

Tim Zuck cherche un refuge

Tim Zuck
Looking for a House

Eric Cameron

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Eric Cameron

La plus grande partie de la vie créatrice de Tim Zuck a gravité autour du Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. Son art retrace le cours de son adaptation personnelle à l'institution.

Il étudiait à ce collège, il y a cinq ans, et son travail lui valut des expositions à Toronto et à New-York avec des artistes du calibre de Dan Graham et de Vito Acconci. Toute une réussite pour un étudiant! De quoi être fier! Les œuvres elles-mêmes présentent une toute autre histoire. Les deux pièces principales étaient des mises en scène dans lesquelles il se mettait littéralement en boîte. A Toronto, il resta toute une journée complètement caché dans une grande construction horizontale sombre qui ressemblait à un cercueil, pendant que les spectateurs regardaient et ne pouvaient absolument pas l'apercevoir. Plus tôt, à la galerie même du collège, il avait présenté une boîte verticale fermée par un couvercle en plexiglas. Au cours de la journée, de l'intérieur, il le couvrait lentement de peinture noire. L'idée d'un artiste se cachant derrière une couche de peinture est si piquante qu'elle semble presque avoir été inventée pour expliquer son œuvre ultérieure. Je tiens à souligner que l'artiste se cachait *rénellement* et que se cacher présente un aspect humain aussi bien qu'artistique.

En septembre 1971, Zuck se rendit au California Institute of the Arts et, en mai 1972, il y exécuta une autre construction en forme de boîte de laquelle des tentacules, qui y avaient poussé, s'élançaient dans l'espace, mais il n'est pas nécessaire de pousser plus loin la métaphore; d'autres œuvres expriment le sentiment de libération. En novembre 1971, ses premières séries de photographies le montraient dans un planeur, volant au-dessus des collines, à travers les nuages et dans le ciel bleu. Évidemment, le planeur est lui-même une sorte de boîte, mais une boîte qui donne des ailes à l'âme: «L'artiste souria avec confiance avant de s'envoler.»

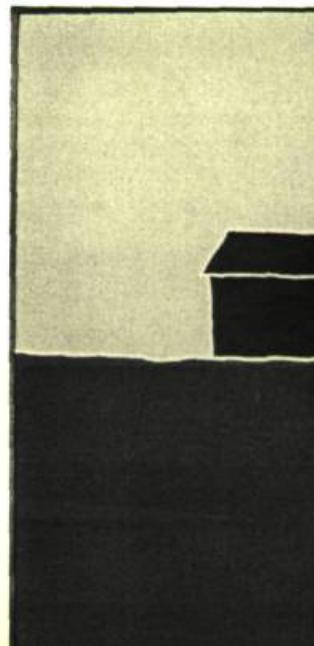
Le sentiment de voyage est fondamental. Derrière, se cache l'idéal puritain de la vie considérée comme un pèlerinage. Ce contraste accentue le négativisme de son ensevelissement dans ses premières œuvres. Le voyageur affronte l'immensité de la scène de la vie et, ce faisant, ajuste son allure selon son étendue limitée. Les photographies datant de l'année passée en Californie expriment l'échelle humaine de la capacité humaine avec une franchise et une modestie incomparables. Une autre boîte représentait un camion articulé qui, à travers le continent, «apportait à la maison» un demi-million de carottes. Dans la

dernière photographie, debout devant le camion, il tient autant de carottes qu'il aurait pu en acheter à l'épicerie du coin.

