

The Iconography of Ed Zelenak

Walter Klepac

Introduction

by Susan Miller and Orin Zelenak

Ed Zelenak unites both modern and ancient currents in his sculptural practice - methods of taking base materials and patiently shaping these by hand are employed together with modern blast furnaces, welders, pattern cutters, and electric grinders. While rooted in the history and tradition of the artists' guild, Zelenak's art-making is set firmly on the very modern course of exploring its own origins.

The essential truth of a culture lies somewhere between the physical and the ideal, between the multiplicity of experience and the unity of thought. As moderns, we have science and certainty on our side, allowing us to reach far beyond the assumptive speculations of our ancestors in understanding and influencing culture. We of the modern era have invented the laboratory, mastering Nature within its confines. And yet, we are no closer to grasping beauty. We are left facing the same mysteries that inspired the ancients.

Our personal experiences of beauty, ugliness, and banality cannot be entirely unique, ultimately being shaped by the symbols of a culture. What we do with a symbol though, how one uses it, remains entirely subjective and fleeting. Zelenak takes up this theme - our individualist and situational self-serving appropriation of symbols - in works that depict familiar iconic symbols in various stages of metamorphosis.

Symbols, and especially iconic symbols, are as storehouses of collected knowledge acting to guide us each in our efforts to participate effectively in our culture. For Zelenak, the task as an artist and sculptor is akin to that of philosopher Alan Watts, which is to root out the common definitions of these cultural signposts and 'denature' them, stripping them bare for all to see and experience in their essential parametric truth.

Zelenak focuses his attention on the familiar iconography of trees, crosses, stairs, arrows, and circles that pervade our experience of everyday Westernized living - symbols that we 'take up' and manipulate unconsciously within the moment, remaining somehow all but oblivious to the flow of knowledge and experience that are essential to a culture's continuing vitality.

Themselves the subject of interrogation, Zelenak's wall and floor sculptures are cast in relief, drawn, carved, centered within a frame, or offset against other larger

objects. The symbols he characterizes are as if frozen in place, their appearance captured in artifacts and objects ranging from the size of a fingernail to several lengths of the human body.

Zelenak conceives his works as a means of expressing the semantic, organic nature of the very human and subjective experiences these icons attempt to signify, together with the fact that these symbols and icons are themselves modified with every use. Through his sculptures, Zelenak establishes that an account of this use - and knowledge of the consequent implications for both the signifier and the signified - must be 'built into' the evolving definition of our culture-making tools.

The technique used by Zelenak in the making of each sculpture is as if a unique invention in its own right, unifying the physical and ideal within a lasting, pleasing aesthetic that allows us to scrutinize the base metals, oils, flux residue, plastics, and hints of pigment from which both the work and our experience of the work emerge. Thus as viewers, our conscious and unconscious appropriation of Zelenak's aesthetic and his technical knowledge of the materials he employs is simultaneously incorporated and revealed in his sculptures.

Indeed, here is art that truly participates in its own definition as we consume it.

Miller-Zelenak London, March 2005

ED ZELENAK: TABLE AND WALLWORKS

In the late 1970s, and from 1982-1987, sculptor Ed Zelenak made a series of works consisting of wood, tin, and paper, that he refers to as the Wall Pieces. Over the past eight years, in addition to producing large-scale, three-dimensional works, the artist has returned to making wall dependent sculptural works. In doing so, he has increased the number of formats, broadened the subject matter and has greatly expanded the diversity and range of these works.

The wall-dependent plaques, landscapes, and the freestanding tables represent in their very different ways Zelenak's response to the profound changes in the creating and reception of art during the period that witnessed the often adamantly contested shift from late modernism to postmodernism. What has been the consequence of this change? Contemporary art practice has been made to examine how seemingly direct and immediate experience is mediated by systems of codes. Within this context of contradiction and impasse where artwork is increasingly viewed in terms of signs rather than objects, Zelenak's works have created a fresh synthesis of sign, object, and the experience of the viewer that opens up new possibilities for exploration and discovery.

The Wall Plaques

Once believed to express universal and eternal truths about the human condition, the symbols and icons of our culture have devolved during this age of information into a generalized economy of signs. Consequently, meanings and references that were once specific and certain now exist in a fluid state, subject to continuous change and adaptation.

Zelenak's small metal plaques, made palpable through their sheer physicality, exist in a state of tension with the inherent susceptibility of the sign to continual reinscription. Indeed, the very materiality of these works serves as an enduring reminder of the concrete reality of our existence. These works commemorate the persistence of meaning: they hint at an undercurrent of lived experience that eludes suppression by the network of codes that society uses in organizing the signs that constitute culture.

The plaques also acknowledge and address the very contemporary condition of informational overload. In each plaque, a central figure or sign sets up a distinct relationship with the visual equivalent of noise through the fugitive and endless play of light on the rough, irregular metal surface that surrounds it.

Taken together as a body of work, the plaques reveal aspects of the nature of the sign in general and our relationship to it in particular: they point to what can be sustained as they draw attention to what is lost.

The Landscapes

In creating the body of wall-dependent works that Zelenak refers to as his 'landscapes', the artist has chosen pictorial means to address the spatial concerns of contemporary sculpture per se, namely the feeling of being within and experiencing space in specific ways.

Zelenak employs only the most basic of pictorial elements to precisely create the evocative effect of these works: subtle, impressionist-like atmospherics, the nuanced positioning of figure and horizon line, and the saturated visual weight of an all-enveloping sky are masterfully utilized to manifest space as presence.

