

Etienne Zack's Object World
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When Etienne Zack arrived in Vancouver in 1997, at the age of 21, he never intended to settle there. He was not planning to find a studio in the West Coast city—nor to study painting at the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design, win the 2005 RBC Canadian Painting Competition, acquire prestigious dealers in this country and abroad or be vaulted into national and international prominence. No, he was not pursuing any such career path, but simply seeking an escape from winter. Zack was on a slow trek to Mexico from his native Montreal when he stopped off in Vancouver and spent his first few nights in the city sleeping in a stairwell near Canada Place. For reasons he can't entirely explain—although they have something to do with sitting in front of Virgin Records at six in the morning and looking about him in wonder—he jettisoned his Mexico plan and stayed.

One of the unexpected consequences of Zack's ten-year sojourn in Vancouver, which ended in March when he moved back to Montreal, is that as a francophone who didn't speak English until the age of 17, he paints in his second language. "I've done all my thinking in terms of approaching the medium of painting in English," he says. "I don't really think in French when I paint." Nor does he suppose that will change with his return to Quebec. His decade-long immersion in anglophone surroundings and study (his ECIAD instructors included Liz Magor and David McWilliams), the histories and cultural theory he's read, the extensive online research that stands behind his art—these all mean that Etienne Zack forged his early career in a foreign tongue.



Object World, 2005
Etienne Zack, 2005
Photo: David Lauder

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To viewers, Zack's paintings speak a visual lingua franca—with jolts of absurdity and surreality. They are stage sets of puzzlement and complexity, scenarios in which strangely animated objects assume the roles of actors, short movies in which every frame is condensed into one exclamatory image. His interiors, still lifes, cityscapes and landscapes are crammed with art-historical and popular-culture references and pierced with metaphysical queries. The crowded compositions pose extravagant “what if?” and “how is it that?” kinds of questions. Some unfold as surreal propositions. In *Undermine* (2007), Zack asks, “What if the floor of my studio, with all the room's contents, were rolled up into a barrel shape?” Then he adds, “What if all the cans of paint spilled and splashed and created an abstract expressionist painting on the barrel's transparent bottom?” Zack's art-historical allusions take a metaphysical form, quite distinct from obvious appropriation.

In *Innerworks* (2007), questions about the nature of inspiration express themselves in the composition of an enormous brick ball that crashes through Zack's studio wall and lands on a canvas on the floor. That creative wrecking ball is also the architectural surround for a drearily repetitive interior, a series of sterile cubicles or workstations that undermine the notion of heaven-sent invention. The turbulence of the scene, with its exploding shards of wood (some are milled and refined building materials, others are ragged pieces of raw log), contrasts with the orderly checkerboard pattern of Zack's studio floor and the pastoral landscape resting on the easel. A nod to Peter Doig, the landscape speaks not only to the nature-culture interface (as do the wood fragments), but also to homage, quotation, derivation. One thinks of Picasso's maxim that “Good artists copy; great artists steal.” In the 21st century, the good and the great both appropriate.

Zack's art also addresses an enduring existential angst. “How do we make sense out of chaotic experience?” he asks. Or, more specifically, out of war and destruction and the military-industrial cabal? In *Heads* (2007), a comically subversive proposition— “Why not make a (high art) painting out of (low craft) potato prints?”—is mated with serious ruminations on the Iraq conflict, the growing numbers of war dead, the punitive jobs assigned grunts (peeling potatoes in military kitchens) and the indiscriminate tide of media-generated imagery that washes over—and anaesthetizes—us daily. Zack painted what look like white pieces of paper onto the walls of his imagined interior, then carved crude faces in actual potatoes and stamped the “papers” with them. The death's-head appearance of those prints and the peeled and carved potato faces lying in a heap on the floor, along with images of people randomly gleaned from the news, cans of primary-coloured paint and a fat package of paper, disturbingly conflate the artist's practice with mass communication, media complacency, menial labour, slaughter and genocide.

