



ED ZELENAK



Table #1, Still Life With Divining Rod 1995–96 (installation view)



Still Life, A Relocated Incident 1997

The early sculptures of the mid-sixties had a very theatrical presence. The intent was to invite the viewer to become one with the piece. Physically moving in, through, and around the pieces, one became absorbed — socially and emotionally bound in a way — sensing our mortality in the shadow of a monolith.

During the late sixties and early seventies my work re-examined issues of the monument and our physical relationship to it. The monument is like a beacon: its presence is undeniable and obvious, like a cathedral. I wanted to redirect how we experience the monument, from the external to the internal. The idea of compressing volumetric shapes resulted in works dealing with a condensed mass. I began to explore the world of metallurgy — of carving into a solid block not unlike the construction of the rock-hewn churches in Ethiopia — the paring away of the excess to reach the essence of self.

In the seventies, I branched into exploring the relationship between humankind and the universe — nature and the self — by exploring the polarities of experience: logic/intuition, order/chaos, myth/reality. Familiar symbols (vessels, basins, vases, circles, arrows) in various stages of metamorphosis were my tools of choice. Water serves as a conduit in this exploration. It is a shifting mirror; what it seems to reveal and betray hides the 'stuff' that is beneath it. It has both surface and depth, an innate duality.

During the past decade I have made extensive use of imagery involving trees, branches, or divining rods, all of which have a close association with water. A divining rod — a dowsing tool — is used for discovering the presence and orientation of water. In 1975, a 'dowser' was called upon to locate the source of water on our studio property. Dowsing requires a person to traverse (map) the landscape holding a length of triangulated wood or two metal rods in each hand. The rods cross when water is found. The fact that not all individuals can successfully dowse intrigued me, and furthered my awareness of other significant ways of understanding the world. It also motivated me to continue exploring natural phenomena.

As a motif, literally and metaphorically, the divining rod serves as a portal for philosophical meanderings. Constructed of two opposing branches co-joined by a central body, this symbol references two contrasting modes of understanding and meaning: that which is based on the scientific, empirical, and rational, and that which is wholly intuitive and spontaneous. Frequently I display the image as subject and object in my work. As subject it records the process of its making, its own interrogation; as object it states its location. This action is not unlike the observation of a swaying tree buffeted by the winds, or the quiet movement of the dowsing action when an underground stream is located. In tandem, the divining rod and vessels are agents for the ever-branching flow of meaning and the ever-undulating nature of our experiences, both physical and metaphysical.

Maps enable us to identify the surfaces of things. Much of the iconography upon which I draw — the arrow, divining rod, circles, ladders etc. — involves symbols implying a sense of mobility. These symbols can offer or suggest either the experiencing or the mapping of a surface. For instance, in such early pieces as *Tablets* (1973), I developed scribing, drawing, and erasure on the surface of the lead plate. I suggested mapping in full three-dimensional sculpture, i.e. *Noah's Ark — Six Plane Curve* (1982–84), a metaphor for travel. More recently in the container pieces *Concave #1* and *Concave #2*, the branches, unnaturally rearranged, dowse the interior — recording the beginning and the end of emptiness.

When making a piece of art, I find that many paths can lead to the final destination. My use of the table form elicited the question, "Where and how does it interact with cultural entities and art forms?" In reality, the table can be a point of collection for objects and a gathering point for people to exchange ideas, and, in a more mundane sense, to partake of nourishment. Viewed as an art object, the table becomes a plane, like a canvas, on which I can lay bare ideas. It sometimes acts as a momentary resting place — ideas are gathered, examined, arranged and re-arranged as the poetry is woven in layers.

I gravitate to making art that is universal as opposed to codifying and interpreting current events through the eyes of the artist. How do we as humans see the world around us, not to mention the world that eludes us, yet we somehow intuit? How do we reach conclusions based on the plethora of information to which we are continuously exposed? My work contains ambiguities because life is ambiguous. Only the beginning and the end are finite on this plane of existence. The paradox is that everything else is fluid within the immobility of the mass.

