

RIGHT: Restrictions Acceptance, 2006,  
acrylic and oil on canvas, 60" x 66"

EAR RIGHT  
TOP: Upright, 2005/6,  
acrylic and oil on canvas, 60" x 66"

MIDDLE: Etienne Zack

BOTTOM: Wiggles, acrylic and oil on canvas  
54" x 60", 2006

# ETIENNE ZACK

## JUNK AND THE REALM OF IDEAS



DYLAN CREE INTERVIEWED  
VANCOUVER ARTIST ETIENNE  
ZACK IN MID-MAY WHILE  
ZACK'S PAINTINGS WERE BEING  
EXHIBITED IN SOLO SHOWS  
AT EQUINOX GALLERY IN  
VANCOUVER AND THOMAS  
DANE GALLERY IN LONDON



**DC:** You've been in a lot of exhibitions during the past few years. In the ten months since you won the top prize in the 2005 RBC Canadian Painting Competition, how many shows featuring new paintings have you participated in, both abroad and in North America?

**EZ:** About nine or ten. Four solo shows in Prague, Bergen, London, and Vancouver. The others were two- or three-person shows here in Canada, New York, and Geneva with painters or artists from other disciplines.

**DC:** Before 2005 do you think your work was much different?

**EZ:** Well, the solo show I had in Madrid in 2004 was not much different from my current work, but if we go back to 2002 and before, it definitely was.

**DC:** Wasn't the focus of your painting more obviously taken up with the hidden influence of technology on our everyday activities?

**EZ:** Yes, but even though I was dealing with ideas concerning technology, back then what was more significant for me was transcribing theory into painting. At that time it was a way for me to learn about painting, both formally and compositionally. Ideas and theories about technology certainly



“ A LOT OF TIMES WHEN I PAINT I FEEL THERE’S A POINT WHERE THE PAINTING TURNS ON ME AND IS HAVING FUN AT MY EXPENSE. ”

served me with content, but more importantly they gave me strategies for quantifying and qualifying aspects of my experience — how I could make sense or understand the world. Apart from theories of technology, I worked with other organizational methods like mathematics and stock exchange results. Even so, I think my work has always been about very tangible and concrete things. It's just that now I'm more acutely focused on the particulars of the things I paint and less influenced by neatly reasoned accounts of the world. I guess I'm now less interested in working by themes. I think it has come to the point where I no longer do bodies of work to carry an idea; rather, I do singular or stand-alone pieces that explore ideas in various ways. This current show at Equinox and the other one I'm in at Thomas Dane Gallery in London are comprised of pieces from different experiences, all mixed up to make each show.

**DC:** Would you say that you're still interested in "behind the scenes" activity, with your work now being more narrowly focused on left-overs, remnants, broken-down and dust-covered objects?

**EZ:** For me it's always been about giving possibilities and an unexpected dimension to objects in shadows, cast-offs, broken things, and detritus. I'm always responding to our world, where there's a constant push for uniformity or reduction of meaning for easy consumption. I remind people of a history that is always amongst us, though it is often trammelled by the interests of what's going on now. Yes, I like to show things aren't readily or so narrowly definable.

**DC:** Is that why you paint?

**EZ:** Well, right now I'm fascinated by the general question, "what does it mean to make art?" I'm constantly asking, what is representation, what does representation involve as a type of staging, and, of course, within the medium of painting, what do I want to do with representation? Unlike my earlier work where I was somewhat preoccupied with painting as an extension of media, I'm now focused on painting as its own entity. I'm exploring painting as an activity, just as with any other medium, that has a distinct place and history within a broader discussion of the arts. Seriously, I consider painting as its own technology. So, when I refer to painting in a painting I'm referencing a pre-established system of operations that effectively guides the eye and the painter's hand.

**DC:** That reflection on painting is strongly explored, though in different ways, in your current show at Equinox and at Thomas Dane Gallery.

