

Joe Zucker: *Untitled Mosaic (Theodora)*, 1972, acrylic, cotton, Rhoplex on canvas, 60 inches square. Courtesy GBE (Modern) and Sarah Gavlak Projects, New York.

# Zucker's Color Constructions

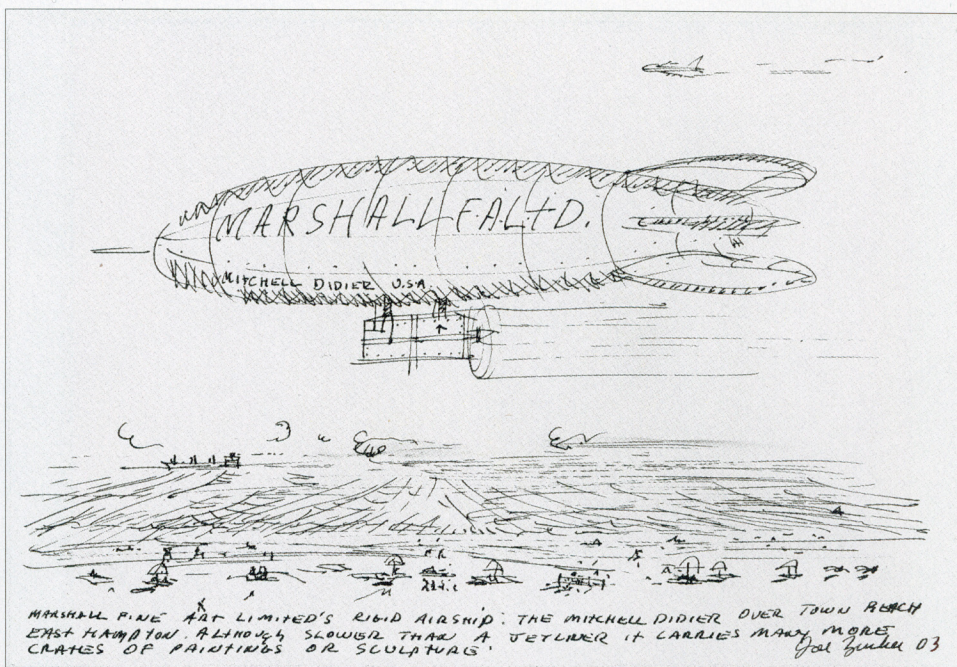
*Perhaps best known for his paint-soaked cotton-ball works of the 1970s, Joe Zucker continues to invent new ways of "building" a painting. Three recent gallery shows revealed him at his most spirited.*

**BY STEPHEN WESTFALL**



**J**oe Zucker has been a synthesizing original right from the outset. The homespun quality of his materials and processes reveals, rather than masks, a keen formal and historical sensibility, while also serving his devastating wit and cold eye for high-art academicism. The triple-gallery survey that unfolded in New York over this past winter was one of the principal events of the season, with GBE (Modern), formerly Gavin Brown's Enterprise, restoring a somewhat neglected body of painting to its deserved foreground position in the pioneering New Image movement, Paul Kasmin unveiling a surprising group of new paintings and Nolan/Eckman offering an extended tour of a hilarious selection of recent works on paper, buttressed by some earlier drawings and watercolors.

Zucker is best known for his paintings of the late 1960s and '70s that were constructed of paint-soaked cotton balls patiently applied to the gridded surface of the canvas. In his catalogue essay for the GBE (Modern) exhibition, Klaus Kertess, who, at the Bykert Gallery, was Zucker's first New York dealer, locates the artist's compositional rigor and craft impulses in the strategies of Minimalism and Post-Minimalism. The cotton balls physicalized the modular elements of the grid to an unprecedented extent and were only the first outlandish shock in the work. The second was the vivid imagery. Sarah Gavlak, the curator of the GBE (Modern) show, brought critical focus to bear on the "Five Mosaics," each 5 feet square



Marshall Fine Art Limited's Rigid Airship, 2003, ink on paper, 10 by 15 inches.

and dating from 1972. The "Mosaics" were based on photos of the Ravenna mosaics, cropped and enlarged to alter the viewer's focal relation to the depicted subject in each image and to accommodate cotton balls as bulging, soggy surrogates for the sharply cut, tiny and comparatively smoothly interlocking

tesserae of the original. At first sight, the grotty cotton balls seem like an affront, but a funny one that quickly gives way to an appreciation of the literal saturation of color they accomplish, and the way they morph at a distance into flowers. (Zucker would include Rose Bowl Parade floats in his subsequent canon of American imagery.)