Ed Zelenak

Until Minimalism came along, with its reliance on plain geometries and its use of metal, plywood, or fibreglass shells, modernist sculpture — even when predominantly abstract, as in the work of Naum Gabo or David Smith — was expected to communicate or to evoke meanings beyond its own particularity. With Donald Judd's landmark essay of 1965, "Specific Objects,"¹ a caveat was sounded. The Minimalist object gave warning that it must be considered on its own reduced terms and that its ontology was questionable. It functioned in the gap between a work of "sculpture" and a made "thing."

Minimalism seemed to give incontrovertible proof that sculpture should resist mixing with those other artistic mediums whose sensory content is often supplemented by discursive relevance. I'm referring to works of art that are destined to 'speak,' and to speak pictorially through a visual language that is widely readable because it is representational — because it approximates, to varying degrees, what the eye normally sees and the mind recognizes. Painting is the paradigmatic case of such 'speech,' and there has been considerable traffic, stretching back over many millennia, between the verbal and the visual, the text and the image. A long-standing intellectual tradition, conveniently abbreviated in the Horatian phrase *ut pictura poesis*,² has concerned itself with the special problems of this interrelationship. Sculpture has often been complicit in this traffic, submitting to pictorial imperatives through its narrative and commemorative uses: reliefs, busts, funerary monuments incised with epitaphs, and so on.

If twentieth-century avant-garde painting hadn't yet done enough to sweep away the old mimetic remnants of painterly language, then Minimalism was sure to do it. This category also included painters (though only a few), such as the early Frank Stella, whose work from 1959 featured little more than right-angled configurations and parallel bands of black metallic paint, intended, as he wrote, to "resist" or "repel" visual penetration and "to keep the viewer from reading a painting."³ Abstract, geometric masses of hard-edged sculpture are apt to function the same way, especially when a strong metal is the medium.

I've always suspected that self-concealment and reification rather than reference are at the core of the sculptural instinct. That is, sculptors know that the qualities of the medium and its special forms of resistance are signs of a primordial limit or dividing line at which matter evades meaning. One can hardly deny that there is something obdurately silent, tacit, and undiscursive in all sculpture. The tension between the materiality of a given medium and the figurations or symbols imprinted onto it or shaped from within it generates a double pull: one pull in the direction of sculptural process and reification, and the other towards questions of pictorial 'speech.' The same tension and the same double pull have been, in the twentieth century, the subject of an intense historical dialogue between one avant garde and another, one line of sculptural development and another. Yet an important question is still left over, even as the hectic avant gardism of the 1905–1970 period has now become archival: can sculpture really stand free of the pictorial moment in art, whose preferred locus has always been the wall or the ceiling, rather than the ground plane?



Table #3, *Still Life With Divining Rod* 1998–2005 (installation view)

This is a nagging but welcome question, full of promise in fact (even as it leads us in circles). Four of Ed Zelenak's recent sculptures have taken on its challenge, with a concerted focus on what the question might mean in the long aftermath of Minimalism. Two bronze bowls, more than two feet in diameter and just over a foot high, occupy the gallery floor, with no intermediary pedestal. These are entitled *Concave #1* and *Concave #2*. Two tables, one in oak and another in solid steel, each stand firmly on their four legs. *Table #1 (Still Life With Divining Rod)* is a square, full-metal structure, weighing over 1,500 pounds and extending nearly two feet in height. The table top is made of hefty, three-inch slabs of rolled steel whose surface shows traces of the industrial process: the enormous, water-cooled rollers of the steel mill have impressed what look like smoky patches of oxidized cloud. But while *Table #1* asserts a monumental weight, *Table #2*, which is effectively its companion piece, seems to have been transferred from a vertical to a horizontal location — or at least its surface gives that impression. It's a table to be sure, and more functionally table-like for being made of oak. But its grooved edges and its stretch of yellowy, nut-brown wood-grain lift the whole sculpture into a visual register and permit us to see it as a transposed wall plane.



