



Things: Ed Zelenak

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Spend a long afternoon listening to Ed Zelenak talk about his current project, as I had the pleasure of doing earlier this spring, and you will hear a lot about process: welding and soldering and cutting, pushing around molten tin on sheets of lead, copper and steel, rubbing dry pigments on metal surfaces. In contrast to the palaver of politicians and the rhetoric of digital imagery, Zelenak's language is that of the forge or machine shop, of a place where workers put their shoulders and might into the fabrication of things. It is speech that is untheoretical, unpretentious, more about making than meaning. Sculptors often speak this way. Poets who are any good always do.

But being inclined (perhaps fatefully) to be curious about what artists think of their art, I asked Zelenak to recite his take (for example) on two figures that have appeared again and again in his work over the last 40 years. One is an elongated five-sided shape, either incised or modeled in relief, which resembles a pre-literate child's attempt to depict what's signified by the word "house." The other is a three-stroke branching sign that looks like a dowsing wand, or an Anglo-Saxon rune, but isn't one. Zelenak replied that they represent "just me, out there." But oriented horizontally within square fields, which are then combined into large grids to create the handsome new *Levitation* wall-works, the five-angled forms, he says, can indicate "pointing to something," himself going somewhere.

In his account, then, a shape is *him*, "out there," though its actual function is provisional, variable, determined by the given composition. At times, it (or he) holds the centre of a largely uninflected, blankish field. At other times, it proliferates and multiplies, becoming a swarm or procession or constellation. It activates, focuses, slows down or speeds up the surface on which it is engraved or disposed. It plays a tactical role in the composition of a surface. It doesn't seem to *mean* anything.

Indeed, the general drift of his descriptions of his thought and work discourages a reading of the art as a body of texts with deliberately embedded profound-

ities, and encourages us to see it as an entirely profane event in history—what happens, that is, when fire and metals meet, when a soldering iron becomes a sketching instrument, when the tool-wielding hand leaves deep traces on a surface. If Zelenak's formalist talk conceals a transcendental agenda, I didn't catch a hint of it on the day I visited his studio.

I should have been glad. After all, I had to write about this art quickly, on a tight deadline. Completely secular, certifiably modernist discourse of Zelenak's sort makes, or should make, writing about the work uncomplicated for anyone passingly familiar with the official story of advanced European, and especially American, sculpture since Rodin.

To be sure, it's all here, modernism is, in Zelenak's sculptures and wall-art: the rectilinear grid, the reluctance to narrate—or, at least, to tell any tale other than the one modernism tells about itself—the insistence on surfaces, mass, and the "objective," the implied critique in his most original works (there are others) of the popular hunger for pictures. In an excellent essay, Lorenzo Buj has traced Zelenak's trajectory through

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and beyond the phenomenon in the history of modern art known as Minimalism. We know who Zelenak is vis-à-vis that history: its heir, its offspring. We know what his art is about.

Or do we? I started to have doubts while sitting on a high stool in Zelenak's studio building. On the wall opposite hung a small flat piece with a gleaming, distressed tin skin, on which had been soldered a clutch of little tin cones loosely nested together. Beside it on the wall was a grid of the square copper plates (with the horizontal tin house-forms) that constitutes an assemblage in the *Levitation* series. Zelenak views this effort as transitional, "the wrap-up of some ideas, the beginning of others," he called it—a bridge between the wall-objects for which he is perhaps best known currently and the upcoming application of pigment to stretched canvas, the first move on fabric (apart from some canvas pieces laid on paper) he has made in fifty years. He expects the horizontal posture of the pointed house-shapes to be understood literally, as markers that unmistakably point away from here, toward elsewhere.

Be that as it may, the tin plane and the *Levitation* grid struck me forcibly as objects that are not preludes to anything. Each is the resolved and well-realized product of mature practice, declarations of what he has learned from years of labouring over hot metal, driving it into those oft-repeated forms, fashioning pigments and industrial substances into sites of intense beauty. As I found while browsing around the studio building on his West Lorne property, where pieces from all decades of his career are stored, Zelenak has occasionally relaxed his rigour, executed works that are merely pretty. But his lapses into the decorative have been few, and the taut tin-clad piece and the *Levitation* sequence are surely not among them.

I would like to name what I felt, sitting before these works, as gratitude, were that word not freighted with connotations of servile indebtedness and sappy happiness correctly seen as incompatible with criticism worthy of the name. Stripped of sentimentality and the atmospherics of vague uplift, however, gratitude is the

word I want. It is a response both aesthetic and moral: aesthetic, inasmuch as it is provoked by the prodigal, always surprising beauty of free, hard creative work; and moral, because inspired by plain dealing, honesty, strict abstention from the manipulation and coercion that characterize the pretty. It is a response to truth.

