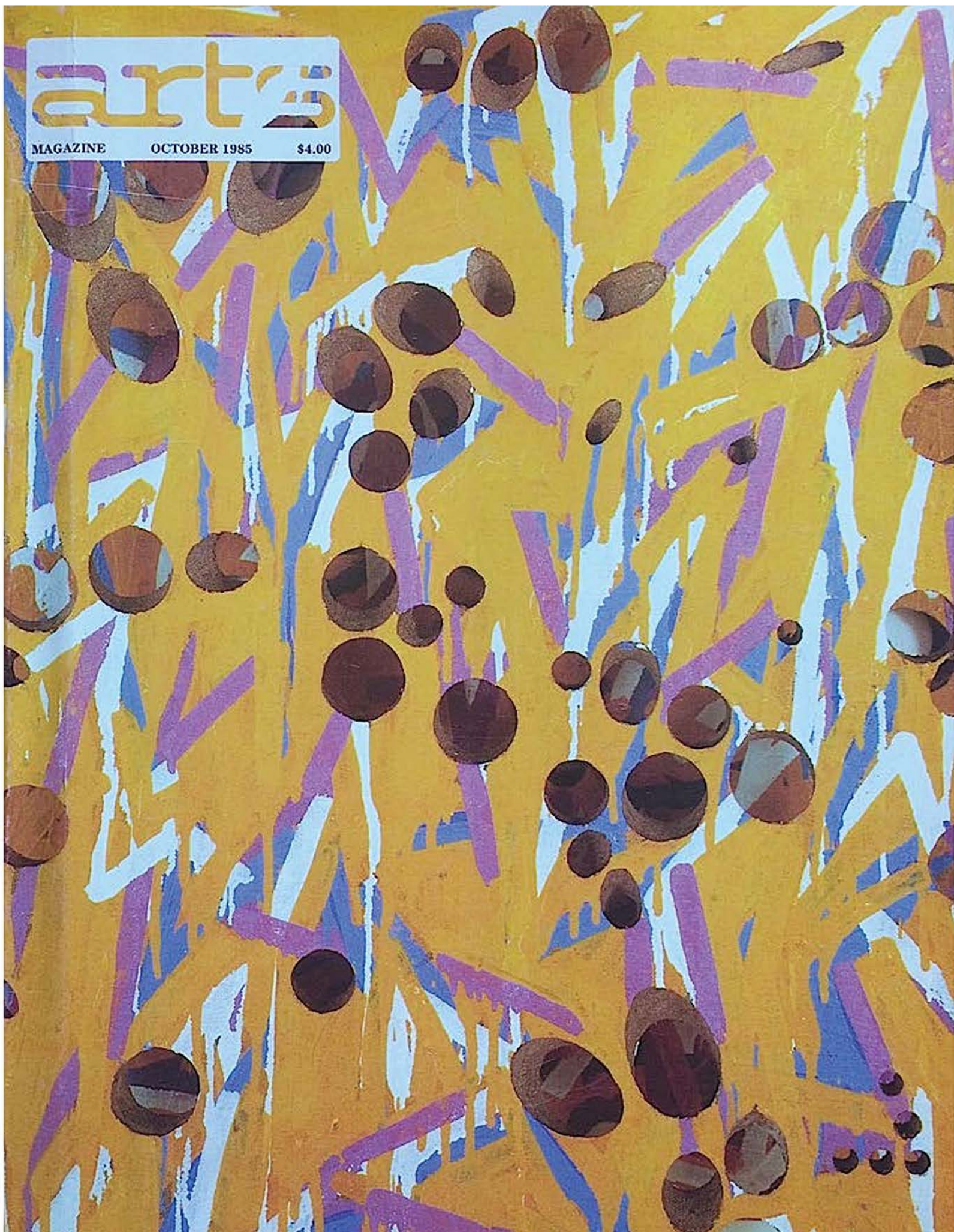


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THE PASSION AND POWER BUILDS: THE OGRE SERIES BY ROBERT S. ZAKANITCH

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The evolution of Robert S. Zakanitch's formal vocabulary is fascinating and provides an informative documentation of a masterful, painterly style that is shifting from the classical to the baroque.

