



KES ZAPKUS' MODERN WARFARE



The proteiform graph itself is a polyhedron of scripture. There was a time when naïf alphabetters would have written it down the tracing of a purely deliquescent recidivist, possibly ambidextrous, snubnosed probably and presenting a strangely profound rainbow in his (or her) occiput. To the hardly curious entomophilist then it has shown a very sexmosaic of nymphosis in which the eternal chimerahunter Oriolopos, now frond of sugars, then lief of saults, the sensory crowd in his belly coupled with an eye for the goods trooth bewilderblessed by their night effluvia with guns like drums and fondlers like forceps persequestellates his vanéssas from flore to flore. Closer inspection of the bordereau would reveal a multiplicity of personalities inflicted on the documents or document and some prevision of virtual crime or crimes might be made by anyone unwary enough before any suitable occasion for it or them had so far managed to happen along. In fact, under the closed eyes of the inspectors the traits featuring the chiaroscuro coalesce, their contrarities eliminated, in one stable somebody similarly as by the providential warring of heartshaker with housebreaker and of dramdrinker against freethinker our social something bowls along bumpily, experiencing a jolting series of prearranged disappointments, down the long lane of (it's as semper as oxhousehumper!) generations, more generations and still more generations.

—Finnegans Wake¹

Ted Castle

The epic form is hardly modern, although everything that is done now is as modern as it can be. But the epic form is hardly modern for a good reason—it includes everything. Most of what is modern excludes almost everything. Life itself is the paradigm for the epic. This does not mean that what is epic is lifelike, but it does mean that it is like life, all-inclusive, contradictory, utterly convincing, evanescent and also permanent, now fond of sugars then lief of salts—in short, entirely whole and overwhelming as such. But there is nothing *short* about an epic; the shortest thing you can say about it is that it is *heroic*. These days we are acquainted only privately with heroes. Public heroes seem either bureaucratic or ludicrous—the hostages were bureaucratic heroes, the bosses are ludicrous—but in person we are all acquainted with someone we admire. When we create a hero through our admiration we make something extensive. It is like having a love affair with someone you haven't met, but really having it, not just wishing for it. Heroic artists (if there are such things) copulate with everybody while experiencing the most extreme solitude, which they require in order to go on with their work. To say that this is paradoxical misses the point. It is impossible.

I know something of the epic form because I wrote an epic novel called *Anticipation* in the '60s. A part of it is to be published this year, after all these years. The idea of publishing part of an epic is on the face of it a contradiction in terms. Since an epic includes everything, a part of an epic might seem to exclude most

All illustrations on these two pages are details from Kes Zapkus' *Modern Warfare*. The sections are arranged in the same relative positions that they occupy in the painting, from top to bottom and left to right.



things. However this is not true. In the same sense that a single cell of an organism includes the diagrams for making the whole being, which is today a fairly proven theory, a substantial part of an epic includes the whole, by allusion. I defend this thought with the epigraph to this article, which is not really a typical passage from *Finnegans Wake*—it is one of the best. The epic, like life, includes mistakes, even though the artist makes every effort to avoid them. The epic is not a demonstration of virtuosity. It is what it is.

Kestutis Zapkus is one of a very few painters that I could situate as epic. As he says, every once in a while he accumulates the energy to make a work that traduces all exclusions. He makes a painting, over a period of months, that is so detailed and so illusive that an exegesis of it, were one desired, would be the length of a short book. But an epic work is its own exegesis, it is art for art's sake world without end time immemorial—"Will you walk into my wavetrap?" said

for it, and we can see that painting today is a lot like writing that uses only words that begin with b-l-a—black, blague, blatant, etc. Or, blah-blah-blah-blah-blah.

Although he has a great sense of humor, Zapkus is not kidding. He is saying the same thing that every great artist has ever said, and he is saying it in the way that only he can say it. What are they saying? Well, it's a long story . . . but in this case we can perhaps sum it up by saying that Zapkus is interested in physical eloquence. Eloquence is a word that he is apt to use aptly. But here is a quotation, referring to an earlier painting called *Homage to Henri Matisse*, which establishes the concerns of Kes Zapkus as a painter:

Every several years it seems that I get enough energy together or a kind of inspiration or a feeling that I can conquer the thing that I couldn't conquer earlier, and I want to do a very ambitious work. I get this image of something so involved as to be extremely difficult to do yet so exciting to

probably abandon him before he abandons it. What has happened is that the man has become a mature artist who can play, without fear of being thought unserious, who can recapitulate all his thoughts and all art in a single work, which is to say, a person who can make an epic. There has to be a meaning to it as well, and of course there is.