La série des Proverbes fait ressortir les préceptes moraux qui fortifient le voyageur. Une sorte de force opiniâtre exprimée par le proverbe anglais qui dit que l'on peut mener un cheval à la fontaine mais qu'on ne peut le forcer à boire; la mise en échec de l'ambition par l'expérience rendue par un autre proverbe qui assure qu'il vaut mieux avoir un oiseau dans la main que deux dans le buisson; l'impératif d'une éthique protestante de travail traduite par le proverbe qui ordonne à celui qui va à la pêche de pêcher sinon de couper l'appât; la valeur des leçons tirées du voyage manifestée par le proverbe qui prétend que pour connaître quelqu'un il faut marcher un mille dans ses chaussures. La littéralité du rendu est désarmante. On voit réellement un cheval qui regarde l'abreuvoir sans manifester aucun intérêt, deux oiseaux qui se cachent effectivement dans un buisson; l'artiste a réellement changé de chaussures avec quelqu'un et, bien sûr, on le retrouve assis en train de couper son appât. Le sens est là, bien en évidence, et le sens de l'art et celui de la vie emboîtent le pas. Ces travaux ont cessé abruptement à l'automne 1972, lorsqu'il revint au Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. Pendant deux ans, il n'eut absolument rien à me montrer. A partir de 1974, les nouvelles pièces ne sont que des essais.

Il est très étrange que le Collège qui, chose rare, a témoigné sa confiance à un de ses étudiants en retenant ses services, devienne maintenant un terrain stérile. Cela est également surprenant parce que la vision que le Collège se fait de lui-même semble très près des conceptions de Tim Zuck. Le Collège n'a jamais aimé qu'on l'identifie à l'art conceptuel. Il y a tout juste quelques mois, Roald Nasgaard, de l'Art Gallery of Ontario, a cru y percevoir «une éthique protestante de travail». On a cité ces paroles avec beaucoup de satisfaction. Comme métaphore, ils étaient justes, mais Tim Zuck confronte la métaphore avec la réalité. A mon avis, le genre d'art qui a suscité la remarque de Nasgaard devait ressembler à celui de Gerald Ferguson et de Garry Kennedy, un art où les enrichissements les plus subtils proviennent de l'accumulation d'erreurs dans le procédé comme cela se produit lorsqu'on va consciemment au bout d'une méthode de travail. C'est également le genre de travail dans lequel se lance Tim Zuck à l'automne 1974.

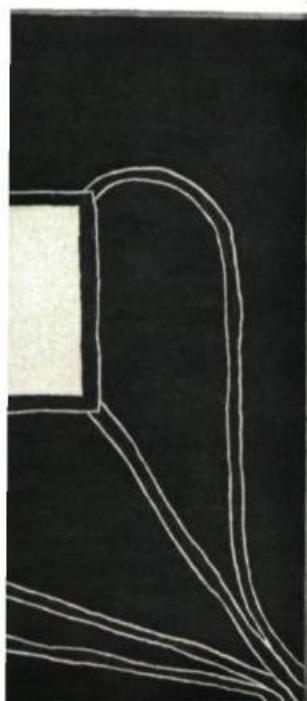
Il applique du ruban collant de différentes cou-



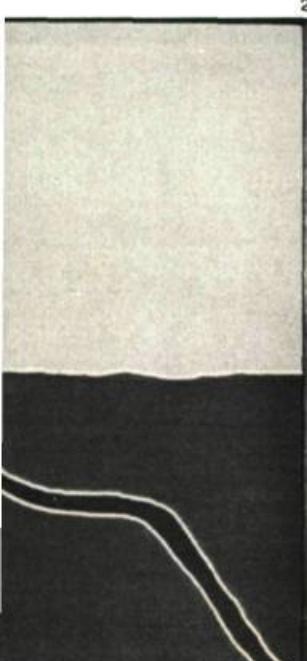
Tim ZUCK
1. Sans titre, Décembre 1975.
Acrylique et crayon sur toile;
66 cm x 66.

2. Sans titre, Avril 1976.
Huile et crayon sur toile;
60 cm 9 x 60,9.

3. Sans titre, Octobre 1976.
Huile et crayon sur toile;
50 cm 8 x 50,8.



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leurs à l'envers d'une feuille de plexiglas et, bien sûr, en raison de la flexibilité du ruban, on s'attend à ce que des plis se forment lors de la juxtaposition des bandes. Il n'y a qu'une seule pièce à laquelle je trouve de l'intérêt. Elle ne mesure qu'un pied carré, et l'artiste utilise un ruban blanc uni. Le ruban ne fronce pas; les bandes forment des lignes parallèles justes; le travail est irréprochable; la technique est sans défaut; le vrai puritain n'accepterait rien de moins. L'ironie qui transparaît est sûrement inconsciente, car Tim Zuck, comme individu, en est incapable.

