

## Ed Zelenak: Divining the Immeasurable

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A measured, economical sense of form and gesture is a longstanding hallmark of Ed Zelenak's art. By contrast, the elegant symbols he offers conjure a wealth of associations. Across five decades, the artist has explored simple, stylized motifs, shapes including variations of crosses, tools, vessels, cosmic entities, hieratic signs, and more. Such forms have been rendered for millennia. Zelenak redeploys them in a contemporary context which often dissociates them from literal religious or similar narratives, though they still convey many of the same aspirations and challenges. His symbols express a yearning for existential meaning, and encourage an empathic transference of personal experience onto—or into—each work. Zelenak has in fact described his practice, which encompasses huge sculpture, a variety of wall-dependent mixed media works, and jewel-like drawings as “philosophical meanderings,” an external means of going into the self.<sup>1</sup> He invites us to see for ourselves and to continue on our own.

After studies in the United States and Toronto, in the mid-1960s Zelenak began experimenting with wood and metal, developing a number of untitled sculptures that prioritized strong line, eccentric angles, and in certain cases a sensation of lightness, even suspension (See pages). He chose divergent materials to arouse feelings of opposition and tension, countering the irregularities of natural materials, such as wood—which at times appeared to have been found boards and rough logs—with more uniform lengths of steel. He underscored this difference by setting the finished sculptures outdoors. Here, the inclement environment exacerbated the gap between man-made, imposed structure versus unrestrained, organic form. None of these early works survive.

In one of Zelenak's best-known early works, *Stoatallos* (1966, See page), the artist approached material and form from a different perspective. The abundant negative space and kinetic feeling celebrated in earlier sculptures disappeared, replaced by an imposing, more simplified structure made solely of darkly-coloured plywood. Expressing the distinction using

architectural terms, while the earlier works exuded an open, “peristyle” sensibility, *Stoatallos* embodied a closed, heavier “hypostyle” concept, with all the inscrutability (or imagined drama) attending its potential, yet to us inaccessible, interior. Indeed, reviewers have interpreted *Stoatallos* with the ancient culture—Egyptian—usually associated with such hypostyle designs.

Interpreted as a blocky approximation of a quadruped's body, *Stoatallos* is certainly reminiscent of the Sphinx, here minus the human head. In its resolute planar sections, it also resembles such edifices as a mastaba or ziggurat. As these are tomb structures, they are also often understood through pop-cultural representations of exotic myth, and this also embellishes elements of the mysterious, even theatrical. In a prefatory text written years later, Zelenak seemed to acknowledge this, noting that *Stoatallos* (and to extent, sculptures which followed, including *Wedge* (1966) and *Slipper* (1967, See pages) could be seen as dramatic, “socially and emotionally bound in a way—sensing our mortality





in the shadow of a monolith.”<sup>2</sup> Zelenak’s interest in layered meaning continues to this day.

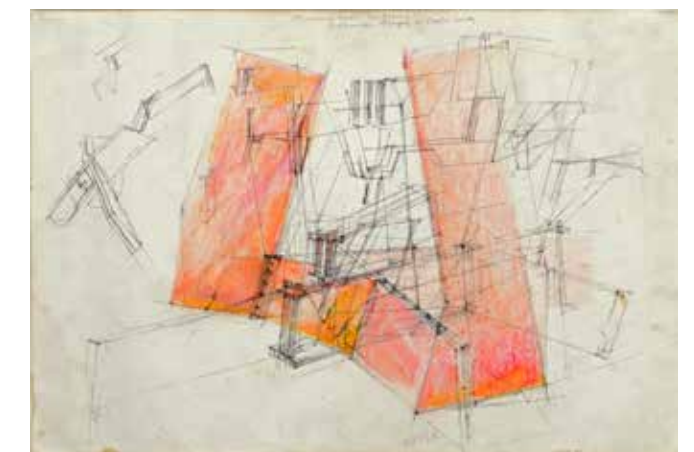
The abstraction found in the early wood and metal sculptures is paralleled by a number of surviving drawings which depict objects akin to these untitled forms. They are austere in colouration and display an almost whirring linear idiom; each appears to have been left at various stages of completion. Compared with Zelenak’s graphite, ink and gouache works of the 1980s and 90s, which portray whole sections of the cosmos, these early drawings seem more like preparatory sketches or primers, though Zelenak defines them as independent works. Just as his earliest 3-D works contrast approaches to space and form, so too do his early and later graphics differ: they shift from “micro” to “macro,” from the implied to the more completely articulated, and from a pared-down use of colour and shapes to more vivid and recognizable form.

