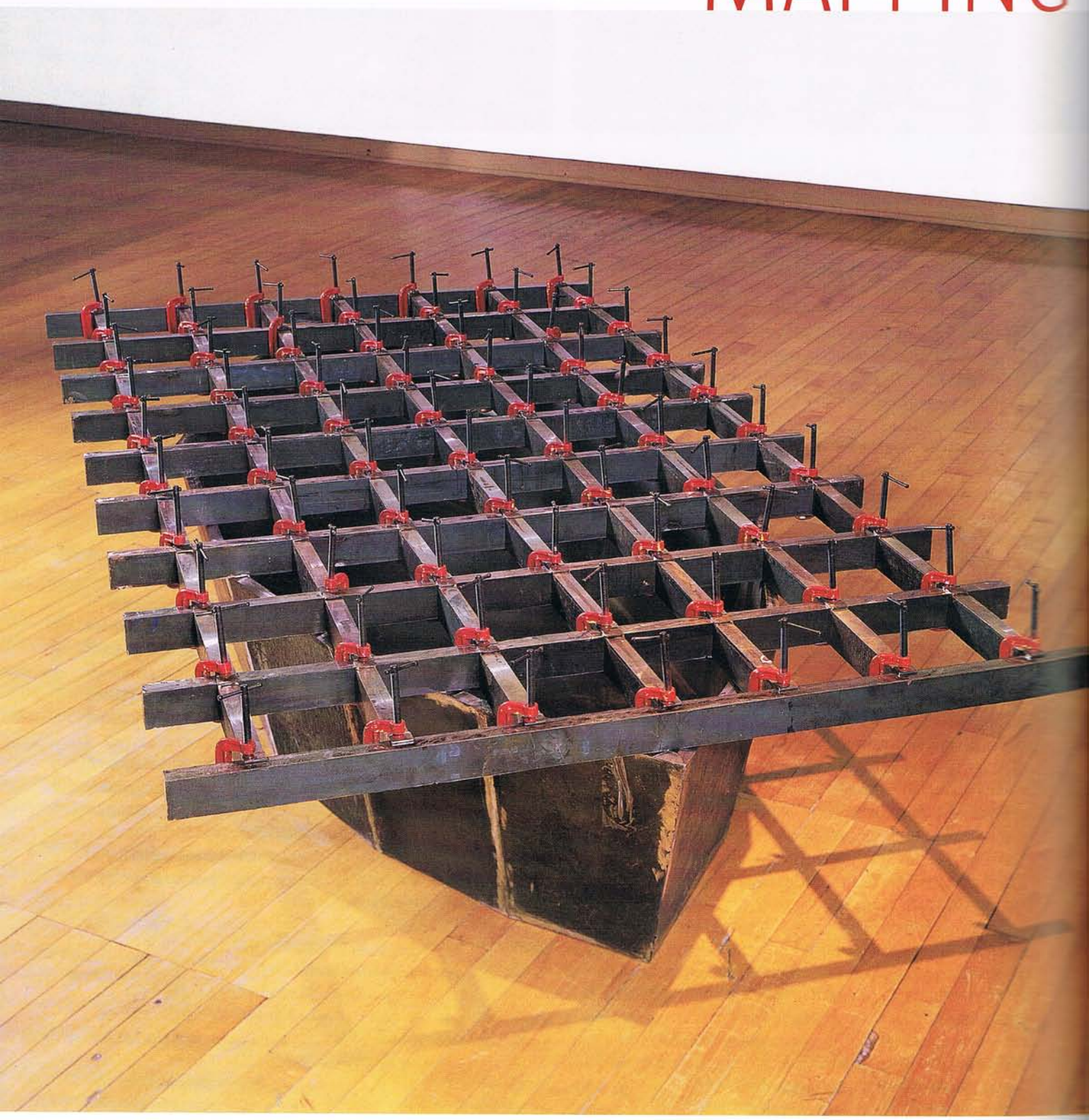
MAPPING



THE ALLEGORY

Ed Zelenak

BY JOHN K. GRANDE

While Ed Zelenak's sculpture seems to reflect that intense period when Pop Art and Minimalism occupied center stage on the arts scene, in hindsight one realizes that his works are highly individuated, with a narrative element, some allusions to science, and even allegorical elements. Zelenak describes that era, when he found his footing in the world of contemporary sculpture, as verbose, consumptive, and very much extroverted. He grew up in tobacco country in southwest Ontario and rapidly came to public attention with a series of monumental fiberglass works that seized the imagination. One of these, *Traffic* (1968–69), attracted comments for its aplomb. Originally sited next to the old National Gallery of Canada on Elgin Street, the work was subsequently moved, not as a result of public outcry but because the establishment in Ottawa did not want to ruffle the feathers of a not-so-art-literate public. *Traffic* conjured a real sense of the visual as spectacle, of art as occupying a state where it could re-direct the social vision and engender a public aesthetic.

At the time, Zelenak's sculpture was influenced by a small but intense London, Ontario, arts scene and by exchanges with his close rural neighbor and fellow sculptor, Walter Redinger. The vocabulary of his work was entirely dissimilar from that of traditional monuments or beatific Modernist prewar sculpture. For Zelenak, sculpture

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Opposite: *Noah's Ark Myth Denied*, 1998. Steel, 16.5 x 101 x 54 in. This page: *Traffic*, 1968. Fiberglass, 22 x 36 x 12 ft.

Stoatallos, 1966–67. Wood, 148 x 414 x 98 in.

served as a vehicle to engender a public event and elicit reaction in the same way as the works of Claes Oldenburg and even Donald Judd. To move away from such ambitious public undertakings in colored fiberglass as *Traffic* and *U-Split* (1968-69) in order to rediscover a more personal, allegorical language has not been an easy task for Zelenak. His legacy is, to an extent, his burden. Times and tastes change.