Which is not to say that Zelenak's most convinced and convincing artworks advance any proposition or creed. They advertise nothing, market no ideology or opinion, make no attempt to recruit the viewer for a political or social cause (as worthwhile as certain causes are). They do not flatter my prejudices or appeal to my humanitarianism, such as it is, or march under any popular banner. They are finally meaningless, and so frustrate the desolating mass-cultural demand that everything we have and do be plumply meaningful, useful, delicious, improving. They have emerged from a long, patient practice of littleness, of persistent labour with a few ordinary materials, a handful of ideas—nothing sensational or showy, nothing that might wow the great world's fashionistas.

Of course, Zelenak's art hasn't always been on the small side. During the 1960s and early 1970s, when he (like other thoughtful young sculptors) was under the spell of New York Minimalism and its apostles among the critics, the artist developed his ideas in numerous large-scale, declamatory constructions. He had largely abandoned this course by 1975, devoting his time and talent thereafter, and ever since, to the more intimate sculpture and wall-work in this show. (What shall we call the latter, wall-bound items in Zelenak's production? Sculptures? Drawings? Reliefs? They reference each of these presentational modes, while they defy pigeon-holing in any one of them.)

But if he moved on from Minimalism's grander gesturing in the 1970s, did he ever really break with the movement's doctrine? My list above of the various things Zelenak's art is not and does not do, for example, could surely describe what many a sculpture made in Minimalism's most persuasive heyday was not and did not do, or tried not to do. (Nothing, the Minimalist and post-Minimalist episodes taught us, can jam the



well-oiled gears of the art market. Even the most resolutely sullen, emotionally withdrawn, anti-consumerist artwork can be proclaimed a “masterpiece” by the art world’s opinion-makers, and be accorded a spot in the shop window, museum or history book.)

Too, Zelenak’s irreligion is of a piece with that of the Minimalist sculptors who provided early encouragement. As usually understood, Minimalism was a key event in modernist culture’s long passage toward total secularization, final emancipation from the mythologies and preoccupations of traditional religious practices—above all, those of Christendom. It sought a condition for sculpture that was materialistic, this-worldly, resigned, and free at last from Western statuary’s subservience to pious storytelling. If what artists say about their work can be taken at face value, Zelenak seeks such a disillusioned condition in his studio, and finds it there.

But taking the art itself seriously—appraising what it is on the surface, releasing it from the artist’s own interpretations—one may come to a conclusion different from his. To my mind and eye, for instance, the resonant new *Levitation* series, the exquisite assembly of nested cones on a troubled field of tin, and other artifacts recently completed or now underway embody an apparently unintended spirituality—one for which (to reprise an earlier point) I am indeed grateful. It is one, moreover, that is compatible, *mutatis mutandi*, with a Minimalist pedigree, though Zelenak’s art can induce skepticism about the official story of Minimalism.

I want to be clear. I am not saying that Zelenak’s works obey the iconographic programme of any theistic system, Western or otherwise. Nor am I suggesting that his art is “spiritual” in some Platonic or hazy, lazy New Age sense. On the contrary: its spirituality consists precisely in its exclusive, disciplined affirmation of the material, of the physical here-and-nowness of tin and copper and lead and pigment—in its declining to become significant, merely “symbolic.”

We can hardly have too much of such realism, which is why I was grateful to find it here. The contempor-

ary world is saturated with the values and energies of the market, the site and source of much unreality. It is in the marketplace, not the monastery, where material things evaporate into phantasms, simulations, hallucinatory place-holders in the vacuous game of exchange. Zelenak’s, on the other hand, is an art of the real. His beauties are those of the concrete and the process, his materialism is a tonic for sensibilities wearied by the relentless abstraction of late-modern consumer culture.

Which leads me back, once again, to Minimalism, where Zelenak began. Reviewed in the light of Zelenak’s elaboration of it, the movement on which Donald Judd, Agnes Martin, Carl Andre and Tony Smith left their mark seems less simply profane than the artists (with the exception of Martin) and their advocates thought it was. It, too, was informed by a spirituality, I would suggest—in this case, a radical openness to facticity, reverence for the thingness of things, resistance to the vast cultural forces that would empty the thing of its stubborn thingness and turn it into infinitely convertible merchandise.

“Say it, no ideas but in things,” urges poet William Carlos Williams in his epic work *Paterson*. Ed Zelenak says so in his artworks, which are among the most thought-provoking being made by any advanced artist of his generation.