It has been ten years since Robert S. Zakanitch created, and soon thereafter labeled the "breakthrough" paintings that established him as a leading member of the popular Pattern and Decoration movement. What motivated Zakanitch and his compatriots in decoration was, at that time, widely discussed. The aesthetic shift that has occurred since then has made it easy to forget the controversy that surrounded this iconoclastic movement's philosophy. Even though the debate was intense, one has to strain to remember the heat of the argument.

That it has been just over ten years since the birth of this aesthetic illustrates how rapidly new work can have a wide-reaching effect. It also indicates that the radical nature of breakthrough art can be quickly absorbed and thus its initial germination just as quickly forgotten or misunderstood. Because our vision is dulled by so much art that has taken for granted the aesthetic position that the first generation Pattern and Decoration artists struggled to attain, it is useful to recall the environment and motivation of the originators.

In the early Seventies, Zakanitch was already a mature artist. Like several of the other painters and sculptors soon to be associated with decoration, he was not, in the fashion of the artists who have emerged in the Eighties, fresh from art school looking to make his mark on the scene with flamboyant innovation. Rather, he and many of his colleagues at mid-career felt themselves strangling under the grip of minimalism. In the initial stage of the change, these artists shared the need to break away from formalism and the intellectual cloud of justification that hovered over it. The restrictive boundaries of the aesthetic environment, with its rules about permissible subject matter, had to be broken. Zakanitch recognized that he and others, by and large, agreed in attitude but had diverse plans concerning what action should be taken. The group's efforts led to work in all mediums—painting, sculpture, and the decorative arts—as well as production that blurred the boundaries of these categories. Within a few years no one talked of a unified Pattern and Decoration movement. As in other instances when twentieth-century artists gathered to discuss common goals or even issue manifestoes, the group activity ended once the talking stopped and the members returned to their individual studios. With hindsight, it is easy to see that the Pattern and Decoration artists not only broke down barriers to make their personal, continued development possible; they also allowed others to follow in their wake as they created an expansive atmosphere toward what was permissible in diverse mediums.

Zakanitch never conceived of Pattern and Decoration as an end in itself. It was not a style to adopt as a solution to the problem of what one should paint. His use of vernacular forms and references was enlisted as a means rather than an end. For him, the ultimate goal was the revitalization of painting. This was achieved by moving from the realm of so-called pure abstraction, which in Zakanitch's case had been the subtle modulation of color within highly controlled minimalist structures, into one that embraced a referential position. The intellectual underpinnings that justified minimal abstraction and determined its component parts were set aside. By unhinging the ideology that predetermined what vocabulary was permitted, the door swung open and led Zakanitch to the evolution of a major body of painterly, referential canvases.

By the late Seventies, Zakanitch was known, and in many circles acclaimed, for his lush and colorful paintings. Jubilant choruses of flowers danced across the surface of each canvas. The flowers were never grouped as bouquets; rather, individual blossoms floated upon the outermost edge of the picture plane, held in place only by the

structural grip of the composition's grid format. Enmeshed in the background, a pattern of evenly placed dots or dashes often augmented the grid structure, providing additional strength to the composition's internal framework. The veins of leaves or the thin stems of more delicate flowers added a linear element. Often the gaiety of these curving lines positively camouflaged the perpendicular format.

The paintings of the late Seventies had a consistent internal rhythm—a repetitive pulse. The beat was steady as the shape of each flower and its regularized placement remained uniform within each picture. The color, however, did not. In most canvases, the color swelled and subsided, creating gentle waves across the picture's surface. Thus, the regularized cadence of the similar images was received in combination with a rhythm that ebbed and flowed. This counterpoint gave the floral paintings an organic breath. The sense of life, along with opulent color and accessible imagery, provided these pictures with both formal strength and popular appeal.

