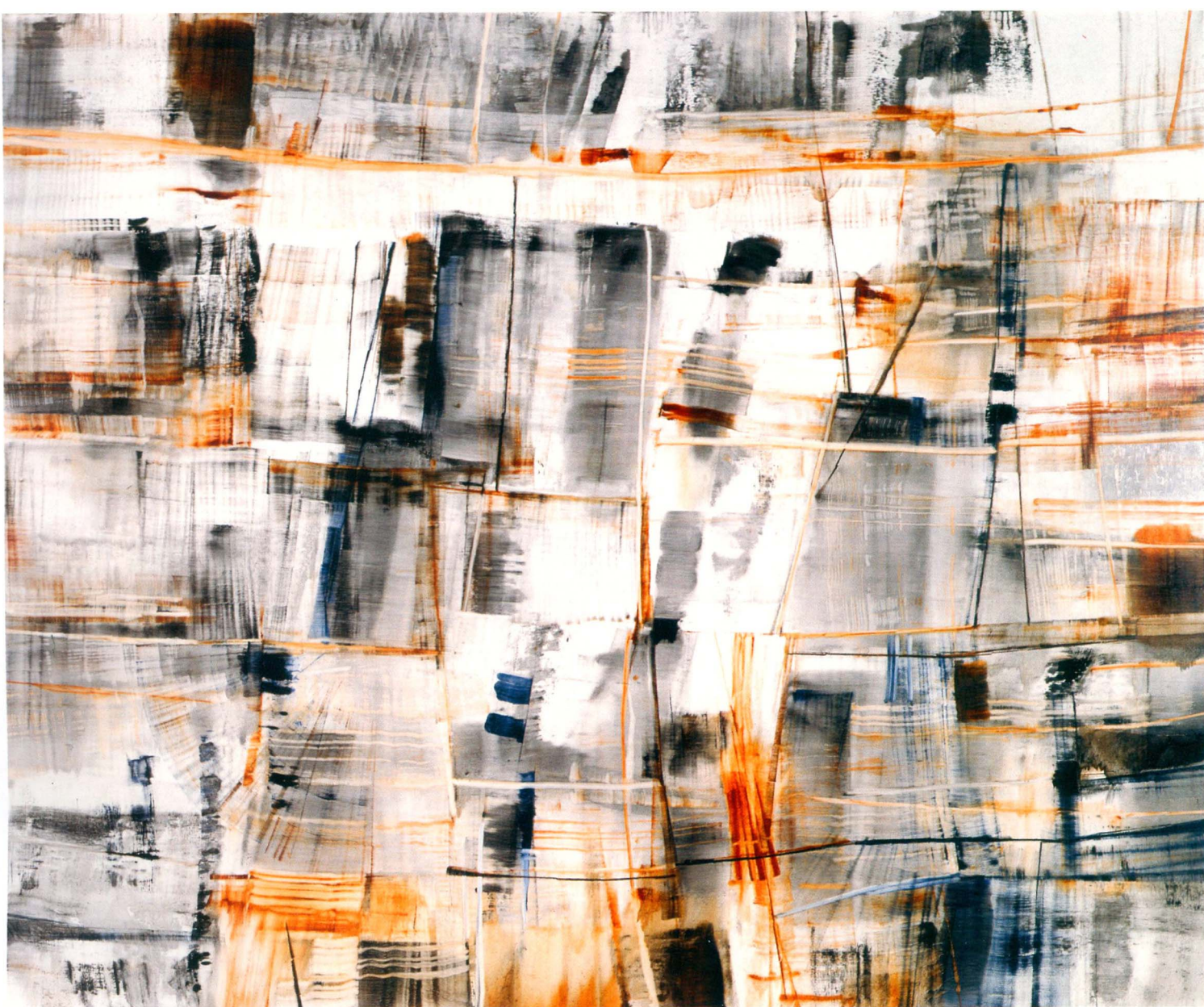
May 18, 2005 – The fading sun dipped below the horizon of the New Jersey Turnpike. Free flowing traffic zipped along at 70 miles an hour. Ricardo Mazal, his wife, Fabiola, and their two young girls were headed back to New York after installing a painting at a collector's house in Philadelphia. Ricardo looked in the rearview at his beautiful girls resting comfortably. He felt Fabi's warm presence next to him. And then it happened. In an instant everything changed. An elderly woman lost control. After grazing another vehicle, she headed straight for the Mazals. They felt a serious jolt. Ricardo stomped on the locked brakes. He could do nothing more. Their car smacked into a tractor-trailer in front of them. The impact with the box of the truck smashed out the windshield. The car began to sink beneath the semi until one of the back tires hit it and spit them out. Around and around they went before slamming into a guardrail. The car slowly trickled backwards and then came to a stop in the middle of the freeway. Ricardo and Fabi lost consciousness.

