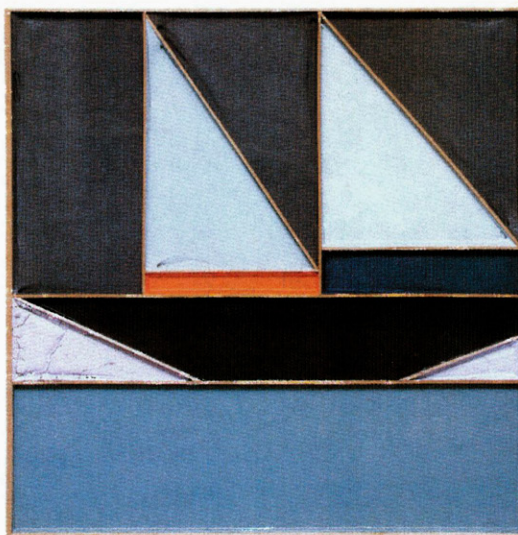


## THE JOE ZUCKER'S FIBER OPTICS



Opposite page: **Joe Zucker, *Merlin and His Son Putting It Together*, 1977**, acrylic, cotton, and Rhoplex on canvas, 96 x 96". This page: **Joe Zucker, *Schooner* (detail), 2002**, acrylic on canvas and wood, 1 of 2 panels, each 48 x 48".

**THE** history of the New York art world in the 1970s is assumed to be clear but is actually not well understood. So many subsequent developments had roots, precursors, or strange John the Baptist-like harbingers that seemed to dissolve and fade but in fact opened the way for much more widely noted phenomena. The centrality and longevity of the key artists classified as post-Minimalist are not questioned, but major figures of so-called Photorealism, Pattern and Decoration, New Image, and

Bad Painting have not been coherently slotted into the narrative of the recent past. The explosion of the art world during the '80s, combined with the field-leveling theoretical constructs of postmodernism and its offspring, destroyed the notion of one dominant artistic story (not an entirely bad thing) but haven't left us any better equipped to reevaluate the positions of more eccentric, less easily categorizable practitioners. Short of a Lee Bontecou-like vanishing act and triumphant return or the surefire strategy of an early death, there seems to be very little interest in reconsidering artists who don't disappear but who also don't settle down and cooperate clearly with whatever the story of a given time seems meant to be.

As much as any artist of his generation, Joe Zucker is up for reappraisal. While he has enjoyed a high degree of street cred among his peers and younger artists, his work still hasn't been clearly mapped on the hinge period between the '60s and '70s, to say nothing of his kinky research during the more recent past. His output is so multifaceted that it is impossible (and not even desirable) to construct a smooth picture of his trajectory. He may be 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.

He has hardly been invisible. His work was seen throughout the '70s and early '80s in contexts that received a great deal of attention—first at the Bykert Gallery in the company of Chuck Close, Barry Le Va, Brice Marden, and Dorothea Rockburne, and then at Holly Solomon, which was the center

of a kind of Warhol-inflected decorative excess during the high Pattern moment. It is fascinating to rethink that time and consider the ways in which Zucker's work connected to the materiality of Marden and early Rockburne or accommodated the systemic obsessiveness of Le Va and the desire for imagery in Close. Yet all the while, his paintings pulsed with some alien energy that had no corollary in the post-Minimalist

**ON THE OCCASION OF JOE ZUCKER'S THREE RECENT NEW YORK SHOWS, CARROLL DUNHAM REFLECTS ON THE ARTIST'S "EXTRAORDINARY CAPACITY FOR TINKERING WITH THE NUTS AND BOLTS OF PAINTING."**



discourse, something much closer to peers farther afield like Chicago's Hairy Who. Likewise, in the context of the Pattern and Decoration aesthetic, Zucker seems both right at home and wholly other. The crazy use of materials and somewhat camp subject matter of his later cotton-ball paintings fit with Kim MacConnel and Robert Kushner, but his analytic mind-set and self-referential tactics don't really connect to those artists.

By the late '70s Zucker could be included in the "New Image Painting" exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art, turning up in yet another extremely topical context that had only tangential relevance to his larger concerns (and was a kind of rehearsal for much of what would come in the '80s but without the Dionysian gloss of the Reagan era). Looking back on the misleadingly labeled neo-expressionist eruption, it's easy to imagine that Julian Schnabel took permission for his plate paintings from the intermingling of materiality and imagery on Zucker's surfaces. Other ambitious young artists began coming and going across the demilitarized zone separating representation and abstraction on the heels of New Image painting and Conceptual art. Schnabel, David Salle, and Terry Winters (from a different direction) all made a kind of depictive painting that would have been impossible without the material and ideational push of Zucker and his peers. But by the end of the '80s Zucker was exhibiting in uptown venues that removed him from the immediacy of the New York scene, and much of his most remarkable work ensued in relative quiet.