In 1968, Zelenak participated in "Heart of London," an exhibition that brought together an incredible range of talent from southwest Ontario, including Ron Martin, David and Royden Rabinowitch, Murray Favro, Bev Kelly, Tony Urquhart, Greg Curnoe, and Jack Chambers, among others. "Heart of London," which was curated by Pierre Théberge (who did a lot to engender international scale and taste in the Canadian arts scene and is now director of the National Galley of Canada), drew attention to a new arts scene, one in which the tactile and ideational superseded the formal discourse of the postwar era. Zelenak was part of a triumvirate of artists working in fiberglass at the time. The other two were Redinger and Hugh Leroy. Describing the public and spectacular aspect of Zelenak's work in *Contemporary Canadian Art*, David Burnett and Marilyn Schiff comment, "The abstraction of Zelenak (and Leroy) is an assertion of the freedom of form to displace space."[1]

What is less well known is that Zelenak's large-scale fiberglass works emerged from earlier site-related plywood constructions conceived for outdoor exhibition. These black-painted works, such as *Stoatallos* (1965–66), were edgier, more angular and abrupt in their geometric configurations, if less refined than the curvilinear fiberglass pieces. But it was in these earlier forms that Zelenak developed a more personal investigation of space and mass, with works that could become allegorical or autobiographical, even in this Minimalist-dominated era. If sculpture followed one of two major directions during this period—either descending into pure Pop sensation, and all that caricature implies, or asserting its object-ness at the expense of the artist's persona and potential narrative—Zelenak pursued a third course. There were always traces of persona in Zelenak's sculpture, even in the presence of a clean unwavering line reminiscent of a Carl Andre or Donald Judd construction. For Zelenak, Minimalist language became a standard or background effect that enabled him to pursue more personal and idiosyncratic variations of those syntactic and structural biases.