Time ticked away, yet nobody helped. The car looked like a crumpled soda can. Outside, chaos had ensued: police on their loud speakers yelling for everyone to get away, a line of traffic backed up farther than the eye could see. With gas leaking from the tank, the situation was incredibly un-

stable. Somewhere from deep within Ricardo heard his wife's screams. "The girls! The girls! How are the girls?" His eyes darted open and instinct took over. He kicked the driver's side door open and Fabi, in her blood-soaked pants, climbed over him onto the freeway. "Get out! Get out of that car!" police shouted. Ricardo grabbed his three-year old and handed her to Fabi. Then he picked up his one-year old, squeezed her tight and scrambled out of the car. Five minutes later, as they watched from a nearby tow truck, flames engulfed their car and then it exploded.

Perspective is important in life and means everything in art. Ricardo Mazal found depth in both on that day in May. Incredibly, Fabi's cuts were minor, and he and his children received a clean bill of health. The Mazals left the hospital with a blanket and \$20 that they borrowed from the doctor to pay for the train ride home. The next morning, Ricardo, who is Jewish, and Fabi, who is Catholic, went to temple and church to give thanks for their miracle. "You have to live every day as intensely as you can, and spend every second loving your family and friends completely," Mazal said about what the experience taught him. "Do what you have to do without fear and do not focus on irrelevant things in life. I knew from that point on, wasting time was no longer an option for me."

IMAGE: *Untitled Blue No. 3*, 2000, oil on linen, 93 x 115 inches.



Born in Mexico City and working out of New York and Santa Fe, Mazal had already become an internationally celebrated abstract painter. Critics and collectors praised him for his incredible technical ability, intelligent subject matter and narrative depth. As he looked back through his career, Mazal realized he'd spent a great deal of time studying mortality. In 1992, he did a series on the circle – the inspiration coming from his family gathered around his mother's bed as she passed away at age 59 from a brain tumor. "That gave me a lot of thought about what a circle meant. The beginning, the end and the womb are all circles," Mazal said. "We held my mom's hand until her last breath. It was one of the most loving experiences I ever had." In his artistic tribute to her, each piece began with a circle touching all four sides of a square canvas. He then filled in the middle with so much paint that the original shape was lost – as though the emotion of saying goodbye

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to the central figure of his family was simply too much to handle. But Ricardo's own brush with death left him with a newfound wisdom. "(The car accident) was the strongest experience I'd had in my life, and it forced me to reflect on the themes of my work. I now understood that they were not about death, but really the celebration of life."

Legacy had always mattered to Mazal, and now with a new and intense purpose, he believed he could leave something truly unique behind. Just a year before the accident, Mazal

had completed his most ambitious series to date, *La Tumba de la Reina Roja* (*The Tomb of the Red Queen*). The art centered on the discovery of an ancient Mayan tomb in Mexico, and the resulting multi-media exhibition served as Mazal's first blockbuster. He wanted to continue his ex-

IMAGE: *Life After Fifty*, 2001, oil on linen, 98.5 x 122 inches.

amination of cultural rituals of life and death, so he came up with the monumental idea of a trilogy. The concept itself seems daunting, something meant for the George Lucases and Steven Spielbergs of the world, but Mazal has embraced the challenge. With the second project, *Odenwald 1152*, wrapped up and now traveling around the world, he will begin his third series on Mount Kailash's sky burials in 2009.