As a mature artist, Zakanitch, from the very start of the Pattern and Decoration movement, had been able to create complex compositions in which a classical, internal structure and brilliant manipulation of color were joined in just the correct balance. The vernacular—at that time, the low-art subject of flowers (and vegetable or animals)—used in a repetitive manner, associated them with Pattern and Decoration. Zakanitch's paintings were always masterful pictures that glowed with a radiance and passion, captivating viewers once again, at a difficult moment in the history of painting, with the power of paint on a two-dimensional surface.

In 1982-83, the structure of Zakanitch's paintings began to change. Over a period of several years, he moved away from the classical order of his best known Pattern and Decoration work. Gradually, the paintings have developed a different internal rhythm and visual impact. The altered compositions that constituted this change have been steadily pouring forth from Zakanitch's studio to make up the numerous exhibitions the artist has had throughout the United States and in Europe. The acrylic and graphite works of the Ogre Series, executed from January through August of this year and currently on exhibit at the Robert Miller Gallery, present the current state of this evolution.

An orderly linear history of the change would provide an inaccurate picture of Zakanitch's development. There have been many series, as well as isolated paintings, numerous works on paper, and prints. Over a period of several years there is a borrowing of compositional devices, a use of similar motifs, and attitudes toward color that sometimes link work; but an emphasis on these easily identified connections can undermine our effort to discern change. While Zakanitch continues to quote his earlier work, he has dramatically plowed ahead. In order to better understand the newest works, it is useful to look back at several examples from the last few years.

In 1982, Zakanitch worked on several vertical canvases characterized by an unequal division into two sections. Unlike earlier work, where the parts melted together through manipulation of color and related images, these paintings are marked by a disjuncture. Three of the split compositions (*Burma Red*, *Yellow Pants*, and *Tucked In*) were dubbed the Couture Series because the upper part of the canvas resembled overlapping cloth. The fabric was usually a pattern of black lines on a colored background. The lines created a crisscross pattern according to the manner in which the cloth was folded or draped. The lower half of all three pictures was classic Zakanitch: a vibrant, gridded field of dancing flowers.

Also in 1982, Zakanitch allowed the overlapping movement of part

Robert N. Zakandich, *Hot Top*
(Copa Series) 1983-84
Acrylic on canvas, 96 x 72"
Private Collection
Courtesy Robert Miller
Gallery



Robert N. Zakandich,
Fields of Hercules (Ogre
Series), 1985 Acrylic on
stretched canvas, 89 x 108"
Courtesy Robert Miller
Gallery



Robert N. Zakandich,
Tiger Park (Ogre Series)
1985 Acrylic
on stretched canvas,
94 x 120", Courtesy
Robert Miller Gallery



of these split compositions to take over entire canvases. Undermining entirely any reference to the grid, *Angels with Golden Hearts* is a work that is truly rhapsodic. The large canvas is composed of three sweeping diagonal gestures, what could be called grand baroque movement. Zakandich has stated that the overlapping structure, once allowed to dominate, gave this picture and others like it a burst of energy. *Angels with Golden Hearts* also includes a frieze of trumpeting angels along the top border which was mostly painted out. Small pink, blue, and white marks sparkle like stars in a Byzantine field of red and gold. Abstract passages predominate.

Two other series continue this move away from the rectangular, the vertical grid, and its complementary mood of quiet order and subtle blend of colors. Zakandich titled a group of 1982-83 vertical canvases the Gentry Series (examples include *Dragon Fly*, *Noble One*, *Cantata*, and *Wasp*). Again using clothing as a point of departure, these paintings

incorporate a pale, ruffled ascot into the top of each picture. The long image extending below the ascot is pinched slightly at its center, as if a male figure draped in a flamboyant floral fabric extends below to complete the dandyish outfit. This series eliminates any doubt as to whether Zakandich has a sense of humor about his use of vernacular (quilts, wallpaper, linoleum, fabric, etc.) sources. At the same time, the liberty that the artist has taken with the fabric's description heightens the tension between the identifiable reference and the abstract content.