From the latter half of the 1960s through the early 70s, Zelenak continued making sculptures intended for placement outdoors. He broke decisively with the use of organic materials, however, to test the properties of the new medium of fibreglass. Its futuristic qualities and versatility balanced with the urbanized settings increasingly offered to Zelenak via public commissions.

Zelenak’s monumental fibreglass sculptures are among the most purely formal and analytical works of his career. As Lorenzo Buj mentions on [page #](#), *Traffic*, located at the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa, may be the best-known example of the series, though other prominent pieces range from *Convolution Scale A* (1969) which stands in downtown London in the courtyard of federal building; *U-Split* (1968-69, Canada Garden, Ottawa); *Slingshot* (1968-69); *Convolution #7* (1971, displayed at York University in Toronto); *Vertical Reverse* (1972); *Andershot*, 1973-74, Department of Public Works, Toronto); *Arnprior* (1972-73); and *Aporia* (1978), which beat out two dozen competing proposals for a display site outside a courthouse in Kitchener, Ontario.<sup>3</sup> (See [pages](#)) Zelenak also made a number

of smaller examples of the *Convolution* series, and a set of circular *Shield* works, of which certain were sometimes coloured in different hues such as green.

Alongside Walter Redinger and expatriate American artist Don Bonham, Zelenak investigated polymers for almost a decade.<sup>4</sup> By concentrating on one versatile material, Zelenak was free to expand upon another influence, the “one-block” Aksumite architecture of Ethiopia. The smooth, translucent surfaces and pliant curves made possible with fibreglass enabled him to amplify clean line, volume, and a feeling of mobility. The works also expressed Zelenak’s pursuit of interiority in all its forms: suffused with changing daylight, the works invoked notions of energy and to the artist, even consciousness. In a related gesture, the artist filled the domes of the *Shield* sculptures with biomorphic, tubular coils. After a time, however, the properties of fibreglass proved inadequate to Zelenak’s shifting formal and thematic needs. He replaced this very “twentieth-century” medium with substances that have had much longer associations with human endeavour, such as steel, copper, and tin. Processes including casting, patination, and soldering also linked to social and technological history. In combination with a growing focus on symbolism—a system that has personal significance for the artist and boundless meaning to other viewers—these choices led Zelenak to describe his new direction as “literally like going into yourself.”<sup>5</sup>





The ensuing body of works, while on occasion imposing, never reach the monumental scope of their fibreglass predecessors. His art of the mid-1970s onward communicates a more physically understated, meditative approach that derives as much from cultural references as from formal experimentation.<sup>6</sup> Zelenak embraced a different type of adventure, one involving laborious process and, through symbolism, individualized reflection.<sup>7</sup> Commenting on this work in 1993, critic John Bentley Mays saw Zelenak's archetypal, even "chaste" works as "demanding unusual silence from the viewer."<sup>8</sup>

The new series of sculptures and wall-works included the *Diagram Block* and *Notations* floor pieces made of steel plate with lead and tin finishes (see pages). Gestural marks resulting from excising, imbedding small elements into the surface, heating and other techniques may be seen as vestiges of the organic elements first seen in the 60s' wood and steel sculptures. He also explored the possibilities between painting and sculpture, producing works in which singular, raw metal structures reminiscent of houses, doorways or vessels seem to scorch their way out of pale, barren backgrounds (See pages). These investigations have proved to be the most productive of his career, spurring a variety of related series exploring mapping, and, taking the argument further, the mind.