Part 1: The Tomb of the Red Queen

During a routine archeological excavation in Palenque, Mexico, in 1994, workers made one of the most important Mayan discoveries in decades. Inside a tomb dating back to 600 A.D., they found a limestone sarcophagus. Masks, jewelry, gold and jade surrounded the mummified remains of a woman cloaked in a rich, red pigment called cinnabar. The queen got her name from that hauntingly beautiful color – one that had always been present in Mazal's art. "The first image I saw of her remains was so shocking and fantastic," he reflected. Instantly, the queen became his muse. In 2003, he traveled to the foothills of the Eastern Chiapas mountain range to do research and photograph the burial site. "I knew it was quite risky," he admitted. "Because the pre-Colombian culture is like a national treasure to Mexicans. So for me as an artist to deal with that subject matter – I had to be up to par and would be under the spotlight."

Mazal could barely contain himself as he hiked to her tomb with the archeologist who first discovered the Red Queen, Arnaldo Gonzales. He climbed the stairs, down some hallways and looked through the tiny hole where Gonzales found her. He expected a revelation. It did not come. "I looked into it and saw this empty space with just the sarcophagus and red walls around it. I said, 'Well, what's happening? Where are you? Give me a clue, please.' And nothing happened. So I decided to get busy." He took out a tape measure and recorded the size of each stone, each detail, everything. Slowly, he became aware of the importance of that little area where she had been buried. "That space was created by a pyramid of stones and was done to embrace her. I started to fall in love with this space. Really love it. There was something so natural about the way they





chose the stones. It was so beautiful. Mazal spent four sweaty hours in the hot tomb. On his way out, he noticed the light and noises from the jungle that surrounded her burial site. He'd discovered the final powerful piece needed to complete his Red Queen puzzle. "So I found three layers," he said. "The first layer was the tomb and the center of that energy being the sarcophagus. It was not about her; it's about this space. So the next layer was the stones surrounding her and the red pigment. And the final layer was the jungle. So that was how I started putting together the project."

That night Gonzales took him back to the tomb so he could see it under the stars. Flashlights guided their way along the path. Mazal had his digital camera and began experimenting. "I just started shooting at black space where I knew the jungle was. The flash illuminated the branches closer to me and then there were layers of jungle until it got totally dark. I started seeing my drawings in the pictures. I shot three hundred right there of just the jungle at night with the flash of the camera. I got to the hotel at twelve, got on my computer and spent all night reverting the pictures to negatives, so that the branches would become black and the background white. They looked so much like my charcoal drawings." Mazal's theory was that photography would help him link reality with abstraction. But as he played around on his computer with those images and others taken of the stones inside her tomb, an entirely new artistic process was evolving before his eyes.

Upon returning to his Santa Fe studio, Mazal began blending the computer-generated studies of his photos with cropped fragments of his previous works. Dozens of transformations turned the real into abstract and produced final virtual sketches in his signature style. He then continued to study shape and space, light and dark through a series of monotypes to get the feeling of working on paper. Satisfied with the direction, he printed out the sketches and taped them to the wall next to the canvases to use as points of departure. Finally, he began painting using fabricated black, foam brushes that vary from a few inches to a few feet in length. Working quickly and fluidly, he applied and scraped away layers of paint. As a result, his canvases diverted from the sketches as new ideas entered his mind. So he set up a camera mounted on a tripod that took a photo every 15 minutes creating loops in his computer. He would break from the art to restudy the evolving pieces and reprint new sketches over

and over again until each painting achieved a deep sense of space, time and movement. Two of the finished pieces were the exact dimensions of the Red Queen's burial chamber, 98.5 x 150 inches. He used that same measurement to create an installation called *Rojo Sobre Negro* (*Red Over Black*), which became the center of the exhibition.