Par la suite, le procédé se complique. L'artiste place des plantes sous le ruban puis, après une couple d'essais, abandonne. Ensuite, il commence à peindre. De petites peintures, toujours carrées, qui s'accrochent aux coins. Parfois, des formes linéaires mènent à un plus petit carré central; ailleurs, deux triangles opposés projettent une simple barre à travers le centre. Ce peut être des rectangles au lieu de triangles; ou toutes les formes linéaires peuvent aussi se recourber pour s'ancre à la base; et, finalement, deux rectangles internes sont unis par les boucles entrecroisées qui ne touchent jamais les côtés.

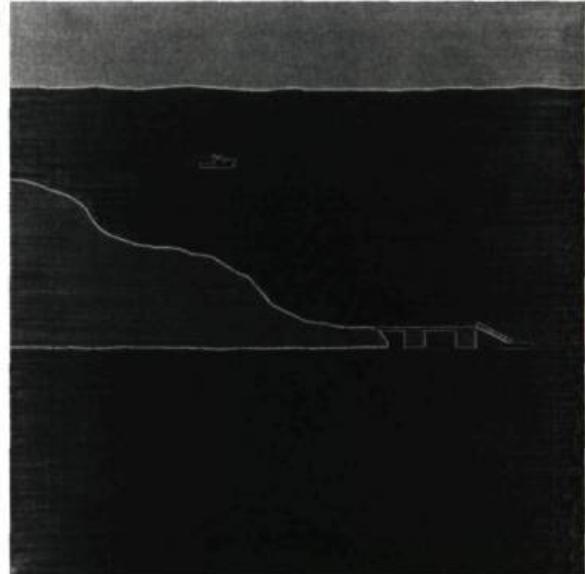
L'émergence de l'image de derrière le plexiglas signifiait un retour de confiance. Au printemps 1976, deux petites œuvres sur carton marquent le passage de l'acrylique à la peinture à l'huile. L'empâtement conserve l'empreinte du pinceau dans la couche de peinture, la trace de la main de l'artiste dans son œuvre. Les affleurements de la peinture d'appret blanche, qui apparaissent autour du dessin original, exécuté au crayon, deviennent, de façon plus évidente, le fond neutre qu'ils constituent. Les deux planches appartiennent au type des œuvres ancrées au cadre. Les formes linéaires se concentrent vers le centre mais ne s'attachent à rien. Il était peut-être nécessaire de confronter d'abord le vide. On y découvre l'image d'une maison.

La reprise de confiance est peut-être liée à l'exercice de son emploi au Collège, et cela a dû l'aider lorsqu'on l'a débarrassé des tâches administratives qu'on lui avait d'abord imposées; toutefois, ses affaires personnelles avaient plus d'importance. Il s'était marié, et sa femme et lui achetèrent une petite maison avec une vue sur la mer. En deux ans, il la rebâtit complètement. L'apparition de la maison dans ses peintures coïncide à peu près avec l'achèvement de sa maison. Il a maintenant abandonné son atelier du Collège.

Dans la première peinture de maison, la bande linéaire simple qui part du coin gauche, en bas, rappelle l'allée qui mène à la porte. On peut maintenant déceler dans ses œuvres abstraites précédentes un élément humain, celui des cartes géographiques. La boîte a assumé les connotations positives de *maison*. L'image demeure toujours très abstraite, les formes simples et les couleurs limitées à quelques teintes neutres, avec peut-être un seul accent acide violent, sans modulation. Cependant, la simplicité n'est maintenant plus qu'une question d'économie de moyens; la signification en est complexe et subtile. Cette fois, l'œuvre parle de résolution plutôt que de libération. Ce n'est pas tant un retour aux habitudes du chez-soi des photographies que la réapparition de l'idéal à l'intérieur et par le processus de l'analyse formelle.

