

Interview Joe-in-a-Box

Joe Zucker on art and illusion by Terry R. Myers

TWO YEARS AGO, JOE ZUCKER had three exhibitions in three New York galleries. These not only put him firmly back on the perpetually shifting artworld map but also introduced many of the critical aspects of his *oeuvre* from the last 30-plus years to a new audience, including many younger painters who likely were not familiar with the depth of his work. That the first exhibition – a show of several of his still-very-fresh ‘cotton-ball’ paintings from the early 1970s – was held at Gavin Brown’s Enterprise, where the likes of Peter Doig, Udojak Krisanamis, Chris Ofili and Laura Owens have shown, made this reemergence all the more stimulating and fulfilling. This show was immediately followed by two concurrent exhibitions: the first (at Nolan/Eckman) a strongly selected 26-year survey of his drawings and water-colours, which also introduced a new series that took on the subject of art storage; and the second (at Paul Kasmin) a debut of new ‘box’ paintings that many longtime followers of his work (myself included) consider to be amongst the finest of his career.

I have known Zucker for almost 15 years and many of the best discussions that I have ever had

about painting have been with him. With another pair of New York shows opening in January, I was keen to hear what he had to say about his new work, which extends the terms of his last group of paintings into very provocative terrain.

TERRY R. MYERS How did the ‘box’ format of your new body of work evolve?

JOE ZUCKER If your work is going to be stored, then I say why not have control over how it’s stored? So, I decided to make these paintings in crates. They have a lid, and they have a box. The box is divided up like a paint box – the kind nobody uses anymore, the kind that went out with Cézanne – the only difference being that the compartments make up a picture. Whether it’s of a volcano or a sailing ship, the painting is in its own container. I find it odd that people in the West are so fatalistic about the way art is kept – they’ll say, ‘You asshole, your work should be in storage.’ It doesn’t have to be this way, though. In the East, for instance, when the Japanese don’t want to look at something anymore, they have an elegant solution for it: they roll up the scroll or fold away the screen. It’s part of their aesthetic. For us, when we store paintings away, it’s like we’re closing a window. We’re still dealing with the problem of illusion, can you see through the window or not? Our attitude to art storage comes from this notion. I’m considering calling my upcoming show at Paul Kasmin, *The Advantage of Open Storage* or *The Trend Toward Open Storage*. I might even call it *The Trend Trend Toward Open Open Storage*, because the paintings in the show will be already open.

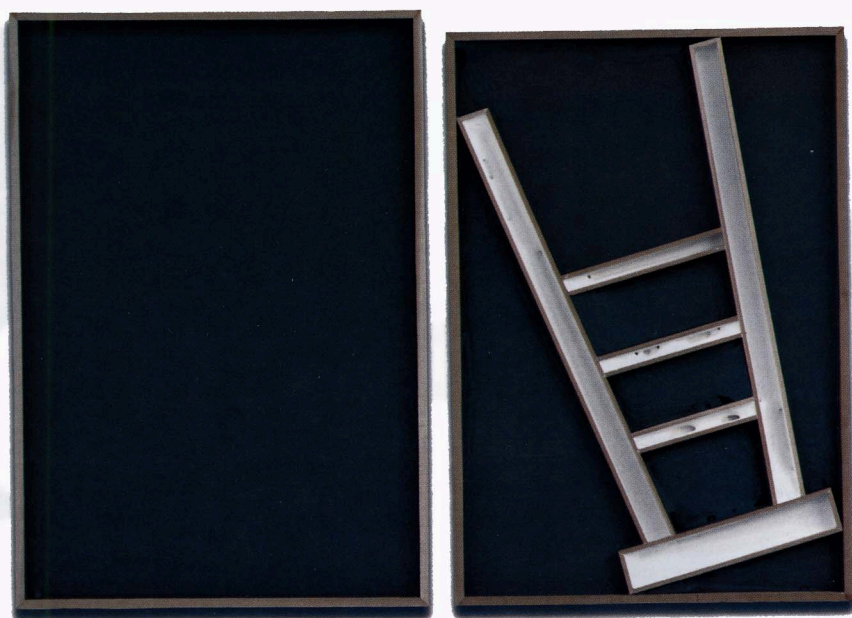
The other thing about these works is that they address one of the problems of painting, which is how to make diptychs that have a real structural relationship to each other, not just an aesthetic one. My box paintings are married together forever. There is a logical connection between the image and the lid; a connection that continues the kind of completeness I’ve been interested in for a long time in my work.