The resulting paintings, along with monotypes, photographs, the installation and a video showing Mazal's process all came together for a groundbreaking exhibition at the Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City. He became the first abstract artist to ever show in that famous museum. Alongside Mazal's work, the Museum of Anthropology included the

ten most important masks ever found in Mayan tombs. Through scale and skill, *The Tomb of the Red Queen* weaved humanity, nature and the sacred together in the vein of the old Maya philosophy.

Part II: Odenwald 1152

Topping, or even matching, the power of the Red Queen would be tough. In the summer of 2007, Mazal walked into his next subject matter while visiting a friend in Michelstadt, Germany. On the last day of the visit, friends took him to some nearby woods where they liked to escape. The place is called Friedwald, or Peace Forest, in English. The triangular-shaped forest is nestled between the Rhine, Main and

Neckar rivers, where lazy trees stretch toward the clouds and a relaxing spirit falls more gently than the autumn leaves. Mazal noticed that many trees had been tagged with circular plaques with different numbers and the letters OD (short for the region in Germany called Odenwald) inscribed on them. The friends told Mazal that the forest is special because families can lease the rights to a tree for 99 years. When a loved one dies, their cremated remains are then interred beneath its limbs. The belief is that they will cohabitate with the roots and live on in this woodland of eternal peace. Mazal knew this had to be his next project.

First, he set up a meeting with the Mayor of Michelstadt, Reinhold Ruhr. "It was very important for me to meet him," Mazal said. "I do a lot of research before I paint. I need to understand every single aspect of the