Zelenak does not view his work, either then or now, however, as "process art." In the years spent in the studio he has cultivated "working relationships" with materials and methods, and the efforts expended to develop an artwork parallel the span and meaning of life, notions surrounding the value and use of art, and, if one is so inclined, metaphysical concerns. There is thus a modern version of alchemy going on in his use of ancient materials and metallurgy in the service of signs.

Beginning in the 1980s, Zelenak began identifying his work using terms that were more colloquial, referring directly to known objects, and to religious or mythic narratives. Rather than give his work names



inspired by Minimalism, such as *Six-Plane Curve*, he made designations that fit with a theme he named "Mythorealism." Under this rubric, he developed subcategories of works, incorporating "vessels," "rods," and cartographical references such as maps and "climb" sites.<sup>9</sup> Titles allude to biblical stories, such as *Noah's Ark*, or those of ancient belief systems, as in *Ra's Voyage* and *Waters of Forgetfulness* (the latter referencing Hades' river of the Lethe). Rather than strictly illustrating specific narratives, however, the titles and metaphors encourage personal interpretation.

For Zelenak, a reference to the epic trials of Ra, Noah, or Petrarch perhaps transforms a specific work into the artist's equivalent of a *Künstlerroman*, or account of or catalyst for artistic growth.<sup>10</sup> While his works undoubtedly carry personal meanings for Zelenak, it is in the end not a necessary point to learn whether they are paracosmic. It is fitting, though, that the artist has often referenced the moon in its steadfast nightly schedule, its circular form akin to that of an ouroboros: perhaps each new work manifests a kind of eternal return, where opportunity and ingenuity is reprised for the maker and viewer.

Zelenak's practice integrates art historical genres such as still life, seen in his vase and table structures of the 1990s. Divining rods and dowsing sticks, which metaphorically can lead the way to understanding, could also potentially be "read" as figural.<sup>11</sup> It is significant, however, that Zelenak's work commonly

## BIG CONE TO GO HERE.



involves blank spaces, or, where more overtly representational, inchoate backgrounds. The emptiness of a relatively unmarked paper or steel tablet, or a more literal receptacle-like object (such as *Vessel, A Measure of Truth* (1986-88) and *Dowser Fountain with a Memory of a Vanished Presence* (1997, [see page](#)) works as a projective space.

The idea of an evocative void is also reflected in the history of art, from religious uses—the open windows painted in Ottonian-era manuscripts, the gold leaf habitat of sacred characters in medieval devotional art; *mihrab* niches in mosques—to those serving different though equally fervent convictions, as in the canvases of Colour Field painters and myriad other abstractionists. A mirror is also technically “empty” yet is endlessly changeable, disclosing much to and about the viewer. The incipient space Zelenak provides is likewise intended to cultivate a similar encounter. According to Zelenak, his work is “all about finding out something about who you are.” He adds that “with each work I try to explain that to which there is no conclusion,” warning that “once there’s closure to something, there’s no point.”<sup>12</sup>