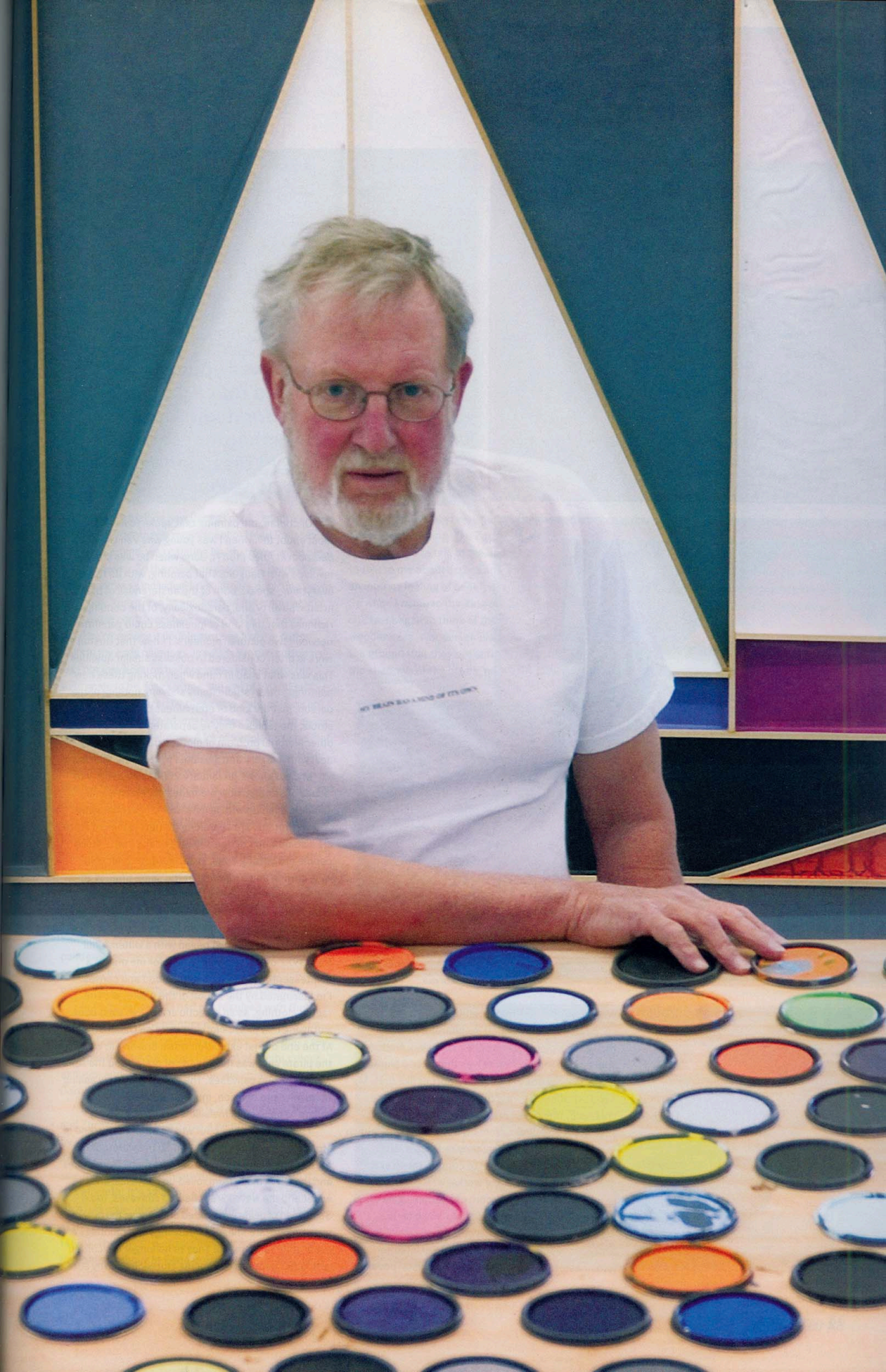
TRM What first struck me when you started these new works was the way in which they possess a clear sense of you leaving them behind in the studio. Things like gesture, and even a demonstration of skill, can happen, but you, the artist, don’t have to be there.