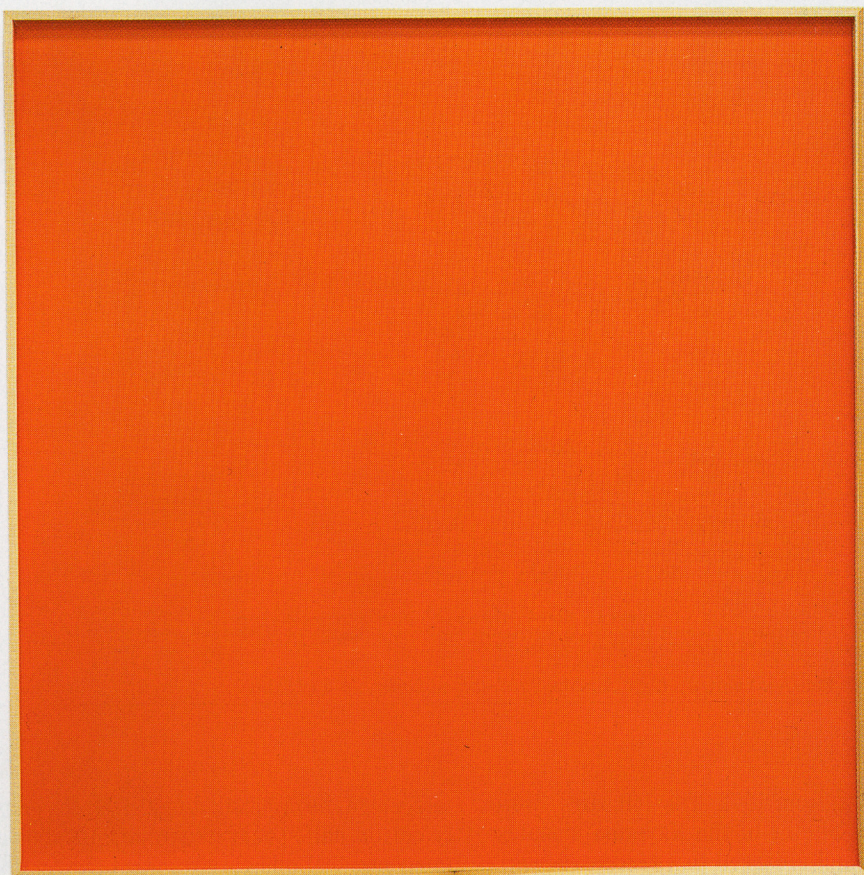
Chuck Close credits Zucker with influencing him, and Kertess's astute positioning of the artist as a prescient forebear of such craft-intensive artists as Kara Walker, Fred Tomaselli and Chris Ofili (and I would add the resolutely abstract Polly Apfelbaum to the list) suggests a framework for gauging the importance of his work. Kertess also reminds us that Philip Guston was coming to his revolutionary late figuration, out of abstract elements in materially aggressive skeins of paint, at about the same time that Zucker was poking his cotton balls into Classical and Byzantine imagery. Though younger, Zucker was addressing the same cultural dissociation between abstraction and representation as Guston was. If Zucker remains more detached and indexical in his imagery, it is a bias of his generation, which was more influenced by Pop than Guston's and less drawn to personal or confessional modes.