Recently Zucker was the subject of three closely timed exhibitions in New York galleries, which taken together (as was obviously the intention) offered the beginnings of a coherent picture of his early coordinates and a clear glimpse of the concerns that have preoccupied him of late. The first of these shows featured a series of paintings from 1971 and 1972 at Gavin Brown's Enterprise. The gallery was an inspired choice of venue for reconsidering Zucker's '70s work. It has one of the liveliest painting programs among galleries of its generation, and it is easy—yet nevertheless surprising—to connect Zucker's paintings with the Arcadian confections of Laura Owens, the glass-noodle abstractions of Udomsak Krisanamis, and the sophisticated primitivism of Chris Ofili. The paintings on view at Brown's were based on images from Byzantine mosaics and employed the acrylic-dipped-cotton-ball technique that Zucker developed in numerous series during the late '60s and '70s. The mosaic paintings have a tight formal premise: The source material underlines the craft references of their process and their serious historical ambition. This interest in painting's objecthood and self-referentiality came to seem a bit fuddy-duddy by the early '80s, but in these paintings it is still alive and engaged in a very strange way. Yet even if they seem smart and odd, they ultimately feel less adventurous than Zucker's other series from the time. The exhibition was welcome but fell short of the revelatory experience one could have imagined had a different selection of cotton paintings been presented, and the addition of an example from his most recent group of paintings diluted the impact of the earlier work without providing sufficient information for creating a meaningful trajectory between the old and new.



**ZUCKER ENGAGES SUBJECTS THE WAY FOLK MUSIC DOES, BLURRING THE DISTINCTIONS BETWEEN HISTORY AND FOLKLORE, PERSONAL AND PUBLIC, MEMORY AND STORY.**





This trajectory certainly exists, although Zucker's output has been so diverse and experimental that tracing a clear path through it is difficult. During the '60s and '70s his painting tended toward historical narratives (the history of cotton technology) or more fablelike subjects (pirates on the high seas, Merlin the Magician), and they had a grandeur and zaniness that were strange to see together. Older painters like Lichtenstein and Rosenquist had taken the monumental scale of sublime New York School painting and perversely turned it toward a jarringly public kind of subject matter, but Zucker skirted a different edge, much closer to adolescent fantasies or the illustration of children's books. He can now be seen to have been struggling against a certain pomposity that had taken hold of self-styled serious painting while retaining its high ambition. Taking the position of the fabulist allowed him to mine mythic and sociological dimensions yet steer clear of heaviness.

Zucker's offbeat subject matter opened many doors onto territory that was not common for his generation of New York painters. It is meaningless to consider his practice without it, but it is difficult to isolate a value there. New subjects have always prompted him to explore new ways of making things, and the reciprocity between the objects and their narrative equivalents is always active. In the past this reciprocity has been invoked to justify his odd subject choices (the history of cotton constructed of cotton balls), but ultimately this effort fails. He engages subjects the way folk music does, blurring the distinctions between history and folklore, personal and public, memory and story. The paintings are truly alchemical and, as such, somewhat mysterious and obscure. He has compulsively turned the usual inert materials of painting, mixed with flotsam from the world, into surprising artistic gold, and the very reimagining and reinvention is a lot of the point.

One of Zucker's primary explorations has been to consider the relationship between paint and support as one of mutual embeddedness. While the cotton paintings involve reimagining paint as something to be physically placed on or in a field, many subsequent series take a quite different approach: Both paint and drawing are physical objects that lock together to create simultaneously a picture and its support. Zucker has explored this idea using sash cord, pegboard, and cardboard as concrete analogies for drawing. In the early '90s he made a series of paintings of the desert, depicting highly geometrized cacti, made from lattices of sash cord strung through wooden frames like some crazy tennis racket. Within this matrix of squares he poured colored acrylic to create the image. (One is reminded here of the connection to Chuck Close's method of breaking the human face into individual bits of information, but Zucker's obsession with weird physicality runs in another direction.)

