



IT IS

Recent Acquisitions of New Canadian Art

WHAT

IT IS

Etienne Zack

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Born in Montreal, 1976.
Lives and works in Montreal.

Frequently using his studio as the stage for creating seemingly impossible scenes, Etienne Zack explores what it means to be an artist today in the context of larger social and cultural debates. He sees basic techniques such as composition, scale, and illusionism as strategies to "reorder certain notions of contemporary culture and drive reconfigured viewpoints to the forefront."¹

Set in one corner of the artist's studio, *Heads* combines Zack's reflections on the war in Iraq with a comically subversive deconstruction of contemporary art. The studio walls are covered in a grid of white sheets of paper affixed with pieces of green masking tape. Most of the pages have been dotted at the centre with a single crude stamp of a human face in red, blue, or yellow, whose random pattern creates a Mondrianesque wallpaper. The studio floor, strewn with a scattering of magazine and newspaper pages, tilts oddly forward from the wall. Three pots of paint, a stack of white unprinted paper, and two large piles of round objects – one of small white heads and another of similarly shaped brown objects – tumble into the foreground. The heads are the same size as the prints on the wall, yet none of them appears to have been dipped in paint. Instead, their mask-like white faces stare expressionlessly back out at the viewer.

Zack explains that the brown objects in the one pile are meant to represent unpeeled potatoes, and the white heads are those that have been skinned and carved. "I was thinking of using a very 'low' form of art (childlike and not generally taken seriously), using a very low technological tool to make a mark (potato prints), and to surround it with 'real' (as in artistically credible) painting to almost legitimize the prints for being there and forcing their aesthetics."²

He has in fact used real potatoes to print the faces onto his painted pieces of paper in a reversal of the *trompe l'oeil* effect. His commentary on the hierarchy of artistic mediums is paired as well with darker undertones. "Potatoes were also meant to make a parallel to the way the army used to make soldiers peel potatoes as a minor punishment for wrong doing or misbehavior. I felt like the printing of the crude faces made of potato prints was in a way a punishment for the rest of the painting or at least the way we conceive of a "good painting," the work had to cope with them and live with it."³

Heads 2007

Acrylic and oil on canvas

198.3 × 228.5 × 4.3 cm

Gift of Michael J. Audain, Vancouver, 2009

In this light, the painting shifts from being a quirky still life that captures the artist's working practice to a disquieting memento mori; the clippings scattered on the studio floor are culled from media images Zack remembers seeing of the war before and during the making of this painting. "I was thinking about the war going on in Iraq and the people there. I wanted the printed heads to commemorate individuals. To stand in for someone that was not anymore."⁴ The disjuncture between the overly cheerful palette and the gravity of Zack's subject matter is jarring. Seeing the artist's effigies strewn among other random clippings gives us pause and points to larger questions: how we experience international conflicts, the power structures that drive them, and how, or even if, we can begin to make sense of the chaos of war.

Rhiannon Vogl

1 Etienne Zack, "Artist Statement," in *Nothing Is Lost, Nothing Is Created, Everything Is Transformed* (Montreal: Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, 2008), p. 180.

2 Etienne Zack, email correspondence with the author, 10 August 2009.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

