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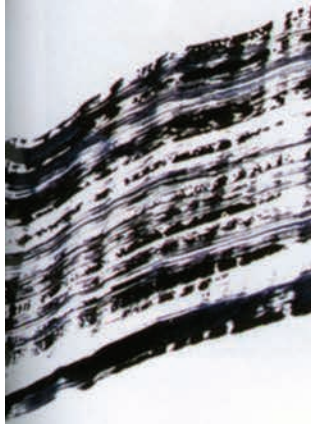
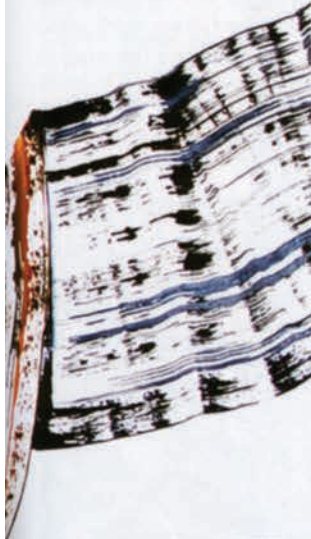


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Ricardo Mazal Uses Multimedia to Stop Time
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Long Day's Journey into Light

Artist **Ricardo Mazal's** multimedia explorations
plumb the depths of human experience

If you walk through fear, ecstasy may be on the other side. Or enlightenment. It's the sort of idea that Mexican abstract painter Ricardo Mazal, a resident of Santa Fe, would grin at with his customary—and infectious—delight. "Things come together in a strange way," says the artist. "In crisis you find opportunity, in breaking down an opening up."

These are the sorts of discoveries Mazal makes continually in his internationally acclaimed, wide-scale exhibitions. With paintings he designs to fit and transform the show's architectural site (whether it's a museum or gallery space), he also orchestrates collaborative audio and video components for installations in order to recreate the spaces that have contained some of humanity's most fascinating customs. This may be the treatment of an ancient queen's death, as indicated by her tomb in Palenque, or the burial practices held at Kailash—considered by many the most holy mountain—located in Tibet. In a single painting his energetic black-and-white striations and wildly interacting color planes can suggest experiences so extreme that they loop back to their opposites—like love's proximity to loss in the human psyche, or how eroticism can skirt violence and laughter flares up in grief.

Mazal's having a dialogue about culture and what it means to be an individual in the age of globalization, using complex processes to execute a single painting. He first paints from a photograph shot at the original site, and then back in his Santa

Fe studio, begins painting. From there he takes a photograph of the painting's first iteration and then shifts the composition in Photoshop, zooming in to perfect an element or extracting it to merge with another. Then it's back to canvas again in a continual loop with digital sketching, all with the gusto of a perfectionist. As his paintings emerge, they become one part of a complex installation—a spatial reckoning of architecture, sound, and image.

But Mazal is also highly empathic, and he's instinctively forging the most direct route to what connected him so profoundly to places like Palenque and Kailash: the phenomenon of human experience. Says international gallerist Sundaram Tagore, "He's very much using what's available to create these extraordinary works of art. But when he creates them, he deals with something primordial and eternal, which is life, death, and redemption."

It was in Mexico City in 2005, when the artist's work appeared in two prestigious museums simultaneously (El Museo Nacional de Antropología and El Museo de Arte Moderno), that Tagore discovered Mazal's talent. "It was beautiful work, some of which I recognized as new art history. He was navigating between cultures, distilling artistic language and syntax. He was also creating his own language, yet knew its grammar really well."

Mazal's captured the imagination of international audiences too, earning him 12 solo museum exhibitions and four retrospectives, along with regular appearances

BY CHRISTINA PROCTER
PHOTOS BY KATE RUSSELL

at the Sundaram Tagore Gallery in New York and Hong Kong, as well as in galleries in San Francisco and Toronto.

Born in Mexico City in 1950, Mazal didn't start painting until his mid-30s. First he studied design, took a semester abroad, and ended up working at a design firm in Chicago, where he met photographer Gary Mankus. When Mankus was unfairly fired, Mazal walked out that day, and it wasn't long before the two, still in their late twenties, hatched their own project, moving to Mexico City and starting a commercial design firm that eventually became a popular chain.

Yet before all this, Mazal had met a British instructor named Robin Bond who had been the art teacher alongside founder A.S. Neill at Summerhill, the well-known experimental school in England. Many who studied drawing with Bond, quips Mazal, left their

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marriages and changed their lives. Bond's teachings endured. "That's where I learned how to learn. He taught you to rebel against everything outside of you and everything inside of you in order to be creative and free."