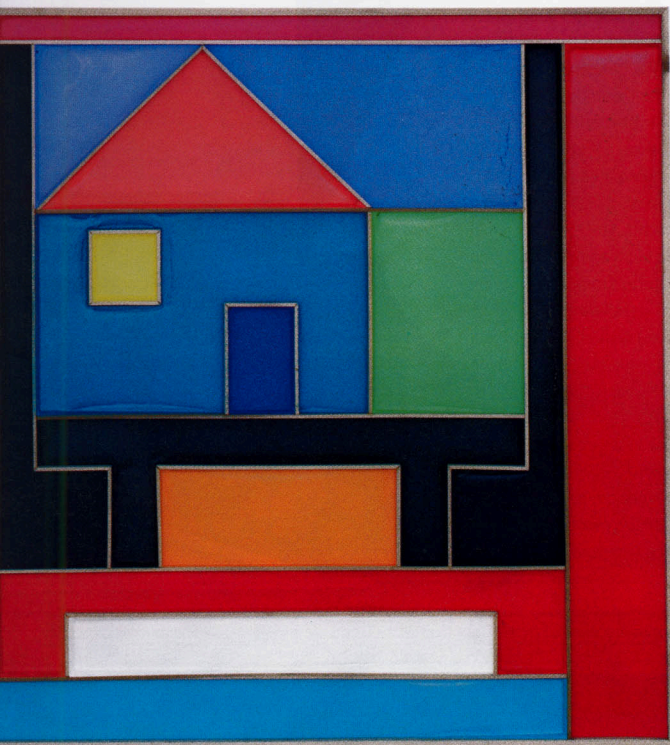
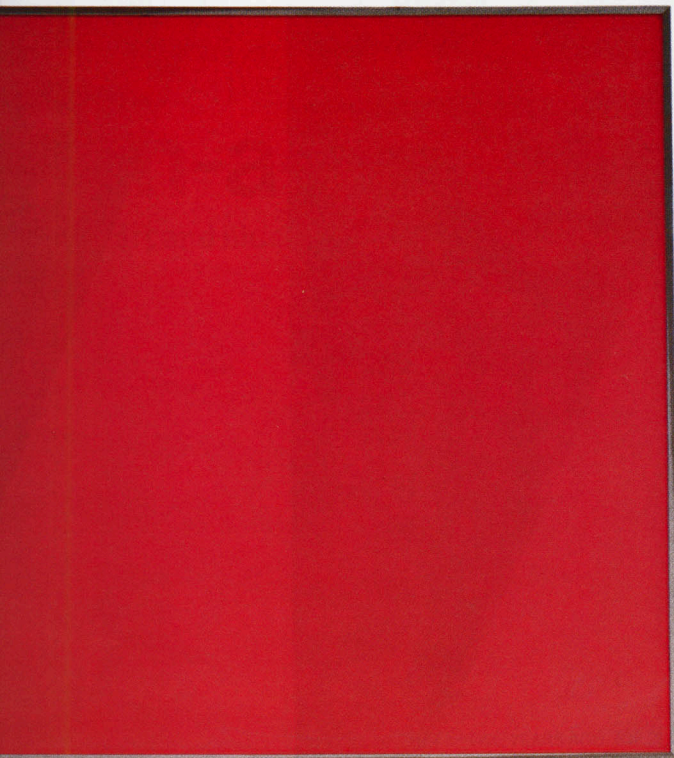
JZ That’s right. The paintings paint themselves.