Dowser Rod, with a re-adjusted site #6 2000

I don't propose this as an idle thought experiment. If we neatly amputate the legs from Zelenak's oak table and hang it from the wall, what kind of thing is it now, what is its genre? Is it a still life in negative relief? Plato thought that a thing such as an actual table was the degraded shadow of a perfect, ideal table, and that the imitation of such actual tables in an art work marked an even further degradation of the 'heavenly' table. Hegel got around the Platonic problem of the copy by arguing that the actual table as well as the table represented in art were moments or stages in the historical becoming of an idea. Twentieth-century theorists have de-idealized the problem of copies and originals by choosing language and semiotic codes as important contexts for discussing art. Zelenak hasn't arrived at his tables from this specific theoretical perspective, but he has incorporated visual and volumetric riddles into the tables, thus directing our attention toward problems of genre ("still life," according to the titles) and toward the personal deployment of a symbolic vocabulary.

Let's be clear about what constitutes these visual and volumetric riddles: each of the four sculptures has been conceived as a container. The two tables are inset with vase-shaped basins that are then topped over with cast tree branches (hand-made casts, not taken from nature); each of the bowls is also fitted with its own insert of branches. Two themes come to mind: fire and water, those two cosmic elements in whose opposed qualities pre-modern physiology and psychology sought a key to human character. There is no doubt that Zelenak has always infused his art with ideas, motifs, and iconic figurations associated with mythology, astrology, the theory of the humours, and so on. In one of a series of interviews conducted with Marnie Fleming in the 1980s, Zelenak spoke of the personal and aesthetic attractions of adopting steel as a material:

I like steel as a medium, and perhaps in some quirky way it has to do with Mars being the ruling god of my constellation (Scorpio). Mars was a warring god. I find that shearing away at metal, using a torch at 5,000 degrees, is itself a very violent act.

On the other hand, there are other things I like, such as the fluid, liquid forms metal produces. Metal can express these dualities. I am not a fixed sign.⁴

There should be a nickname or a phrase for this type of bipolar approach, which must reach back to the heady period of Zelenak's first emergence as an artist. He came of age at a time when the intoxicated Jungianism of the Abstract Expressionist generation was quickly receding and a sweeping Minimalist and Conceptualist militancy was invading the Western art scene.

But I would like to suggest that Zelenak has never been able to make a final settlement with Minimalism. For a sculptor, it posed certain axiomatic resolutions that he couldn't quite accept. Minimalism valued visual rationalism and mass production, and tried to banish or exclude metaphor. Judd decreed that a commitment to specificity and objectivity should quash all symbolic relationships between the work and the world. Allegory,

anthropomorphism, ideology, tiers of rarefied meaning, all such 'external' contexts should become void. Zelenak took such purifications only as far as he needed. He found it useful to conceive of the sculptural object as a geometric gestalt. Yet it is now going on four decades since Zelenak began approaching his work from a Minimalist standpoint, and it has become clear that he has refused to make capital-*M* Minimalism the telos of his art.

In 1966, with *M* riding high on the advanced art circuit, he built *Stoatallos*, a large, black plywood sculpture whose planes and dimensions (over thirty feet long and twelve feet high) demanded that viewers prowl about inquisitively, intrigued by its architectural bulk. The work was situated in a public location. Its materials and its geometries proclaimed that it was plainly and simply itself. But its faux-monumentalism was another matter, and its shape was allusive. It squatted flush to the ground, like a headless, geometrically-simplified sphinx or an enthroned elephant.

Nearly thirty years later, Zelenak's tables continue the dialogue with Minimalism and its limitations. His sculpture has migrated indoors. From steel mill or wood shop to his own studio, and then to the gallery. The tables are cleanly delineated, plainly cut: no curved edges or ornamental details on the legs, sides, or surfaces. And yet this combination of planes and legs also tempts us toward a reconsideration. As noted earlier, the flat surface plane has been pictorially disrupted by the double insets: the vase cut-aways and the simulacra of cast branches. The branches introduce an ineluctable degree of realism in an otherwise perfected play of geometries. But even if this organic element could be ignored in order to focus only on the cool, rectilinear design of the table itself, there remains the problem of those unadorned legs. They are a testimony to how Minimalism, fifty years after the fact, had recapitulated a revolutionary development in twentieth-century sculpture. I refer to the act by which the post-Rodin avant gardes first gained their own footing: the elimination of the base or the pedestal as a neutral platform for the erection of higher aesthetic or ideological truths.

