



## From Minimalism to Metaphor

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Ten years ago, in an essay for an exhibition that began at the Thames Art Gallery in Chatham and went on to tour two other regional sites (the McIntosh Gallery in London and Gallery Lambton in Sarnia), I spoke of the interplay between Minimalism and metaphor in Ed Zelenak's work. Pictorial tropes and symbols have been a recurring feature of his later career, asserting themselves with greater regularity in the 1980s when he was moving into his third decade as an artist. By this point he was consolidating a personal—and perhaps even private—iconography that has carried through to the present day. But while the passing decades have also seen Zelenak working in an array of media, from paper to lead, from tin to dry pigment, from plywood to rolled steel, one of his unflinching aims has been to rethink and resignify his relationship to Minimalism.

Vanguard Minimalism of the 1960s tried to substitute the “specific object” for traditional approaches to sculpture, including assemblage and abstract Modernist constructions which might still maintain traces of the human figure or natural forms. Often the specific object was some sort of rectangular, modular shape, made of plywood or fibreglass, or—rather famously—of industrially produced bricks. The object refused to rest on a plinth or attach to a wall, and disavowed any likeness to the human body or to other things in the world. It declared, unambiguously, only its own facticity. It was geometric and therefore predictable from any viewing angle. It had no interiority, no apparent content, no story to tell. It just ‘asked’ to be encountered. It was obvious that the grids and cubes of Minimalism were meant to repress or banish the sinuous lines of landscape, the expressive gesture, the biomorphic blob, and the metaphysical resonance of the circle.

History moved on and Minimalism became academic, but it had also cleared out much of the Modernist lumber room. And despite its own puritanical strictures, its passing allowed for an enriched field of experimentation or idiosyncrasy under the rubrics of “sculpture” or “objecthood.” It left serious sculptors like Zelenak free to craft such in-between ‘things’ as symbolically charged wall pieces or table-like objects. Two works

that struck me with such compelling force in the 2005 exhibition were a pair of imposing, beautifully fashioned tables, one in steel and one made of wood and bronze, both originating in the 1990s. Depending on the conceptual puzzle you wanted to disambiguate, they could be seen as supporting structures for still-life insets of tree branches acting as divining rods, or as specific objects whose integrity had been invaded by an extraneous metaphorical agenda. What Zelenak seemed to be suggesting was that the Minimalist object was the endpoint of a historical process in which the ethos of the grid, introduced by the earliest schools of the twentieth-century avant garde (Cubism, Constructivism, De Stijl, Bauhaus) could become a threshold for new sculptural iterations.

Zelenak scored major early successes as a sculptor of Pop-tinged public art. His formation, beginning in the late 1950s, took him from OCAD in Toronto to the Fort Worth Art Center in Texas. In 1969, back at home in the combine tracts of Southwestern Ontario, he was hailed in the pages of *Art in America* for his international sensibility and new works that had him “temporarily abandoning . . . gestural vigor . . . for a more concentrated minimal statement.”<sup>1</sup> He settled near West Lorne, a mere fifty kilometres from London, on a bucolic property not far from a 401 ramp, and embarked on the long, productive period of his artistic maturity. He and fellow sculptor Walter Redinger were famous for planting their studios side by side amidst the to-





bacco fields and earning their keep by harvesting the yearly crop.

Times were on the upswing. Civic commissions for outdoor installations in London and Ottawa, and points in between, earned Zelenak notoriety. The most impressive of these works was *Traffic* (1968-69). One of his several experiments in fibreglass, it was a symmetrically contoured, bio-suggestive bauble that gave back lyrical reflections of Ottawa's dawn-to-dusk sunlight. The venerable Canadian constitutional scholar Eugene Forsey, a recent Trudeau appointee to the Senate, dashed off a letter to the press, asking who had authorized the placement of "that hideous representation of the large intestine" into a park near the historic Lord Elgin hotel.<sup>2</sup> But as critic Burf Kay rightly noted, *Traffic* brought out the classical subtexts of Modernism through a spirit of Pop abstraction; it reflected the moods and tints of the daily weather, while also adhering to mathematical proportions and offering a sense of self-enclosed inevitability.<sup>3</sup>

