

Art Tranquil, Art Defiant: Kes Zapkus

Renouncing the abstract perfection of his earlier paintings, Zapkus now addresses issues of war, social control and polarization by violence in splintered, jagged, deliberately unbalanced compositions that encourage viewers to participate in the activity of "putting things together again."

BY LUCY R. LIPPARD

What eyes Cubism has given us! Never again can we make a painting of a single view. We now have a visual dialectic. How easy it should be for Marxists to understand!

First [the artist] finds within his medium the equivalent of the qualities he feels to be lacking in life. Every formal quality has its emotional equivalent. Then he begins the endless task of trying to interpret reality with these qualities always inherent in his interpretation. Perhaps no one but an artist can quite understand this. Yet it is the fundamental way in which we set out to improve the world. It is only a subjective improvement? No, because a true work of art communicates and so extends consciousness of what is possible.

—John Berger,
A Painter of Our Time

These days it's hard for me to deal with art for art's sake. Most of it seems so literally abstract (whether it's representational or non-representational) in the midst of an all-too-concrete world. I'm preoccupied with how the human spirit is going to survive the onslaught of death-dealing megalomania and reaction through an active and outreaching, rather than a passive and decorative culture. I'm not, of course, unfamiliar with the art-as-object, new-reality, what-you-see-is-what-you-get credo. It has just become a lot harder to believe in it over the years. Context encroaches. Meaninglessness unsatisfies. I was once a more or less formalist critic; I can still be sensuously moved by

the justice of a line or color or form put precisely where and how it should be put. I can still see, but I don't enjoy seeing for anyone else any more. The fact that seeing itself is not enough worries me sometimes. I don't want beauty to disappear from the world, but I don't want it to be owned by the enemy, endlessly manipulated for ugly reasons, defused into meaninglessness by isolation and alienation, through a value system that has nothing to do with the reasons art is made.

I am, therefore, startled when I am caught and touched by art for art's sake, as I have been for some 13 years by Kestutis Zapkus's paintings. Something comes through in them that reinforces what I would like art to stand for—something of Zapkus's own conviction that "art is a meaningful activity, a private investigation, a simultaneous conglomerate of *all* experience, not just individual, but social too." Many artists say this and some believe it. Few manage to integrate it into their art as a way to get at the truth, or as Zapkus puts it, "use feeling and impression to get at the distortions."

Zapkus once commented that he would like to condense his entire visual perception of the world into one segment of his painting. Consequently, each segment is diverse and exciting in itself, serving as a point of conflict when juxtaposed to another segment, the entire statement being dependent on the interaction of these smaller areas. The visual and mental excitement caused by these

individual statements is the "music" of the painting.

That is from the (anonymous) catalogue preface to Zapkus's third one-man show, at the K. Kazimir Gallery in Chicago in May 1965. It still holds, in detail. The music reference, which I was going to try to avoid because I'm a musical illiterate, is in fact unavoidable. Zapkus has played the violin since he was a child, and for years played daily as a kind of warm-up exercise for painting. This has crucially affected the way he sees the surface of a canvas—serially and structurally, or constructively. He has compared his paintings to "a piece of music stretched out"; or, as Martica Sawin has elaborated on the theme: "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" (*Arts*, June '79).

Zapkus's paintings have always been rhythmic seas of intricately ordered color/space, punctuated by staccato surface forms, floating on layers of underlying currents. Every unit is a complete idea and composed configuration in itself. He works on a canvas for months or even a year, waiting till a surface is quite literally filled up, brim-



Collision Course, 1981, oil and acrylic on canvas, 96 by 192 inches.

ming with color, line, movement and feeling, all obsessively intersecting. His early works, such as *Eighteen Squares* (1963) and *Sixty-Part Fugue* (1964) were already what he calls "structural expressionism," holding the picture plane in a Cubist manner while leaving room for a multiplicity of "incidents," some of which involve implied depth. All this activity took place within a gridded armature that has been there ever since—sometimes as a subterranean force, sensed but not seen, sometimes visibly regulating the fragments.

Having achieved a *style* so early in his professional life, Zapkus has been free to refine and intensify it over the years. He tends to move in five-year

cycles between poles of geometric precision and a looser lyricism. This rhythm has saved him from stagnation; and yet it never occurred to me that Zapkus would alter his refusal of associative and pictorial elements in his obdurate abstractions. In a 1973 statement, although mentioning a new interest in "color as an emotional and evocative element," he repeated that his "ambition in painting is to make it autonomous and unreferential as much as possible; hence, I am reluctant to use shapes or representations. The smaller internal scale discourages shape reading, and maintains the interest within the 'all-over' range where one reads articulation rather than subjects."

