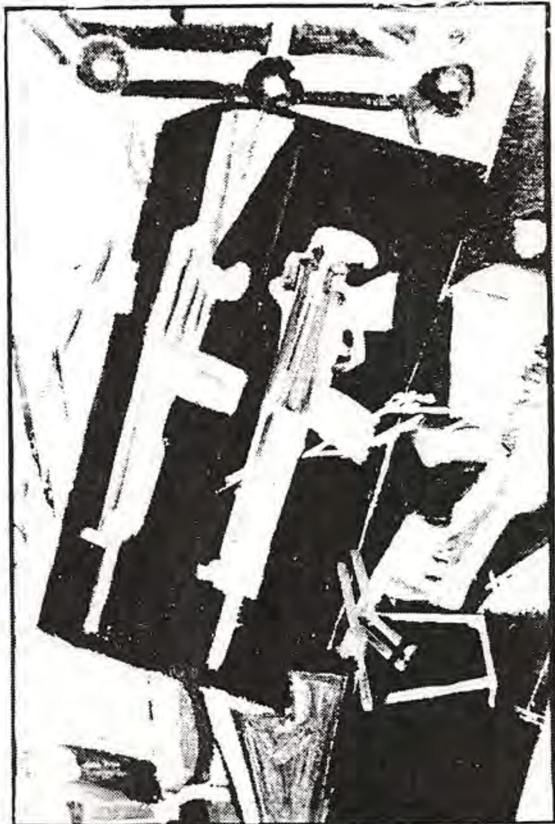

PHOTOGRAPHS BY FRED W. McDARRAH

Kes Zapkus, *Gift to the Underdeveloped*, with detail from center of painting at right

Battle Cries

By Lucy R. Lippard

For better, rather than for worse, most contemporary artists tackling the subject of war have no firsthand experience of its terrors. Kestutis Zapkus is an exception, and his "Children of War" series shows it (John Weber Gallery, to November 24). During World War II, Zapkus and his mother fled the German, then Russian invaders of Lithuania. As refugees, they were bombed on the roads, lived in camps, and then were bombed again in a small German town. They came to the U.S. in 1947.

No wonder that Zapkus is passionately opposed to war, and to nationalism: "All positions of strength are the wrong ones," he says. "People shouldn't push others around and *ideas* shouldn't push people around." Although convinced that "a painting is not just an object, it is an eloquent, believable stand-in for the many-sided experience of being human," his own art was obdurately nonreferential until around 1980. Then the overall patterned surfaces of his intricate abstractions began to shatter into asymmetrical explosions and impatient bursts of color. An 8-foot-by-16-foot epic called *De-Nationalization (1982)*, for instance, is at first glance an expanse of intertwined shapes and strokes; on closer scrutiny the flags of the world's nations emerge, warring for space amid brushy (and bloody) patches on the crowded field.

As Zapkus's paintings began to blow their cover-up, they released an energy that might have been long-suppressed anger. Bigger forms and faster brushwork revealed the complex structural dissonance. His compositional strategie remained the same as in the earlier "purer" works—point and counterpoint derived from music, each small area jammed with visual information, contradicted or coopted by its neighbor. But an illusionist element was creeping in. The paintings resembled aerial views of bombed cities, an impression reinforced by titles like *Modern Warfare*, *Dreams of Patriotism*, "The Dresden Series," and *Tales of Conquest*—which Zapkus calls an ironic tribute to false patriotism and Westmoreland's Vietnam bodycounts, now timely again.

In the current show, uniformed soldiers, guns, and tanks skulk in the painterly undergrowth. The two most successful paintings—the 9-foot-by-14-foot *Lamentation* and the smaller *Gift to the Undeveloped*—are predominantly black, or dark. They evoke a sense of the war victim as a hideously exaggerated version of a child, exploitable, manipulable, help-

less, caught in a battle rather than fighting one—because increasingly, in Lebanon, in El Salvador, it is civilians of all ages who are the children of war.