**A**long with the "Mosaics," the GBE (Modern) show included a startling recent painting that struck out in a new direction, while retaining the artist's intense involvement with paint as a quasi-sculptural material. *Untitled, Interior with Vesuvius/*



Robocrate Flagship, 2003, watercolor and graphite on paper, 22 by 29 1/2 inches.  
Photos this page courtesy Nolan/Eckman Gallery, New York.



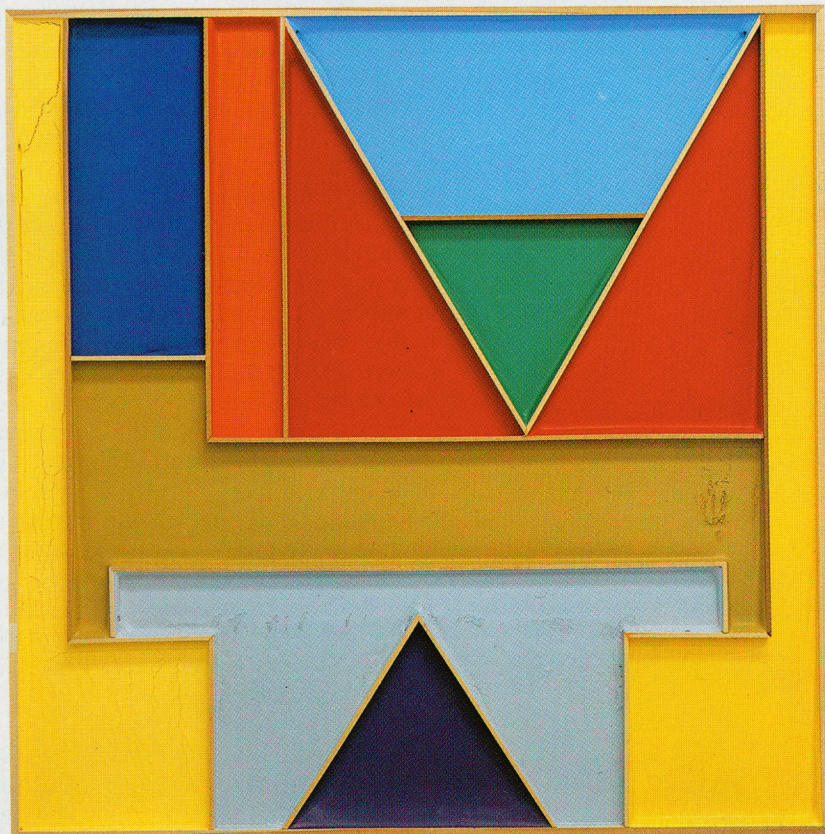


**Zucker's recent "box paintings" are often reminiscent of Diebenkorn, perhaps with an infusion of Donald Judd as well. But the material presence—thick gooey paint—is all Zucker.**

*Pompeii* (2003) is a vertical diptych whose square panels are like trays into which thickened black acrylic paint has been poured and left to dry. The top panel is a monochrome swell of tarlike paint held by wooden slats at the perimeters of the panel. The bottom panel has more slats positioned within its interior, marking off a shorthand Mount Vesuvius in triangular lines, the fluid swells of paint fleshing out the spatial intervals between the dividers. This new, literally bracing, format was expanded upon in the show at Paul Kasmin, which featured eight more similarly constructed paintings, most of them opening into a range of colors in the lower panel, where the slats create discrete compartments that together form a stylized image. The artist refers to these works as "box paintings," with the upper, slightly larger panel conceived of as a "lid" for the lower one and the show as a whole titled "Unhinged" after the absence of a joining element between the two.

The imagery that Zucker explores in these works consists of geometric essentializations of sailing ships, domestic interiors and houses. The top panel in each painting is a monochrome, often dark, but the shapes demarcated by the slats in the bottom panels are broken into separate colors, like stained glass, or the wedges and post-and-lintel shapes in Diebenkorn's "Ocean Park" paintings. The colors are primaries and secondaries, rich and tonal, with an occasional warm gray or black thrown in. The sails of the various ships allow Zucker to play with horizontals and isosceles triangles, and the results are often quite reminiscent of Diebenkorn, perhaps with an infusion of Donald Judd as well. But the material presence is Zucker's all the way: thick paint, gooey in appearance, once wet but now dry and cracking like sun-baked mud on an old desert floodplain.