In the mid-to-late '70s, however, Zapkus seemed to be somehow removing that articulation from the viewer's range. The multifaceted forms, as always made up of endless other tiny forms and lines and brushstrokes, had gotten so minute that the impression was of a nearly monochrome field. He recalls another artist coming to his show at Paula Cooper in 1977 and saying, from a distance, "I like the blue one." "Come closer and see it," urged Zapkus. But the man wouldn't move. I had a similar feeling, that I was in some subtle way being kept at a distance, or even pushed away. The microcosmic elements had almost neutralized the dialectic be-



art) as a decorative facade, a congruous element in late capitalist consumerism: "People don't expect anything of value or depth today from art."

The immediate catalyst was a series of conversations with a psychologist friend in the summer of 1979. Zapkus has always considered his art to be "a statement about what it means to be alive. I put in everything I know about art—in a symbolic way about life—right and wrong, strong and weak." Where his work had always been rooted in formal tension and release, "release was usually not given much room because there was more tension coming soon." His friend kept peering at his paintings and saying, "So where is all that experience? You can't escape any part of your conscious or unconscious."

"I kept saying back, 'It's all underneath. You don't have to wear your heart on your sleeve,'" Zapkus recalls. "But later that happened." Irritated, but challenged, he found his work opening up to a new range of expressionism which began with a series of drawings called *The Dresden Studies*, including *War Drawing*, *Children's Zone* and *Turbulence Remembered*. The ensuing and continuing series of large all-over paintings is overtly about war, about his distrust of social control, about

Zapkus takes pride in the incompleteness of his new work, insisting that it's no longer about taste and style, but about "taste and style and everything else."

tween micro-and-macrocosmic views. Coming up close and peering at the detail was somewhat claustrophobic. The paintings were beautiful, virtuoso, but for my taste too tight, too well constructed, almost painful in their completeness.

Zapkus was not unaware of this. Responses to the 1977 show were an eye-opener for him. He realized he had been working primarily for himself. Now he longed to share his experience. With a new, participational motivation, he began to stress the importance of crossing barriers, communicating more directly through his art. The highly patterned surfaces loosened up and cracked open, revealing an emotive en-

ergy that had previously been hidden beneath the layers of detail. Now the distance between viewer and canvas became real, in a vertiginous, quasi-aerial perspective. Zapkus takes pride in the new work's incompleteness, insisting that it's no longer about taste and style, but is about "taste and style and everything else," introducing a "rhapsodic attitude about a lot of junk." He now gets a certain convert's delight in pointing out how each tiny area of a painting looks like something in itself—a pier into a lake, a swimming pool, a patch of warehouses beside a playing field.

He attributes this new development to a disillusioned view of the way the art public looks at his work (and most

polarization by violence. A 1981 drawing is titled *Fluency Lost for Fervor Gained (Ulster)*, which seems to describe this evolution.

The war paintings and those related to them represent an attempt to express the aggression and anguish an artist relatively happily sequestered in classroom and studio has to feel about what's going on in the world today. Zapkus has sometimes broken the artist's expected isolation from politics. He was active in the Artworkers Coalition from 1969 to 1971. He is idealistically aware, inclined to a humanist anarchism that is based on his conviction that "all positions of strength are the wrong ones; people shouldn't push oth-

ers around and *ideas* shouldn't push people around." He wants his art to be part of "a radical re-examination of human nature for radical change. The search for life's meaning is a major human right."

Zapkus's passionately anti-violent attitudes are inextricably entwined with the events and memories of his childhood. Born in Lithuania in 1938, he and his mother fled German then Russian invaders while his father stayed behind as a partisan fighter. They were bombed on the road out of the country, spent the war in refugee camps, then in a small town near Hamburg which was also bombed. They remained in another camp until 1947, unable to return to Lithuania, with no news of his father. Eventually they went to America, settling in Connecticut and then in Chicago. Years later, his father's death in the continuing struggle for Lithuanian liberation was confirmed.