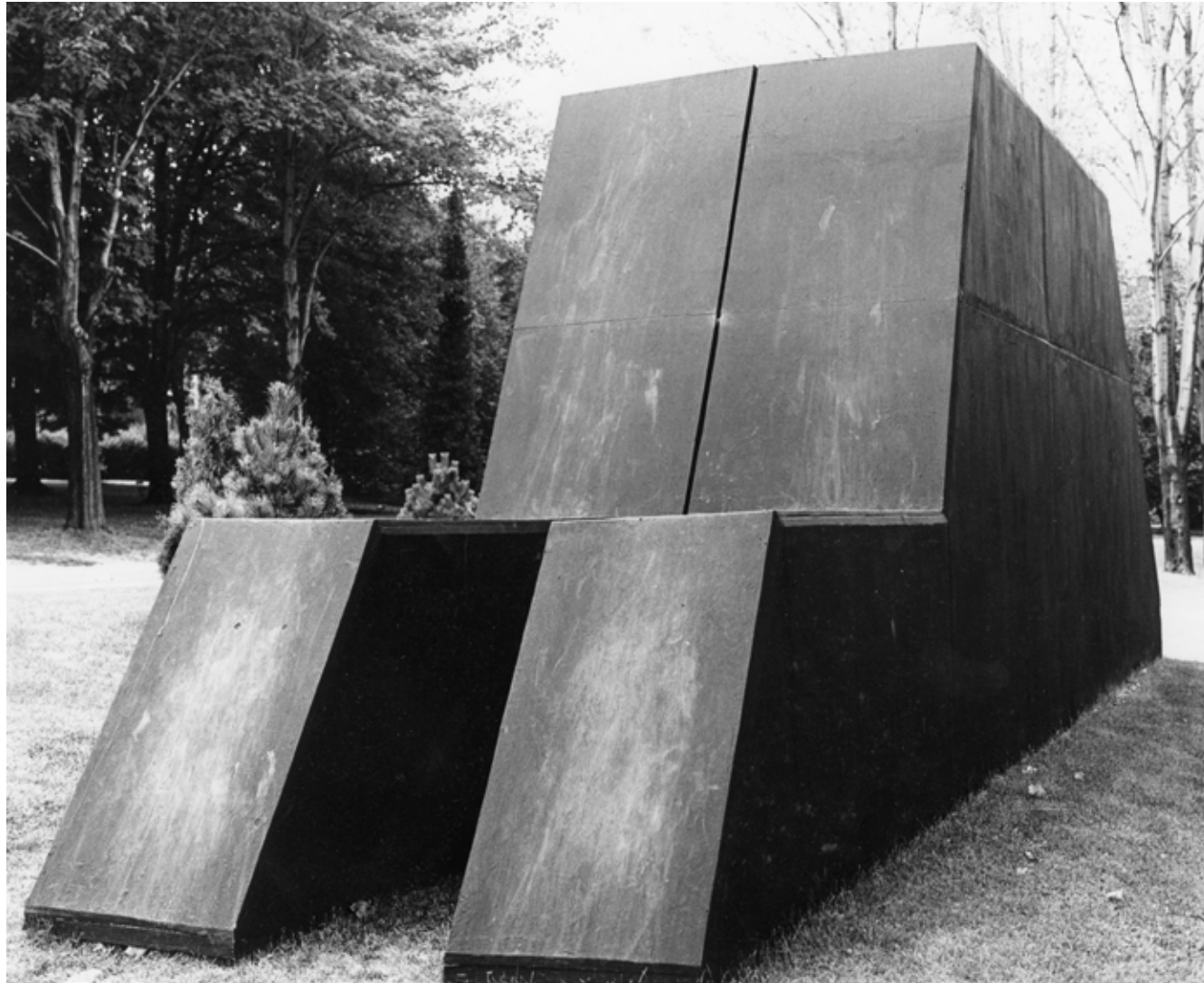
The large-scale, decidedly public structures of the late 1960s and early 1970s were riding a wave of innovation that testified to the economic and counter-cultural verve of that baby-boom era. But Zelenak isn't technically a boomer; he was born in 1940, five years earlier than the cohort, and the persona that reappears throughout the phases of his practice has become ever more studied and eremitic. Deepening inwardness pervades the later career, and Zelenak proves, again and again, that Minimalism and metaphor need not be mutually exclusive. Major pieces such as *Noah's Ark: Myth Denied* (1998), to cite just one instance, bear this out. It shares attributes with the first breakthrough works, which include *Traffic* and one of its notable predecessors, the much more sombre plywood sphinx named *Stoatallos* (1966-67). Like them, *Noah's Ark* asserts physical presence and registers a sense of theatricality that recalls the canons of Minimalism. Yet its heavy, steel bulk and formal precision strive to make an antithetical point, for which the title is a clue.