When his commercial career started to feel empty, Mazal sold his share of the company and jetted off to Barcelona to "be a bohemian." He decided to learn how to paint, at first by copying figurative elements from art books, until he discovered the Estonian composer Arvo Pärt's musical composition *Tabula Rasa* one night and began to see colors. "I closed my eyes and it was like I could see painting after painting. I could imagine spaces." Whether or not it was a brief bout of synesthesia, he's been painting with that inspiration ever since with such pace and intensity, it's as if he's listening to a high-energy orchestra.



Previous page: Mazal's *Bhutan PF 1* (2014), oil on linen, from his most recent series reflecting on the function of prayer flags. Above: Through Mazal's eyes we see images like *Mount Kailash Cobra* (2010), archival pigment ink, print on paper. Right: The second leg of his trilogy on cultural burial practices took Mazal to a forest cemetery in Germany, where he produced works like *Odenwald 1152 No. 12* (2008), oil on linen.





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Another moment of epiphany set the direction of his career. "At one point I was thinking to myself, 'Everything I'm doing is claustrophobic. I need air and light and transparency.' I realized I was not a painter telling stories." It was at this point his move to abstraction began.

Mazal left for New York, where he refined his color palette after he saw a retrospective of Mondrian's work and walked out with a realization. He only wanted to paint with black, white, and the primary colors. Although he mixes these to create other hues, including gray, he'd never again use white to "dilute" a primary color; rather he uses transparency and the white of the canvas or primer below.

Color thus became his language. This

is most apparent in his more personal, earlier series, like those from 1997, when he responded to an odd event. A Brazilian psychic told him: "Your brother doesn't talk." This was more or less true, Mazal's brother being generally concise, and his response was *My Brother Doesn't Talk* paintings that became door-sized portals to incredible sound, with layers concealing flashes of other colors emerging through a vertical diptych that's half brilliant red in base, half black. His *Yellow Circle* series of the same year was painted after he went through a tough breakup. He realized, "There are four walls in my studio and four in my apartment, so I'm going to do eight paintings of the same size, and they're all going to be yellow. And that is

my rationale!" When a friend told him it's the color of the heart chakra, Mazal wasn't surprised. It's also no surprise he placed the wall-sized yellow canvases facing each other in a circle for the show—he was starting to think about how to reenact the performative qualities of spaces that hold experiences.

His abstractions continued to draw from his personal experiences through the early 2000s, as seen in work like the ecstatic *E-Series*, based on passionate email exchanges with a woman named Fabiola, who lived in Mexico City, which eventually led to their marriage. (The couple had been introduced by a friend after Mazal half-jokingly promised a painting to the person who introduced him to his wife.) Not long



after, at the age of 52, Mazal painted the last of his personal series, *One Inch Above*, during the months before their first daughter, Julia, was born.