With the *Copa Series* of 1983-84, Zakandich goes all out with his showy, humorous intent. He maintains the vertical, split format as well as the grand, sweeping movements. This time the entire composition is a takeoff on Carmen Miranda's infamous headdress. In *Fruit Apert*, bunches of ripe bananas and grapes are piled high upon a green and black turban. The makeup of the turban resembles the cummerbunds in the *Couture Series*. The complete image has a shape of its own that is surrounded by a white border used by the artist to fill in the vertical

composition *Celery Head* and *Hot Top* are two other outlandish millinery creations. In the former, sweeps of green burst forth from a decorative source, while in the latter a flashy red structure surmounts a zebra-patterned base. In both instances the Carmen Miranda reference is recognized but the exacting description of Zakaniuch's previous paintings has been abandoned. Paint drips freely and ambiguous shapes are scattered about the surface in a casual manner.

In the later half of 1983, Zakaniuch starting working with graphite in combination with acrylic. One of the first results of his introduction of a new material was *Moose*. The top of this split composition is in acrylic: blood red roses splattered against a black and white checkerboard field. The bottom is composed of thin graphite lines on gessoed canvas of swirling trumpet-shaped vines. Shortly thereafter, Zakaniuch determined that the graphite would be more successfully utilized on a hard surface. Thus he turned to masonite. Not yet attracted to the idea of working with graphite alone, he used the graphite on gessoed masonite in association with acrylic on canvas. He did this by abutting canvas and masonite panels, permitting the work on each to partially overlap. This series, some of which were shown at the Harkus Gallery in Boston in 1984, included *Caviar*, *The Iron Czarina*, and *Elbow Room*. All emphasize grand movements that take on shapes independent of the two joined rectangles. They also juxtapose vibrant color with black and white patterns.

In 1985, Zakaniuch separated his use of graphite and acrylic into two bodies of work. For all the 1985 pictures, he has abandoned the rectangle as a starting point. Zakaniuch is acutely aware of the positive function of strictly adhered-to limitations; they serve as starting points, laying the ground and providing impetus. So it was only with forethought and preparation that the artist has taken this step, at just the correct moment in his evolution, when the abandonment of a longheld limitation did not weaken his framework but instead strengthened it. At this point the change appears consistent with the direction that his painting has taken over the last several years. The shaped canvases and wood or masonite panels provide a new structure in which these developments can expand and therefore flourish.

Because the internal activity in Zakaniuch's paintings no longer mirrored a rectangle, the rectangle of the stretcher had come to counter his composition's internal dynamics. This problem has been successfully dealt with for a time by the compositional experimentation and variation discussed above. Zakaniuch, however, had arrived at a point where a composition of the intensity he strove for should be without divisions or superfluous edges. It needed to have a singular, integrated field of activity and an edge that was non-rectangular.

While this move toward shaped canvases had been percolating for some time, Zakaniuch's involvement in the spring of 1984 with the production of a rug in Aubusson, France spurred him on. In the past, Zakaniuch has resisted the tendency of the Pattern and Decoration artists, as well as numerous other contemporary sculptors and painters, to create functional objects. He has never produced lamps, chairs, tables, or screens or been involved with the use of tile, mosaic, or glass design that some artists have incorporated into public art environments.

Zakaniuch's involvement with the Aubusson manufacturers came about through the invitation of M. Louis Goodman, an architect and designer. Zakaniuch is clear about his approach to the project, made wary by the many unattractive wall hangings and rugs of well-known artists. He would not permit a painting of his to be translated into a rug. On the contrary, he created, working on the floor, a design for a rug. He assumed that his piece would be used as a rug, not as a wall hanging, and therefore viewed by people standing or sitting directly on it. Zakaniuch made three designs, one of which was hand-woven at the Aubusson factory. The artist made a special trip there to work through the details of the project. He discussed with the staff the dyes, the weaving techniques and the blends. By taking a special interest in all aspects of the rug's manufacture, he determined not only the color but the surface texture, both essential components of the rug's final successful effect.