In executing these landscapes, the artist draws conspicuously on the sensibilities, materials, and experiences of the sculptor. This is evident even in how the element of color is engaged. There is no bravura paint handling to be found here: the means by which these works achieve their effects are not painterly. Gouache is applied to the plywood surface in a direct routine manner.

The embedded element in each of the works—the ubiquitous form of the tree found throughout Zelenak's production over the past decade—never relinquishes its identity as a bright, self-contained, metal object. This tree form is a foreign object that is never subsumed by nor totally integrated into the picture. If the object-like tree form is

indeed a sign, it is a sign that has been emptied of all extraneous content. Its singular function within the landscape works is transparent and predominant: it is an exquisite catcher and reflector of light.

The fact that the metal element is in the form of a denuded tree trunk exists mainly to aid us in our reading of the picture as a drastically pared down landscape. Still, the mood and much of the resonance of each work stem largely from its subliminal allusion to the sight of an isolated figure in a barren landscape, bringing with it a host of psychological associations that plumb the deeper layers of our subconscious.

The radically standardized format and fixed sizes of the works in this series focus our attention on exploring the relation of visual sensation and perception to our experience of space. Together they recall the serial nature of early minimalism, as well as hint at the formal framing conventions of the snapshot and indeed of photography.

The primary model for these works, however, is ultimately sculpture itself. Seeing the same isolated figure in work after work becomes something akin to looking at the same outdoor sculpture throughout the course of a day, under various climatic conditions and at various distances.

As such, these works can be said to convey discrete quanta of aesthetic information (rather than present a view of a particular place as in the case of traditional landscape painting). In them, the artist has turned to a two dimensional medium in order to capture and transcribe the multitude of singular effects that constitute the temporal-spatial reality of seeing an object in space which sculpture brings to us but cannot itself suspend and hold up for our contemplation.

The Tables

Zelenak's "tables" are compelling evidence of the artist's continuing ability to make full bore, fully three dimensional sculpture. Seen from a distance, the starkly geometric form of a generic table asserts its presence with authority, thereby establishing a direct connection between the work and the very physical here-and-now nature of the world in which we exist.

Zelenak's tables are spare, steel objects whose scale speaks openly of the monumental. Wider than they are tall, the tables appear to spread out before us as we approach. It is only as we move close to a table that it delivers its surprise, transforming the space it occupies into something more resonant, more complex, and stranger than anything we may ever have anticipated.

At the center of each table is a curved, bowl-like depression across which a molded steel branch is inserted. This strangely compelling, exquisitely articulated network of branches closely resembles the delicate, complex texture and structure of the original tree branch from which it has been cast. We are no longer dealing with

generalized signs here. We are in altogether different territory: something much more specific but at the same time something mysterious and possibly unsettling.

A transformation takes place in these works. What was once wood is now metal; what once felt normal to the touch is now cold; what was organic is now inorganic; what once lived is now inanimate. The tables then are about passages from one state to another, the one state (that of the non-living) inherent and implicit in the other (the living).

Each one of the tables affords a different frame, or setting for its branch. The generously proportioned circle at the center of one of the tables suggests the larger domain of abstract thought. It seems to hint at the limits the mind imposes on the world. Its framing of the branch reminds us that the forms and logic of geometry are routinely brought to bear on the objects in nature. Here, the circle represents the arena within which the mind considers the external world: we see through a circular opening, much as we do when peering through a microscope or telescope. This framing is an example of what our culture--in the form of Western reason--imposes upon nature so that we can understand it. The table in this case becomes in effect a laboratory bench or a dissecting table.

Considered as a metaphor for the human body, the branch in the table pieces can itself be perceived as a vessel carrying our mind/bodies from the beginning of our lives to their final, inescapable conclusion. There is in it a strong connotation of the limits to life and of the finitude of existence. It is a theme that runs throughout the Zelenak's table works.

Walter Klepac Toronto, March 2005

Artist Statement

For the past thirty-five years, my work has focused on examining relationships between humankind and the universe by exploring the polarities of experience - accomplished by attending to the antinomies of logic and intuition, order and chaos, myth and reality.

The works I have created throughout this investigation trace the parallels between the physical and allegorical nature of water and the ways and means by which we obtain knowledge through perceptions of material essence.

Water is an essential life force. The elemental properties of water provide a robust metaphor for the restless, dynamical processes of life and living that give rise to meaning. Thus water is as a shifting mirror: what it appears to both reveal and betray at

the same time, in fact hides the complex 'stuff' that lies just beneath its surface. Much as with meaning, water possesses both surface and depth.

Water exists for us not only in the raw, literal aspects of our physical perception, but also as a universal symbol endowed with a long and rich history of cultural signification. This elementary transposition of matter and symbolic artifact occurs within a fluid realm where the nature and content of the signifier, the signified, and the relationships existing between them are in a state of perpetual reinvention.

The divining rod - a dowsing tool - is used for discovering the presence and orientation of water and its flow. Used in my work as a motif, the symbol of the dowsing rod serves as a portal for philosophical exploration. Vessels (vases, urns, etc.) serve as vehicles that move along channels - waterways that lead to rivers and ultimately to the oceans. These vessels, or containers, function simultaneously as both systems and pathways of transit for conveying our thoughts and dreams. Taken together, the dowsing rod and the vessel are agents for the ever-branching flow of meaning and the ever-undulating nature of our experiences, both physical and metaphysical.

Ed Zelenak Toronto, 2005