**EZ:** Yes, a lot of my recent paintings are about environments for making art and how those particular environments effect the processes that go on



within it. They're [paintings] about "the studio" and about painting inside a studio and, in turn, they reflect on the world outside the studio. Like any space for production of whatever kind, the studio is a highly controlled space. So to me, even the broken gyroc in the corner of the room appears as very purposefully arranged and staged. But you have to understand that I play with the notion of staging of an image as having already been staged by our local tradition of photography.

**DC:** You seem to be making fun of, while exploring, certain contemporary art movements and ideas through representational painting.

**EZ:** In a few works showing at Equinox, apart from the tradition of "staging," I play on part of the critic Clement Greenberg's account of abstract expressionism, basically, the idea that to create an abstract painting involves painting as close to the surface of the canvas as possible. It's just paint on canvas, it's flat. For the painting *Upright* I deploy various depth-perception tricks taken from [the tradition of] representational painting to, instead, flatten perspective in order to poke fun at Greenberg's description of abstract painting. The effect of my representational piece is folly as it turns notions of foreground and background on its head. *Upright* is like having opened a storage locker door that holds back a bunch of junk that's



*Doing and Looking;*  
*Looking and Doing*, 2006,  
 acrylic and oil on canvas, 54" x 60"

about to fall on you. I guess the notion of there being set rules for generating particular paintings strikes me as absurd.

**DC:** In a lot of your paintings you animate stuff or junk by imbuing it with psychological states and moods.

**EZ:** I think that all the junk we're surrounded by has an inherent action to it that's the result of having been made a certain way. So when you juxtapose certain things there's something intellectual that happens in that space between them, and in between you and objects that have been made a certain way, that creates very personal or private associations and connections. This intimacy can be due to the object. Apart from what we invest in them, I think objects have their own consciousness.

**DC:** You sound like a modern mystic.

**EZ:** Well, even though I consider painting to be a prescribed technology, I have to say that when I'm at play, working in the studio on paintings or even sculptures, possibilities come alive that I don't think could be predicted. A lot of times when I paint I feel there's a point where the painting turns on me and is having fun at my expense. The painting starts doing stuff that is beyond me, perhaps laughing at me.

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**DC:** In a previous discussion you described yourself as a kind of "archivist of the under- and un-detected." Could you explain?

**EZ:** I see meaning in the unspoken and forgotten aspects of culture. Basically, I'm curious as to why, when we're walking down a street, we are attracted to one object over another. What informs that attraction or gets our immediate attention? For me, I've always been attracted to what is left behind and is not pronounced. So when it comes to the act of painting I'm very conscious of what I spend time on, or put energy into, for purposes of directing the eye. But I don't take too seriously my inclination for bringing detritus to the foreground, I question and toy with the [presumed] preciousness inherent in selecting the things that I paint. Really, each painting is caught up in a whole inner game or hierarchy of power between materials and ideas and between ideas and meanings. It's just a question of what element or elements will take priority, and that I can't say because it's always changing.

**DC:** What interests you more, the technical act of painting or the concepts that you play with?

**EZ:** Developing my techniques is very important but, if I don't have an idea or a concept, I can't be painting.

**DC:** Apart from how we think or don't think of daily objects, "clutter" has also been identified as a prominent feature of your recent work. Why clutter?

**EZ:** I think in the clutter there's a freedom for me to organize things. It's open to being assembled. Clutter on the canvas instantly becomes a pattern or composition of color and shape.

**DC:** Is there a purpose to clutter — to encourage multiple perspectives, or seeing and thinking in varied ways?

**EZ:** It depends on the kind of game I want to play. In a number of my paintings clutter serves to pollute and distract from the main focus of the image. *Resistance and Acceptance* is a good example of how I work this tension between what's usually conceived as significant and as superfluous.

**DC:** Keeping with the themes of implicit order and generating patterns, what might we expect from you next?

**EZ:** I think portraits of types of knowledge or of things that I know. My future work will continue to be driven by an interest in what things mean and what things do.

Dylan Cree is a Vancouver artist and writer.

Etienne Zack is represented by Equinox Gallery, Vancouver.