The transitional sculptures that followed explore movement in space, approaching the Minimalist vernacular merely as a means of communication and not as dogma. They develop into configurations that merge a sense of time and of experience, and this can become quite poetic, engendering a sense that sculpture is an inner reflection or distillation of direct experience. Experiences become markings, weld marks, and mottled metal surfaces—all contributing to a sense of approximate feeling, something that approaches sentiment but has its own Cartesian logic. An approximation for a feeling becomes a line, and another line is added to that. Eventually a kind of mapping developed. Smaller-scaled, well-executed diaristic diagrams in steel and metal, like the "Diagram Block" series (1974–75), carry messages within the mass of metal. Tiny alloyed tin forms fit into larger planes of steel like notes from the underground; Zelenak says that they were influenced by the floor plans of African churches. Sometimes the inset metal shapes move or drift in the same direction; other times they are at odds with one another. Zelenak often positions these works vertically so that they become wall pieces, even as their alchemical array of metals (lead, tin, and copper) develop the dialogue on place, the mapping of flat

space. These poetic paraphrases are among Zelenak's most accomplished works, for they diagrammatically describe space, always with a reference to structure, scale, and experience. The diagrammatic works evolved into the large-scale "Wall Pieces" (1982–87), a series that embraces a graphically strong yet sculptural language. Always at the point of becoming, each configuration embodies a rational presupposition of a potential worldview. One diagram implies another, and they engage the imagination with their animated and highly tactile, rational version of abstraction. In these works, one can sense Zelenak's Cartesian bias as a sculptor: reason over passion. But as he recently commented, "At one's deathbed, one is never sure whether the sculptor's rational beliefs and sense of purpose, or even his sense of confronting the ephemeral nature of life through permanent solid mass, would all vanish into thin air in an instant, to even be negated and rejected by the sudden realization of the finality of it all."[2]

Zelenak's sculpture relates to drawing in an unusual way, for it involves metal, mass, and clean, clear line. Diagrammatic lines give way to traces that reflect movement, or an implicit motion. A potential site as depicted by lines becomes displaced, occupying another place in the plane within a field of surface texture. We likewise see this in Zelenak's wall drawings, which are very sculptural. The relationship between Zelenak's sculptures and his wall pieces is permeable, and the distinctions are very slight: a sculpture could be raised to become a wall piece, or vice versa. The disciplines are decompartmentalized, and media flow into one another, but always with a sense that experience is a physical and perceptual thing. Zelenak takes a pragmatic approach to materials, but paradoxically as a work evolves over time, it begins to look preconceived—even though an instinctive and ever-evolving series of consequences leads to the final work.

In the 1970s and '80s, Zelenak emerged as an intensely personal, reflective sculptor,

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Top: *Petrarch's Climb*, 1988. Steel, 14.5 x 190 in. diameter. Bottom: *Channel Pass 2*, 2003–04. Steel, 56 x 107 x 38.5 in.

Container Contained, 2005. Solid steel, 6 x 54 x 36.5 in.

and the recounted experience that we sense within his works developed into a near-mathematical, universal language that quantifies space and motion. Sculpture seems to record implied motion, its underlying motivation to elicit a response from the viewer. Zelenak defines this as a search for (objective) truths, but those truths are expressed in a highly personal, even poetic way. With their three-dimensional maps, diagrammatic equations for experience, and a note-like style, these works seize us with a sense of mystery, with the impossibility of measuring meaning or experience. Zelenak's sculptures have a Minimalist cadence, but they seem more beautiful than object-like. As Mark Rothko wrote: "Our notions of beauty today are essentially Platonic. That is not strange, of course, since we have already observed that our most manifest and comprehensive reality is Platonic...the artist, in addition to portraying external experiences, can, depending on his skills, also portray internal truths by noting and depicting the profound subtleties of those external appearances."[3]

From his fiberglass outdoor works of the 1960s to the more Minimalist-inspired studies and wall works, to the more recent heavy steel works, Zelenak's sculpture has progressed to become very much of its time, yet it can still be identified with his native farmland region. There is a precision and a love of materials, whether fiberglass, steel, copper, or oak. Each material brings a new resonance to his language. Zelenak often leaves soldering marks in the metal works and then plays on the horizontal and the vertical quality of sculpture to emphasize the relation between body, space, and architecture. Seen in this way, his work relates more readily to Robert Morris's performative sculpture than to the Minimalism of Judd or Andre. The strength of Zelenak's measured sculpture rests precisely in the fact that his work is ultimately theatrical, performative, and biographical (even if abstract).