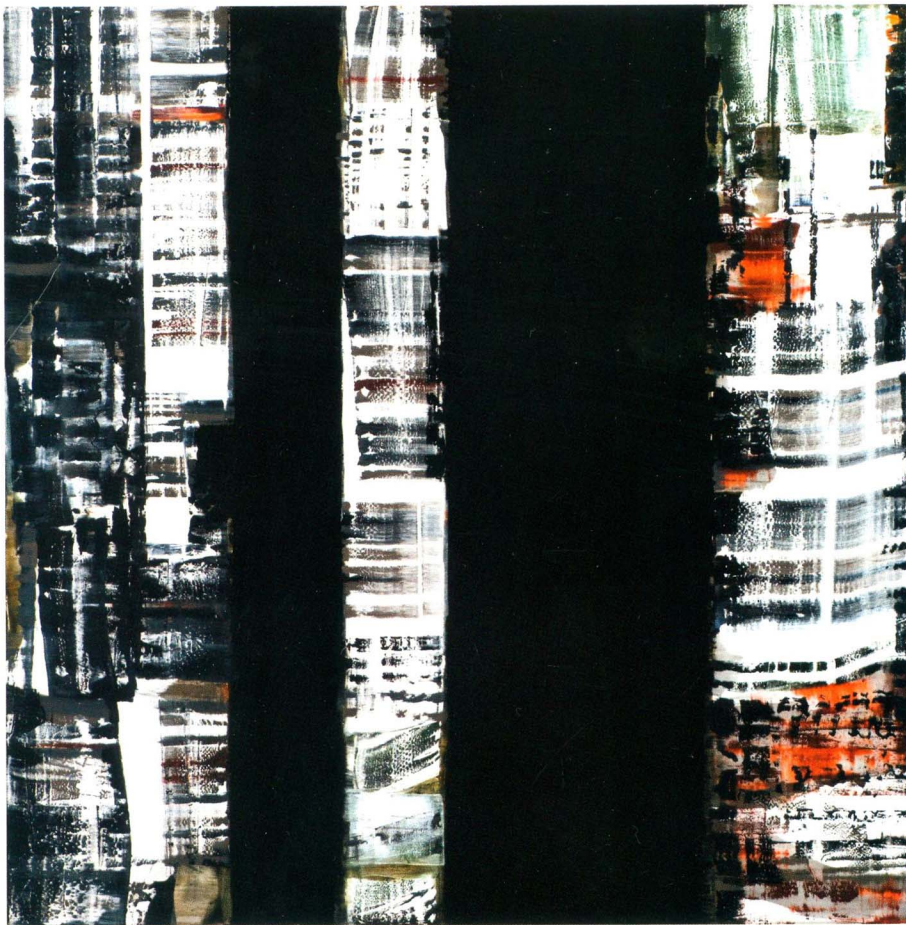
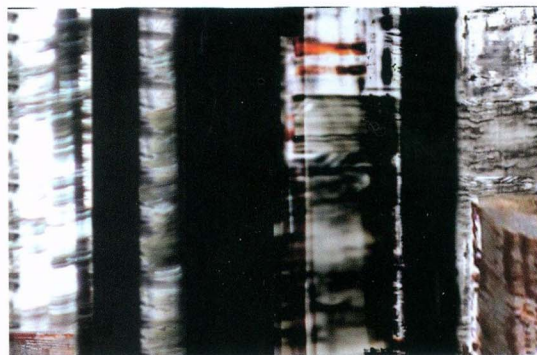
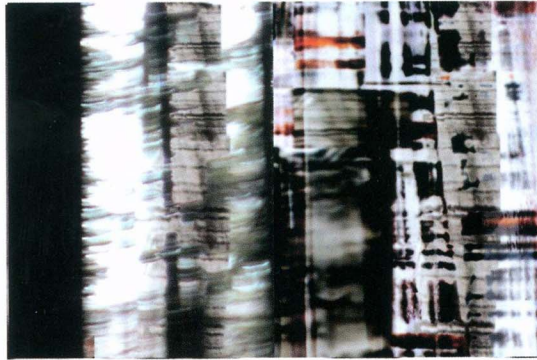
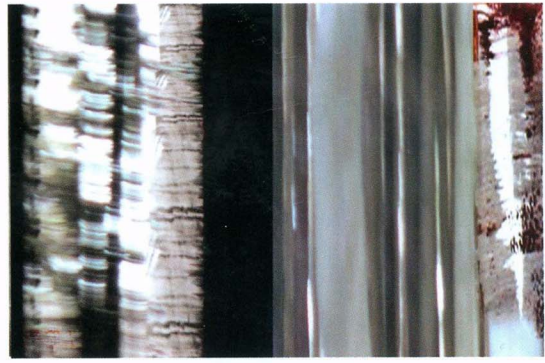
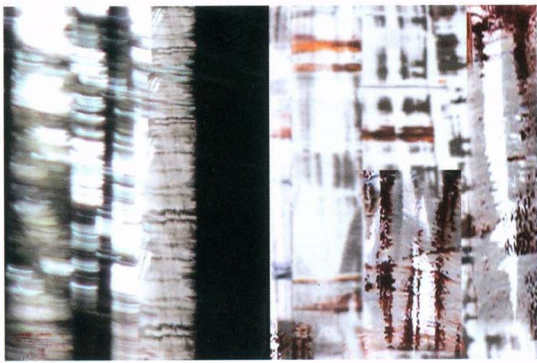


IMAGE: At left, *Odenwald 1152 No. 11*, 2008, oil on linen, 98.5 x 78 inches. Above, *Odenwald 1152 No. 10*, 2008, oil on linen, 78 x 78 inches.



subject that I'm dealing with." The two talked about the Red Queen and Mazal's intention to do a book on Odenwald and turn it into a traveling museum exhibition. At the end of the conversation Mayor Ruhr said, "Ricardo, I would like to offer you something. I would like you to have a tree." The gesture touched him to the core because each tree is expensive – anywhere from 5,000 to 20,000 euros. But Mazal's religion discourages cremation, and when he dies he wants to be buried in Mexico. The mayor insisted he take the tree anyway. "The fact that you're Jewish is very important to me," he said. "We used to have a very vibrant Jewish community in this town until the war. For the last few years I've tried very hard to attract another Jewish community here. One of the few temples that the Nazis didn't burn exists in this town. The historical significance of that is important. For me, it's a way of extending a hand to you and be a part of what you're doing." Mazal accepted the symbolic ges-

ture, but now the project had new context because of one specific tree. He didn't get much sleep that night.