Steel is one of Zelenak's vocational substances, and water, with its life-giving properties and seemingly endless range of symbolic meanings, forms a persistent theme. The commanding, floor-based sculptures of the 1980s and 90s may embody the end-stage vigour of a perfected Minimalist ethos, but they're also permeated by cosmic prompts and spiritual insinuations. These reside everywhere—in the shapes and forms of the objects, in their materiality, and of course in their titles. With *Noah's Ark*, the clamped steel grid that rests atop a stylized hull seems to act like a myth buster; it appears to resist the story of the ark, although we can't be sure. That may be too facile an inference, and the opposite may in fact be true: that it's much rather skepticism that's being rejected, and that the grid represents both the mapping of the ineffable and the function of consciousness at work in the world.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, translated into English in 1962, revolutionized North American approaches to sculpture. The French philosopher, only recently deceased, taught that the relationship of consciousness to the object is chiasmic. "We have the experience of a world," he wrote,

not understood as a system of relations which wholly determine each event, but as an open totality the synthesis of which is inexhaustible. . . . From the moment that experience—that is, the opening on to our de facto world—is recognized as the beginning of knowledge, there



is no longer any way of distinguishing a level of a priori truths and one of factual ones, what the world must necessarily be and what it actually is.<sup>4</sup>

Science is abstract; experience is existential. We project ourselves into the unsynthesized totality of the surrounding field. We navigate reality by constructing intuitive, pre-scientific epistemologies. That's how consciousness functions in a state of temporality and how experience constitutes our primordial form of knowledge. We are caught up in an intertwined X-pattern of incoming perception and outgoing cogitation. It is this infinite attempt to discern an open totality 'out there,' enmeshing the self, that informs the pictorial and metaphorical gestures in Zelenak's practice. In *Noah's Ark* he confesses that neither Minimalist reductiveness nor biblical legend affords closure in the quest for synthesis; and more to the point, neither steel nor water are fundamental matter; both are, so to speak, synthesized from primary elements; and so, taken together, grid and hull, titular myth and physical thing, conjure up ideas of an integrated yet open-ended search for meaning across the world's elemental depths.

This is expressed in more modestly scaled works as well, particularly Zelenak's several cycles of wall reliefs and two-dimensional pieces that occupy an unspecified space between sculpture and drawing. Here, stripped of sculptural mass and volume, his development of a personalized iconography stands forth within the flatness and pliability of the various formats. His iconic language consists of a few simplified, pictorial elements. Among the most frequent of these are the cleft Y-shapes of divining rods, but there are also images and relief casts representing vases and bowls, twigs and branches, and a crude, single-gabled house outline that, when laid on its side, can be seen as a burial box, a boat, or perhaps an aeronautic vessel. Metaphor picks out points of unexpected identity in two diverse objects. Allegory plots a geometric correspondence between literal and conceptual entities. Zelenak's icons operate on either side of this tropological distinction.



The dowsing stick is an investigative tool. It originated as a kind of wavelength device for detecting hidden mineral deposits in mines or finding subterranean springs and waterways. Astrological signs and solar myths have also appeared in Zelenak's work and in his comments to reviewers. At the end of the 1980s and into the 90s, for example, he produced a number of gouache on paper works diagramming the constellations and evoking celestial journeys. How can we add it all up? Where is Zelenak taking us with his pictorial language? The natural asterism which marks out the coordinates for the geometric ciphers of the zodiac is merely an effect of our perspective from planet Earth. Astrology may or may not be more of a fiction than dowsing, but both lend themselves to mantic uses and occupy a fascinating mental territory between crackpot 'science' and the more noble ideals of perennial metaphysics.