The splintered, jagged, deliberately off-balance war paintings with their almost identifiable episodic configurations reflect a child's memory of jolting, incomprehensible, polyglot experiences and sights. On a more universalized plane, they might reflect an international experience of equally incomprehensible chaos. The "aerial" viewpoint was suggested by a 1978 flight over Mexico City and a plaza excavated to expose three cultures: Aztec/baroque-colonial/modern. Zapkus was mesmerized by the patterns of usage in the different periods, the movement and re-usage, and by imagining the full range of human experience operating there at each period. *The Dresden Series* applied this sense of historical landscape to the speeded-up devastation of *Modern Warfare*—the title of an 8-by-16-foot "epic" (idiosyncratically perused by Ted Castle in *Artforum*, March 1981). The crackling energy of this major work is also found in *Ulster Linen (Tranquil)* and *Ulster Linen (Defiant)*, 1981. In the former, with a palette of blues and beiges, a strong architectural impression is based on unbroken rectangles. In the latter, a strange array of reds flashes across the brown ground in exotic, asymmetrically placed polygons, and the surface of the painting seems to be disintegrating in chunks.

Zapkus prefers a huge canvas, up to 30 feet long, that will keep him busy on a single work for many months. "Every several years," he says, "it seems that I get enough energy together or a kind of



Two details from *Dreams of Patriotism*.

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 contemplate that it takes me a while to get ready for it" (*Artforum*, March 1981). In the earlier paintings, he was trying to "picture the co-existence of all things and formally to match a symphonic work in the amount of information perceived in a totally constructed whole." By the completion of *Homage to H.M.* (1974-75, H.M. being Henri Matisse)—a stunning 9-by-30-foot field of interlocking "notes" emerging from and buried in a field of white—he felt

he had accomplished that, and his goals began to change. He wanted truth rather than stylistic reductions to generate the next step.

The 14-foot-long *Tales of Conquest*—an ironic tribute to false patriotism in general and Westmoreland's lies about Vietnam bodycounts in particular—is part of a series rather than serially complete in itself, as the old work was. The "unfulfilled" quality of the recent work leaves room for response, the artist's as well as the viewer's. Zapkus is trying to build these gaps into the structure, in a spirit of "eagerness and cautiousness," encouraging speculation on how to put reality back together again. *Tales of Con-*



Dreams of Patriotism, 1981, oil, acrylic, pencil and charcoal on canvas, 84 inches square.

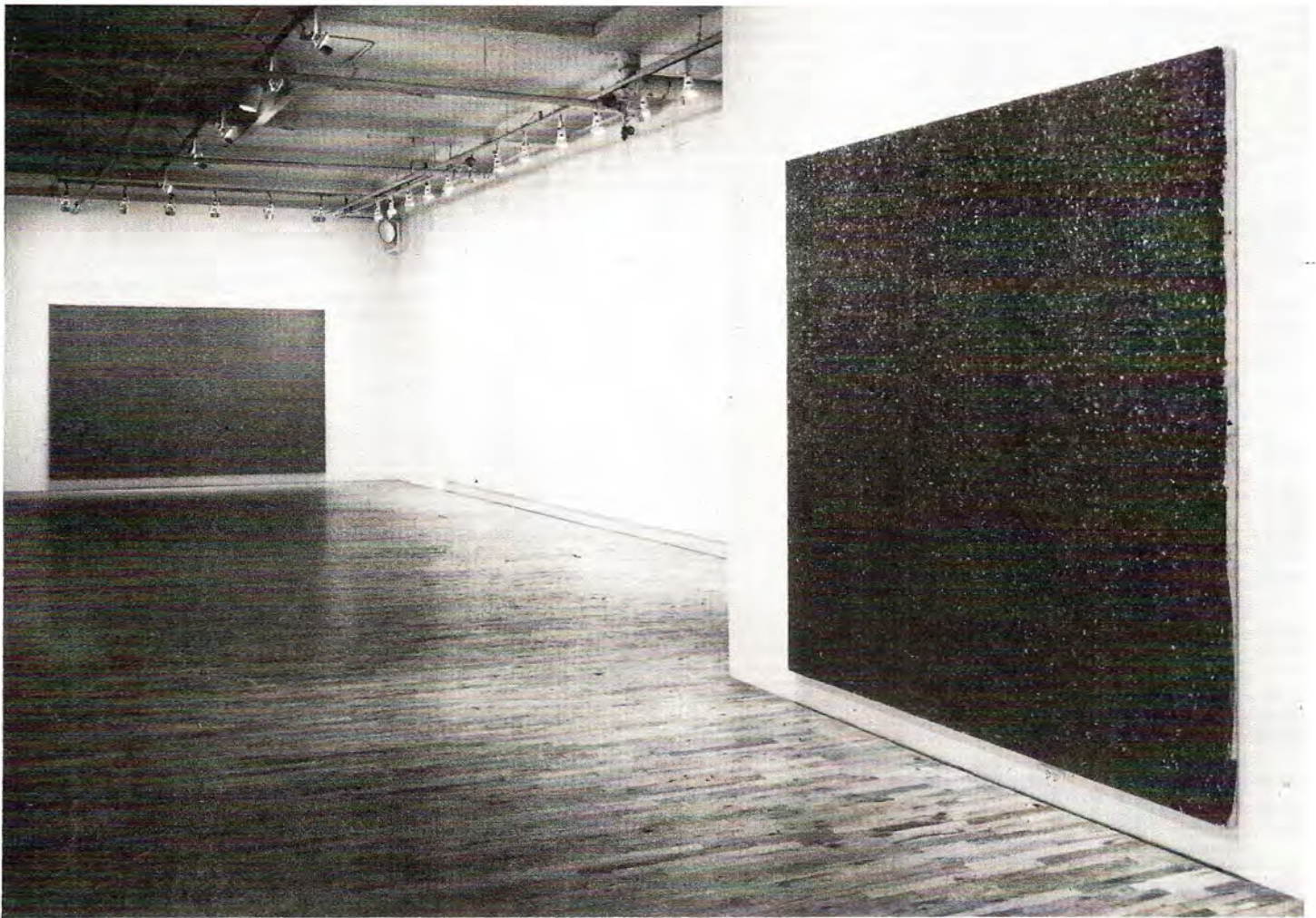
quest, necessarily tight in composition because of its large scale, nevertheless is structured around a series of "explosions" and jarring raw patches like bombed-out areas. The small-faceted mosaic of *Steel City* splits open into a white center. *Night Sea* plunges down in a wedge. *Shattered Calm* spins around a cracking center. *Collision Course* almost illustrates its title, and *Dreams of Patriotism* is dynamically unbalanced.