The mayor picked him up the next morning and they went searching for a tree. Hours passed without a decision. "Imagine that if you're going to be serious about this," Mazal said, "I have to think that that's the tree where I'm going to be buried for eternity. This is the place and I have to choose it. Why am I choosing one tree rather than the other one? There are 400-year-old huge trees; there're newly planted trees that you're going to grow with. So who am I? How am I reflecting myself to choose this tree? And I'm by myself, not with my wife or family. I was going through a deep personal analysis." Then in the distance OD 1152 called out his name. He raced down a hill to the beautiful, four feet wide tree that opened up into four trunks – two small ones, and two large ones. "It

IMAGE: Selection of six digital studies for painting *ODENWALD 1152 NO.8*.

was my family and me," he said. "We went to celebrate at the mayor's house with wine, and I cried."

The artistic magic came several days later when Mazal went to visit his tree alone. With the sun disappearing, he pulled out his camera and shot with the light coming from behind the trees. The images had the appearance of stained glass in a church. It was the breakthrough he needed. "I realized it was the light itself, the spirit, which sparked the emotions I was feeling," he said. The early evening backdrop changed the color of the trees to gradations of gray and black with touches of green, red and blue. The motion of his hand also blurred the images making them even more abstract than the Red Queen. After taking hundreds of photographs, Mazal repeated the steps he'd developed by blending them with cropped art on his computer. He produced digital sketches, some horizontal and some vertical, to showcase his different interpretations of the forest. The finished paintings include muted earth tones, but the dominant colors are black and white as light turns the trees into silhouettes signifying positive and negative, life and death.

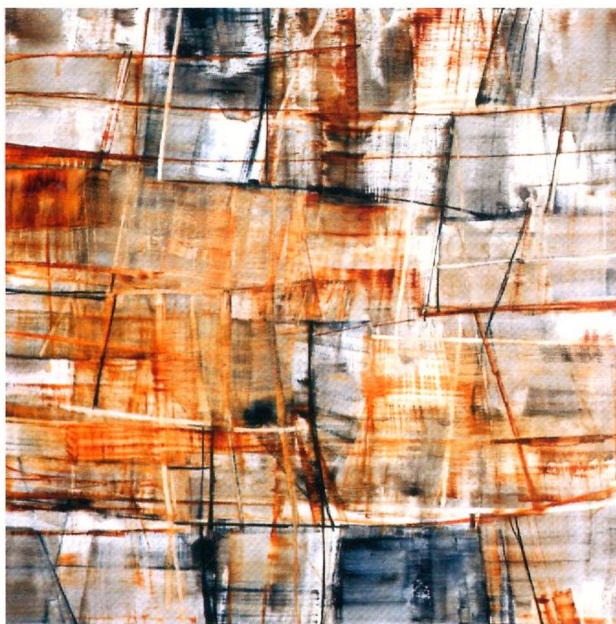
Part III: Sky Burials of Mount Kailash

Mazal's third series in the trilogy will be on the sky burials of Mount Kailash. It is the most sacred mountain in Asia, and the center of the universe for the Tibetans. Religious pilgrims take their dead to the sacred spot where they chop up the bodies exposing them to the elements and birds of prey. The Buddhists believe in reincarnation, so the sky burial is simply the disposal of an empty vessel. The body serves as food to sustain the living – whether an animal eats it or nature decomposes it. Mazal's exploration into this ecologically friendly funerary ritual begins in 2009.