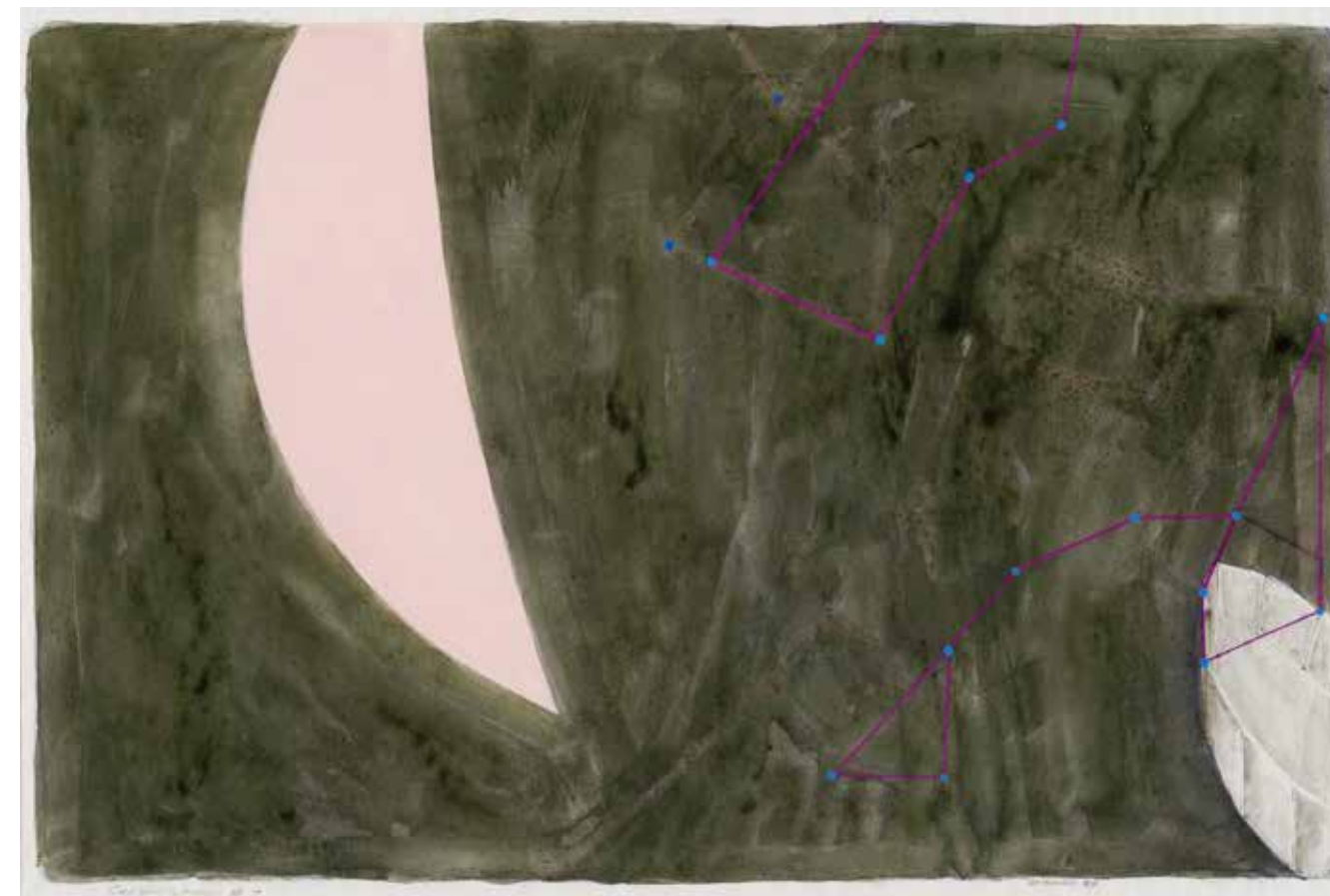
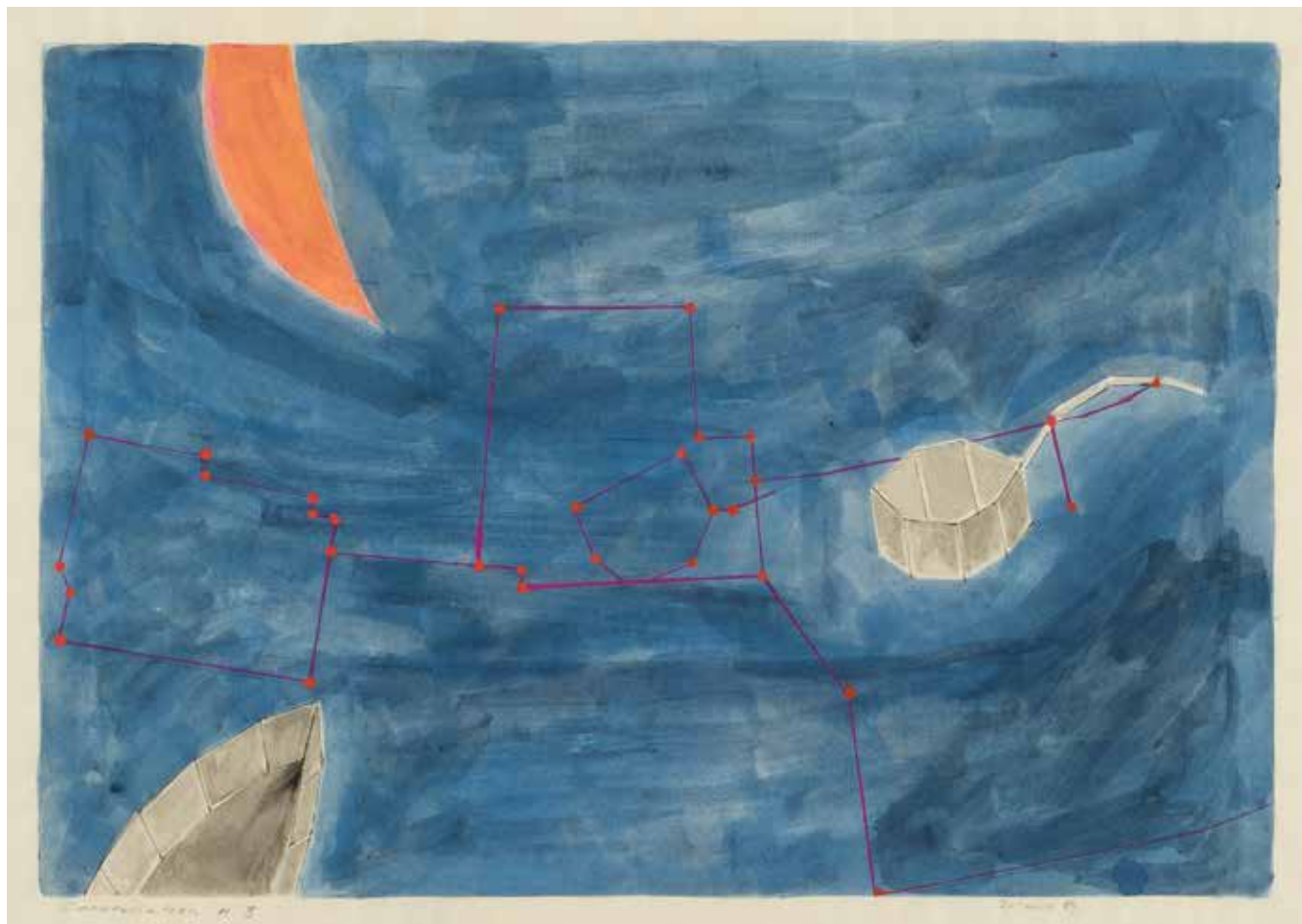
The same investigations guide Zelenak’s drawings, though his renderings in charcoal, gouache, graphite, ink, paint and later, dry pigments have not received the same level of attention as his sculptural work. Many of the drawings, including the *Map* series, are stark and iconic, resembling hieroglyphics. Another group, the *Constellation* images, pairs almost uncharacteristically vivid colour with delicate line. The more painterly