The recurring motifs in Zelenak's recent sculptures also possess an allegorical quality. He frequently returns to the divining rod that a dowser uses to find water, a symbol of rural living, of connectedness to the earth. Water is a life-force, and the search for it becomes a metaphor for the pursuit of meaning in life. Still other figures, suggestive of vases or urns—vessels whose role is to contain, gather, or hold—have been brought into the new sculptures, works that are not at all small scale. The vessel or container becomes a vehicle that speaks of transport, with suggestive channels that describe distribution and redirection, a natural economy in which procreation replaces manufacture. Zelenak's vessels can have prows like a boat, seemingly plowing across a gallery space. For a recent show at Christopher Cutts Gallery in Toronto, Zelenak presented some of these works, including several from the "Divining Rods" series. *Channel Pass* (2000) consists of 4.5 tons of steel brick, shaped into two curving walls. The ogival, essentially feminine shape of these two curving walls is offset by the weighty, stolid nature and outward appearance of the steel. Indeed these "walls" have a defensive or protective quality, while the basin in the center is smooth and light sensitive, catching and bouncing light off its interior. The directional nature

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Table 2, Still Life with Divining Rod, 1998–2002. Steel, 30 x 72 x 72 in.

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of the two pointed ends of the sculpture, as well as its placement in a wite cube space, recalls the early days of Minimalism, but again these works are allegorical and experiential, with a metaphorical cadence.

One of Zelenak's larger "ground-bound," stationary sculptures, *Channel Pass* could be a boat or vehicle embarked on a journey, but its interior form and mass make it more intuitive, a metaphor for an inner journey. It is infused with markers that visually direct or define space. *Table 1, Still Life With Divining Rod*, a 1,500-pound square sculpture, is literally a table with a concave bowl in its center. The monochrome steel table and the branch/twig that both obstructs and protects the interior bowl suggest a search, perhaps the artist's, to find meaning, but the source—the water—and the meaning are quite obvious, directing us toward the natural and physical world. The bowl could be a metaphor or the actual container that gives and sustains life. The elegantly titled *Dowser Fountain with a Memory of its Forgotten Past* features an imposing round well of steel bricks. It is formidable and suggests closure, fortification, and spatial confines.

There is a tension in this and other recent sculptures between austere mass-volume (now scaled down) and a more intuitive side that directs us to the unseen forces that guide us through life.

Sixteen small wall-mounted plywood pieces with poured tin sections were also included in Zelenak's recent show. The tin-filled areas, like the "inner bowls" in the larger works, act as areas of containment that compliment stylized and simplified landscapes. Metaphors for the natural world, these child-like landscapes rephrase the temporal and spatial preoccupations dealt with more abstractly in the "ground-bound" *Table 1, Still Life with Divining Rod* and *Channel Pass*. Their hieratic and symbolic markers cut from tin, painted clouds, and land and sky equations can be arranged in a sequence and play off the weighty steel sculptures.

Zelenak's work continues to evolve with an acute sense of the physical and tactile. His contribution as a sculptor lies in the way that he personalizes our intimate, even instinctual, relation to architecture, environment, and space. He does this in a quasi-scientific way, broadening the discourse on content and experience. His diagrammatic mappings are theatrical and performance related. Zelenak traces experience with a comprehensive and qualitative poetic sense, something that harkens back to the influence of Tony Smith or Frank Stella, whose work he witnessed at the Detroit Institute of Arts' "Form, Color, Image" show in 1967. But beyond the art-for-art's sake ideology and Minimalism and Pop Art, we discover a much more personal and allegorical sculpture: Zelenak's art moves beyond its early influences and origins, and in so doing evokes a beauty inherent in matter itself.

Notes

1 David Burnett and Marilyn Schiff, *Contemporary Canadian Art* (Edmonton: Hurtig, 1983), pp. 226–28.

2 Ed Zelenak in conversation with John Grande, March 2006.

3 Mark Rothko, *The Artist's Reality; Philosophies of Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), pp. 67–68.

John Grande's newest book is Dialogues in Diversity: Art from Marginal to Mainstream.