It is now a full hundred years since modernism lurched from the starting gate on the basis of this innovation. If the table legs and the embedded "still life" elements don't remind us of this, then certainly the copper and bronze bowls should, sitting out there all on their own. The ground plane, whether its site is the earth itself or the gallery floor, remains ground-zero for nearly everything that the sculptor does. One of the dogmatic tenets of Minimalism was that the object (usually box-like) should rest impassively on the ground, in fealty to the law of gravity. Moreover, it must be visually consistent from all points of view and should harbour no mysterious inner significance. But Zelenak breaks from these restrictions through a double gesture. First he disrupts his perfectly literal table surfaces and metaphorically re-codes them as something sculptural and pictorial. Then he extracts these same disruptive elements — the basins and their branches — and puts them directly on the gallery floor as self-standing vessels.



Still Life, A Memory of Itself 1996

Despite the fact that Minimalism has been a persistent feature of his practice, Zelenak has still stuck obliquely to metaphor. His practice has always been shadowed by myth and symbolism, without openly succumbing to their meanings. Symbols, myths, and metaphors are in one way all snippets of the same moth-eaten cloth (it was the imagist poet T.E. Hulme who once referred to the starry sky in such terms). They always reformulate the world afresh, opening our lives to possibilities and mysteries that we might not otherwise experience. Metaphors and symbols resuscitate hidden meanings and divine fresh connections. It's part of the human war against total mortality, or, more precisely, it's part of our human reluctance to submit to a horrifying prospect: that the universe is nothing but a dead, un-spirited agglomeration of material facts and insanely vast, insensibly empty spaces; that there's nothing else left but a cold shivering this-and that-ness in whatever random corner you happen to be in for the brief duration of your term. Metaphor, in short, is like a bit of surplus or value-added enjoyment, a way of defeating entropy and squeezing more life from our barren and wintry exile on this planet.

Some of Zelenak's rather ingenious, metaphorical refutations of Minimalism may be located in how his tables cut a niche between the monumental and the mundanely scaled,

between Constructivist geometries and Minimalist absolutes. The *Still Life* set-pieces then present another level of refutation. The tables differ in size (the oak is larger and taller, and not perfectly square), but both are scaled so that their literalism reaches out toward a quasi-monumental sense of presence. Meanwhile, the personal and cultural significance of everyday tables, vases, and bowls is heightened by a centering strategy. Here it is not the significance of the centre but the strategy of centering that matters. Central placement of flower bowls, plates, or any type of centerpiece is always a rhetorical or a ritual gesture. Moreover, the focal layering of tree branches, perfectly scooped insets, supporting table surfaces, and, finally, the legs of the tables themselves, stack up a contiguous interplay of allusions and embodiments. With each of the elements that I have just listed, Zelenak's references are turned toward a tension in the modern history of art: Minimalist literalism vs. symbolic, metaphoric, and mimetic signifiers, or what I would call the pictorial and semiotic imperative in aesthetics.

What should we say of the tables themselves? That they are caught in an undecidable cross-play of ontological designations: not quite literal, not quite Judd's specific objects, and not quite metaphors? Tables, after all, are furniture, and though they are not themselves plinths or pedestals, they prop up, they sustain, they figuratively frame and literally subserve all sorts of objects and meanings: flower pots, computers, Judy Chicago's dinner plates, cadavers, strippers, etc. This list could easily lengthen, and if we start throwing more ontologies at the problem, pushing farther along the conundrum-meter of twentieth-century art, we slide from table to desk

we finally appreciate how serenely Zelenak's tables have indeed strayed from Minimalism while fulfilling some of the essential requirements of that movement.



Still Life, Recording the Voids 1999

The effect of the insets and branches is to lift the tables out of their immediate historicity; that is, their dialogue with modernist traditions of the modular, the factually objective, the art work as a thing rather than a picture, a symbol, or an idea. Instead, these interventions, so clearly symbolic and pictorial, transform the tables into ritualized presences. Their planar surfaces become cool, even backgrounds for a ceremonial centerpiece. But this centerpiece has sunk into its background. And this is where the art-historical trouble begins again. The fact that the surface is not acting as a ground or a support that sets off something above it, but is the container of a container-shape, itself presented in cut-away form and overlaid by the tree branches, forces us to read the literalness of the table top as a metaphoric trap. The literal, in other words, can't be completely cleansed of its metaphoric potential.