The extravaganza continued at Nolan/Eckman, which presented a selection of watercolors and drawings in ink and felt pen from the last 25 years, with the major portion of the exhibition devoted to recent work. The drawings are consistent with a cartoon tradi-



*Interior #2, 2002, acrylic on canvas and wood, two panels, 49 1/2 inches square, 48 inches square.*

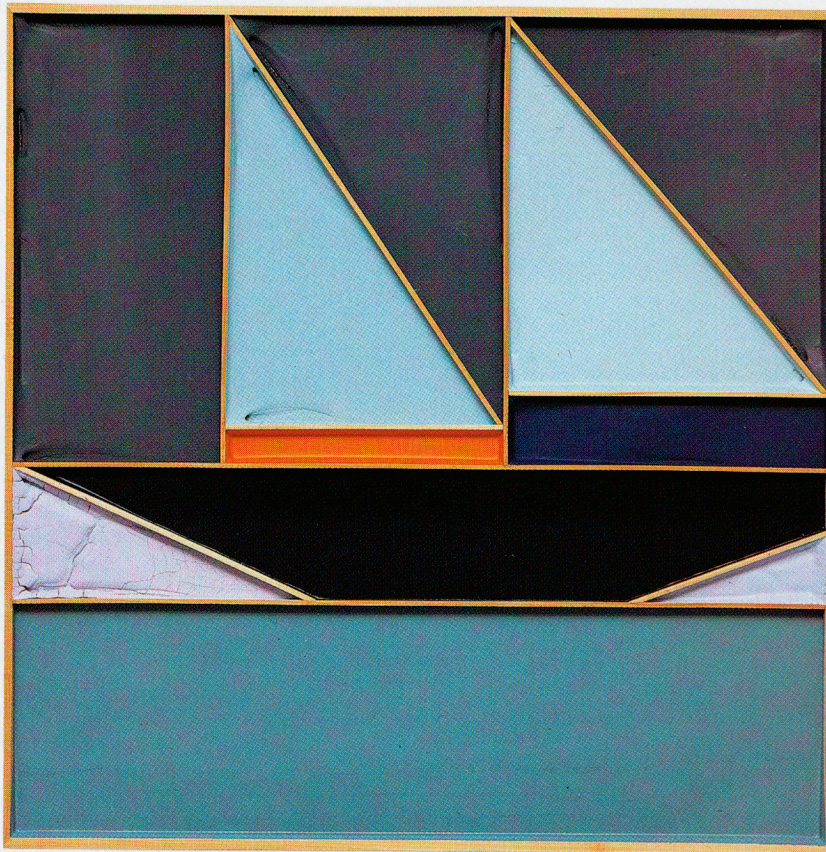
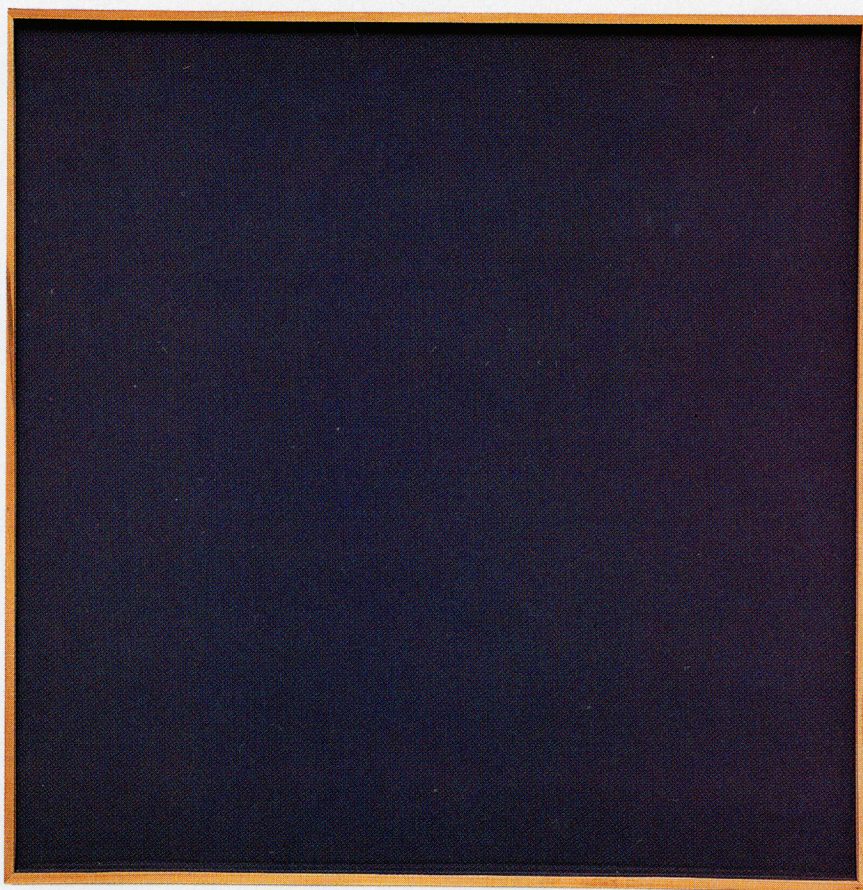