Below
My Stool #4, 2005,
acrylic on canvas and
wood, two panels, box
83 x 55 cm, lid 86 x 58 cm
PHOTO: GARY MAMAY
COURTESY THE ARTIST

Facing page
Joe Zucker, 2005
COURTESY GALLERIE AUDEL
SCHEIBLER, COLOGNE







Left
Interior, 2005, acrylic
on canvas and wood, diptych,
156 x 156 cm and 152 x 152 cm
COURTESY GALERIE AUREL
SCHEIBLER, KÖLN

Facing page from top
My Chair, Table, Bed,
2005, acrylic on cardboard,
two panels, box 25 x 20 cm,
lid 25 x 20 cm
PHOTO: GARY MAMAY.
COURTESY THE ARTIST

Volcano, 2005, acrylic on
canvas and wood, diptych,
240 x 118 cm and 236 x 114 cm
COURTESY GALERIE AUREL
SCHEIBLER, KÖLN

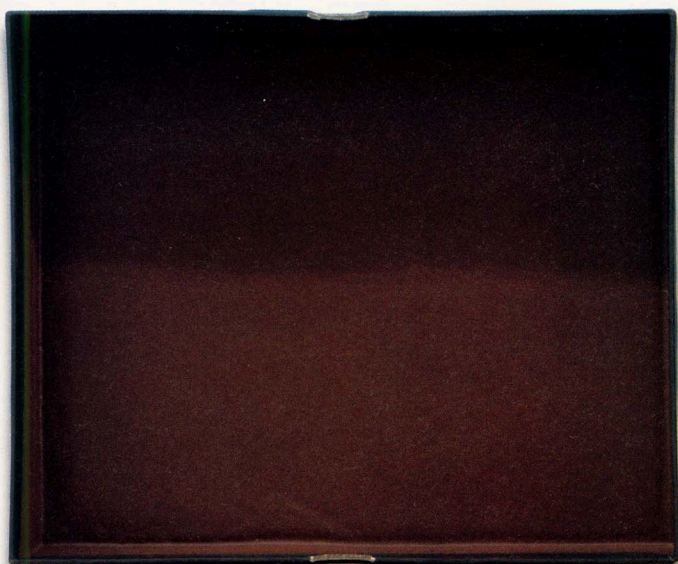
When I was young I really believed that a painting spoke for itself. I loved Ad Reinhardt because I thought his paintings had their own skin. Nothing spoke stronger for themselves than those black paintings. My box paintings are sort of like that. My hand is not in them; my furniture is in them. The objects in these new box paintings are the stools and tables and chairs from my studio. They establish the scale of the paintings: they're lifesize. The crates are only big enough to contain those exact objects. Another group of works, which I'm planning to install in the second room of Kasmin's gallery, are other objects that would help make up the studio: an easel, a closet, a bed. These are objects of sparseness, objects that have an existential loneliness, but they don't speak of artists' poverty.

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Of course, the painting that spoke to me the most about this when I was young was Van Gogh's *Bedroom at Arles* (1889), done when he was closely involved with Gauguin. That painting, with its two of everything, speaks both of the austerity of the artists' poverty and, paradoxically, of the bonding and richness that this kind of loneliness could generate between two pictorial pioneers. I know that Guston's work is often considered to possess similar qualities. This was what I had in mind when making these new paintings, these studio items showing nothing of the person, just the kind of eternalness of objects. The stools, the tables – they're separated even from that other pictorial problem of modern painting, how to deal with imagery and illusion. I'm stripping this down.

