



## KES ZAPKUS: *New Paintings*

by Hovey Brock

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In this exhibition of new work, the paintings ask you to listen as much as look. Their surfaces group countless small gestures arrayed in grids that suggest the willful structure of musical phrases with subtly shifting syncopated rhythms, like a Steve Reich composition. However, these are not grid paintings in strict Minimalist terms. Unlike typical grid painters, Zapkus has no use for reduction. To the contrary, his work strives for a comprehensive grasp of the world around him as each gestural phrase adds up to some kind of occluded sign: a whisper of a flag, the hint of a traffic sign, or a miniature El Lissitzky.



Kes Zapkus, installation view. Courtesy Silas von Morisse Gallery.

Tiny paint stroke by stroke, Zapkus introduces his spectral images through a mash-up of Modernist styles: Cubist passage, De Stijl lattices, Suprematist circles and wedges, a glimpse of Mont Sainte-Victoire. In his *Children of War* paintings, a series from the early '80s, you actually see miniature tanks, explosions, and battleships. At the time, Zapkus, a World War II child refugee from Lithuania, had felt compelled to respond to the Cold War rhetoric of the Reagan administration. None of the works in this current show rise to the level of representation in the *Children of War* series, but *Ode to Americana: Cartoons, Ads, and Clichés* (2017) comes close. The top and bottom bands have a series of strange shapes organized into compartments that verge on recognition: in the upper left corner, an angular red shape that could be a penis or a toy gun, or in the upper right corner, may be a scene from *Krazy Kat*, with Ignatz the mouse, or in the lower right, Han Solo's spaceship the *Falcon*, from *Star Wars*. Unlike most abstract painting, *Ode to Americana* is not a

serene contemplative experience but rather a hallucinatory semiotic immersion, a descent into the wacky, candy-colored universe of American entertainment.

For Zapkus, the symbols of popular culture are not the only nihilistic influences numbing our responses to our surroundings. *Middle East from Bosch's Inferno* (2106) an enormous black painting, conflates the horrors of the Islamic State, with its aggressively retrograde, medieval interpretation of Islam with the hellish right-hand panel of Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. Black has always been understood as a sacred color in Islam. A *sayyid*, or descendant of the Prophet, traditionally wore a black turban. Co-opting that symbolism, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi usually appears in a black robe and turban when making his televised speeches. The right-hand panel of *The Garden of Earthly Delights* is also black, but a kind of gleaming black infused with the unearthly light of Hell fire. *Middle East from Bosch's Inferno* actually weaves together two kinds of black across its white grid, one a deep velvety matte hue, the other hovering on the luminous edge of charcoal grey. The entire canvas is an unholy braiding of medieval absolutism past and present.

Zapkus returns to the Middle East again in his most ambitious and striking painting in the show, *Red Sea Ordeals in Cyberspace* (2017). The Red Sea holds a particular fascination for Zapkus as both the location where humanity emerged out of Africa and the center of so much conflict today, especially in Sudan and Yemen. The scale of *Red Sea Ordeals in Cyberspace* is gigantic, measuring a full fifteen feet across. The dominant color is a glowing vermilion hue. The entire length and breadth of the support is covered with tiny waving lines. Little packets of black and brown seem to collide aimlessly in this vast hot expanse. If this painting had a sound, it might be air raid sirens off in the distance. The overall effect is at once mesmerizing and repelling. Zapkus's title implies yet another conflation, this time between the most ancient origins of humankind and our newest forms of communication. In opposing these periods, Zapkus seems to be asking, "What has changed between then and now?"

The artist and critic Marjorie Welish has compared Zapkus to James Joyce in his level of encyclopedic ambition. Indeed, looking at a Zapkus painting is much like reading a page of *Finnegan's Wake*: each take lays a new set of meanings as the lines, dots, and polygons coalesce into an alternate constellation of references. However, there is another aspect of Joyce that deserves comparison, and that is his satirical edge. At least since the '80s, Zapkus's paintings have been ready to remind us, sometimes gently, sometimes not, that in spite of all our technical achievements, we are only human.

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#### **CONTRIBUTOR**

##### **Hovey Brock**

HOVEY BROCK is an artist and has an MFA from the School of Visual Arts Art Practice program. He is a frequent contributor to Artseen.

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#### **RECOMMENDED ARTICLES**