



Kes Zapus at John Weber

Kes Zapus's recent work expresses openly the anxiety that burns behind the stylistic bluff and swagger of so many less experienced painters today. I refer to the fear that no matter how demonstrative or semiotically layered it becomes, painting may by its historical nature just fail to connect with the circuits in which our thoughts and feelings about life run now. This anxiety is fed by the manifest powerlessness of painting to affect the commercial and mental image-traffic of popular culture: *Vanity Fair* may be able to deliver Eric Fischl's painting to the yuppie market, but what are the chances Fischl's paintings (or anyone's) will get people to stop shopping in *Vanity Fair*? To make matters worse, painting remains under attack within the art world by a phalanx of conceptual artists and critics who see it as fatally identified with a failed modernism.

Zapus's rejoinder to forebodings of painting's irrelevance and obsolescence appears at first to

be the common one. He has loaded his work with images to which we cannot help but respond, even if our response is only to note how little we spontaneously feel when faced with glimpses he provides of combat and weaponry that we know should be highly charged information. However, their overt content is not what gives his new paintings their surprising authority. Rather, its source is the complex texture of relations he establishes between image fragments and painterly detail. Zapus elaborates each picture's surface in such a way that those relations are not fully stated in the work itself but must be clinched by the viewer. To delve into those relations attentively is to help construct and sustain them. In other words, Zapus's paintings are defined not only by their considered physical execution, but by the kind of activity they demand of the viewer in order to be seen for what they are.

All the paintings in the show

belong to the "Children of War" series. They refer ultimately to the artist's childhood experiences as a war refugee, but their immediate purpose, he says, is to render the consciousness of a culture—ours—steeped in the rhetoric and imagery of war even when it is not fighting one. The paintings are dense with layers of images in various degrees of visual definition. The scale of the images tends to be small relative to the size of the marks used to form them, so there is a constant perceptual jostling that occurs as you focus on a pleasing passage of paint handling, only to be hit by the distasteful recognition that you've been contemplating the treads of a tank, the camouflage pattern on a battleship or the exhaust plume of a missile in flight.

Perhaps the most pervasive reference to war mania is in the shattered compositions of the paintings. Small studies included in the show reveal that a good deal of planning goes into the make-up of Zapus's enormously elaborate pictures, but clearly there is a lot of improvising going on as well. It is possible to see all kinds of artistic allusions here—to the Cubism of Picasso and Delaunay, to drawings and paintings by George Grosz, to the early paintings of Robert Rauschenberg and the postcard pictures of Malcolm Morley. But what finally makes Zapus's paintings so convincing is not their formal genealogy but his sureness of touch and his knack of making great constellations of color and detail look both exploded and unified. Not every picture in the show comes off, but *Spoiler* is as good as any new painting I've seen in the past several years.

What makes *Spoiler* good, and what makes all of Zapus's recent efforts admirable, is the meaning they give to looking at a painting. The risk Zapus runs by filling his pictures with images of war is that he will seem to be just another liberal artist tormented by conscience because he's not doing what he thinks he should to change an unlivable world. But he has forfeited nothing of the art of painting to his activist impulses (if that is what dictates his choices of imagery). He has not presumed to judge the efficacy of painting to make changes in the world or even in the consciousness of the individual viewer. Instead he has stuck to the premise that looking at accomplished painting can intensify the sensations of seeing, which are sensations of life, and that these give rise to an appetite for life, which is potentially a moral force. With no compromise of the pleasures of painting, he has sim-

ply filled his work with what he can't get out of his mind, with what he knows none of us can get out of our minds (except by repression) if we so much as read a newspaper, go to a movie, or enter a toy store.

What will happen if really intense vision is brought to bear on the images of war that are themselves part of the arsenal by which great powers rule? No pretense to an answer is built into Zapus's paintings. They are just offered as devices for heightening the intelligence and courage of the eye, and it is hard to imagine how they could be more effective.

—Kenneth Baker