



**E**tienne Zack's painting *Supply and Demand* is a still life of an artist's clutter. It's not his only painting that refers to the studio where it was made, but it is particularly memorable. In it are two stacks of cardboard boxes on a garage-sale blue throw rug with yellow trim and brown fringe. The stacks are precariously balanced on steel pipe crutches. Like frail octogenarians, these empty patrons seem to contemplate with withering interest a scrappy cliché of a Jackson Pollock canvas nailed to the wall behind them. It is a drip painting as much indebted to bumblebee-on-windshield as to Abstract Expressionism. The box pile on the right has its topmost, skull-sized box cocked back, almost snooty. The pile on the left appears to be no more charmed by this runt from Clement Greenberg's litter than her friend. A pile of boxes almost leans to whisper: Isn't painting supposed to be dead?

## ETIENNE ZACK IMAGE CRUSHER





by Lee Henderson

preceding pages, left: *Three last words were images*, 2005, acrylic and oil on canvas, 54 x 60". All photographs courtesy the artist and Equinox Gallery, Vancouver.

right: *Strong View*, 2005, acrylic and oil on canvas, 30 x 32".

Her friend raises a flap with uncertainty. But the canvas pictured in Zack's *Supply and Demand* isn't meant to be in sync with *Autumn Rhythm*. Instead, it's a kind of impoverished *trompe l'oeil*, a representation or parody of that drizzle-stick style from the days of the End of Painting. The soft cardboard forms that totter on their geriatric props conform their tastes and habits to a series of increasingly smaller boxes—out with the old, in with the new; art is elsewhere, materialism

unpopulated urban spaces, murky but somehow arresting colours, subtly iconoclastic jokes and a little bit of magic.

Needless to say, Zack's recent solo show at the Equinox Gallery in Vancouver was sold out. *Supply and Demand* was the first painting you saw inside the gallery. Most any white cube the world over is in contrast to a kind of back-alley anomie of cement and weeds—and that's Zack's world. His paintings are of a formless urban state. He paints the art behind the gallery and the neglected junk in the corners of the studio. Before his debut at Equinox, Zack had

already had solo shows in Madrid, Spain, at the Marina Miranda Gallery, and Artcore in Toronto. Neo Rauch selected his work for a group show at the Norwich Gallery in Norfolk, England, in 2004.

Born in Montreal in 1976, Zack lived and went to school there until 1997, when he travelled west to Vancouver. He slept in parks his first few nights in the city and finally decided to rent a studio where he could make art. "That's the way I travelled in those days," he said. "I didn't know I was going to stay in Vancouver so long." He was sneaking in to use the printing presses at Emily Carr often enough that he decided to apply to



*Hitting Home*, 2005, acrylic and oil on canvas, 60 x 66".

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is cube-shaped. Zack's *Supply and Demand* is a funny and unsparing story about the relationship between the painter and the viewer. It's a story as old as art itself: the recyclable studio visit where neither the artist nor the audience is up to the task. It's a painting that also serves to encapsulate a lot of what makes Zack's style so worthwhile—that self-deprecating conceptualism, his oil-and-vinegar mix of techniques, the oddball, ramshackle, sculptural forms set in

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In Montreal, Zack was making a lot of sculptures, but by the time he arrived in Vancouver, he was already beginning to paint. "I like sculpture," Zack told me. "It came a lot easier as a medium for me, but painting was fascinating because it was so hard to do. I remember wanting to paint certain effects on the canvas and nothing

would end up looking the way I wanted. Painting was a real challenge. I could see the potential of learning with it. In a certain way, I think stubbornness is essential when I paint. I think of painting as a place where I can crush different images and ideas, and have them exist in the same space."

This "crush of ideas" is most important when Zack's lasting interest in contemporary sculpture is "crushed" into his plans for a painting. A canvas often starts with something three-dimensional, a handmade thing along the lines of a mess. The little palm-sized woodblock ziggurat that Zack made wasn't really a sculpture until he painted it. Context, however wonky, makes the painted version more accurate to Zack's intention. In *Top Shape*, the ziggurat is superimposed on the imaginary scene of an Impressionist barbecue. In a rush, everyone's vanished from the picnic site, leaving behind salmon bones and condiments along with a burnt-out Hibachi and some other trash. All that remains as the painting's subject, no doubt, is the *top shape*, this sage object, a well-defined but mysterious icon (the hoary pyramid), rendered in much higher detail than anything else around it.