Frequently, too, Zack grapples with our age's endless onslaught of unedited information. “How,” he asks, “do we make choices in the face of so many clashing propositions and contested beliefs?” Zack describes *You talkin' to me?* (2008) as a work in which he “crashes together” many diverse ideas. References here include Michelangelo's *The Creation of Adam* and Robert De Niro's mirror monologue in *Taxi Driver* along with

notions of creativity (the hand of God is about to touch a curiously rigged-up paintbrush), bunker-mentality self-sufficiency and, conversely, self-defeat



Charles Zack, *Anxiety and Self-Sufficiency*, 2008. Oil on canvas, 132 x 147 in. www.charleszack.com

of the Italian Metaphysical school of painting. It's not an intentional allusion. Zack used to argue that his paintings were not surrealistic, that everything he depicted, no matter how curiously juxtaposed, had an existence in the real world. And yes, that may have been true at one point—but no longer. His impossibilist scenarios, weirdly charged relationships among incongruous objects, unlikely formal and spatial configurations and, most importantly, his desire to express complex ideas in visual form all reinforce the (unconscious) Metaphysical school analogy.

There's also Zack's idiosyncratic relationship to the objects that jam and clutter his compositions. The oft-depicted contents of his studio—cans and tubes of paint, brushes, buckets, bowls, books, sticks, cardboard boxes, rolls of toilet paper, slabs of wood, carved chunks of Styrofoam, sinks, ladders, tables, chairs—appear to be

animated. It's as if Giorgio de Chirico's mannequins had mated with SpongeBob SquarePants and their progeny taken up residence next to Zack's easel. The artist is insistent that objects are deserving of respect, that they are ideas made manifest, that they embody their own history and design, that they possess an aura. In this, he says, his thinking is aligned with animism.

Back in Montreal, in a big, bright studio near the Rosemont Metro station, Zack observes that his long absence from the city has meant that he now stands outside its art scene—as he did when he first arrived in Vancouver. "That's quite crucial to making paintings," he says. "You get immersed in a completely different environment that offers completely different things and you become formed by somewhere else." Then he adds, "You bounce thoughts off where you are and you inspire yourself doing that." ■

Zack also questions how we acquire specialized knowledge, how we come to know what we need to know. *Important Things* (2007) is, again, an absurdist scenario: two paintings, one a historical portrait in an elaborate frame, the other an Op-art composition in a plain

frame, create a fat, distorted bundle in which is contained a vast quantity of books. The strain of containing all these books—all this knowledge, all this language, all this history and theory—has caused the portrait to bulge hideously, the eye almost popping out of its socket. The arresting deformity of this image speaks not only to the amount of information Zack attempts to compress into every one of his paintings, but also to problems of identity, creativity and our status as cultural constructs producing yet more cultural constructs.

In order to grapple with just such a range of ideas on the surface of his canvas, Zack abandoned abstract imagery in the early 2000s and developed his distinctive, lively style of representation. He clearly wanted to reinvest his medium with meaning. Comparisons have been made to Philip Guston, who famously relinquished a successful career as an Abstract Expressionist to embrace a highly contested form of figuration. Certainly Zack deploys a cartoon-like and confrontational style at times, although his images are strongly sculptural rather than graphic in character and often engage in problems of illusionism. He folds eclectic references to Renaissance, baroque and classical representation into his work, along with patches of paradoxically crude realism, what he calls “trompe l’oeil—but slobby.” Zack is curious, as many painters are, about how much or how little trickery is necessary to create the illusion of three-dimensionality. He’s also interested in the ways digital reproductions of paintings alter their appearance, flattening both form and colour, mediating our reading of our cultural legacy and our understanding of the world.

It is significant that Zack conjoins the problematics of his profession— what is art’s role? what is its history? how is it possible to make a painting in this time and place?—with the wider struggles of contemporary life. Still, the art scene, within and beyond his studio, continues to fascinate him. When *i think of culture...* (2008) addresses the frenetic, commodified world of contemporary art. The composition is conceived as a kind of architectural vortex, with different spatial configurations spinning off it. These spaces signify classroom, museum, auction house, exhibition hall, fineart publisher and bank, all spinning around the prize, a big red slot-machine cherry. Some of Zack’s allusions may be arcane, but here they are completely transparent. Conspicuously absent from this mechanized and calculated cycle of production, consumption and profitability is the artist himself.

The curious perspectives, classical statuary, uninhabited architecture and charged air of unreality in this work are reminiscent of the Italian Metaphysical school of painting. It’s not an intentional allusion. Zack used to argue that his paintings were not surrealistic, that everything he depicted, no matter how curiously juxtaposed, had an existence in the real world. And yes, that may have been true at one point—but no longer. His impossibilist scenarios, weirdly charged relationships among incongruous objects, unlikely formal and spatial configurations and, most importantly, his desire to express complex ideas in visual form all reinforce the (unconscious) Metaphysical school analogy.

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