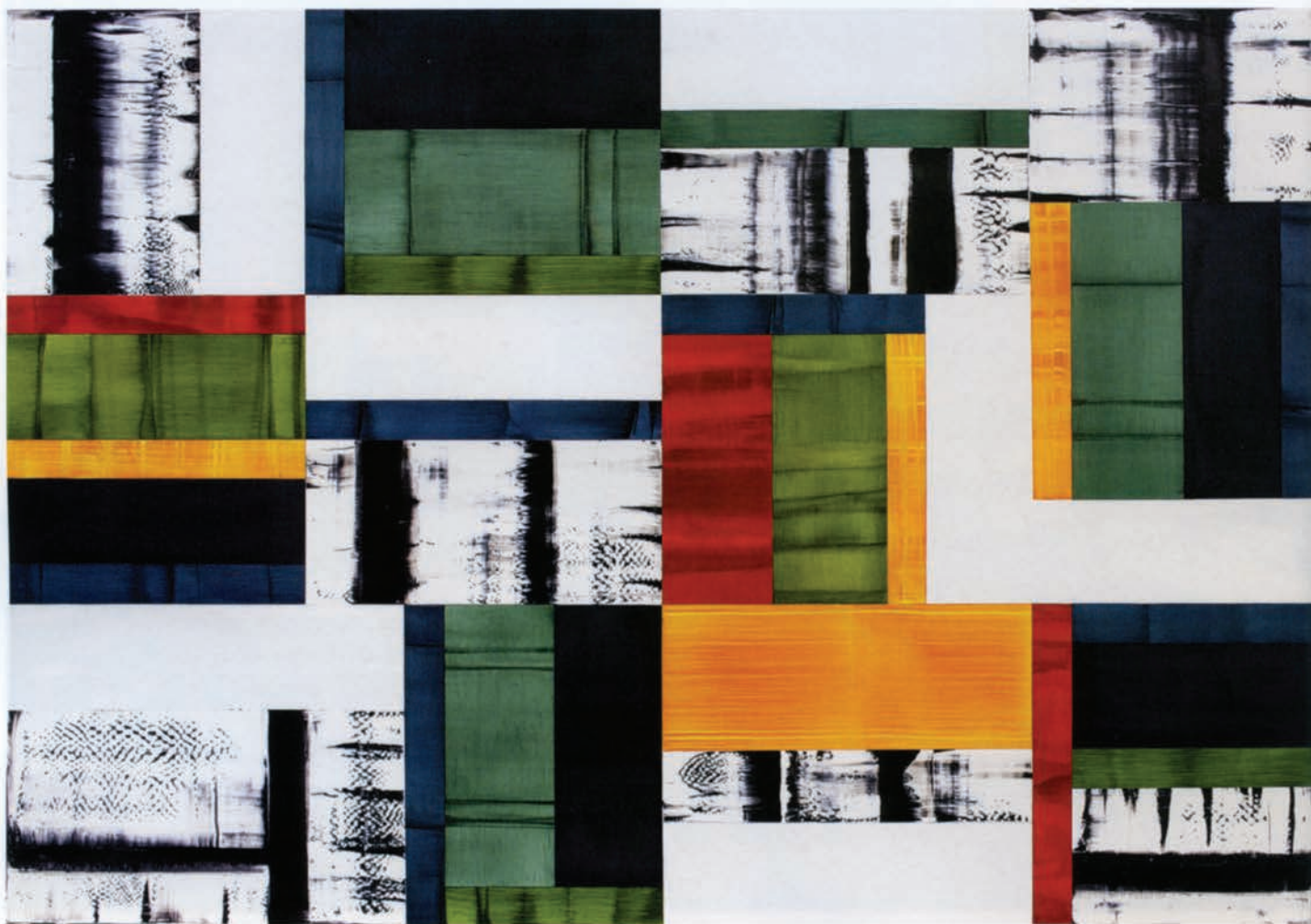
A weird twist of fate brought the family to New Mexico. While based in New York, the couple would spend summers in Santa Fe visiting Mazal's in-laws at their vacation home. Mazal would rent an old warehouse studio from the Center for Contemporary Arts that leaked when it rained. Fabiola was pregnant with Julia when they were set to fly back to New York on September 13, 2001, when the events of 9/11 intervened. Mazal's studio was four blocks from Ground Zero, so the soon-to-be parents elected to stay in Santa Fe. Since 2008, Mazal's worked in the studio he'd always imagined, a New York-

style loft space with Sangre de Cristo views that he created with local architect Jonah Stanford.

Mazal keeps an apartment in New York, where his family frequently goes for his shows. They acquired another apartment this year in Mexico City—one designed by the renowned modernist architect Ricardo Legorreta. Though Julia and Sofia, who attend private schools in Santa Fe, are fluent in Spanish, the Mazals do find it strange to raise their daughters in a country of their choice but not their homeland. This is perhaps another of Mazal's many identities that construct what Tagore, for one, identifies as a "third culture" in his work.

It was after his move to Santa Fe that Mazal began discovering his digital process.

Mazal, left, works in his studio. Like his paintings, his studio, shown above, was designed for holding air and light. Outside there's a small pool, a favorite spot for his daughters.



Left: *Odenwald 1152 PH1* (2008), pigment ink print on paper.
Above: *Bhutan Abstraction G1* (2014), oil on linen. Opposite: Mazal and his assistant, John Wolbers, also make variously sized brushes out of foam pieces held together with cardboard.

His energetic black-and-white striations and wildly interacting color planes suggest experiences so extreme that they loop back to their opposites

"It was fast and fascinating," he says. "I loved that instant success with the computer. You can expose things quickly. You can see small parts blown up. Everything opens up."

In 2002 he embarked on a trilogy about burial practices that took him about a decade to complete, starting with *La Tumba de la Reina Roja* (Tomb of the Red Queen) in the Mayan ruin Palenque in Mexico; then *Odenwald 1152* from one of the *Friedwälder*, or "peace forests," in Germany, where the dead are cremated and buried to grow with a selected tree; and ending with his *Kailash* and related *Kora* and *Black Mountain* series. These exhibitions made the world gasp. He was recreating some of humanity's most pro-

found experiences.

For him, the trilogy emphasized a symbol that was already operating in his life and work: the circle. His mother had passed away when he was only 30, and Mazal and the rest of the family were with her when the nurse said it was time. They stood in a circle holding each other's hands. "I had visions later of this bird's-eye view of my mother lying there in a circle," says Mazal. "And since then the circle has been in my work."

Meanwhile, his design training never left him. It was with this trilogy that Mazal began using multiple Photoshop layers to resize paintings for the walls or floor, experimenting with their interactivity and occasionally requesting a temporary wall

be erected. Only then does he create new paintings for the space.

His most recent series, *Bután Abstracto* (Bhutan Abstractions), opened March 12 and exhibits through June at El Centro Cultural Estación de Indianilla in Mexico City. It may be his most successful distillation yet, inspired by his awe for prayer flags. He calls their function to carry prayers through the wind into humanity "a poetic and beautiful statement. An idea in itself worth a whole exhibition."