The ziggurat is no potato, but Zack's paintings still suit writer George Bataille's definition of the word "formless" as being like "a spider or spit." Zack's universe prefers traps and orifices, limbs and digits over bodies, and pushing paint is better than preliminary sketches. Instead, he does preliminary objects. It should be strange that sculpture is what gives his paintings their formless unity, but then a

painting like *Memory Maid* is nothing without its brilliant blue field of Pepsi tin scattered and smudged down the canvas, urban debris remodelled as the many petals of Arctic forget-me-nots. And just as formless in *Memory Maid* is the crumbling wall made of Styrofoam. Gaping holes have appeared in its surface where the little squeaky nuggets have drifted in static-clusters through the agency of a breeze or zero gravity over the bushel of Pepsi cans.

*Top Shape*, 2004, acrylic and oil on canvas, 39 1/2 x 44 1/2.



Bataille believed that, at their root, materialists are hierarchical. He said, "They have situated dead matter at the summit of a conventional hierarchy of diverse types of facts, without realizing that in this way they have submitted to an obsession with an ideal form of matter, with a form which approaches closer than any other to that which matter should be." Perhaps Bataille saw the fate of the materialist to ignore what a child sees instantly: that the toy is never as perfect as the thing containing it. The box, the packing foam and the pop can are all closer to "ideal" than what appears inside them. In *Memory Maid* as well

as many of his other paintings, Zack represents the strangely formless beauty of the disposable, compiling, as it were, a visual dictionary of the negative spaces around our material desires.

The critic Yve-Alain Bois was so inspired by George Bataille's "formless" that he curated a show in 1996 at the Centre Pompidou around the idea,



*Making Things Do Things*, 2004, acrylic and oil on canvas, 42 x 48".

and in his introduction to the catalogue, he quotes Bataille's writing on Manet. His words could as easily apply to Zack: "To break up the subject and re-establish it on a different basis is not to neglect the subject; so it is in sacrifice, which takes liberties with the victim and even kills it, but cannot be said to neglect it."

If paintings like *Supply and Demand* and *Memory Maid* succeed in something so violent as Bataille reads into Manet, it's because Zack isn't neglectful, either. Sacrifices are not uncommon—to start, there's an amputated thumb in *Feels Right*, and Superman's leg is all that's left of his suicide in *When it comes to this don't call me for answers*.

There's also Zack's overall sacrifice of logic for the good of accumulation. His most influential contemporary is the invisible, stacked, scattershot image bank on everyone's hard drive. That superimposed ziggurat in *Top Shape* makes sense in Photoshop, among the myriad framed images spat out across the searchable universe, an unparalleled

web for culling whatever whenever. Another contemporary Vancouver artist, Geoffrey Farmer, a sculptor of a kind, is working a similar line between prop, performance and a pack rat's antipathy towards materialism. It's a kind of art after Google. Other Vancouver artists like Steven Shearer and Jason McLean could be included here. They all respond to Google with engines of their own. What makes Zack's observations about the current state of imagery fresh is that even the most domestic objects he paints can bewilder us as alien, like the coir doormat as flying saucer levitating above the other studio flotsam (including a rolodex, aka old-school rva) in Zack's painting *Hitting Home*. Or the sparkling miasma hovering over the black void in *Special Effects*, where what's familiar is the intrusion of the fictional.

*Special Effects* should remind Vancouverites of the science fiction filmed in the city's alleyways and vacant lots. Vancouver, proud of its talent to mimic any city, has seen its share of smoke and mirrors. The special effect of Zack's painting is as formless as Vancouver, a rain cloud alert to change. *Special Effects* is also a believable image of the future. As the world's slums and high-rises all grow to look more and more alike, or more like Vancouver—the "City of Glass," as Douglas Coupland calls it—Vancouver itself will eventually lose even this tenuous identity. The charm of Vancouver's transparency is made into a gaseous dazzle by Zack, an explicitly filmic fume that only means to distract the eye from the black hole of mean streets below, as if poverty were nothing but a drop curtain for a magic act.

There is a strange drama in the painting *Making Things Do Things*, where the handle on a red bucket looks like a cartoon smile, thanks to the devilish drumstick horns poking out its top and the scarred Pinocchio nose jutting from its bucket-face. It's a crude sculpture to make Paul McCarthy proud, emerging from a hole in a wall to view the mottled blue box trapped inside a cryptic wire fence (another trap, another spider) that may or may not be creating some kind of energy field; the title suggests it. On the right there's another stack, this time of paint trays and rollers. The top tray is about to fall over, gobbing hot pink onto the floor. The paint sits on the canvas so flatly bright and gratuitous that it detaches from the illusion. It's as formless as too much spit, and if anything is being done in the canvas, it's this pink "slippage," quoting Bois again.

