

Ed Zelenak: Objects in Process

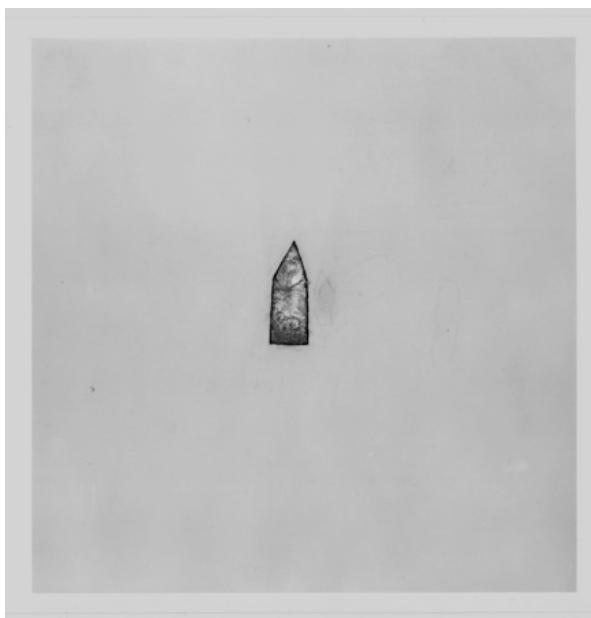
By Orin Zelenak

Melting, burning, abrasion and compression in human hands have shaped the history of consciousness. Their increased rationalization, particularly in the last century has brought the “megalopolis” (composite cities like Boston – New York – Washington) extraterrestrial travel and drives the Information Age. These ways of exploiting substances are what enable the materials we create to live on in our human experience.

The surfaces surrounding us, as well as every product we consume involve the manipulation and design of objects. What is “useful” is defined increasingly by a scientific paradigm which holds the object *a byproduct of technology*. Physicality is, thus, assumed as part of a larger process of technological dynamism. The reality of objects obtained in this way separates the crude stuff of matter from its user, the consumer. Material is held functional and not mysterious.

Ed Zelenak's sculpture investigates an alternative paradigm of meaningful objects. The nature of physicality in his work does not hope to appeal to an abstract(ed) consumer and it's not held derivative of an expanding industrialization. Instead, matter made material is mysterious – it is the beginning, and not simply a conclusion. With this idea the artist investigates the individual both physically and metaphysically engaged with the object.

The sculpture exists (as a whole, a unity) aesthetically and in Zelenak's work is informed phenomenologically. With painstaking attention to craft, his art tells the story of its own making.



Physicality is reified as a mysterious whole and (re)performed in the ancient techniques of shaping, parting, joining and marking. Casting metals through “lost wax” – a technique Zelenak employs – is a knowledge descendent from the ancient Egyptians.

“Lost Wax” casting begins with the plaster mold of the form to be made into metal. From this mold, the object is re-created in wax. A second mold is created which patterns both the inside and outside of the intermediary wax object. When the second mold is heated the wax evacuates, leaving a negative impression of the object within the hardened mold. Hot liquid metal fills the space, then cools and assumes the shape rigidly. The mold is destroyed and only the casting remains. Throughout these transitions the shape and size of the object is preserved while each iteration further realizes the final piece. The metal sculpture, the aesthetic object, records the serial motion “as a casting.”

Metal is itself an extraction and purification of the earth, beginning as the molten byproduct of burning rock. When cast, it again becomes liquid and for those few moments will obey the impetus of a new shape. Such alchemy is a knowledge coincident to an act, *a knowledge which is executed*. It is also an innovation which is (re)performed in a historical context over sixty centuries – an impulse which reveres material and is preserved in Zelenak's work.

Like (geographical) maps, this artist's sculptures represent collections of lines which function together to tell a story of location.

The aesthetic investigations of these sculptures seek some ground in the object itself. For Zelenak, the individual faces physical reality as a fact, so that knowledge of perception only ever occurs presupposing objects. The brute existence of substance may remain systematically inscrutable, but is, nonetheless, a powerful center of meditation. A consistent theme in this work contemplates “the fact of materials” in a polarity of order and chaos.

In the branches in trunks of the tree figure, for instance, Zelenak unites a geometric formalism and aesthetic impulse. A study of an ideal tree undertakes a highly rigid, ordered system of representation. Each figure consists of a main trunk and branches cast of tin, inlaid into a wooden plane which extends to the frame. Welded to the tin “vox principalis” are copper branches offset from those beneath.



Dowser Rod With Readjusted Site - #4 - 2000
Cast tin, copper, graphite, wood
H.14.5" x W.15.5"

A freehand drawn perspective line locates the base of the tree, while other pencil reference marks and branch sketches surround the main mass of the figure.