So we come back to the key ontological questions: is the table purely objective, in fact a table that can function as such, or does it not also represent the familiar twentieth-century problem of distinguishing the work of art from its identical other in the real world? What of the cast branches: are they three-dimensional 'pictures' of branches as well as being tokens of an opposition between the organic and the man-made simulacrum? The basins, what are these, symbols of containers or simply the literal insides of incomplete objects?

It's possible to detect a faint degree of early avant-garde allusiveness in these questions — allusions to Duchamp and his punning with ready-mades, and to Braque and Picasso when their first Cubist still lives failed to differentiate between the representation of solid and void, figure and ground. Unlike the compositions of early Cubism, however, Zelenak's tables and their insets are stringently clear in how they lay out issues of space, solidity, and reference. These issues are posed through the strategy of central placement and within a strict Minimalist modality, but only to serve up Minimalism as the final pivot-point for an extended historical irony.

The irony is subtle and at times almost undetectable, but it's there. In opting for the table format, Zelenak revisits a set of kaleidoscopic issues in twentieth-century sculpture. These were first formulated at the turn of the century and have not quite left us yet. No other era in Western art has made such a virtue of interrogating, of turning and overturning, its defining structural unit, its conceptual starting-point: the modernist grid.⁵

“Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow...” Macbeth might rattle on repeatedly, not to grieve over the metaphysical vacuum of his miserable existence, but to describe the compulsions of a particular trajectory in avant-garde art. A trajectory defined by the inexhaustibility of the right angle, multiplied four or eight times or more until it forms any of a ubiquitous array of modernist icons — the square, the rectangle, the grid, the box, the table, the Lego set, the skyscraper, and all the exponential variants of these.

Zelenak’s tables have been conceived within the modernist matrix of the right angle, but their relationship to modernism’s long and gridded past is poised on the brink of irony. The way toward his tables and their curiously disruptive bowls-and-branches was paved by Constructivism, Bauhaus, de Stijl, and, most directly, Minimalism. All of these were avant-garde movements, coming on in successive waves of innovation and exclusion. All operated according to strict laws of pure or modular form. But the pursuit of purity, geometry, and exactitude was a paradoxical type of originality, as Rosalind Krauss demonstrated. One of the dominant myths of twentieth-century art has been the *tabula rasa* — an avant-garde myth that the Italian Futurists embraced and asserted full force when they announced a radical break with past paradigms and academic traditions. The Futurists were among the first, but they were not the only ones to do so. The rhetoric of radically new beginnings, of starting from a clean slate, defined much of modern art well into the mid-1970s (when feminist revisions of the Western canon combined with gynocentric historicism finally put an end to the eighty-year march of “patriarchally” self-centered avant-gardists). Both painting and sculpture, says Krauss, pursued a kind of originary essentialism through the format of the grid, which persists well across the century: in the broken lattice-work of Cubist figure-ground relations, the white-on-white Suprematism of Malevich, the geometries of Mondrian, Agnes Martin, and Sol Lewitt. But at the same time, the grid was paradoxically self-cancelling as a symbol of modernist originality. It lent itself to serialism or infinite repetition. No matter how differentiated the reinscription of the grid had been in advanced art — whether we’re talking about actual grids in painting, or a hand-stretched rectangular canvas, a machine-made Minimalist cube, or a conceptual factor of some sort — it is recognizably the same format that is being reinvented from scratch. Seen in this way, the grid exposes the blank slate as a mythical lie about modernist origins and individual artistic originality, for it defeats or rather pre-emptively originality by being transcendently modular. Zelenak agrees, presenting his tables as ironic postscripts to a modernist tradition whose originality consisted in the repetition of basic, right-angled lines and forms. The insets and the branches, lodged in the middle of a near-perfect Minimalist table design, are what make this irony evident and conceptually challenging. Zelenak has plunged a pre-modern and predominantly visual genre — the still life — into an aesthetic format that is presumably incompatible with pictorial speech.