The thing in *Mornin'* appears on the canvas like one of Baudrillard's "Moebius spiraling compulsions," a flowering fractal in a bad place. It has the weight of a piñata, another great formless sculpture you "break apart" to redistribute the material treats inside. But the illusion isn't long-lasting when each flower is applied to the canvas as flatly as a twist of pencil shavings. It's not "super-flat" like Japanese art monsters, but the peak of the flower curl does have what looks a lot like the blue iris of a mind-blown child. The wall behind this innocent form is papered with skinshots culled from Zack's memory of seeing how the American troops in Iraq decorate their bunks. Like war, pornography itself is formless too, a constantly shifting pattern of bodies piled on top of bodies meant to hypnotize a blossoming phallus (in this case, certainly), twisting it out of reach of love and nearer towards cruel objectification. Each twirl of a flower, then, represents an innocent eye as it spins on an axis around these poorly whitewashed images of exploitation. Here Baudrillard's piñata is a sacrifice. Zack's wall of pornography reminds us of that genre's particularly ludicrous failure as a kind of materialism searching for an "ideal form." The more appropriate image, and Zack produces them, is one that "crushes" ideas together and doesn't attempt to reduce one thing right down to its perfect butt end.

Like Yves Tinguely's machines or the patterns of debris by Tony Feher, Zack's sculptures aren't abstract but they're still ultimately formless. Their final shape is paint, as in the schmoo stones floating

over the shallow grave in *Guerrilla Garden*, bright as Disney characters, or the giant, jagged explosion in *Free Loader* that's made out of cardboard and masking tape, quickly scrubbed white on its facing side. Unseen authorities have the explosion fenced off on a messy football field. Perhaps this is a valiant attempt to substitute the dramas of sport with the expressions of art, but it has not worked as it should have, and, like the row of African masks along the bottom of *Head Room*, Zack's painting of a Mies van der Rohe parkade, these are all representations of a kind of bricolage.

It's probably inequitable to suggest that Zack's mother tongue has some relationship to his knack for bricolage, but a Frenchman's talent for cobbling something out of nothing is everywhere apparent in his art. (In France, there's a store like

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Canadian Tire called Mr Bricolage, where you can walk in today and buy an exact duplicate of Marcel Duchamp's *Bottle Rack* for cheap.) But whether bricolage is in Zack's blood, or a matter of art education, many of his paintings look to be a culling of whatever objects were available and made into something that inexplicably works. Not quite still, and not quite life, every inanimate thing seems kinetic, mortal and uncharacteristic under Zack's hand.

"Bricolage is an interesting term," Zack wrote to me in an e-mail. "I can say that when I start painting a picture I'm trying to 'bricole' different scenes and images I'm remembering. I think bricolage is a bit like

doodling, but in my case I do bricolage when I start making the model sculptures. It has a playfulness to it also. For me it's a way to make things that stand in for something else. It's also funny how when a bricolage is done it's not always clear whether it's bricolage, art, or just a mess. I like that—bricolage is part of a process for me to make pictures. It creates a strange visual twist, when part of the painting has been developed physically in another space and in another medium."

From the point of view of a young artist, the End of Painting must seem like a generational thing, but at the time it obviously felt as if Abstraction were the evolutionary End. What Bataille believed was another of the materialist's self-absorbed searches for the "ideal form" was actually achieved in painting, so it was thought. It was death by progress. Innovation was a kind of pyramid scheme with Robert Ryman or somebody just as pale on the top. That's definitely what Russian painter Aleksandr Rodchenko had in mind for himself when he said of the three monochrome panels he painted in 1921: "Red, blue, yellow. I affirmed: It's all over. Basic colours. Every plane is a plane, and there is to be no more representation." So who's to blame for killing painting? Was it Rodchenko, or World War II, or was it Roland Barthes declaring that "to be modern is to know that which is not possible any more"?

Zack's work is proof of the happy impossibility about the End of Painting, that absurd falsehood, that profoundly cynical doomsday report issued by nearly everyone in the 20th century. Douglas Fogle, curator of the Walker Art Center's comprehensive show in 2001, "Painting at the Edge of the World," calls it the "corpse of painting." The catalogue for Fogle's show is brick-thick and full of paintings and still there's talk of corpses. Each of the essayists who contributed wonders how such pessimism could overcome them. Never mind the laws of supply and demand, people failed to take into account the irrepressible urge to create. Most of modern art's trends were pessimistic on this scale. Zack's paintings are not so pessimistic. They appear after decades of post-mortems, grand eulogies and good riddances. Certainly there were repercussions to this falsehood, like installation art, and Zack has addressed that as a good thing. Meanwhile, every year since the End, zombie canvasses have returned, and no end in sight for paint manufacturers. Enough time has passed that Zack's paintings are able to dismiss history's morbid, incorrect verdict and get on with making things do things. ■

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