A completely different take on landscape and physicality has preoccupied Zucker over the past few years. He has been painting pictures of lakes that aren't really pictures at all. He literalized the idea of a painting as a container by filling small cardboard boxes with paint, which he let congeal, evaporate, and then dry in basically monochromatic fields. This process was elaborated in larger works constructed in shallow wooden boxes. The result conflates subject, painting, frame, image, and surface into a pictorial object that simultaneously resembles a John McCracken sculpture and a cocktail tray. Collectively (and possessively) titled *Joe's Lakes*, they preclude a conventional response and seem to be both intellectual artifacts and mistakes.

These *Lake* paintings were the precursors of the works recently exhibited at Paul Kasmin Gallery. Their genesis was in a group of studies made from small, empty

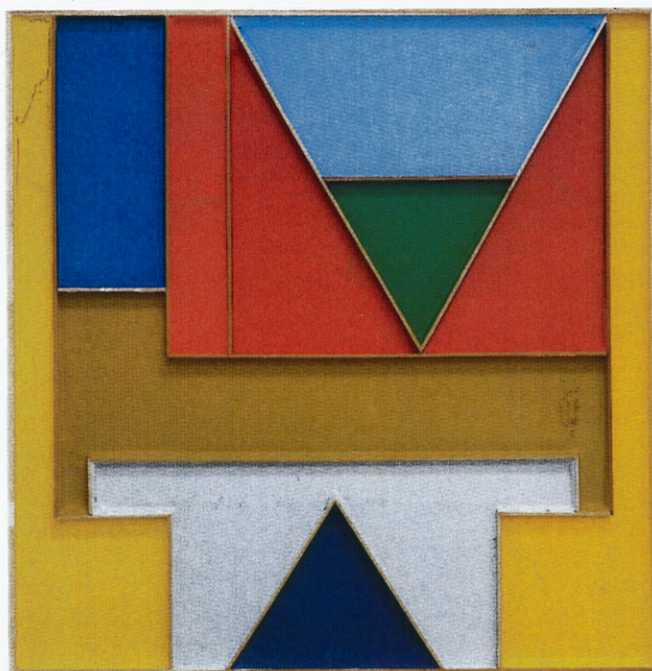
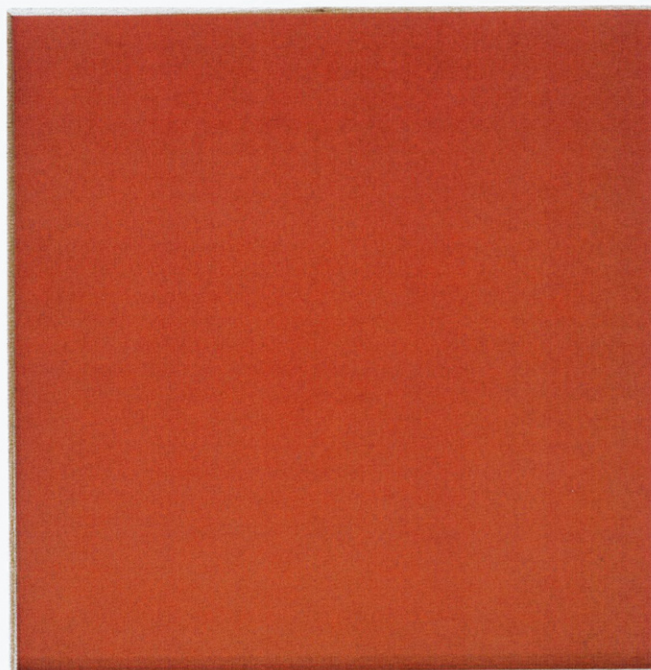
Opposite page: **Joe Zucker, *Untitled Mosaic (Justinian)*, 1972**, acrylic, cotton, and Rhoplex on canvas, 60 x 60".  
This page: **Joe Zucker, *Cactus Series #11*, 1990-91**, acrylic and sash cord on wood, 77 x 41".



cardboard boxes and their lids. Zucker cut strips of the material and laid out a maze-like arrangement of little walls within the boxes, which when viewed from above represented geometrized images of sailboats and houses. As in the *Lake* paintings, he poured viscous, brightly colored paint into the sections to create the individual elements of a schematic image. The empty lids of the boxes became the empty sky. These studies were developed on a much larger scale in the paintings in the show. The boxes and their lids were built out of wood, resulting in shallow relief objects filled with polychrome arrays. The strangeness of their specific presence—clean and pure yet redolent of unattractive physical processes—made for a very complex experience. The gallery had the feeling of a child's playroom, with the bold hues and blond wood so familiar from contemporary children's furniture, and the paintings themselves had almost the look of functional objects. But all the while one was staring at *paintings* and struggling to understand their pictorial foundations. What, for example, would it mean for a painting to have a lid? Questions like these underline Zucker's centrality in the confusing dynamic between conceptually driven abstraction and the reemergence of depiction as a concern of serious painting. He operates in the border zone between understanding, making, and seeing—enormously rich terrain that directly challenges much of the backward-looking representational art that is lately receiving so much attention.