En rétrospective, les austères préoccupations structurales de cette phase analytique semblent avoir tou-

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jours caché une métaphore de sa situation personnelle, comme s'il était, pendant tout ce temps, emmuré derrière une couche de peinture. De même que les photographies, les peintures de *maison* présentent une image du monde, mais, pour Tim Zuck, la peinture s'avère un médium plus flexible que le film. Parfois, ces bandes linéaires qui sortent des coins représentent non des sentiers mais de la fumée et, dans un cas, les racines d'un arbre. À un niveau plus profond, ils figurent des liens symboliques entre la base de signification personnelle de l'artiste et son expression publique par le langage de la peinture et de la toile. Vus de l'extérieur, ils font ressortir une possibilité latente dans le format de la toile et, de l'intérieur, ils révèlent les sources personnelles de la force requise pour confronter ces questions institutionnelles.

Au moment de percer, l'œuvre demeure aussi ce qu'elle était, et c'est ce qui lui donne sa subtilité et sa résonnance. Ce qui est passionnant, c'est le sentiment de la découverte immobilisé dans l'image, la joie de la réalisation qui, un jour, fit courir Archimède par les rues, tout dégoulinant de l'eau de son bain, l'annonce des trompettes sonnant de l'autre côté. Malheureusement, contrairement aux découvertes scientifiques, celles de l'art ne confèrent pas de bénéfices permanents mais s'épuisent habituellement au cours du processus même de la découverte. La question est de savoir comment le pèlerin vivra lorsque la fanfare se sera tue.

Sa percée peut avoir aidé Tim Zuck à traiter certains problèmes personnels, et il existe une demi-douzaine d'œuvres qui sont peut-être ses meilleures à ce jour. Dans celles qu'il a depuis produites, un bateau apparaît, tout d'abord à côté de la maison, puis se décide à quitter la jetée et à braver la haute mer. En même temps, le langage de la communication a brisé les amarres qui le retenait à la structure formaliste de la toile et glissé en direction d'un naturalisme naïf.

Dans un de ses anciens films, Tim Zuck marche sur le lac gelé. Il ne dit pas si la glace était mince, mais ne l'est-elle pas toujours pour un artiste?

(Traduction de Marie-Sylvie Fortier-Rolland)
English Original Text, p. 91

a basic issue confronting Western Canadian culture. The only barrier that has stood in the way of having this Western self totally defined or absorbed by the other has been the land. For the Western identity it has been the measure of difference. That difference made a new identity possible.

The basis of that identity is man's relationship to the land. Man and the land are the two poles of Norman Yates' art. Not to be overwhelmed by the land, he turned to man and history. Not to be swamped by the creations of society, he retreated to the land. In this tenuous balance he has found creative space.

As a young artist he was simultaneously drawn to both French Impressionism and German Expressionism. This dual attraction signaled his desire to deal equally with the human condition (expressionism) and with aesthetic concerns and nature (impressionism). In his most recent work, *Landscape*, he has interpreted man predominately as black and white drawing and nature as colour, thereby creating a basic metaphor for the tension between history and the environment. This tension, which is the prime dynamic of his art, has been generated by living in the West where he has found his sense of man in the history of this region and, in its landscape, his sense of colour and perspective. In the past, the synthesis of these elements has not always been successful in the sense that it has not produced an authentic expression in which modernity and the indigenous are totally integrated. Not until now has he succeeded in giving an indigenous dimension to aesthetic concerns and a universal meaning to the indigenous elements of place, people and history.

During the Fifties, his first attempt at a synthesis in which he articulated his fundamental concern as being the problem of the human figure's relationship to space was understandably fledgling, derivative and dependent. The environment he dealt with was not his own. It was Eastern Canadian, or it was foreign. The society and culture was only distantly his own. So that the water-colour of the girl in Toronto *Merry Go Round* (1954) and that of the figures in a street of English rowhouses *New Town* (1963) remain very much at the level of scenes observed by an outsider.