approach of these graphics links with the aesthetic seen in Zelenak’s recent *Levitation* grids.

The content of the *Constellation* and similar grouping ranges from fantastic ruminations on space, to documents of (perhaps literal) astral projection, to enigmatic chartings of the cosmos. It is illuminating to connect these celestial views with the meteorologically-inspired images of Zelenak’s regional colleague, Paterson Ewen. Like Zelenak, Ewen began his career making nonrepresentational art, which at one point expressed itself in exacting, Minimalist arrangements of line that would not seem out of place alongside one of Zelenak’s plywood or fibreglass compositions. There was no direct influence between the two, yet later on both men also worked a similar stretch of phenomenological and metaphysical road, their imagery growing more dramatic.

Ewen’s approach, famously involving routing and painting huge sheets of plywood, is more gesturally frenetic and colourful, and at times nearly immersive. For his wall-dependent works, Zelenak used different, equally arduous processes to produce scenes in which turbulence was concentrated into metal nuclei. His emotive elements are less overt, though musing on them, it becomes clear why they have been interpreted as pulsing with “dark energy” and “suffused with existential brooding.”<sup>13</sup>

The efforts of both artists represent exquisite, individualized interpretations of comparable subject matter. It is interesting to note Ewen’s addition of



metal fragments in his works to depict the moon and other galactic phenomena, and the kinship between his lunar imagery and Zelenak works such as *The Appearance of Wholeness: Seabed* and certain *Ra's Voyage* drawings (see page).<sup>14</sup> Their watercolour treatments are also fascinating complements. Ewen's paintings are larger and more blustery than Zelenak's smaller, more controlled ones. These latter images, which have been labelled as romantic, instead bring to mind reliquaries, with glowing purple, midnight blue, and radiant Chinese red seemingly lit from within.<sup>15</sup>

In discussing the vehicle or projectile-shaped motifs Zelenak employs across all his works, critic Walter Klepac suggested that the artist's symbolism can be indicative of scientific discovery and achievement. Klepac linked the artist's symbols of travel to views through a telescope or microscope (Zelenak himself has intimated that the objects he represents are "far away").<sup>16</sup> While Lorenzo Buj describes a connection to Dante Alighieri (Page), this mix of the scientific, spiritual and fictional also recalls the interplanetary travels envisioned by Christian author C.S. Lewis in his *Space Trilogy* (1938-45). In the first two of the three novels (*Out of the Silent Planet* and *Voyage to Venus*,

followed by *That Hideous Strength*) Lewis' hero, a philologist named Dr. Elwin Ransom, journeys to Mars and Venus, where he is involved in struggles between good and evil.<sup>17</sup> He finds himself in the proverbial "cleft stick" (an apt idiom here) yet discovers the essential truths of the galaxy and by extension, of God.

Lewis' descriptions have interesting parallels with the experience of Zelenak's works, including views of crafts and outer space, and the enigmatic, metallic skies travelled in his *Levitation* works (see pages). In *Out of the Silent Planet* (1938) Dr. Ransom's interstellar conveyance has a similar, though shifting, metallic form:

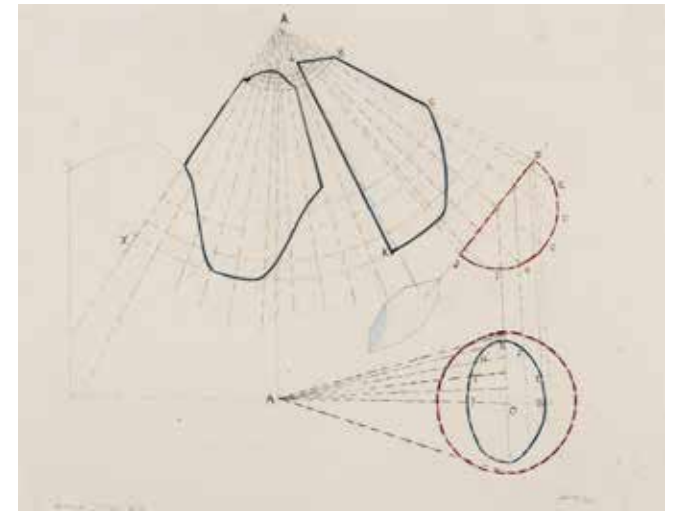
The light of the huge moon—if it was a moon—had by now illuminated his surroundings almost as clearly as if it were day. It was a very strange room. The floor was so small that the bed and a table beside it occupied the whole width of it: the ceiling seemed to be nearly twice as wide and the walls sloped outward as they rose, so that Ransom had the impression of lying at the bottom of a deep and narrow wheelbarrow.



