



Kes Zapkus, *Das Meer Ist Blau*, 1987, oil on cotton, 96 by 192 inches. John Weber.

## KES ZAPKUS

John Weber

Not so long ago, once one stepped close enough to decode the abstract goings-on, the taut geometries of Kes Zapkus's field paintings revealed a hidden arsenal of bombers, tanks, and mine explosions. Here he seemed to have entered, as he says half jokingly, "a period of *glasnost*."

What Zapkus means is that he has dropped the embedded representational subject matter and returned to the complex and rigorous abstraction by which he first became known. At the same time, thanks to

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his overtly political phase, Zapkus's current abstractions are further enriched. It is as if his encounter with the apparatus of war gave him permission to explore both morphology and scale, which he had once hesitated to do lest he compromise modernist space. There need be no worry of that. At least in this fine exhibition, the artist demonstrated that despite the popular belief that hard-core modernism is reductive, it is in fact fully capable of sustaining formal and expressive range.

In *Das Meer Ist Blau*, for instance, archipelagos of concise Cubist structures, articulated in response to an underlying grid or plan, are occasionally swept by the passionate currents of Abstract Expressionist brushstrokes or breakwaters of obdurate

Minimalist facades, with perhaps an intimation of landscape—all seen in different perspectives and sighted from numerous horizons. This stylistic activity lies pulverized and distributed throughout a vast blue field; in Zapkus's paintings, blue is not simple, it is commensurate with the world.

In a certain sense Zapkus's art has always been political, and remains so, for even without the pretext of subject matter, it aims to resist the pat polemics convenient to war, feminism, and other matters that have rendered other artists' work both obvious and patently commercial. His art is political, then, because it is experiential, characterized by a long-term process of assimilation of themes and forms. The show was complex, encompassing the agitated grandeur of *Das Meer Ist Blau* as well as the intimate tectonics of *Primo's Fall*. Deep in its foundations and now enriched in its means, here for once is an art whose content the viewer cannot master by standing in a gallery's doorway. —M.W.