

## KES ZAPKUS

Imagine listening to 35 minutes of a Beethoven quartet and retaining in the mind each measure so that the individual elements and the cumulative impact are simultaneously accessible. Looking at a Zapkus painting is like seeing the whole of the quartet while being able to scrutinize each measure and analyze each movement at leisure. Zapkus' paintings are so closely wedded to aspects of musical structure that the process of seeing them inevitably calls to mind the process of listening to music, except that one encounters the sonorous totality first and then discovers the complex interweavings between the separate components. The search for color-sound equivalences, which goes back at least to Aristotle and preoccupied a number of painters and musicians earlier in this century, finds one of its most complete materializations here because of the grid system which adds structure and rhythmic beat to the color harmonies of Orphists and Synchronists or the tone poems of Whistler. To the evocation of mood and the sensuous appeal of color interactions, Zapkus adds the challenge to the intellect to grasp the structural systems that are elusively evident. He is an exacting painter who forces contradictions by setting seductive painterly passages against strict linearity, avoids ingratiating color, and counters every reference to system with elisions and improvisations that obscure it. His paintings record the complex action of mind made palpable as it interweaves the predictable and the unpredictable to achieve that balance

between order and chaos that satisfies one of the most fundamental aesthetic requirements.

The grid emerged as the underlying system in Zapkus' work in the early 1960s as he grappled with the problems of multiple paintings within a single framework, and it has been the constant basis, manifest or implicit, of his subsequent work. In the new (1978-79) canvases, the horizontal/vertical grid is interwoven with other linear systems running diagonally in shifting directions, and catching one by surprise as one system takes over from another, with junctures obscured by softly brushed color areas and small eccentric shapes. These interruptions break the lines into "planar lines" (narrow rectangles or dashes) which track across the picture plane. Each square of the original grid may be located by a set of clues, fragments of straight edge boundaries, references to corners or pencil lines drawn over the color areas. These squares demand multiple readings: as small compositions in themselves, as subtly shifting passages to adjacent units, and as sets of relationships that are repeated with variations at varying intervals throughout the entire composition.

Although the schematic underpinning remains the same for each painting, the emotional pitch varies from one canvas to the next, running a gamut from the raucous cacophony that blares from *Major Network* to the calm that pervades the predominantly gray-green *Tides/East Marion*. The difference lies in the size of the legible color areas, in the dominant color chords, and, in the artist's words, "whether the activity becomes cohesive or contrapuntal." *Major Net-*

*work* blares as if all channels were tuned in at once because the color areas are relatively large and the high intensity colors—orange, pink, red, lime, turquoise, purple—vie for dominance while the segments of planar line are multidirectional and staccato in effect. Occasionally softly melodious sections, such as a green-blue-violet sequence, shift brusquely to a jarring pink and red, stitched diagonally across by orange, which in turn give way to the dissonance of black with yellow. These expanding colors tend to push apart from each other rather than fuse, thus heightening the effect of strident hyperactivity.

By contrast, the brushstrokes of *Tides/East Marion* are smaller, aligned with greater regularity, and often of the same or closely related colors, similar to the four or five parallel strokes that form a plane for Cézanne. The recessive greens are enlivened by glints of orange, yellow, and pink and the shifting stitchery of the grid is emphatic in red, black, and blue-green, but the tighter organization of the small units and the less extravagant palette stabilize the fluctuations to produce an overall sense of tranquility, of spaciousness and benign light that is the direct opposite of the density and clamor of *Major Network*. A close reading reveals scrupulous attention to niceties of texture and paint handling, strokes that have marked substance contrasting with thin translucencies, soft edges and firm, and subtle shifts in the "weave" of the paint. The silkscreened grid that introduced a deliberate mechanistic element into Zapkus' painting of three years ago still flickers through this painting,

setting up a polarity with the gestural brushing, but it surfaces with diminishing frequency and disappears from subsequent works.

Packed into the storage spaces of these canvases, like information waiting for retrieval, is a layering of diverse historical references, intentional and perhaps unintentional, that brings allusive richness to the work. Echoes of the sign system and syntax of Analytical Cubism as well as to the mechanical devices of the Pop artist, acknowledgments of Mondrian's adamant stand against external reference and of Matisse's emotive use of color, the gesture of the action painter and the egalitarianism of the modish grid—all are gathered in a grand synthesis. Held in precarious balance are the painterly coloristic elements and the rigid dictates of the linear system, the former analogous to tone, the latter to measure or beat.

Although Zapkus does not list Seurat in his personal pantheon, one cannot disregard the fact that his undergraduate years were spent at the Chicago Art Institute in the inescapable shadow of the *Grand Jatte*. The lessons of its scientific system, its calculated color distributions, its linear structure, and the very manner of execution reverberate in his work. It seems to have set a standard in scale, complexity, theoretical foundation, and skill in orchestration that sparks the ambitions of these works of nearly a century later. The concept of color music, already a gleam in Seurat's eye, finds one of its most convincing realizations to date in the intricate celebrations made visible on these resounding canvases. (Paula Cooper, *May 15-July 6*)

Martica Sawin

Kes Zapkus, *Major Network*, 1979. Acrylic and oil on canvas, 5 x 16'. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery.

