JOE ZUCKER: AVOIDING THE ISSUES OF THE REALIST PARADOX
by Max Blagg

“Some people think I love sailing ships, but for me they are just part of a visual strategy: they are wood and canvas, as are the stretcher bars and canvas painting surface. I have diversity in my work, but I also have control of it. I rarely paint things that I like.”
- Joe Zucker, Bomb Magazine Summer 2007

“The pistol shot of the painter’s eye dislocates the real” - Robert Bresson

Seil #32
2008
Latex on paper and cardboard tubing
131” x 66”
Joe Zucker is an American pioneer. An agitator and instigator, builder and pourer of paint, fearlessly deploying all manner of materials and subject matter. These paintings dislocate imaginary scenes from the “Golden Age of Piracy,” Zucker’s sidelong “slipping glimpses” at the men and ships who terrorized the seven seas in the early 18th century, and ended up, most of them, dancing at the end of a rope. What’s so jolly about the Jolly Roger?

A longtime student of the movements of fish and water, each summer Joe spends a month in Minnesota, chasing walleye pike, while the pike dream of evading his lures when the familiar shadow of his “Meshugganasota punt,” a modified bass boat, glides above their heads. He smokes out the pike and eats them later, smoked. Returning East to catch the shimmering light of Long Island’s autumn, Zucker intercepts the striped bass on their run up the Atlantic coast, wrangling keepers from the chaotic schools beneath the waves, their peregrinations threatened from all sides; by larger predators, by men with elaborate lures and wire lines, haul seiners with giant nets.

By November, in his studio in the East Hampton woods, surrounded by canvas and wood, acrylics and oils, brushes of badger and Japanese nylon, black crow quills, and magical markers, Zucker prepares to confront another long East Hampton winter, strangling the realist paradox, mopping the bourgeoisie, steering paint into alluring configurations. Evoking in a few swift strokes, sensual abstractions that flow and reverberate, unraveling like tourniquets, Chinese landscape scrolls, the Torahs he studied as a boy at temple in Chicago.

The curve of the lowly cannonball, for example, that simple sphere, solid, unremarkable, its essential heft transformed by Zucker’s hand and eye. The artist points out how, in one painting, the cannonball pierced the picture plane when it perforated the mizzenmast, revealing the landscape behind, something this viewer might not otherwise have noticed. In reality, the iron sphere was deadly in its effect when it struck the opposition’s ships -- it wasn’t the ball itself so much as the spray of splinters it created when it connected with the sturdy but yielding wood of the boat; splinters that pierced the fragile flesh of the powder monkeys, mere boys who tended to the guns. Those cannonades prefiguring the infernal weaponry in use today and every day by men at war, projectiles designed by mild mannered sociopaths to explode in midair, spraying a deadly rain of bomblets that lay waste to everything, animal, vegetable and mineral, in their wide-ranging path.

Zucker was about the same age as those sacrificial powder monkeys when he avoided a potentially fatal, certainly fateful, trip to the Mekong Delta by applying himself savagely to art, his fluid lines filling a thousand pages of expensive Arches paper, traversing the seven seas of a wild imagination, ecstatic visual texts laid end to end, a rhapsodic paper chain that he would revisit for the next four decades, refining his multiple takes on American origins: cotton and slavery, boats and fish, water and sky, and the slow grinding effects of colonial power slowly ruining this green planet. In every dream home a heartache, on every pirate ship real human misery behind the gorgeous blossoming sails, the grinning skulls of their Jolly Rogers.

Although these renegades and buccaneers have been hailed for their democratic principles, terrorists are what they were, the oars of their longboats wrapped in muslin as they rowed silently toward another defenseless coastal village. Taken by surprise, the innocent men women and children soon found themselves bound for a distant country where they would be sold as slaves. One group of captives was
taken from the American town of Baltimore, and sold as human chattel in the North African port of Algiers.

Pirates supplied the black market of many ports with their loot. Backroom deals with crooked politicians. On the coast of Ireland, some farmers arranged for cattle to be traded for plunder, under cover of darkness, the local constabulary having been paid off to stay off the beach that night. Lion Gardiner may have made similar clandestine arrangements with Captain Kidd, another subject of Zucker's eloquent pen and brush, when he sailed for several weeks around Long Island Sound, looking for a safe place to hide his treasure, (which, despite advances in metal detection and ground piercing radar, still has not been found).

Kidd is famously remembered as a violent, avaricious pirate seeking to enrich himself with the contents of defenseless ships, yet he started out a quite legitimate seafarer, a privateer under contract to the British Government. Kidd, who thought himself protected by the British, eventually found himself at the mercy of an early version of Smiley’s people, neatly framed when he finally returned to London. Although his wife was a fixture in high society, and he had friends in high places, he was a threat to the status quo. After being confined in the miasma of Marshalsea prison, his health failing, he was tried by a corrupt high court, [the trial notes read like something out of Kafka] and publicly hanged at Execution Dock. Zucker has detailed his last minutes in several dark drawings and a massive diptych rendered in acrylic, sash cord and wood, in which Kidd’s wife and his parrot glumly observe his corpse, which was tarred post mortem to preserve it as it swung in the wind, a warning to all those who would mess with His Majesty the King’s income.