In this way, beginning with plywood, layer after layer of material, technique and notes of this process are added. A "tree" is formed. Each part of the whole is a difference substance (wood, tin, copper, graphite.) Each is worked differently and carries unique physical properties. With attention, the identity of each grows in contrast to the other substances around it. What is whole of the "tree" synthesizes these diverging parts; a site where substance and its properties are negotiated with technique to become material. In harmony at last, the drawing of the tree tells its own peculiar story of growth in one spot, making available a visible genealogy of the work.

This is geometry in service of the artist's will, order justified aesthetically: an alchemy. In Zelenak's work, this decision leads to a highly ordered in precise fabrication, which incorporates anecdotes of its own methods.



Diagram Block - 1974
Solid steel, alloyed tin
L.36" x W.36" x H.3"

Act of making become part of a finished whole. A of history fashioning emerges in the markings, surface effects, shape, size, and even framing techniques of the objects.

The creative act is recorded and formerly narrated, but reveals parts of a larger, aesthetic whole.

Similarly, the copper vessel, is aesthetically preoccupied with "containing."

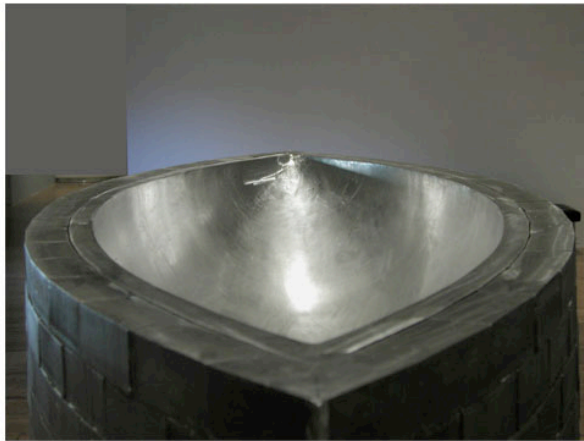


Dowsing the Edge of Emptiness - Concave #1 - 2004
Copper, bronze
Diam. 30" x H.15"

An "impulse to contain" that unites concept and material must be defined artistically. In realizing such a task, Zelenak presupposes a field, or backdrop of space within which any thing can be contained. A vessel of this nature contains space only to the extent that it divides space. And it is the real metal separating an inner and outer vessel to which he predisposes his audience.

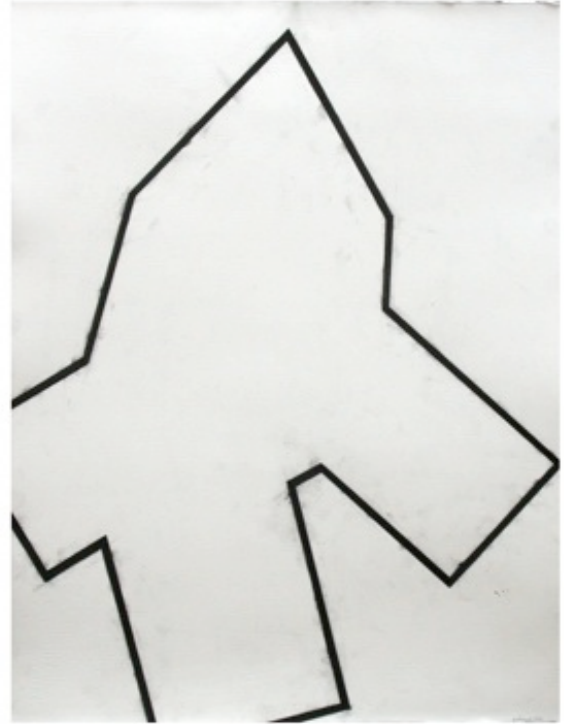
An abstract surface, a necessary component of "containment" is made real. It available beyond the simple shape of the vessel are a host of material characteristics (density, melting point, hardness, malleability, color, etc.) articulated in the crude matter of the object. The story of the physical properties is left on the surface of a shape appropriate to these meditations: ore smelted into copper and then heated, pounded, scratched, discolored with acids, soldered, etched, removed and replaced. The characteristics of "containing" are delineated and combined in a real object. The vessel offers the artist a vehicle for reflection.

Joined in one form are aesthetic and crude aspects of physicality. In this way, the work is (as all the works are) one in process. It is as much a continually unfolding and evolving entity as it is a whole and reified object.



(Detail) Channel Pass - 2003-04
Steel plate
H.56" x L.107" x W.38.5"

The work gives neither empty screen nor a projection of meaning, and therefore it both entices and repels a viewer who wishes to re-signify the symbols.



