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Pirate, Rebel, Trickster

By Jess Fros
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Joe Zucker's works are on view at the Nyehaus Gallery in New York City through Oct. 4. (9/16/2008) "Plunder From 1977 to 2008," an exhibit of works by Joe Zucker, a mutinous artist and East Hampton resident, is on view at the Nyehaus Gallery in New York City through Oct. 4.



The exhibit juxtaposes drawings and paintings from the 1970s with an installation and several large-scale "scroll" paintings from 2007. The subject of these works, spanning over 30 years, is piracy, and not high-tech digital download piracy, but the swashbuckling, looting, maritime piracy of Black Beard and Captain Kidd.

Throughout his extensive career, Mr. Zucker has exhibited alongside artists such as Agnes Martin and Brice Marden at the pioneering Bykert Gallery in the 1960s, and later with dealer Holly Solomon, who was well known for her support of new and experimental mediums, including the New Image and Pattern and Decoration movements to which Zucker belonged.

Over the course of his career, Mr. Zucker's work has been included in three Whitney Biennials, 1977, 1983, and 1995, as well as the 1986 Venice Biennale, and has been the focus of numerous solo and group exhibits. Noted art writers, such as Roberta Smith, Klaus Kertess, and Robert Storr, have written about his work, as well as the artists David Salle, and Carroll Dunham, and Chuck Close.

Despite the recognition among his peers and critics, Mr. Zucker has remained somewhat underground and is considered first and foremost an artist's artist, rebelling

against the conventions of art, not only in materials and process, but, moreover, subject matter. His brazen use of crude materials and counterintuitive content pushed the boundaries of high and low culture, his statements were both humorous and defiant, and his mediums, ranging from pegboard to paint-soaked cotton balls, were unconventional to say the least.

Joe Zucker's "Canon Balls," enamel on woven-paper painted strips, at Nyehaus Gallery in New York City



The large-scale 1970s paintings exhibited at Nyehaus present surfaces built from Rhoplex, a material more commonly used as caulking or sealant. You can hardly call the frosting-like gestures brushstrokes, but they serve this purpose and then some.

The material activates a subject that might otherwise be considered cartoonlike; an undulating sea navigated by a smarmy pirate on a raft complete with the quintessential parrot, distant desert island, and threatening school of sharks. It sounds chaotic, and possibly more like a storyboard for "Pirates of the Caribbean" than contemporary art, but the fact is, these paintings writhe with energy in surface and line. So much so that it requires some distance (mental and physical) to recapture the campy narrative depicted in these formal compositions.

The corresponding works, done primarily in 2007, consist of brightly colored sea scrolls made from latex, paper, and cardboard. Floating on each scroll are cannonball scale circles, some in black and some in loosely gestured greens and blues, implying that the scroll might be a ship's sail under attack, and the landscape beyond is illustrated in the implied holes.

To the benefit of the scroll works (not necessarily the pirate paintings), the gallery space retains the residential scale of its 19th-century Renaissance Revival brownstone, giving the works a dimension a Chelsea Gallery might diminish. Most of the gallery walls are painted black, with the exception of a small project space containing the installation titled "Canon Balls." This work features red and black scrolls running up and down all four walls of the gallery and woven where they meet at the floor. The space is a kind of inverted battle, described on scrolls plaited together to form a space not unlike a ship's hull.

The practical definition of a scroll is "a roll of papyrus, parchment, or paper which has been written, drawn, or painted upon for the purpose of transmitting information or using as a decoration." Mr. Zucker has clearly chosen the scroll to refer to his offbeat subject matter, but more important, it seems he has selected a medium that exemplifies a purpose of contemporary art, which is to explore the distance between decoration and communication.

The fact is, the artist's work is and has often been stupefying. In a business full of pretense and intellectual posturing, when presented with pirates, even the most affected art expert is left with the all too familiar "I don't get it" uncertainty.

Well, don't try to get it. Enjoy it. All signs point to Mr. Zucker being a self-referential trickster of sorts — playing technique and subject for and against each other to undermine any rote definition or genre.

As the artist Carroll Dunham wrote in a 2004 issue of Artforum, "He is the kind of artist whose fate is to inspire other artists with the originality and weirdness of his thinking, while eluding the clear branding that guarantees a secure spot on the grid of consensual understanding."