His ideas don't always reveal themselves right away, though. It was Fabiola who exclaimed, "Your paintings!" upon seeing the prayer flags on rooftops in Bhutan. Their white base and strips of red, yellow, and blue, the colors of Mazal's own works,





Julia Mazal (left), age 13, and Sofia, age 11, frequently visit New York and Mexico City with their parents. Above: The family's apartment in Mexico City, designed by Ricardo Legoretta. Opposite: Mazal and his wife, Fabiola, who accompanies him on his journeys.





are meant to ward off natural disaster. Though he notes he's neither religious nor superstitious, he's also quick to say things like, "I'm Mexican more than anything," or "That's from my Jewish side," and he appreciates an encouraging sign now and then. He began gathering material.

Back in Santa Fe, he approached his frequent collaborator, musician Chris Jonas, with a video he'd taken of the prayer flags beating in rapid wind. Slowing it down, Mazal discovered incredible compositions in the stills. The pair did the same with a recording he'd taken of Buddhist monks chanting; once decelerated to abstract the sound and layered with instrumentals, it became the exhibition's soundtrack.

Next he teamed up with a young coder, Charles Veasey, to program a video installation that allows people to type their prayers—within the attention span of 140

characters—into an iPad or through his website, ricardomazal.com. To record the prayers for @ButanAbstracto, Veasey had to circumvent Twitter's time limit between archiving posts. He also devised a code that twists the text of people's prayers instantaneously into the projected flags. "As an engineer it can be easy to lose sight of aesthetic," Veasey comments. "Ricardo constantly reminded me that technology has to be poetic."

The projection room was constructed by draping transparent black shades at the entrance of the exhibition, through which visitors could glimpse the main room. "There had to be air coming out," comments Mazal. "It's about the wind, the prayers." After you pass through this space, the six paintings of prayer flags that are hung inside the gallery take on new meaning. Their color bands are part of a

network, solid and relational. Yet at another end of the large room, there's a diptych of white space with freer fabric leaping from its two-dimensional plane, as if it's in communication with something beyond.

"It was like stopping time," Mazal says. "The movement is in there, but you don't see it. I stopped the video every half-second and ended up getting gorgeous compositions with twists of color."

For Mazal, there's a universe of design in the split instants of fabric moving in air. As Tagore notes, he's abstracting until his work becomes about selection and negation, a contemporary approach.

"He's taking a vast universe and then looking from the macro to the micro. And he's narrowing it down, so something as small as a hand, or an insect, a speck of dust, a dust particle on your finger, can represent the whole universe, and so you







Previous page: *Bhutan* Abstraction paintings, mostly created in early 2015. Above and right: Opening night for the exhibition in Mexico City, where his younger daughter, Sofia, kept things light with a song by Taylor Swift.



absorb everything about it, stay with it, and then let it come out in ways that are totally abstract," says Mazal.

They returned to camp, but the mountain remained shrouded in clouds, and word was it could stay that way for weeks. Discouraged, they went for a walk around Manasarovar, one of two lakes at its base. As Mazal walked, picking up stones, he spotted one with a striking resemblance to the mountain's northern peak, composed of the same black-and-white striations. Ecstatic, he showed Fabiola. Not 15 minutes later, he says, a wind so strong they had to hunch down came up and blew away the clouds.

Kailash had revealed itself.

"I stayed about two hours photographing [the north side of the mountain]. There was this point when I felt

enormous fear. We were on top of this glacier, a place where, in a second, you're gone," he says as he snaps his fingers. "I had this struggle with amazement and fear. I think that's what has stayed with me the most."

The next day the group climbed another 2,000 feet over the Darmala Pass to complete the 18,000-foot pilgrimage, but they never saw the mountain again.

If Mazal sees the fear in these paintings, it's fear he's already walked through. In the Kailash paintings, Tagore sees enlightenment. "In the snow melting against the great shift of the mountain, there's the melting of the ego. And the dissolution of the ego leads to the complete understanding of how the universe works. Our struggle, our everyday existence, is to understand that."

Tagore was so impressed by this work that he selected *Kailash Black Mountain 2* to submit to the 2015 Venice Biennial. It will hang in the grand ballroom of the Museo di Palazzo Grimani, a 16th-century palace, through November.

Mazal won't admit to such a message as Tagore outlines, but you can see it in his work. You can also see that without struggle and fear there's no journey to beauty, a concept explained by Chinese philosopher Tsang Lap Chuen. Tsang says the sublime happens when we approach the life-limits of our being: At the top limit we border on something neither human nor natural, at the bottom on nonexistence, and we live in the median. For Mazal, though, there are no separate states, just an ever-circling journey between the limits. ✿