Basin Map Study #16 - 1990
Litho crayon, ink, charcoal, dry pigment on paper
H.26" x W.20"

Can an object be made which exists to interrogate itself? This is one of Zelenak's questions. Undertaking it, he reveals his own Minimalist preoccupations with the art object, asking when methods of crafting become artful. His sculpting meditates on how process is a real and not wholly abstract entity which gets caught up somehow in the physical product. Investigations, in this sense, of both crude and manufactured materials are, for Zelenak, ultimately aesthetic and not phenomenological. The sculptor places more faith in the object than in any knowledge of the object. Sculpture is a possibility reified in the techniques of crafting material. The tension between what is made and what is being made is a psychological triumph of faith. Believing that symbols are available, they that "collect" life and so must be emptied at some point, is quintessential to Zelenak's deconstructive efforts.

This sculptor's art objects offer their audience a critique of the authority behind Positivism. Meaning, his works suggest, is not always of a nature which can be measured. If the domain of certainty which Positivism suggests exists then it is a valid object of inquiry. This means that any technique of measurement provides an interpretation of reality. Zelenak's viewers are left to continue an investigation which begins with every piece. The engaged viewer desires, not only an aesthetic moment, but also an analytical experience. In fulfillment of this yearning, symbols are offered as open texts. They are stripped-down, bared of their conventional meanings and devoid of context.

The symbol then is full of what is absent. Because the expected referents for the symbols are missing, they are the very ones which become most present. The immediacy of these referents occurs in the question: "Why do they *appear* absent?"

The works do not guide the viewer towards any new meaning for the divested symbol. The symbols are never re-signified; they are deconstructed and not put back together again. Yet this does not leave an empty site for the reader to project signification onto the symbol. Instead, the question arises of the legitimacy of any claim of authority or ownership of a symbol system. The institutions of the Art World are always concerned with authority and assert a powerful force in public discourse. Within this forum, the artist and critic (viewer) compete for author-ity, in a dispute over where meaning is created. This debate indicates a belief that an appropriate authority exists to dictate meaning. The exercise of this belief perpetuates the staticity of the symbol and passivity of the audience. In Zelenak's critique, Positivism is a model of significance in which each signifier corresponds to only one set of possible referents.

These three symbols take a very clear place in the history of art, their roots stretching back to the early Christian era.



Reading the Field, Study #21 - 1992-93
Cast alloyed tin, chemical etch, wood, graphite
H.17" x W.13" x D.5"



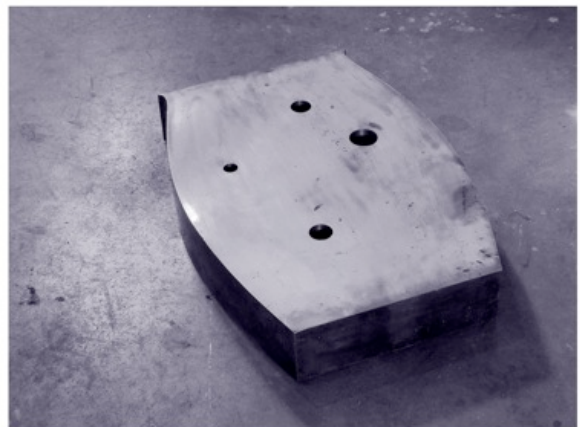
Drawing the Boundary, Study #7 - 1997-98
Alloyed tin, copper
H.25" x W.18"



Basin Map-Right Arm Channel #2, 1995; copper plate; 35x15x14



Divining Rod #2: 1995-96; copper plate, tin; 11x7.5



Container Contained, A Template - 2003-05
Steel
H.3" x W.19" x L.27"

Resisting this conception of the meaning – creation of the artist traffics in dismantled “conventional” symbols. Any interrogator of the object of the cross, the tree or the vessel will recognize that these forms engage a history beyond their own fabrication. These are not random geometric shapes, but publicly signified cultural icons. An interpretation of the work would be incomplete without asking why these emblems have been chosen

Christian iconography so strongly possesses them that these symbols cannot be employed without making reference to their religious connotations-- the cross a sign of suffering and redemption; the tree referring to the Trees of Life and Knowledge as well as to the cross; the vessel a metaphor for the containment of the soul within the body. Zelenak's work manipulates the symbols, yet it is not "religious work." Why then does it utilize forms which operate within a framework of religious iconography?

What is relevant in the choice of these symbols is not their conventional meanings (i.e. redemption, knowledge, or containment of the soul), but rather the way in which they acquired meaning. Not the "what" but the "how" of the symbols' authority and persuasiveness is under scrutiny. The work examines the process of signification, both in how it develops publicly and how it confronts the individual.