Lorenzo Buj

Lorenzo Buj is an art critic and a university professor living in southwestern Ontario.



Vessel-Vessel, A Measure of Truth 1986–88

Notes

1. Donald Judd, “Specific Objects,” 1964. *Arts Yearbook* 8 (1965): 94.
2. Translation: “as is painting so is poetry,” from Horace’s *Ars Poetica*, written in the first century B.C.
3. Emile de Antonio, “Excerpts from *Painters Painting* (1970),” in *Artists, Critics, Context: Readings in and around American Art since 1945*, ed. Paul F. Fabozzi (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2001), 170–1.
4. London Regional Art and Historical Museums, *Ed Zelenak: Finding a Place, Selected Work 1976–1988* (London, Ontario: LRAHM, 1989), 12.
5. Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986).

List of Works

All works collection of the artist unless otherwise noted

Still Life, A Relocated Incident 1997

tin, wood, graphite, paper; 137.5 x 94.0 cm

Dowser Rod, with a re-adjusted site #5 2000

tin, copper, graphite, wood; 93.0 x 105.5 cm

Still Life, Points of Location 1998

wood, graphite, paper; 137.0 x 94.0 cm

Dowser Rod, with a re-adjusted site #6 2000

tin, copper, graphite, wood; 88.5 x 103.0 cm

Still Life, A Memory of Itself 1996

alloyed tin, copper, graphite, paper; 137.0 x 94.5 cm
The Donovan Collection, St. Michael's College

Still Life, Recording the Voids 1999

wood, graphite, paper; 137.0 x 91.2 cm

Concave #1 2004

bronze; 71.0 cm diameter x 38.0 cm depth

Concave #2 2004

copper, bronze; 71.0 cm diameter x 38.0 cm depth

Table #1, Still Life With Divining Rod 1995–96

steel; 115.0 x 115.0 x 59.5 cm

Table #3, Still Life With Divining Rod 1998–2005

wood, bronze; 183.0 x 160.0 x 75.5 cm

Vessel-Vessel, A Measure of Truth 1986–88

steel; 102.5 x 49.5 x 15.5 cm

Collection of the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art

Biography

Ed Zelenak lives and works in West Lorne, Ontario. From 1957 to 1959, he studied at the Ontario College of Art (OCAD), resuming studies in 1960–61 at the Fort Worth Art Centre and the Barsch Kelly Atelier in Dallas, Texas.

He first exhibited in 1963 at the Pamela Helbing Gallery in Houston. His work was exhibited from 1969 to 1992 by the Carmen Lamanna Gallery (Toronto), and Galerie Brenda Wallace (Montreal). He is currently represented by Christopher Cutts Gallery, Toronto; Thielsen Galleries, London; and Gail Harvey Gallery, Santa Monica, California.

His work is included in the collections of the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa; Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts, Lausanne, Switzerland; the Czech Museum of Fine Arts, Prague; the Chicago Athenaeum, Chicago; and the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. It is also collected by several universities and provincial museums.

Ed Zelenak

Thames Art Gallery (Chatham, Ontario)

February 4 – March 13, 2005

McIntosh Gallery (London, Ontario)

September 15 – October 30, 2005

Gallery Lambton (Sarnia, Ontario)

September 2 – October 14, 2006

Curators Catherine Elliot Shaw, Carl Lavoy, David Taylor

Editor Alison Kenzie

Photography Brenda Francis Pelkey

Design Otto Buj

Printing Printcraft Ltd.

ISBN 1-89651-31-6

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Concave #2 2004



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Gallery Lambton is funded by the County of Lambton, the Ontario Arts Council, memberships, and donations.



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McIntosh Gallery exhibitions and programs are generously supported by The University of Western Ontario, the Canada Council for the Arts, the Ontario Arts Council, Foundation Western and the Gallery membership.



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Thames Art Gallery exhibitions and programs are generously supported by the Canada Council for the Arts, the Ontario Arts Council, and the Municipality of Chatham-Kent.



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