Allusion, allegory, metaphor, symbolism, and myth are themselves divining devices or means of cognitive mapping. The world, as an experiential field or as a general concept, is a set of inferences and relations, as Merleau-Ponty observed: how one can "distinguish . . . what the world must necessarily be and what it actually is."<sup>5</sup> Beyond the deafness and blindness of an immeasurable universe some transcendental meaning surely subsists. Perhaps. The truth is there, traced out in ghostly demarcations across the starry heavens or hidden in subterranean rills. Thus speaks the iconic language of a sculptor whose lines and forms are oth-



erwise wedded to commanding sparseness of the Minimalist object.

In the second half of the 1980s Zelenak produced four versions of *Petrarch's Climb*, conically shaped steel sculptures of a decidedly mathematical profile. With their geometric simplicity and right-angled vertices they adhere to Minimalist tenets from the earlier era but their surfaces are also marked with figures and abrasions. The sculptor's traditional mission is to assert mass and objectivity, and to register touch or some trace of workmanship, even of the finest kind. But Minimalism had been all about clean, industrial topology. While Eva Hesse used rubber tubing to engender organic connotations onto the steel frame of the Minimalist cube, and process artists stressed bodily presence and manual labour, Minimalism took matters out of the sculptor's hands. In reducing the amount of handling actually done by the sculptor, it eliminated traces of the expressive self. Remnants of such conservatism and austerity are still present in *Petrarch's Climb*, but the title takes us beyond the art historical narrative.

Francesco Petrarca was a fourteenth-century Italian poet who in 1336 decided to climb Mont Ventoux, one of the most imposing peaks in Provence. Reaching the windy heights and glorying in the prospect, Petrarch (the standard English version of the name) took out a copy of St. Augustine's *Confessions* and began reading. It would be impertinent to detect too much in Zelenak's title, but it's hard not to take *Petrarch's Climb* as a statement about a deepening reflective urge and new perspectives at early mid-life. Augustine's work famously describes his own spiritual evolution and path toward conversion, and Petrarch himself often went in search of meditative retreats, abandoning his beloved Italy and his equally 'native' city of Avignon for quiet hillside hideaways in the valleys of Vaucluse.

Out in West Lorne, where he and his wife Clara were raising a family, Zelenak wasn't nestled too far from the madding crowds of London or Toronto, or Detroit for that matter. But in the late 80s, just before the internet

hit, this was far enough. It distanced him from contemporary Neo-Expressionist trends and allowed him to maintain a solemn distance from the upsurge of identity politics and Post-Structuralist polemics that were rolling through the art world. Zelenak paid no special heed to the widely proclaimed death of authorship or the deconstruction of subjectivity. It's true that *Petrarch's Climb* relies on the visual predictability of Minimalism's core doctrines. With its isometric shape, the cone takes up its position as a geometrical exercise, yet at the same time, and in concert with the title, it proposes an allegorical dimension.

The *Petrarch* sculptures aren't about that poet's medieval religiosity or his imaginary dialogues with Augustine, one of the towering forefathers of Christian theology. Rather, they match the object, allegorically, with the scaling of magnitudes. The idea is of measuring the self against internal and external immensities. Reviewing an exhibition of *Petrarch's Climb*, writer Donald Brackett remarked that "[t]he message of Zelenak's work is about dropping beneath the surface of the world, toward its interior, and finding a pinnacle."<sup>6</sup> This is astutely observed, for the cone, depending on its orientation, can hurl us into the ether of sidereal distances or pitch us toward narrowing depths. In short, *Petrarch's Climb* revisits the point made earlier in relation to Merleau-Ponty—the quest for synthesis. It suggests that geometric forms are abstractions redolent of scientific as well as esoteric potential.

Consider the cone shape: does it have any comparable cultural standing on par with the circle or the square? This question can be asked at multiple levels. The circle and the sphere seem to have been symbolically more fertile than the square or the cube. The ground plan of Stonehenge is older than the Parthenon. Yet both circle and square are combined in eastern mandalas. As for the cone, what should we think of its function in the arts or the mystical sciences? In the astronomy of Johannes Kepler, the cone wasn't among the five, multi-faceted Platonic Solids through which he systematized the universe.<sup>7</sup> Yet we recall that Kepler inscribed such solids into their containing spheres,



and that most cones are mathematically formed from their basal circles. We can therefore hardly say that the cone, as a geometric figure, is but a mathematical abstraction, when it might bear on the shape of the universe itself. Is this a bridge too far in art criticism, but not in art?