During the Sixties, he attempted a second synthesis which was more sophisticated. By this time he had returned permanently to the West and was a respected member of the local Edmonton art community as a professor of fine arts at the University of Alberta. So his sense of the indigenous was greater. He expressed it in a series of drawings titled *Allegoria* which satirized man and power at the university. Then he reacted to this immersion in the local by going back to the universal, represented by his purely aesthetic experimentation in colour with newly developed acrylics. When the inevitable synthesis of these two forces (the particular as social and the universal as aesthetic) appeared it was in the form of symbolic paintings such as *Banner Figure* (1968) of a human figure crucified on a flat background of thick tonal colour. This stage did not provide a solution because the aesthetic was imported and even the social, which was outwardly indigenous, was actually only the local expression of a universal student revolt of the Sixties. In short, the indigenous was under-represented in this second synthesis.

Yates returned to the now all too familiar cycle. First, he immersed himself once more in the universal. He experimented with op and pop art, film, photography, culminating in a multi-media technological wonderland of a set designed for Wilfred Watson's play *Let's*

Murder Clytemnestra According to the Rules of Marshall McLuhan. In response to this extreme, he turned completely back into his roots in a series of drawings titled *Regina Riot*, 1935 and *Canadian heroes series Number One* which were sparse, simple, pencil drawings of the human figure paralleling the *Allegoria* series. These new scenes from his childhood in the Depression went further into the indigenous, were more in touch with the West than the content of the *Allegoria* series. A deeper dialectic and therefore deeper synthesis was developing. Although the *Regina Riot* series dealt with the abstract problem of space and perspective in a highly conceptual way (expressing rather mechanically his theory of the multi-faceted, multi-dimensional, multi-spacial world of relationships rather than entities) their life and strength came from the human struggle they portrayed.

Out of the contradiction between the technological art emanating from New York and Toronto and the visions of a Prairie youth came his most recent, and to my mind, most successful synthesis. For the first time, the indigenous, rather than being restricted to content, to black and white drawings of figures and things, has crossed over into the realm of colour, into aesthetic concerns of form which were dominated before by the influence of imported art movements. For the first time, abstraction became rooted in the landscape. Likewise, in the *Landscape* series, man has gained colour, becomes part of nature, the universal. Though the contradiction between man's creation and nature is still there, there are glimmerings of commonality. What is most interesting is that his universal is not the imperializing technology of McLuhan's global village but the universal of the land, one which respects the particular, one which displays diversity and not uniformity. Coming as it does out of the indigenous, the particular, it is a universal that does not threaten.

Landscape has bridged the gulf that separates the two major trends in contemporary art — the high realism of the representational mode and colour field formalism of the abstract mode. These paintings approach the indigenous horizon of the West, symbolically, abstractly, conceptually. They express it essentially, rather than superficially the way traditional landscape or scenic art does. The faint figures, which have bothered some observers who find them a discordant element, do in fact create the tension of the work which is the tension between modern man and nature that Yates has seen in the history of the West. They express the bridge he is building between the aesthetics of representational art and abstract art, which critics keep separate. Although these figures are definitely populist agrarian figures out of Western Canadian history, they carry an unmistakably universal quality as witnessed in *Landscape Twenty-One* where the humanity is reminiscent of the original wretched of the earth — Adam and Eve.

These paintings are *origin-al* in a number of ways. They are *origin-al* in breaking ground for the much-needed dialogue between representational and abstract art. They are *origin-al* in their going back to origins that are in the land, in the people of the land, in the brilliant, hard light of the Prairies, in the immense space and in the overwhelming sense of horizon and the horizontal. They are *origin-al* in their taking up of the fundamental issue facing the human in the West — dealing with nature. They are *origin-al* in expressing his own origins in the agrarian civilization of the white European immigrant who first attacked this land. They are *origin-al* in returning to the simplicity and first

principles that come from an immediate, direct experience of the land. And they are *origin-al* in pioneering a way for Western Canadian artists to deal with the dual threat of cultural provincialism and cultural imperialism. Norman Yates' originality comes from the regional but ends in the universal origins and issues of the human condition.

