

# AVENUE

Questions of Artists



## ABSTRACT EXPOSITION

Montreal painter Étienne Zack is not afraid to put Jackson Pollock in his place — in this case, a VHS cassette



Recently, a visitor to New York's Met Museum accidentally ripped a Picasso painting valued at \$130 million. But what if an artist sets out to poke holes in art's values? The crazy (and crazy) Montrealer Étienne Zack offers a few ideas. With a new show at the Montreal Museum of Contemporary Art, Zack tells Leah Sandels about the experiments that make his art rad.

**Q** Where do your paintings come from?

**A** I guess they come from where I'm from — past experiences and the kind of education I had. They come from reading and thinking about art, and also about everyday life topics like politics, philosophy and history. In each painting I set out to explore one idea or a spectrum of related ideas.

**Q** Your paintings can be discouraging, with so much to look at. It's hard to focus on one thing. Where's the focus for you?

**A** I need to use clutter to distract from the main subject of my paintings. But I don't see it that way anymore. Still, they're charged images with a lot going on.

**Q** Some of these paintings I've had in my head for years — sometimes it's just parts, and then the parts come together after a while, when I understand what it means to put this idea and that idea together.

Most of the settings for my paintings are studies of interiors, places where a sculpture or object is set up, as a performance or happening to about to take place.

For example, *Spills in a Safe Environment* is about making abstract paintings. In it, a set of glass plates that have holes in them are covered by brushes and a bucket of dripping paint. The paint drips through holes in the glass and into a rug at the bottom. It reminds you of hard art, like when Robert Rauschenberg stuck glass in the ground. But it also reminds you of abstract painting, or even environmental disasters. That's what I mean by different ideas coming together.

There's also a painting called *Dueling*, which is about Jackson Pollock and films about Pollock that looked at painting as a fight. There's a gun barrel, a device shaped like a profile and film cassettes with shots of Pollock and photography streaming out of them.

Finally, there's a painting called *Thorough* — in its frames, it looks like a classical portrait of a head.

But as you go towards the center, it disintegrates into veins under skin, microscopic hairs, brachyotrons and finally a big gun. In real life, it's about different ways of seeing the body. From classical portraiture to dissection to MRI.

**Q** One of your old paintings, *Abdul for Hussein*, seemed to poke fun at our world status games. How do you see that piece now that you're having your first big museum show — what would you identify as that kind of abuse?

**A** When I made that painting, it seemed like everybody was making art for a certain idea of success. I wanted to talk about that in my own way, to make a structure that speaks to a certain attainable standard.

It's not that I'm against success — I work really hard, and almost have no choice in doing so. But I also know there's a whole system around art, and a lot of my paintings are about that, too — about art objects and how they are presented in institutions. There're about the system that sell and diffuse art after it is made and how those affect the value of art.

**Q** It had's hard for you?

**A** In the past I've usually set up sculptures and made them into paintings. But for a new show in Vancouver I'm transforming a painting into a sculpture.

This new sculpture/painting is about a sort of assembly line for art. In it, there are lines for art making and art selling and art magazine printing. So again, it's about a system. But it doesn't have to just be about art. I think the same distribution systems are applied to music and many things in our society, like sports or merchandising.

Overall in my art, there's a system and an aesthetic that I hope people try to follow a bit. I hope they get something out of it — almost like a stream, carrying people.

Étienne Zack runs his April 20 at the Montreal Museum of Contemporary Art. For more information, visit [mcca.org](http://mcca.org).

— *Arneel Paul*

*Spill Spills in a Safe Environment, 2000. Left: Dueling, 2000.*

National Post  
February 9, 2010  
By Leah Sandals  
Section B7

## Abstract Exposition

Montreal painter Etienne Zack is not afraid to put Jackson Pollock in his place--in this case, a VHS cassette

Recently, a visitor to New York's Met Museum accidentally ripped a Picasso painting valued at \$130-million. But what if an artist sets out to poke holes in art's values? The crazy canvases of Montreal's Etienne Zack offer a few ideas. With a new show at the Montreal Museum of Contemporary Art, Zack tells Leah Sandals about the ruptures that make his art rad.

Q Where do your paintings come from?

A I guess they come from where I'm from -- past experiences and the kind of education I had. They come from reading and thinking about art, and also about everyday-life topics like politics, philosophy and history. In each painting I set out to explore one idea or a spectrum of related ideas. Q Your paintings can be disorienting; with so much to look at, it's hard to focus on any one thing. Where's the focus for you?

A I used to use clutter to distract from the main subject of my paintings. But I don't use it that way anymore. Still, they're charged images with a lot going on.

Some of these paintings I've had in my head for years -- sometimes it's just parts, and then the parts come together after a while, when I understand what it means to put this idea and that idea together.

Most of the settings for my paintings are studios or interiors, places where a sculpture or model is set up, or a performance or happening is about to take place.

For example, Spills in a Safe Environment is about making abstract paintings. In it, a set of glass plates that have holes in them are covered by brushes and a bucket of dripping paint. The paint drips through holes in the glass and tints a rag at the bottom. It reminds you of land art, like when Robert Smithson stuck glass in the ground. But it also reminds you of abstract painting, or even environmental disasters. That's what I mean by different ideas coming together.

There's also a painting called Dialog, which is about Jackson Pollock and films about Pollock that looked at painting as fetish. There's a paintbrush, a canvas shaped like a profile and film cassettes with shots of Pollock and pornography streaming out of them.

Finally, there's a painting called Thorough-- on its fringes, it looks like a classical portrait of a head. But as you go towards the centre, it disintegrates into veins under skin, microscopic hairs, brushstrokes and finally a big gouge. To me, it's about different ways of seeing the body, from classical portraiture to dissection to MRIs.

Q One of your old paintings, Model for Success, seemed to poke fun at art-world status games. How do you see that piece now that you're having your first big museum show -- what some might identify as that kind of status? A When I made that painting, it seemed like everybody was making art for a certain idea of success. I wanted to talk about that in my own way, to make a structure that speaks to a certain attainable stardom.

It's not that I'm against success --I work really hard, and almost have no choice in doing so. But I also know there's a whole system around art, and a lot of my paintings are about that, too--about art objects and how they are presented in institutions. They're about the systems that aid and diffuse art after it is made and how those affect the value of art. Q What's next for you?

A In the past I've usually set up sculptures and made them into paintings. But for a new show in Vancouver I'm transforming a painting into a sculpture.

This new sculpture/painting is about a sort of assembly line for art. In it, there are lines for art making and art writing and art magazine printing. So again, it's about a system. But it doesn't have to just be about art. I think the same distribution systems are applied to more and more things in our society, like sports or merchandising.

Overall in my art, there's a system and an aesthetic that I hope people try to follow a bit. I hope they get something out of it --almost like a strange, satisfying puzzle.

- Etienne Zack runs to April 25 at the Montreal Museum of Contemporary Art. For more information, visit [macm.org](http://macm.org).

Read more: <http://www.nationalpost.com/arts/story.html?id=2538908#ixzz0f5Izbx9T>  
The National Post is now on Facebook. Join our fan community today.