If Zucker has one foot firmly rooted in the material and conceptual dialectics of the late '60s and early '70s, a time before postmodernism had been clearly defined and elaborated for the art world, he has the other foot in developments outside mainstream New York artistic thought, in various regional attitudes and in what we now refer to as outsider art. Roberta Smith's *New York Times* review of his shows at Kasmin and Nolan/Eckman Gallery framed this impulse very clearly, and it was most apparent in the latter show, which contained several groups of drawings. The earliest material there was related to Zucker's pirate paintings of the '70s, and it is revealing to consider them in the context of other drawings from that decade. At that time, drawing assumed the stature of a primary medium, functioning simultaneously as an immediate thought diagram and a bridge to earlier art-historical considerations. Mel Bochner, Bruce Nauman, Rockburne, and La Va each in their own way exploited







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Opposite page, left: **Joe Zucker, *Pirate Junk with Gang Plank*, 1977**, marker on paper, 24 x 38".  
Right: **Joe Zucker, *Interior #2*, 2002**, acrylic on canvas and wood, 2 panels, each 48 x 48". This page: **Joe Zucker, *Robo Crate Museum of Contemporary Art*, 2003**, watercolor and graphite on paper, 22 x 29".

this condition to great effect, and Marden's drawings had a weight that gave the notion of a painter's drawings a surprising gravity. Zucker was up to something quite different. While the relationship of image to cotton lends his paintings a slowed-down, frozen-in-amber quality, his drawings have a surprising bounciness. They were made with colored markers in a loopy hand, which conveys the antic, almost visionary energy behind the paintings. One might consider affinities with William Wegman's drawings of the time, in which a purposely amateurish technique conveys serious thinking; or one might alternatively relate them to Zucker's distaff cousins, the Image Painters then working in Chicago.

Nolan/Eckman also exhibited part of a complex group of watercolors from the mid-'90s that concern the Old Coot, a bearded artist in a broad-brimmed sun hat who paints *en plein air* and whose every aesthetic and technical decision is explored as a pictorial subject. These offered a glimpse of the self-involved, irritable artistic voice that has moved more to the center of Zucker's art in recent years and set the stage for the mesmerizing (and confusing) pen-and-ink drawings that were the most recent things on view.

Continuing to explore self-referentiality and objecthood from a nutty and perverse direction, Zucker has made a narrative of his feelings about the infrastructure of the art world. Previously he covered art galleries in his "Sleazeasy Gallery" pictures,

1992–93 (drawings and pegboard paintings of a space where freely drawn giant rats lie dead on their backs under naked lightbulbs). More recently he has turned to art storage, an issue that has surprisingly eluded previous representation despite its ubiquity in the life of object makers. The drawings in the show made a fetish of the problem. They depicted vast container cities dedicated to the storage of unexhibited art works and even a giant art-handling robot resembling something from a '50s comic about the future. The wordy and (somewhat) amusing captions (not a new feature in his art) embody a crotchety voice, which may be angry at a world that forces the aging yet productive artist to face the linked problems of storage and mortality. The touch and line are more disciplined than in any other drawings Zucker has done, the subjects more turned inward and recalcitrant. They are graphically expansive and surprisingly monumental while also vibrating in a tone of sardonic navel-gazing that is obviously generative for the artist but can be off-putting for the rest of us.

Zucker's narrative and material strategies link him to the work of much younger artists like Dana Schutz, whose one-person exhibition in New York last year contained a cycle of paintings organized around a fanciful end-of-the-world fable, which freed her to explore diverse painting approaches, or Michael Raedecker, whose impure paintings combine passages of generic rendering, loose painterliness, and unlikely craft-derived techniques. Although these artists may lack Zucker's extraordinary capacity for tinkering with the nuts and bolts of painting, they share his desire to rethink conventions of representation at a time when teleological assumptions about art history have been discredited. Zucker's urgent and chronic reconsideration of representational premises reminds us of a possibility for invention that is not offered by the world of mediated pictures and rehabilitated styles. Zucker's visual indigestibility and narrative accessibility invert the assumptions behind much of the art we are seeing lately and take us into a parallel continuum of shared stories and disarming pictorial candor. This paragon of cantankerous specificity gives us something we may not know we want but almost certainly need. □

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