The problem of the hinterland artist is not peculiar to the Canadian West. The Quebec painter Jean-Paul Lemieux, himself a profound regionalist with a deep sense of Quebec's angst, has been one of the inspiration for Norman Yates. "Lemieux's figure in space," Yates says, "gave me the idea that paintings could deal primarily with space, with space as space, with deep space." Both men love the land and the people of the land. In that love they found themselves. Both artists have shown that when the indigenous, rooted self meets and absorbs, without subservience, influences and ideas from powerful imperial centres, the resulting synthesis is potent for both worlds.

Coming to terms with this place, the West, isn't over for Norman Yates. The dialectic continues with new contradictions feeding his development. If he continues further in his journey into the *origin-al* he will face the momentous task of going beyond his immigrant heritage into the immense region of history and myth that has been and is the life of the native peoples of the West. This road into the past is actually a way into the future of the Western identity. The journey into the indigenous (the *origin-al*) is a process of discovering a perpetually unfolding identity.

TIM ZUCK — LOOKING FOR A HOUSE

By Eric CAMERON

Most of Tim Zuck's creative life has been spent in or around Nova Scotia College of Art and Design; his art plots the course of personal adjustment to the institution.

He was a student here five years ago and his work earned shows in Toronto and New York, alongside artists of the calibre of Dan Graham and Vito Acconci. Quite an achievement for an undergraduate! Something to be proud of! The works themselves tell a different story. The two major pieces were performances and both had him closed away in a box. In the Toronto presentation he was completely hidden in a great dark horizontal tomb-like structure, and he just stayed there all day while people came and looked and found no trace of him at all. Earlier, at the college's own gallery, it had been a vertical box with a plexiglass front. In the course of the day he slowly covered it from the inside with black paint. The notion of the artist hiding behind a layer of paint is so poignant it seems almost to have had to be contrived as an explanation of his later work. The point I want to stress is that he was hiding, and hiding is a human issue as well as an art issue.

He went to California Institute of the Arts in September 1971 and in May 1972 he did another box piece there. It had grown tentacles reaching out into space, but one doesn't need to force the metaphor; other works already speak of the sense of release. In No-

vember '71 the first photographic series had him flying a glider over hills, through clouds and into clear blue sky. Of course the glider is a sort of box too, but it is a box that gives the spirit wings: "The artist smiled confidently before take-off."

The sense of journey is fundamental. Behind it is the puritan ideal of life as a pilgrimage. The contrast emphasizes the negativity of his entombment in the earlier pieces. The traveller encounters the vastness of life's setting and in the process adjusts to the limited span of his own stride. The photographs from Tim Zuck's year in California express the human scale of human capability with a frankness and modesty for which I can find no comparison elsewhere. Another box was an articulated truck "bringing home" half a million carrots across the continent. In the final shot he stands before it holding up as many as he might have bought at the corner store.

The Proverb sequences pinpoint the moral precepts that fortify the traveller. An obstinate sort of fortitude: "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink." Ambition held in check by experience: A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush." The imperative of a Protestant work ethic: "Fish or cut bait." The value of the journey's own lessons: "In order to know a man you must walk a mile in his shoes." What is disarming is the literalness of the rendering. There really is a horse looking disinterestedly into a horse-trough; the bush really does have two birds in it; he really has changed shoes with somebody; and there, sure enough, he sits cutting up bait. The meaning is right out there on the surface and the art meaning and the life meaning are right in step. These works ceased abruptly when he returned to NSCAD in the fall of '72. For two years there was nothing he was prepared to show me at all. The new pieces from '74 begin tentatively.

It is very strange that the College, having demonstrated its faith by taking the very exceptional step of appointing its own student, should then prove infertile ground. It is strange too because the college's own view of itself seems so close to what Tim Zuck is about. It has never liked its identification with conceptual art. Just a few months ago Roald Nasgaard, visiting from the Art Gallery of Ontario, detected a "Protestant work ethic". The phrase has been quoted with some satisfaction. As a metaphor it was apt, but Tim Zuck confronts the metaphor with the reality. The sort of art I suspect prompted Nasgaard's remark must have been like Gerald Ferguson's and Garry Kennedy's, in which the subtler enrichments come about through the accumu-

lation of procedural error in conscientiously following through a working method. This is also the sort of work Tim Zuck starts to do in the fall of '74.