The room was walled and floored with metal, and was in a state of continuous faint vibration—a silent vibration with a strangely lifelike and un-mechanical quality about it. But if the vibration was silent, there was plenty of noise going on—a series of musical raps or percussions at quite irregular intervals which seemed to come from the ceiling. It was as if the metal chamber in which he found himself was being bombarded with small, tinkling missiles. Ransom was by now thoroughly frightened—not with the prosaic fright that a man suffers in a war, but with a heady, bounding kind of fear that was hardly distinguishable from his general excitement: he was poised on a sort of emotional watershed from which, he felt, he might at any moment pass either into delirious terror or into an ecstasy of joy. He knew now that he was not in a submarine: and the infinitesimal quivering of the metal did not suggest the motion of any wheeled vehicle. A ship then, he supposed, or some kind of airship... but there was an oddity in all his sensations for which neither supposition accounted. Puzzled, he sat down again on the bed, and stared at the portentous moon.<sup>18</sup>

A following paragraph reveals that the celestial body is no moon at all, but the fast-receding Earth. In *Voyage to Venus* (1943), Dr. Ransom inhabits an icy, casket-like vessel in which he travels in suspended animation.<sup>19</sup>

In Zelenak's gouaches, the visible overlap of brushstrokes makes plain the artist's hand. This element has not only continued but prevailed in the directions he has since followed. From the 1980s to the present, Zelenak has added colour in dry form and in other media, overlaying it on paper or mylar, on wood and on canvas stretched over panels. He has juxtaposed such new, dramatic information with his metal icons, setting them within rudimentary, though still recognizable backgrounds, including landscapes. One type of portrayal involves a transmission of energy from the



Earth-bound rod to the implied heavens, or vice versa (see page). In the early 2000s, Zelenak's work grew more representational yet: pictograms morphed into trees with enflamed canopies—rendered with metallic wire—spewing their essence into the sky.

In addition to mixed media, Zelenak forges metal elements, casts tin, aluminum and bronze; and scrapes, polishes and otherwise treats metals in myriad ways. To develop what are perhaps the best-known examples of his recent works, the *Levitation* series, he uses a soldering iron to flow molten tin solder onto prepared copper plates. The resulting sheets, assembled into expansive grids, are as pictorial as other recent works. Each section portrays what appears to be a craft in various stages of an expedition. Dispersed among the sections are red metal "ciphers" or "pauses" which mark its progress. The *Levitation* pieces mark a cross between the conceptual, Minimalist thread dominating Zelenak's early work and the more descriptive, redolent directions taken later. The overwhelming use of solder nevertheless recalls the artist's past investment in a single medium such as fibreglass. In this context, the capacities of one material expresses a surfeit not only of formal properties but of emotional states.

Critic Christopher Hume has labelled Ed Zelenak an unapologetic Modernist, and his work is, involving the meaning and form of art, the exploration of material, and the belief in a kind of motivation and progress



towards an ultimate transcendence. Interiority is still significant to him, whether it be in the play of light, implied spaces, or visions of zodiacal signs (which influence fate on an individual basis). In a review of a 2003 exhibition, reviewer John K. Grande described Zelenak's work as an "uneasy equation" in which messages were "never resolved, only intimated and intuited."<sup>20</sup> Zelenak himself states that "my work contains ambiguities because life is ambiguous. Only the beginning and the end are finite on this plane of existence."<sup>21</sup>

#### Endnotes

1. Ed Zelenak, artist statement in *Ed Zelenak* (Chatham, Ontario: Thames Art Gallery, Gallery Lambton, McIntosh Gallery, 2005) unpaginated (first page).
2. Ibid.
3. *Convolution Scale A* is located at 451 Talbot Street in downtown London.
4. Don Bonham credited London with providing him with the foundations of his career. He wrote: "What a wild 8 years I had in London. Times like that only happen once in a blue moon. To be honest, I loved London. It gave me my start, and it was a wonderful home base. Canadians took it for granted, but to me it was unbelievable." Don Bonham and John K. Grande, "Angels of Beauty: An Interview with Don Bonham by John K. Grande," *Wigway* no. 5 (Spring 2003): 37.
5. Ed Zelenak interview with the author, February 20, 2015.
6. A work from the 1980s, however, *Ra's Voyage, Five Plane Crescent* has been set in a park near the Ivey Business School at Western University.
7. Zelenak explains that his almost confrontational

positioning is a "static mode" to clarify an issue or question. Ed Zelenak interview with the author, February 20, 2015.