Equally incredible to the artistic trilogy is the fact that Ricardo Mazal didn't pick up a paintbrush until he was 36 years old. Art had always been inside him. As a child, he walked around with a pencil in his hand and drew pictures throughout biology class. But he chose a different path at first, graduating college with a master's degree in design. He ran a successful firm for years, but then woke up one day with his artist alarm clock going off, so he quit his job and answered the call. Mazal taught himself by going to museums and reading stacks of art books. His influences include Nicola De Maria whose poignant abstract canvases had the narrative guts that he wanted in his own paintings. He gained an understanding of color value by limiting his palette like Emilio Vedova. He learned every one of Cy Twombly's lines and demanded his paintings have the same intelligence. Ultimately, Mazal developed his own technique by applying different colored washes and then slathering on paint. He would scrape through the thick, wet layers revealing hints of the creative process. The music of Estonian composer Arvo Pärt was his guide. "Pärt's music gave me tons of images, spaces and emotions that I wanted to paint in this passage of music," Mazal said. "I think music became for me what women were for de Kooning. It was contemporary music that guided me and became my muse."

His passion for art and music can only be exceeded by the devotion he has for his wife and children. One of his important early bodies of work, the *E-Series*, combines his greatest loves. The "E" stands for e-mail, which

IMAGE: At top, Mazal working in his Santa Fe studio. Below, *One Inch Above No. 4*, 2001, oil on linen, 80 x 80 inches.





is how his relationship began with his wife. Mazal was living in New York and had a couple of failed relationships behind him. He wanted to meet a Mexican woman, and told his friends, "Whoever finds the love of my life and the mother of my children, I'll give you a painting." It was incredible because in days, I started getting all these propositions. Until one friend of mine, Norma, called me and said, 'I bumped into a woman at an art show yesterday in Mexico City. I think she's it! She's got beautiful eyes and she loves art, she loves music and her name is Fabiola.' I said, 'Fabiola. I love that name.'" Mazal's one prerequisite was that the woman of his dreams had to know about the music of Gustav Mahler. Fabi not only knew Mahler, but also loved his work.

The first email Mazal wrote her went something like: "Fabi, I hate personals so I'm not going to tell you my height and weight and that I like jogging and horseback riding. Instead, you just sound fantastic. Let's get married!" For some reason, those words didn't freak her out, and she responded with a great sense of humor. Ricardo and Fabi started off slowly, but after a month, they were writing each other five times a day. By the fifth week, they were totally in love. "We had a perfect email marriage," Mazal says. "We were just crazy for each other without knowing how we looked, what age we were, what religion we were, nothing." Finally, they mustered the courage to talk on the phone. After hours of conversation, it was time to meet face to face. "That night when I met her in Mexico City, I said, 'You are real. You are everything I thought you were going to be. I would like to marry you.' Eight months later we got married." Mazal's friend, Norma, also got her painting.

As a tribute to his love for Fabi, Mazal wrote portions of their email on his *E-Series* canvases. "I wrote them with my left hand and in circles so

that nobody could read them – not because I care about you reading them, but because I didn't want you to see a word like love in the canvases where the word itself would take you to a specific place. It was the *E-Series* because it's the email and the erotic series and the emotional series and it's exploding and very vital and expressive type work." With two kids, they don't email as much anymore, but Mazal says the love is even more intense now. "It continues to grow and grow and grow. She is the most authentic, transparent, vital, honest, beautiful, happy, simple person that I've ever met. I love everything about her. I'm very blessed and lucky."

In life, love and art, Ricardo Mazal has developed his own language. He is an old soul, a man of sensitivity and a hopeless romantic. His eyes shine to the verge of tears when he talks about his girls. His oldest is showing lots of artistic promise. "She can go from drawing a picture of a house and switch to totally abstract, and she tells you, 'This is an abstract painting,'" he boasts. Mazal has pictures of both girls covered in paint as they slap on the white washes on some of his large canvases. He often has flashbacks to the car accident, and shudders at the thought of a different outcome. It's a constant reminder that life can change in an instant. So Mazal makes time for the extra "I love you" email, the longer breath when the outdoor air smells just right and the pause when an additional blessing needs to be counted. Great moments need not be fleeting, and it's with that perspective and purpose that Mazal celebrates life in everything he does.



IMAGE: *La Tumba de la Reina Roja: From Reality to Abstraction*, Center for Contemporary Arts, Santa Fe, NM.