Zapkus hates warfare. He was born in Lithuania and spent his first six years amidst warfare and its dreadful consequences. As a refugee from the usurpation of the Baltic states, he and his American mother endured hardships that are best left undocumented in this context. There is something extremely repulsive about his painting *Modern Warfare*. But it is equally attractive. The colors aren't "nice." People say, "Wow!" and turn away. It is full of "life." All of the juxtapositions and recalcitrant reformations and the endless syntax of vitality exist in every portion of this huge painting that is 8 feet high and 16 feet long. It is almost unphotographable, because a good photograph of it would have to be just about as big as the work. *Warfare* is possibly the greatest painting Zapkus has made. It is interesting that it is more like some of his earlier work, shown in Chicago (where he lived and worked), and in Paris, than it is like his more recent work, some of which, although complicated, is rather plainer and more logical. It is not, however, simply like his early work as such; to put a word upon it, it is like a synthesis of Cubism and Abstract Expressionism.

Such elaborate claims are beyond proof in a purposely limited article. I wish to suggest that in this work, and in others, Kes Zapkus confronts us with an abstraction that is entirely meaningful, with a colorful elaboration of ideas that go way back and rebound into the future. I do not care for the pastime of looking for "things" in this great painting—however, the artist loves to do so and constantly reminds himself of himself and of the work of other painters and of painters that may come along. He's constantly pointing out the "boats" or "circles" or "shaped canvases." But this, I think, is a pedagogical device: as a great teacher sometimes may, Zapkus wants to make accessible something that seems intimidating. To me, however, *Modern Warfare* remains a wonder, full of color and of the absence of color, highly drawn but not too reminiscent of loved objects, fully itself and ultimately full of dread. I could not resist photographing somewhat arbitrarily chosen parts of it in close-up, and I was unwillingly to photograph it altogether.

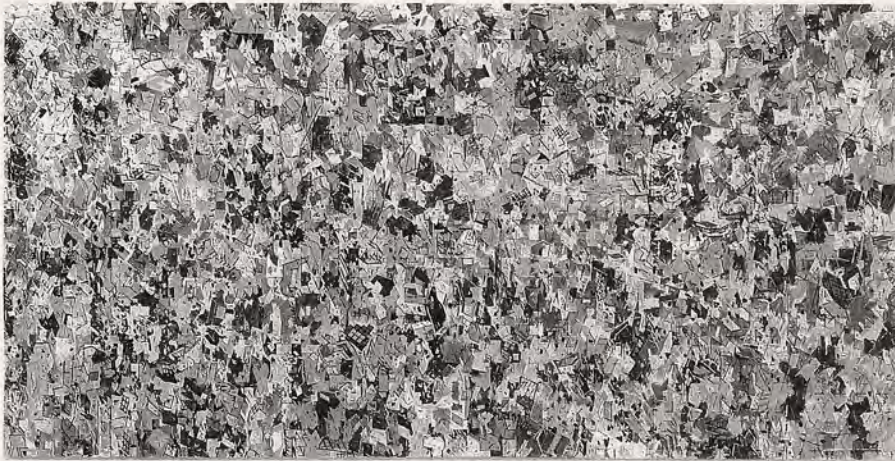
Tis time to observe Occurrences, and let nothing remarkable escape us; The Supinity of elder dayes hath left so much in silence, or time hath so martyred the Records, that the most industrious heads do finde no easie work to erect a new Britannia.

—Thomas Browne, May 1, 1658



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1. James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, 1939, from the corrected edition, New York, Viking Press 1958, p. 107.
2. *Finnegans Wake*, p. 287, note 1.
3. Quoted from the sound track of the 1980 film *With Paint on Canvas: Kes Zapkus* by Jerry Gambone, 16mm, 42 minutes.



Kes Zapkus, *Modern Warfare*, January 1981, oil on canvas, 96 x 192"

the spiter to the shy,"² and so on and so forth. This is not a joke.

When I saw his latest work, *Modern Warfare*, I knew that he had created an epic painting. Most critics who have written about Zapkus have spoken about music. One of the reasons for this is that he loves music, both ancient and modern. But the other reason is that they can only imagine a modern epic in terms of music. The juxtapositions and variations in his work are so supple and so masterful that you have to think of a time-oriented art, and music is handy. The literary epic is moribund, as far as anybody knows. Important literary books, the few that are being published today, concern themselves with something and its opposite, or the obverse and the reverse of the same coin, because of the syntax of mass marketing. That's why we think that nothing can encompass everything, that nobody but Carol Burnett or Benny Hill (who are both epic artists in the mass media) could possibly entertain our ability for survival sufficiently to become noted

contemplate that it takes me a while to get ready for it, but finally I do, and I make the attempt. As I live with the idea, as the painting begins developing, of course there are ecstatic moments and moments when the painting seems extremely lifeless or dead, but I keep faith in the idea itself. A painting this size is very difficult to see all at once. I spend hours and hours looking and making changes, mostly looking. I like the sensation of it completely surrounding me to the extent that I can't quite grasp its totality which extends beyond me.³

Modern Warfare is one of his largest works, one of his best, one of his most comprehensive. In contrast to his previous work, there are parts of the painting that are hardly painted or only slightly touched. In contrast to his previous work, there seems to be a lessening of the ambition to perfection at the same time as there is an increase of the ambition for totality. Although he has shown work for 20 years, Zapkus has never been regarded as an on-line, in-fashion, sure-fire success. Without his changing anything substantive, I see him now in the stream of a fashion that will