tion that runs from Rube Goldberg and George Grosz through Saul Steinberg, Guston, H.C. Westermann, Peter Saul, William T. Wiley and Tony Millionaire (the comic-strip genius of *Maakies*). The drawings from the '70s are all treatments of pirate ships, the most spectacular being *2 Malay Pirates in the South "Chinee" Sea* (1977), which features two warships seemingly colliding in midair off a desert island. The island, water, ships and rigging are all filled in with warm shades of watercolor. The main sail on the right sports an antic Jolly Roger. The show then jumped ahead to 1994, with another maritime watercolor, a couple of funny ledger drawings (the artist as book-keeper), a representation of a Winsor & Newton brush factory in Philadelphia and some depictions of Henri Rousseau on a painting tour of Egypt, selecting bristles for a camel-hair brush from live camels.

The rest of the works on paper shown at Nolan/Eckman combine drawing and watercolor in an extended satire of art-shipping and storage practices. The viewer gets the feeling that a shipper named "Mitchell Didier" (or something close) lost or damaged some of Zucker's work. In any event, these works on paper depict "Mitchell Didier" dirigibles and "Trimaxion" underground storage vaults whose scale dwarfs NORAD, while masted art-carrying ships cruise the high seas Flying Dutchman-style. Almost anyone connected to the art world has at one time or another fallen prey to depression when contemplating the sheer bulk of the stuff being produced around the globe and the long shot any of it has of surviving into the future. Zucker's drawings join Richard Artschwager's constructed shipping crates and Terry Allen's ballad "A Truckload of Art" in the contemporary canon of artist responses to the vexing question of inventory and how it subverts assessments of ultimate worth. Zucker's recent drawings are executed in a fine whipcord line that builds and replicates into startling densities of architectural shading, the watercolor as deftly handled as ever. Zucker is clearly at the top of his game right now, making paintings and graphic work that are formally elegant and pointedly funny. Where's he been? Working, obviously—and keeping a weather eye out for Mitchell Didier. □

*A selection of Joe Zucker's paintings, "Ravenna," was on view at GBE (Modern), New York [Nov. 15-Dec. 23, 2003]. "Joe Zucker: Unhinged" appeared at Paul Kasmin Gallery, New York [Jan. 8-Feb. 7, 2004], and an exhibition of his drawings, "Joe Zucker: Drawings 1977-2003" was on view at Nolan/Eckman Gallery, New York [Jan. 8-Feb. 7, 2004].*

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*Schooner, 2002, acrylic on canvas and wood, two panels, 49½ inches square, 48 inches square. Photos this spread courtesy Paul Kasmin Gallery, New York.*