My last shows [in January 2004] also dealt with issues of storage: how old mines in Pennsylvania could be filled up with artists' work; how companies and institutions are searching for new places to store art – abandoned oilrigs and places like that – these people are cutting edge, avant-garde in their own way, storing and exhibiting at the same time. With my two upcoming shows, I wanted to continue to explore this notion through another pair of simultaneous shows of watercolours and paintings. My last show at Nolan/Eckman began with a watercolour from 1977 of a pirate ship, which for me makes a quintessential statement about wood and canvas. I'm fascinated by the notion of the pirate, with his ragtag clothing, as an eclectic artist. I've even done a drawing of a pirate-clothing store on Canal Street. At the end of that exhibition was a drawing in which the pirate ship was itself made of crates and the sails were rolled-up canvases. The crates were now sailing themselves to oblivion, much as the *Pequod* was sailing to oblivion in Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851).

I started to think about what was left at the end of *Moby Dick* – Queequeg's coffin. So the watercolours for this upcoming show are of ships made from crates, and the sky is made from rolled-up canvases, and the water and the waves are rolled-up canvases, too. So instead of being generalized art storage, the new watercolours are images of drawings and paintings of every style I ever made. They're no longer concerned with other people's stuff being stored: this is my stuff.



And while I'm making new things I'm recording a picture of the past – strangely reminiscent of Henri Rousseau, who, to my mind, was painting brushstrokes when he painted leaves. So the rolled-up canvases in my watercolours serve as individual brushstrokes depicting waves or clouds. They serve as smoke from the smokestacks from these container ships sailing off to wherever. To me they're serving a double purpose like the cotton balls in my early paintings, in which a round cotton ball was not just a cotton ball but it was also exactly the right scale to be, for example, the eye of a parakeet.

I was encouraged by these new watercolours so much I went ahead and enlarged one of them to an eight-by-ten-foot painting. A lot of people assume that I create images of particular objects simply because I like them – 'Joe really loves ships,' they'll say – but I like the fact that a sailing ship is made out of wood and canvas. I like that what I am painting on reminds me of a sailing ship. The thing I like most about this new large painting is that it works because it uses the waves, clouds and crates to depict space. The modules are not just there for sentimental, corny reasons – 'there go all of Joe's old paintings sailing off forever' – they actually define a kind of space that is reminiscent for me of one of my all-time favourite paintings, De Kooning's *Excavation* (1950). My large, singular painting also has a shallow space for illusion, and in it I can be in total control of how much I want to unroll my past to determine the space of my new paintings.

Initially, I thought I had not resolved with the colour of these new paintings. I thought back to the sensual colours of the last paintings – I shouldn't say that, but the last paintings had a lot of bright colour in them, and it was local colour, the colour of early Corot, sort of crystalline.

I had seen a show at the Met dealing with Manet and Zurbarán, and there was a painting in the show by Zurbarán of a kneeling St Francis. [*St Francis Kneeling* (1635–9)]. I looked at it for a long time and saw that there is hardly anything of St Francis in it – it's all cloth. It's all about cloth, colour, sackcloth. He's in a cave, not outside it like the great St Francis at the Frick by Bellini. [*St Francis in the Desert* (c. 1480)]. The Italian painting is about faith. It's about humanism, about St Francis waiting for birds to land

on his arms. It's also very much about Venetian decorative painting. The Zurbarán, on the other hand, started to talk to me about crates, started to talk to me about artists and that loneliness. It's an interior feeling of belief; it's not a depiction. So when I came to thinking about colour for the chairs, I began to think of them as isolated in their woodenness. Wooden chairs in wooden boxes, with the ground that they are surrounded by the colour of the shadows of the boxes, not an illusion of anything,

but simply the colour that is in a box. Same with the ships, the crates are crate-coloured; the sea is kind of sea-coloured. I have made an attempt to tighten the 'objectness' of both sets of things, to unify them in a colour sense so that the two shows are interchangeable. They speak to one another: this is the furniture of my painting. ●

New work by Joe Zucker will be showing at Paul Kasmin Gallery, New York and Nolan/Eckman Gallery, New York from 12 January to 11 February 2006