Ra's Voyage, Circumnavigation Study #3 - 1992-93
Tin casting, wood, graphite
H.29.5" x W.22" x D.2"

Any particular symbol is a curiosity by virtue of its potential and not conventional meanings. Rather than interrogating a particular symbol itself, Zelenak's sculptures employ each symbol in an investigation of the whole system of meaning: how symbols work, how symbols are made, and how symbols are taken apart.

Symbols evolve to assert a shared meaning through their use in discourses of power – public discourses which articulate their own authority. This authority sustains itself by a process of exclusion; deciding who will and will not participate in giving new meanings to things. In this way, a fixed relation established between symbol and referent. The meaning develops historical, regional, and individual nuances, but functions as an idiom shared by its users. This artist's work negotiates a relationship

between what is purely representational and what exists as the "real" referent: the object.



Divining the Mound - 2000
Tin cast, copper, canvas on paper, wood
H.64.75" x W.42"

Symbols fraught with deep-seated cultural meanings are reworked and uncovered, as layers of signification peel away in a process of de-signification. These motifs are not re-signified, but remain bare. Stripped of traditional definitions, they resist the deposit of new meanings. Rather than simply replacing one set of fixed meanings with another, the referents of the metaphors are destabilized. The whole paradigm which values a fixed correspondence between symbol and meaning undergoes examination. In this way, the body Zelenak's work criticizes *standards and measures of meaning* in both Positivist and Christian ideas of "universe."

Set into a flat, empty plane, the figures of the drawings are isolated, hanging naked on display for scrutiny. As layers of material reveal the techniques of fabrication, so layers of meaning tell of their manufacture. Knowledge of the steps of construction discloses the most effective method of de-construction. The symbols become more fluid, continually in question, yet exhibit restraint to assuming new meaning. The simplicity of the shapes and the austerity of the background surfaces place the symbol in relief. The object itself lies unapproachable, self-contained, behind glass, keeping the viewer at a distance.

Amid questioning the location of meaning and the evolution of symbols, the object itself must not be forgotten. It exists as more than a mediator between artist and viewer for it is paired to both their experiences. Perhaps in this way, the sculpture speaks its own language of physicality. Divorced from its creator and unyielding to its viewer, the object takes the role of storyteller and story, subject and object of the investigation.

This narrative aspect of Zelenak's sculpture focuses the viewer on ideas of movement. The circularity of a *substance which transforms itself* is a myth the sculptor pursues aesthetically. A faith in the whole and a doubt of the parts are genetically combined. The series of cast tin icons and the copper plate trees are products of this tension.

Fixing a central object that corresponds directly to the sculpture is impossible. The central figures of the 8" x 6" tin castings individuate themselves.



Three Branch Channel Pass - 1996
Copper, tin
H. 12.5" x W. 8" x D. 5"



Branch, Vase Ratio - 2000
Alloyed tin, copper
H. 11" x W. 7.5" x D. .75"

Silver images of vessels – as vases and as dippers – float on a background sea of texture. The central figures appear as memories, ephemeral, against an inscrutable background.

Recessed within the polished surface of these are other copper figures. Locating and defining the primary object of the work no longer makes sense. Instead, the interdependence of the parts informs the whole. This interconnection or accommodation of all created parts to each other, and each to all others, brings it about that each part has relations that express all others, and consequently, that each part is a perpetual living mirror of itself and of all others.



Silver Vase; 1994-95; tin alloy, copper, silver

The metaphor by which Zelenak chooses to express this paradox is motion: directed dynamism. Beneath even the most rigid surfaces their lies change, and an accessible history of that change. Like the cast tin vessels, the copper and lead tree works tell a story of parts and whole and the flux which unites them.

Not only is each “tree” a skilled genealogy of its own fabrication – a whole, a unity in this sense – but each is a segment of a serial body.

The symbol moves through numerous iterations as both center and plane are varied. Buoyed on the waters of copper and lead – base metals – the figure moves across an expanse. Crossing gray and golden and painted seas, the central figure passes over the horizon of the “tree” and becomes a directional device. In the serial body of several works, each functions to reenact the emptying of the “tree” as well as bring to attention the background.



Diving Rod - On The Line #4 - 2002
Alloyed tin, gouache, wood
H.13" x W.14.5" x D.2"

In this way, the journey of the symbol, is recorded without beginning or end. Movement – as a metaphor for the transition and voyage of the sculpture – enables this paradox. For Zelenak, the contradictions that “physical facts” present are dialectic and in the end “tested” aesthetically. His sculpture offers the potential of a “justified” object because it remains one in process.

Orin Zelenak

Orin Zelenak lives and works in Wallkill, New York.



Dowsing the Memory of a Forgotten Forest, Study #1 - 2002-03
Cast tin, wood, gouache, graphite
H.103.75" x W.101.5"