8. John Bentley Mays, "Traversing the Spiritual Realms," *Globe and Mail*, September 24, 1993.
9. The *Cone* and *Petrarch's Climb* works of the 1980s have archaeological and spiritual allusions. Medieval maps represented certain regions, such as the North Pole, as perfect cones. This concept was observed in literature, for example the terraced Purgatory of Dante's *Divine Comedy*.
10. Critic Christopher Hume quoted Zelenak as stating "The whole creative process is a voyage." Hume, "Sculptor Bends Steel to Suit Symbolic Designs," *The Toronto Star*, January 31, 1992.
11. The artist has remarked that these pieces are "maps of a process which comes out of acknowledgement that there may be a shifting paradigm or an alternate paradigm dealing with the truth and how we structure our worlds." Sandra Coulson, "Dowsing rods are used to find water. Ed Zelenak employs the Y-shaped sticks to search for something deeper," *London Free Press*, February 21, 1999.
12. Ibid.; also Sonali Velinker, "Canadian Art Comes to Town," exhibition review, *Live In Style* (New Delhi, India), November 2001.
13. John Bentley Mays, "Traversing the Spiritual Realms," *Globe and Mail*, September 24, 1993.
14. In his centralized forms and spiritual ambiance, the work of Toronto painter David Bolduc (1945-2010) also shares an affinity with Zelenak's body of work, and their work has also been exhibited together. Zelenak's work was shown alongside Ewen's at the National Gallery of Modern Art in India, in 2001, and in other instances in London.

# RA'S ORANGE

- Bolduc and Zelenak exhibited in London in 2005.
15. Critic Walter Klepac termed the works on paper "romantic." Walter Klepac, "The Iconography of Ed Zelenak," accessed online December 10, 2014 at [http://www.edzelenak.com/literature/files/Zelenak\\_A3.pdf](http://www.edzelenak.com/literature/files/Zelenak_A3.pdf).
  16. Ibid.; Ed Zelenak interview with the author, February 20, 2015.
  17. These "theofictional" books have alternate titles and subtitles, which respectively are *Malacandra* (1938) *Perelandra* (1943), and *A Modern Fairy-Tale for Grown-Ups* (1945). In the final book, Dr. Ransom is still a key figure though there are now subplots.
  18. C.S. Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet (Malacandra)*, (New York: Scribner Classics Edition, 1996), 24, 25.
  19. C.S. Lewis, *Voyage to Venus (Perelandra)*, (London: The Bodley Head, 1943). Lewis' notion of the vessel as a "celestial coffin" symbolizes the Resurrection. This is emphasized in its return to Earth (page 32):

...we stood in clear early sunlight in the little wilderness of deep weeds which Ransom's garden had now become and saw a black speck against the sunrise and then, almost silently, the casket had glided down between us. We flung ourselves upon it and had the lid off in about a minute and a half.

"Good God! All smashed to bits," I cried at my first glance of the interior.

"Wait a moment," said Humphrey. And as he spoke the figure in the coffin began to stir and then sat up, shaking off as it did so a mass of red things which had covered its head and shoulders and which I had momentarily mistaken for ruin and blood. As they streamed off him and were caught in the wind I perceived them to be flowers.

20. John K. Grande, review, "Ed Zelenak: Christopher Cutts Gallery," *Vie des Arts*, no. 194 (Spring 2004): 98.
21. Zelenak, *Ed Zelenak*, unpaginated (first page).