



Ed Zelenak ◀◀

Ed Zelenak *Petrarch's Climb* 1989–2000
Hot-rolled steel, ink on mulberry bark paper 4.87 m diameter
Courtesy Christopher Cutts Gallery

How many works by contemporary visual artists send you scurrying to find a copy of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* to search out the literary references hidden in their origins? While some artists may eschew the programmatic element, Ed Zelenak embraces it and manages to pull off a high-wire sculptural performance; over the last 30 years he has consistently mined a poetic territory all his own. *Petrarch's Climb* (inspired by the 14th-century Italian poet and philosopher who kick-started the Renaissance with seminal notions of humanism) is only the latest and perhaps best example of what he does so well.

Using the physical as a means of entry into the ineffable realm of the metaphysical mind, he balances, in his art, that which can be said and that about which we must remain silent. A famous American insurance executive once defined poetry as “a search for the inexplicable.” What I think Wallace Stevens meant by that remark was that poetry begins where conceptual understanding ends. And that is exactly the aesthetic, even spiritual, territory that Zelenak cultivates so richly in his fall solo show at the Christopher Cutts Gallery.

Poker pal of Boccaccio, and once banished from Florence with his bad-boy buddy Dante, Petrarch was the first writer to project a palpable sense of the autonomous individual and the private self's mastery over nature. This concept is famously associated with his climb of Mont Ventoux in southern France. When describing why he climbed it, he wrote, “because it is there.”

This sense of the primacy of the individual being is something Zelenak sculpturally encapsulates with an evocation of the inner mountain within us all: a hot-rolled steel mound, 16 feet in diameter, whose gently sloping cone shape speaks of the desire for both physical and psychological ascent. As if whispering to us in the voice of a foundry, the surface of the steel retains the scratches, smudges, measurements, arrows and industrial gestures that identify this as a work of minimalist and conceptualist theatre.

The paradox is that while purely minimalist in its celebration of materials and the art object as a thing-in-itself, Zelenak's *Petrarch's Climb*, along with the mixed-media works on board that accompany it, still manages to position itself as a poem in space, a successful metaphor for our essential human condition. The drawings, which use the artist's perennial “house” motif as a stand-in for the human body and inner self, manage to quietly convey both isolation and engagement. With an apparently open void of softly smudged whiteness surrounding them, his fragile forms are elegance personified.

The show was called “On the Face of It,” an idiomatic expression that suggests depths lurking behind outward appearances. The title was apt. The message of Zelenak's work is about dropping beneath the surface of the world, toward its interior, and finding a pinnacle. ■

by DONALD BRACKETT