It seems the Royal Navy’s brutal code of discipline was directly related to hundreds of decent English seafarers becoming pirates. In the early days of sailing ships there was a strict demarcation among the ranks --the so-called “top-men” spent most of their time high in the rigging, expertly furling and unfurling the massive sails. Noted for their stylish dress, these independent mariners (whom Errol Flynn as Captain Blood would later mythologize) did not fraternize with the midshipmen or other, more lowly, crew members, indeed they rarely descended to the deck, except to retrieve a fallen axe or marlin spike. Such rebels were more likely to be recruited to piracy than acquiesce to the brutality of life in the Navy, whose unofficial motto was, and perhaps still is, “Rum, Sodomy and the Lash.”

Long before Johnny Depp exhausted the Caribbean franchise with an excess of ham as Captain Jack Sparrow, Hollywood pirates always seemed more authentic. In the film adaptation of R.L. Stevenson’s Treasure Island, Robert Newton was Long John Silver. You could never tell how drunk he was; he resembled a lot of the artists Zucker first encountered down at Fanelli’s on Prince Street in the early 70’s, shaking off Picasso’s looming shadow like young dogs shaking fleas, shambling, loquacious, funny, pissed as Newton, with a tendency to sudden violence that would often leave a trail of broken glasses and blood on the floor of the old saloon. Artists, like pirates, have always had that ambivalent allure, intimidating but oddly attractive.

Zucker evokes these bawdy nautical scenes as vividly as Coleridge’s Ancient Mariner, in the vibrant and voluble collection assembled here in Bridgeport’s Housatonic Museum of Art; pirates, pirogues, parrots and widows, rough wooden ships abstracted to the canvas, billowing sails, scrolls that tell dead men’s tales.
Seil
2007
Latex on paper and cardboard tubings
162” x 84”
Installation photos courtesy of the Bonnefantenmuseum, Maastricht, Netherlands (2009)

Untitled (Skull)
2007
Latex on paper with cardboard tubes
Vertical: 42 1/2”
Horizontal: variable
BIOGRAPHY


SELECTED SOLO SHOWS

1965  Heistand Hall Art Gallery, Miami University, Oxford, Ohio. “Paintings”.
1966  Zolla/Lieberman Gallery, Chicago, Illinois. “Recent Paintings”.
       Adele Rosenberg Gallery, Chicago. “Systemic Paintings”.
1968  Collector’s Gallery, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota. “Paintings”.
1971  University of Montana, Missoula, Montana. “Recent Paintings”.
1974  Jacobs Ladder Gallery, Washington, DC. “Ships”.
       Bykert Gallery, NYC, NY.
       Texas Gallery, Houston, Texas.
1975  Daniel Weinberg Gallery, San Francisco, California. “Recent Paintings”.
       Bykert Gallery, NYC, NY.
1976  The Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, Maryland.
       Porshch Gallery, Washington, DC.
       Bykert Gallery, NYC, NY. “New Paintings”.
       Holly Solomon Gallery, NYC, NY.
       Galerie Gillespie-Laage, Paris, France.
1979  Holly Solomon Gallery, NYC, NY. “Recent Paintings”.
       Galerie Bischofberger, Zurich, Switzerland. “Neue Bilder”.
       Minneapolis College of Art and Design, Minneapolis, Minnesota. “New Drawings”.
1981  Pace Editions, NYC, NY. “Candles”.
       Holly Solomon Gallery, NYC, NY.
1982  La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, La Jolla, California. “Joe Zucker Paintings – Collection on Loan from the Rothschild Bank AG, Zurich”. 
       Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York. “Surlacing Images”.
       Texas Gallery, Houston, Texas.
1984  Daniel Weinberg Gallery, Los Angeles, California. “Ponce de Leon Painting”.
       Volumn College Center Gallery, Reed College, Portland, Oregon.
1985  Queens Museum, Queens, New York. “Ponce de Leon in Search of the Fountain of Youth”.
1987  Hirschel & Adler Modern, NYC, NY.
       Texas Gallery, Houston, Texas. “Paintings 1965-88”.
1989  Hirschel & Adler Modern, NYC, NY.
1992  Aurel Scheibler, Köln, Germany. “Backdrop Paintings”.
       Parrish Art Museum, Southampton, New York.
1993  American Association for the Advancement of Science, Washington, DC. “Spider Chronicles”.
       Texas Gallery, Houston, Texas. “Pegmen, Rubberband Men”.
1994  Aurel Scheibler, Köln, Germany. “Canoe, Walleye & Axe Lake”.
       Nolan/Eckman Gallery, NYC, NY. “Tofje Journal”.
1997  Danese Gallery, NYC, NY. “Plimsoll Line”.
1998  Galerie Fred Jahn, Munich, Germany.
1999  Nolan/Eckman Gallery, NYC, NY.
       Aurel Scheibler, Köln, Germany.
       Guild Hall, East Hampton, New York.
2003  GBE Modern/Gavlak Projects, NYC, NY.
2004  Paul Kasmin Gallery, NYC, NY.
       Nolan/Eckman Gallery, NYC, NY.
2005  Aurel Scheibler, Köln, Germany. “Interior/Exterior”.
2006  Paul Kasmin Gallery, NYC, NY. “Open Storage”.
       Nolan/Eckman Gallery, NYC, NY. “Container Ships”.
       1500 Dragon Street, Dallas, Texas. “No Fun Intended”.
2008  Scheibler Mitte, Berlin, Germany. “The Good, the Bad and the Ugly”.
       Susanne Hilberry Gallery, Ferndale, Michigan. “Sea/Sea”.
2009  Texas Gallery, Houston, Texas. “Scrolls”.
2010  Galerie Steinek, Vienna, Austria. “Joe Zucker: Drawings”.
       Mary Boone Gallery, NYC, NY. “Tales of Cotton”.
2011  Mary Boone Gallery, NYC, NY. “A Unified Theory”. (Fifth Avenue)
       Mary Boone Gallery, NYC, NY. “A Unified Theory”. (Chelsea)
2013  Mary Boone Gallery, NYC, NY. “Empire Descending a Staircase”.
2016  National Arts Club, NYC, NY. “Joe Zucker: Armada”.
2017  Maccarone Gallery Los Angeles, California “10000 Brushstrokes”
       The Drawing Room, East Hampton, New York “Neo, Neo, Neoclassicism”
SELECTED GROUP SHOWS