Zapkus's technique is a metaphor for his evolution from covert to overt communication, from a studiedly specialized and distanced art to one that pleads with its audience to listen. The breakthrough has been psychological as well as aesthetic. Zapkus's coming to terms with what art means, or could mean, has paralleled the process of coming to terms with his own history. This looser and more passionate style is open to interpretation, though still fundamentally abstract and still as tightly constructed as ever. (Zapkus's expressionism is definitely not of the splash and splotch school.) The dynamic imbalance and jarring disjunctions, the structure successfully masquerading as anarchy, say more about the content than the images of soldiers and guns do. Yet the representational elements serve to kick off the more profound response, acting as the next level beyond the titles. They also suggest that behind the chaos there are causes: that people make wars.

In this heyday of expressionless expressionism, war, holocaust, and above all fear are favorite topics. Yet few artists manage to communicate the utter desolation I imagine war to be. Zapkus's paintings are not merely chaotic. They have something to say about chaos. Like newsreels, or relatively realistic movies when the hero is absent from the frame, they could be happening to you. They evoke the literal pointlessness of war—the disorientation, running down blocks full of people made unrecognizable from fear, past houses that are no longer there, the corpses of friends and enemies undistinguishable, everything aimed aimlessly at you. The density, even claustrophobic horror vacui of these canvases evokes the terror all spaces must hold in such a situation. I'm always saying that a politically conscious art has to come from lived experience—by which I don't mean you have to be bombed to make art against bombing, but that some part of you has to be able to envision being bombed, rather than just to make pictures of it.

The presence of recognizable images in this show may discourage those who don't like to see a "pure" art sullied, don't like to see artists change. A case in point: Raymon Elozua, who has shown four times with OK Harris, was told six weeks ago that his next show (scheduled to open November 10, on Veterans' Day) had been canceled, despite the fact that the gallery had "okayed" the new work in progress. Perhaps it is just a coincidence that the pieces dealer Ivan Karp (as reported by the artist) so abruptly rejected on the grounds of "ugliness, content, and nonsalability" were more overtly political than Elozua's battered industrial landscape sculptures and nostalgic drive-ins. (And perhaps it is just a coincidence that the only exhibition I've ever been commissioned to curate but wasn't paid for was the "Call and Response" show on Central America at Colby College last March; will I never learn to get these things in writing? . . .)

Elozua's November show was to consist of a series of four large ceramic reliefs entitled "Honorable Discharge," which he describes as "a history of blue collar workers who fought in World War II, came home and 'bought' the American Dream, working in the factories, and in the last 10 years have both been betrayed and abandoned by a changing America." Each relief is divided equally into a huge head and an accompanying figure or object composed of clay chips laid on exposed metal armatures, so people become "facades." With their raw, matte textures, glum colors, and simple close-up forms, the reliefs are indeed "ugly," in the time-honored modernist sense of "disturbing." The Statue of Liberty, countered by a pouncing eagle, is a noble fake, a reminder of how stinting the welcome is for some refugees today; the three battle pieces memorialize U.S. invasions of Italy, Germany, and Japan, recalling to me that some one-quarter of World War II vets suffered the "Vietnam syndrome," nervous disorders and lifelong nightmares.

Elozua's two latest works, also giant object/portraits, are of workers in the workplace. Where the "Honorable Discharge" series was an attempt to understand his father's life, these include the artist's own experience. Raised in Chicago as the son of French and Cuban immigrants, Elozua was told about the Gestapo and Batista. Like his father, he has been a steelworker. He worries that his reliefs might be seen as Reaganite propaganda for patriotism; I wondered, if I had seen his pieces at the OK Harris emporium of slick Americana, would I have thought they were pop mockeries, rather than respectful acknowledgments of scars, resilience, and dignity through quasimonumental form? Straightforward and unrhetorical images of working people are almost nonexistent in high art. Elozua's show, like Zapkus's a political statement based in personal experience, would have been an exception.

What will it take to seduce more American artists into confrontation with their own social experiences—a possible antidote for the diminished expectations we have of art today? There were no images of Hiroshima in high art in the '40s and '50s; even the Nazi holocaust was pictured only years after pictures of it—photographs—appeared. In World War III this source of inspiration will not be available. How can we have so much information about war and know so little? Is it the fault of the image makers? Reagan's reelection gives me a greater sense of doom than *The Day After*. If we can't imagine or image a person out of work, sleeping in the street, shot down resisting eviction, tortured by a police state, what hope have we of providing countervisions?