Different colours of sticky tape are pressed down on the back of plexiglass and, of course, one anticipates, because the tape is flexible, that irregularities will develop as one band is laid next to another. There is only one piece that I find of any interest. It is just a foot square and uses plain white tape. The tape does not crinkle; the bands run exactly parallel; the craftsmanship is immaculate; there is no procedural error; the true puritan would accept nothing less. The irony is certainly unconscious; as a person, Tim Zuck is incapable of it.

Eventually the patterns get more complicated. He sticks plants underneath the tape, but gives up after a couple of tries. Then he starts doing paintings. They are small paintings, always square and they cling to the corners for support. Sometimes linear forms lead into a smaller square in the middle; at others, two opposing triangles project a single bar across the centre. There may be rectangles instead of triangles; or all the linear forms may bend round to find a single anchorage at the base; and finally two internal rectangles are linked by crossing loops that never touch the edge.

The emergence of the image from behind the plexiglass was a sign of reviving confidence. In the spring of '76 two small works on board mark the transition from acrylics to oil paint. Its full impasto retains the imprint of the brush within the layer of paint, the track of the artist's hand across his work. The chunks of bare white primer around the original pencil drawing become more clearly the neutral ground they are. The boards are both of the type of corner-anchored works. The linear forms probe out towards the centre, but they attach to nothing. Perhaps it was necessary that the void should be confronted first. The next canvases discover there the image of a house.

Reviving confidence may have had to do with settling into his job at the college, and it must have been a help when he was allowed to slough off the administration chores that were at first imposed upon him, but personal things were more crucial. He had married and they went out and bought a small house overlooking the water. In two years he totally rebuilt it; the emergence of the house in the paintings roughly coincides with its completion. He has now given up his studio at the college.

In the first house painting the single linear

band from the bottom left corner identifies itself as a path leading up the door. Retroactively its abstract predecessors are invested with the human value of maps. The box has taken on the positive connotations of *home*. The image is still very abstract, the shapes simple and the colours limited to a few neutrals with perhaps a single sharp acidic accent, all without modulation. But simplicity is now a matter of economy of means only; the meaning is complex and subtle. This time around, the work speaks of resolution rather than release. It is not so much a return to the homey mores of the photographs as that ideal's re-emergence within and through the process of formal analysis.

In retrospect the austere structural concerns of that analytical phase seem always to have concealed a metaphor of his personal situation — as if he had all this time been walled up behind the layer of paint. The house paintings realize an image of the world just as the photographs did, but for Tim Zuck paint proves a more flexible medium than photography. At times those linear bands springing from the corners present themselves, not as paths, but as smoke or (in one drawing) the roots of a tree. At a deeper level they are symbolic links between the artist's own base of personal meaning and its public expression in the language of paint and canvas. Read them from the outside and they pinpoint a latent potentiality in the format of the canvas, from the inside and they declare the private sources of the strength to face those institutional issues.

So at the point of breakthrough the work also remains what it was and that is what gives it its subtlety and resonance. What excites is the sense of breakthrough transfigured in the image, of the joy of realization that once sent Archimedes running through the streets dripping bath-water, the intimation of trumpets sounding on the other side. Unfortunately artistic breakthroughs, unlike their scientific counterparts, do not confer permanent benefits, but usually exhaust themselves in the act of discovery itself. The problem is how the pilgrim will spend his time once the fanfare has died away.

The breakthrough may have enabled Tim Zuck to deal with certain personal problems and there were half a dozen works that are perhaps his best to date. In the pieces since, a boat first appears alongside the house and then dares to leave the jetty and brave the open sea. At the same time the language of expression has broken its moorings to the formal structure of the canvas and slipped over in the direction of a naive naturalism.

In an early film Tim Zuck took a walk on a frozen lake. He does not say if the ice was thin, but for an artist it always is.

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