

## Ed Zelenak — Divining the Immeasurable

BY NIDA HOME DOHERTY

**F**OR THOSE WHO are accustomed to the norm of viewing art in a museum, walking from canvas to canvas while admiring the technique of the artist and contemplating the meaning of the art, be prepared for quite a different experience in viewing the work of West Lorne artist Ed Zelenak, currently on exhibit at Museum London. With Zelenak's exhibition, a dramatic kinetic aspect is wedged within the relationship of the viewer to the work.

This is a retrospective exhibition from Zelenak's large and varied oeuvre covering the 50 years of his career. The exhibit is divided into three separate rooms, with the work in each area connected to a dominant theme.

In the first room are earlier pieces and photos of Zelenak's work from the '60s and '70s. Immediately upon entering, on one wall of the exhibit, one is confronted with a large steel structure entitled *Stoatillos*, reminiscent of the sphinx constructs of ancient Egypt, with its imposing angular shape. Standing before this piece, the viewer becomes effectively dwarfed, and at the same time transfixed, under the projected grandness and size of this work. In the same room, placed in various areas on the floor and with similar images seen in photos on the wall, the viewer is positioned amongst large, translucent, orangey-pink, tubular floor/ground pieces, which look like a dissected giant earth worm on a human scale. One is drawn to their sensual curvature, while as the same time repelled by their visceral fleshiness. Also in this area is a nascent image that will occupy a place in future renderings of Zelenak's for the rest of his professional career. In a large frame rests a mixed media work called *Five-Sided Figure #5*. Zelenak's schooling in minimalism is evident in this work. A sole, metal temple-like structure sits floating in a vastness, a space empty of foreground, middle ground, and back-

ILLUSTRATION: Ed Zelenak: *Vessel, A Measure of Truth* (1986-88). Collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Toronto  
Photo: Bob McKenzie

ground. When standing before this work, the viewer is placed in the same groundless frame in an attempt to connect with the strong solitary iconic image.

In the second room Zelenak's prowess as a sculptor is immediately apparent with works on the scale and heaviness of Rodin or Henry Moore. But here too the relationship of the viewer to the art is more dynamic than the traditional viewing of great sculptures of the past. Dead centre in the exhibition, commanding a huge space on a wall, is an expansive all metal wall piece, composed of 64 squares (12" x 12"), divided into four rows with



16 in each row. In each piece are the same sparse and somewhat vague images hammered in low relief form — a five-sided temple, or a boat possibly, pointing in various directions as it floats above a water-like texture. The piece is punctuated with small red tabs, "pauses," serving to subtly interrupt the general linear movement of the wallscape. This is a strongly meditative piece, calling on the viewer to stand silent and contemplate the rhythm and flow of the images, like a mantra — boat, water, pause, boat, water, pause. For someone who is held in a moment of deep meditation while standing before this work, body and mind are transcended in a kind of timelessness. The work is appropriately called *Levitation* — 26 Pauses. Adjacent to this work, on the

floor, is a large circular flat metal piece approximately 24 feet in diameter, made up of 38 steel plate wedges, the breadth of which cannot be taken in fully with a gaze from normal standing level. Only with a consciousness of awakened imagination can one project him- or herself to float above and view the work from an all-seeing position, creating a tension in the earth-bound viewer who aspires to transcend above. Also on the floor in this same room is another heavy floor piece, *Five Plane Crescent*, a black metal circular form, like a moon, a moon that has lost its magnetic pull in the solar rotation and

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plunged into planet earth, burning itself out to a three-foot diameter metal piece at the foot of the viewer, the roundness of the full moon still intact, with the enigmatic five-sided shell of a crescent moon clearly visible.

**I**N THIS ROOM are a number of pieces on the theme of Noah's Ark. What is the meaning behind this reference to a well-known Biblical story? Its true significance remains elusive, but the image that remains strong in the mind of this viewer is the drawing of a small boat set on a course in the vast ocean, like something viewed from a space ship looking down on a diminished earth.

When moving into the third room, immediately one holds in his/her vision

a four-foot high brick-like metal cylinder structure in the scale and size of an actual well. The viewer is drawn toward this object, compelled to peer into its depth. The title gives an inkling of its intended meaning, *Dowser Fountain with a Memory of a Vanished Presence*.

The theme of this room is distinctly about divining, mainly divining as the mysterious energy force that pulls on the body through a medium or conductor in search of water below the ground. There are numerous references to the effective use of this disappearing ancient practice, including the recent Russell Crowe movie *The Water Diviners*, and Zelenak himself tells of his own experience in calling upon a diviner to find water on his property.

Divining in a broader sense is connected to intuition and insight. This room is full of images of divining and in turn a kind of searching for something — almost obsessively so. Here, through the art, the viewer and the artist come together in a search to satisfy a desire to find something that lies behind the divining pull. It is a searching that is at times playful, as in the still life series which uses the visual puns of words like vase, vessel, boat, container for holy water, and at other times deeply philosophical as in the piece, *Locating the Other Self*. With titles containing such words as 'channelling', 'dowsing', 'branding', 'voyaging', taken as a whole these works become an intense search for something, something that lies beneath the surface, and at the same time offers a direction. But like the image of Noah's Ark, of a boat set on a definite course when seen from far above, when viewed from even farther away, the small boat appears ultimately lost in the overwhelming vastness of the universe.

For those who go to see Zelenak's retrospective exhibition looking for a heady experience of what is the deeper meaning of the iconic symbols, you could very well find that meaning remains elusive and opaque. But if you go with an openness of the mind, and let the body speak, as it meanders through the work, the experience becomes both physical and transcending.

The Ed Zelenak exhibition continues at Museum London to August 16, 2015, with a walking tour conducted by curator Cassandra Getty and the artist on Sunday, June 28 at 1:00 pm.