Mary Boone Gallery, NYC, NY.
1979  Holly Solomon Gallery, NYC, NY.
Leo Castelli Gallery, NYC, NY. “Drawings”.
Neue Galerie Sammlung Ludwig, Aachen, Germany. “Les Nouveaux Fauves/Die Neuen Wilden”.
La 39 Biennale di Venezia, Venice, Italy. “Drawings: The Pluralist Decade”.
La 39 Biennale di Venezia, Venice, Italy. “Art in the Seventies”.
The Museum of Modern Art, NYC, NY. “A Penthouse Aviary”.
1981  The New Museum, NYC, NY. “Celebration III”.
Leo Castelli Gallery, NYC, NY. “For Trisha Brown Dance Company”.
Sidney Janis Gallery, NYC, NY. “New Directions: A Corporate Collection Selected by Sam Hunter”.
1982  Kestner Gesellschaft, Hanover, Germany. “New York Now”.
Kunstmuseum Lucerne, Lucerne, Switzerland. “Back to the USA”.
Leo Castelli Gallery, NYC, NY. “Artists Call: 50 Artists/50 Collectors”.
Holly Solomon Gallery, NYC, NY. “The Innovative Landscape”.
1986  La 42 Biennale di Venezia, Venice, Italy. “Alchemy”.
Fort Lauderdale Museum of Art, Fort Lauderdale, Florida. “An American Renaissance: Painting and Sculpture Since 1940”.
1991  Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore, Maryland. “The Landscape Observed”.
2003  Paul Kasmin Gallery, NYC, NY. “The American Landscape”.
Mary Boone Gallery, NYC, NY. “Image Matter”.
Zach Feuer Gallery, NYC, NY. “Jr. and Son’s”.
2010  Karl & Faber, Munich, Germany. “Exhibition VI: American Drawings and Selected Prints”.
2011  Aurel Scheibler, Berlin, Germany. “Twenty: 20 Jahre/ Years Aurel Scheibler”.
2013  Industry City, Sunset Park, Brooklyn, New York. “Come Together: Surviving Sandy, Year 1”.
Paul Kasmin Gallery, NYC, NY. “Bloodlines Revisited”.
2015  The Rachofsky Collection/The Warehouse, Dallas, Texas. “Geometries On and Off the Grid: Art from 1950 to the Present”.
Galleria d’Arte Moderna, Villa Reale, Milan, Italy. “Don’t Shoot the Painter”.
2017  Midtown Lever House, New York City
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY


Kertess, Klaus, “Figuring it Out: Figuration and the Human Figure”, ARTFORUM, November 1980, pp. 30-35.


Smith, Roberta, “Post-Minimal to the Max”, THE NEW YORK TIMES, 14 February 2010, pp. AR1, AR23.


ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Housatonic Museum of Art (HMA) is pleased to present the exhibition *Scrolls*. With a career that began in the mid-sixties, Joe Zucker remains one of the most innovative contemporary artists working today. His inspired ingenuity interweaves history, subject matter and the physical materials of his work to create an inventive iconography that exerts its own swashbuckling energy. My deepest thanks to the artist for sharing his work and singular vision with us.

The HMA is equally grateful for the energetic poetry within the prose contributed by author and poet, Max Blagg. His text beautifully entwines the biography of this iconoclastic artist with the brief and brutal history of seafaring fortune hunters.

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HOUSATONIC MUSEUM OF ART

JOE ZUCKER
SCROLLS