Several of the paintings in the present exhibition are similar in shape to the Aubusson rug. The pinched middle and the irregular edge of the rug and the internal shape of the earlier canvases have now become the shape of the stretcher. Also, the weaving pattern or braid, clearly a motif reinforced by the artist's trip to Aubusson, is a primary element

in several of these compositions. Zakaniuch had utilized weaving motifs in earlier work, often as border designs, but not in the dominant position they appear here. It is reasonable to presume that the Aubusson experience, coupled with Zakaniuch's predisposition to the supposedly gentler crafts (Zakaniuch grew up in a matriarchal household and learned to braid, embroider, and make horsetail rugs as a child), permitted him to incorporate not only the shape of the rugs into his next body of paintings but also the strong weaving reference.

Zakaniuch had considered calling his 1985 works the Magic Carpet Series. But wary of too literal an interpretation, he came up with an amusing alternative, more in keeping with the vivid imagination that his titles so often reveal: the Ogre Series. They are thus named after fairy tale creatures. Like these bizarre monsters, Zakaniuch considers the shapes of his new canvases and masonite panels to be odd and misshapen.

Among the first Ogre Series pictures is *Fields of Hercules*, an image with the strength that its title conjures up. The most intense blue and red one could imagine covers the entire shaped canvas. Gigantic blossoms hang from a diagonal trellis; a huge vine twists across the center. Green, the barest suggestion of leaves and stems, peaks through a mysterious night-blue sky. The flowers and vine seem to bleed red. All the interior dynamics of the composition work in tandem with the shape of the stretcher, the enlarged scale of the images and the showy use of color result in a bravura of referential abstraction.

Zakaniuch's *Tiger Falls* is a completely different composition, a circle with a scalloped edge that gives its curve irregularity. Yet, a similar analysis can be made of its internal workings and its walloping impact. Salmon-colored lilies with black spots have been given gigantic proportions. Their huge petals are tossed about in what resembles the violent waves of a green sea. The swirling motion of the stormy waters and placement therein of the flowers' sensuous petals reflect the outer shape of the canvas. All the elements of color, scale, shape, and paint application combine to produce an explosive force.

Within months after starting the shaped paintings, Zakaniuch embarked on a group of graphite on masonite panels that are cut in shapes similar to that of *Tiger Falls*. His original intention was to allow the white of the gesso preparation to play a major compositional role, as a series of positive images amid a darker, negative field. As he worked with the graphite sticks, however, Zakaniuch found himself covering almost the entire surface. Flecks of white do peek through, like the simple marks in the artist's early pattern work, but it is the rich graphite that Zakaniuch has assiduously worked into the hard surface that dominates.

Zakaniuch has approached the graphite as a mysterious color and medium, one that yields a surface with an absorbent-reflective quality. Consequently, the surface fluctuates in the changing light and breathes with life. While these gray panels are subdued in comparison to Zakaniuch's high-energy, color-saturated canvases, they possess a similar radiance. They are odd-shaped objects that float on the wall and exude a captivating warmth.

At fifty years of age Zakaniuch is an artist who has watched the mood of critical opinion swing from one extreme to the next as movements come and go. Fortunately for him, and for us, he understands the necessity of personal development and evolution that take place over time with their own internal logic, and which may or may not parallel current trends. Without repeating himself, yet also without jumping into disparate modes, Zakaniuch has amassed a large body of work. The evolution of his formal vocabulary is fascinating and provides an informative documentation of a masterful painterly style that is shifting from the classical to the baroque. More compelling than the structural development of his pictures or the continued use and transformation of vernacular vocabulary is the affirmation that these works of art communicate. They are positive statements about painting and life. They affirm our sense of humanity and the ability of art to speak to that fact. They deal with beauty as emotion and do not deny the romantic attitude that art can elevate our feelings about ourselves and others.

Zakaniuch is not afraid to take an aesthetic stance that may be out of fashion at this particular moment. As a result, it is very likely that one day in the future Zakaniuch will be considered an artist who was able, during a long career, to be both of his time and ahead of his time, and thus worthy of a place in art history.