All of this is new for the obsessive structurer. When the surface of the older work was broken, it merely displayed a glimpse of another layer; the bedrock was never exposed. In the recent work, the break is harsher, more precarious;

tilting planes and contradictory spatial illusions leave the viewer in a scary visual no-one's land. "I love dissonance, or the sense of several individual voices expressing something without being hand-in-hand, though simultaneous," Zapkus wrote in 1970. The "aerial" viewpoint allows geometric forms to have a double meaning. Circles, for instance, can be seen abstractly or as giving a sense of location, of something fixed, of order within disorder, simultaneously targets and sanctuaries. The angular polygons he concocts seem too varied to be invented (as in "truth is stranger than fiction"). But they are landscapes of the mind, landscapes filled with remembered detail, 44 years

of dreams, anxieties, of parts constantly juggled to see where they fit in a life and on the surface of a canvas.

The esthetic, or formal, distancing I felt in the all-over works of the '70s has been replaced by the kind of distancing that provides not overviews but insights. The aerial vision (that of the bomber/destroyer and the painter/reconstructor) is literal, but also Brechtian in the way it offers the viewer no immediate emotional identification. It does offer emotion, however, in a very contemporary manner, the way a film like *2001* took us outside ourselves, in an almost tangible experience of the breadth of



Installation view of Zapkus's paintings at the Paula Cooper Gallery, May 1975.

the unknown. In fact, in Zapkus's new work a cinematic approach seems to have replaced the musical one—equally intricate but somehow rougher, more sequential, faster-moving. Perhaps this is the result of Jerry Gambone's excellent film about the artist (*With Paint on Canvas*, 1980), which parallels serious art's function of teaching people how to see by teaching people how to see serious art.

Zapkus is now moving toward a fusion of his two favorite artists, combining the dancing discipline of Mondrian with the flowing exuberance of Matisse. Already a master of structure, he is now motivated primarily by feelings. The new work communicates the power of his convictions in a deeply moving way. Reflecting the melancholy and grandeur of the modern experience, of a time when we live in the targets Zapkus superimposes on the land, he insists that his art's role is "not simply to bear witness to terror, but to allow the viewer to participate in the activity of putting things together again."

Zapkus is now moving toward a fusion of his two favorite artists, combining the dancing discipline of Mondrian with the flowing exuberance of Matisse.