In citing Petrarch, arguably the first proto-Renaissance humanist, and the successor to Dante, and in formulating a symbolic approximation of Petrarch's ascent, Zelenak is pushing beyond the boundaries of Minimalist specificity or formal autonomy. This work may have nothing to do with the funnel-like form of Dante's Hell, or the "perning" and "widening gyre[s]" of Yeats's poetry, including the conical spindling and unspindling of historical and psychic time as plotted out by Yeats in the arcane pages of *A Vision* (1925), but it puts the principles of Minimalism onto a metaphoric plane. It is impossible for artists who use such timeless, immortal forms—particularly artists with Zelenak's sense of mission, whose work touches up against cosmographic mysteries—to escape their archetypal associations.

Toward the middle of the 1990s, Zelenak's journey from specific objects to allegorical meanings, from sculptural materiality to abstruse symbols (and back again), was emblematically presented in a series of wall works centred on the ancient Egyptian sun-god Ra. Here, in the pictographic spirit of the myth it celebrates, Zelenak presents a bullet- or boat-like forms orbiting or speeding in the direction of some sort of fireball. The wedge-like boat shapes are cast from tin; the orbs are composed of pure, saturated pigment, radiating effusive oranges and yellows from the heart of the colour spectrum. These fiery circles derive from the iconography of Ra as seen in score upon score of hieroglyphic images where a serpentine disc surmounts the head of a hybrid man-animal creature. Zelenak's 'boats' recall the solar barge in which dead Egyptian aristocrats were ferried to their rest and in which the sun symbolically travelled on its diurnal cycle, navigating the earth's nether regions in the hours of darkness and reappearing in full, life-engendering splendour from dawn to noontide.

Was Zelenak reading Mircea Eliade or Northrop Frye in the 1990s or in earlier days? Probably not the latter, but he was intuitively in tune with Frye's observation that the great themes and modes of the arts correspond to the natural cycles of the solar year, as do the seasons of a man's or woman's life. In the course of a phone conversation in late January 2015, Zelenak told me that he wasn't much concerned with "how art history has morphed and how my work has interwoven with that. I'm interested in reaffirming that consciousness is part of the world in a profound way. You take stock of the shift in each passing decade. You go through life and one day find yourself on the back side of it."<sup>8</sup> I understood the sentiments, particularly in that last comment. Even the best life is a patchwork of semi-accomplished projects and late-arriving epiphanies, but consciousness never relinquishes its forward thrust through time, its intentional relation to objects within and without the horizon of mortality.

Zelenak's art does interweave, very meaningfully, with some of the major phases of art history in the last fifty or sixty years, but it does so on his own inward terms. Just as he didn't buy into the rising Post-Structuralist moment during the 1980s, he also hasn't cared to address the digital revolution or the revival of religion in an age of terror. And why should he? Zelenak has spent a lifetime reformulating the Minimalist paradigm and submitting it to the test of metaphor and symbolic allusion. Taken as a whole, his work engages in the ongoing process of divining the mystery. From mid-career onward, Zelenak has been saying that art is not an end in itself, but rather the platform or the place where you go to meet the deeper questions that persist through all the permutations of maturity and growth. But if the artist is seasoned and the craft is lasting, the art lives long and the questions never stop surfacing . . . questions that survive the scandalously final (?) fact of death, a fact which is either the withering breath of god, or a dim-witted prank perpetrated by a semantically elusive universe.



#### Endnotes

1. Barry Lord, "Three Young Canadians," *Art in America*, vol. 57, no. 1 (January/February 1969): 89.
2. Letter to *The Ottawa Citizen*, cited in "The Eye of the Beholder," *Time* magazine (27 September 1971): 7.
3. I paraphrase, very closely, Burf Kay, "In Praise of Traffic"... NO OTHER DATA IS AVAILABLE IN THE PDF OF THIS ARTICLE [That's OK, I will look up!](#)
4. Quoted in Wolfgang Iser, "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach," *New Literary History*, vol. 3, no. 2 (Winter 1972): 286.
5. *Ibid.*, 286.
6. "Poet's Peak," *Canadian Art*, vol. 17 no. 5 (Winter 2000): 80.
7. Unless we are to think of the cone as a variation on the pyramid.
8. Discussion with the author, January 26, 2015; twenty-six minutes' duration.