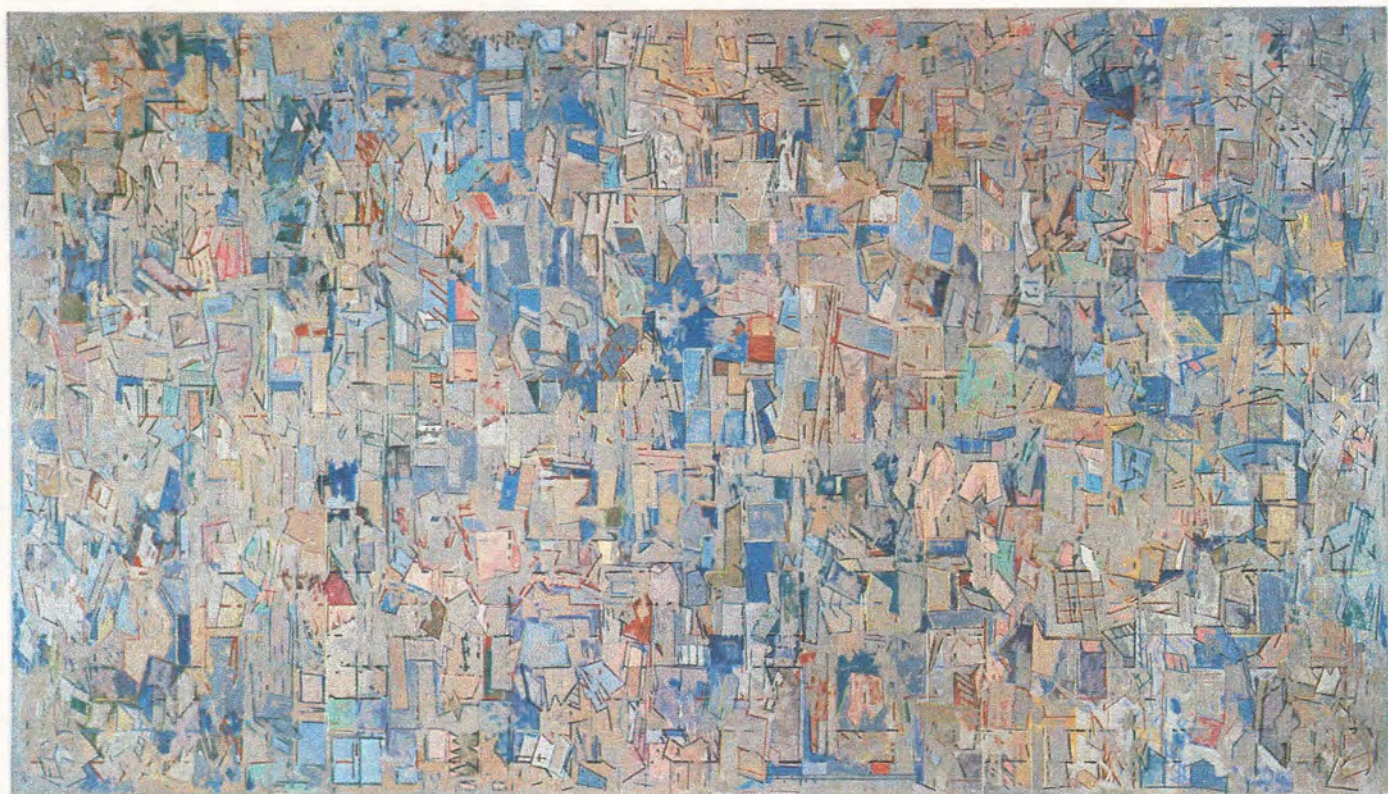
Social commentary in abstraction is no easy task, and often the titles are the prime clue to the meaning—as in *Danae's Shower*, a cascade of golden parts, or *Speculation's Claim*, which is about land development. Zapkus is currently interested in "the identification of differences"—an esthetic metaphor for such a need in our increasingly homogenized and controlled society. The fact that his formal elements are now larger and more visible means the "flavor of differences between the parts" becomes clearer. While the older, non-associative parts demanded

multiplicity to support them, now the symbolic elements reverberate in their own space. One new painting is intended to convey "the human spirit crushing adventurist, imperialist politics." The next large work may be on the subject of "denationalization"; national symbols—"the flags of all nations"—will be shattered, the parts interlocking to form a new whole.

With the war paintings, Zapkus's art has become both deeper and broader. While his audience will probably remain relatively specialized, he maintains that "art becomes a public issue because it is the result of private investigation. All art is a guinea pig in the human experiment. A painting is not just an object, it is an eloquent, believable stand-in for the many-sided experiences of being human." □

All quotations not otherwise cited are from letters or conversations with the artist.

Author: Lucy R. Lippard is an art critic for the Village Voice. Her book *Ad Reinhardt* was recently published by Abrams.



Kes Zepkus: Ulster Linen (Tranquil), 1981, oil and acrylic on linen, 48 by 84 inches.



Ulster Linen (Defiant), 1981, oil and acrylic on linen, 48 by 84 inches. All color photos Linda Davenport.