

A few years ago Agnes Martin painted a few grid pictures and became a cult figure. This was when the critics were changing their minds about Mondrian's Boogie Woogie paintings, now that they seemed less end-of-the-line and more point-of-departure. This was also when certain field painters like Noland started combining clean grids with spattered atmosphere. Certain geometrically inclined artists like Ed Moses started drawing parallel lines through gooey process. Certain expressionist-divisionists like Kes Zapkus began using the overall grid as a handy device to order painterly activity. Then there followed a great hoard of dotting, dashing, scribbling, twitching, ruling grid artists who claimed the ruled line to be the best thing to happen in the salon since the hard-edge masking tape craze of the mid '60s. Bottom of the bird cage, pizza pie pointillism left no space uncovered, and at last, so it seemed, we could talk about painting as a noble craft again.

I would like to suggest that the paintings of Zapkus are among the very few in this idiom that have survival capability. The closeness, the poetry of elegant detail in his recent work shows the possibilities of personal eclecticism at a time when stylistic plurality seems inevitable. His last show of paintings at the Paula Cooper Gallery go beyond

his initial task of outbooging Mondrian and outscribbling Johns. They enter a realm more closely guarded, closer to the heart—maybe comparable to the Bauhaus Klee, or a kind of intimist painting one is not used to

seeing in this country.

For Zapkus the grid is only the beginning. It is an excuse to get out of bed in the morning and start painting. It is a Roman town plan transformed by centuries of neighborhood intrigue. It is a machine for picture making, but a conspicuously handmade machine. Zapkus gets a painting going with clean graphics—the ruled-on grid, the screened-on halftone dots—and then paint is applied improvisationally to give the picture topographical surface. A partially random, hit-and-miss spotting of color defines light-filled areas that run right to the edge. The colors pick up certain parts of the grid here, fragment other parts there; this has the seemingly contradictory function of unifying the space while eroding the structure. Oldmasterly layering and touching up leave particles of line and shape frozen in a tunnel-like matrix. What begins as somewhat unpromising key-punch design ends with sparkling decoration, tangible atmosphere, intriguing manipulation.

In some pictures, Zapkus' almost monastic urge to miniaturize gets him into trouble, and the jot and tittle marks dissipate energy a little too evenly over the surface. In others, like *Phthalocyanine Tint*, the eye is led star-chart fashion from point to point, until ambiguities and complexities emerge. Zapkus' paintings take time to read, and I like that.

What we have in *Phthalocyanine Tint* is an image sometimes comfortably, always intelligently wedged between detail as pure structure and detail as the dematerializing of structure. There are contrary impulses toward allover pattern and pure alloverness, and that contrariness is part of what the pictures are intended to be about. This is not snowflake pointillism, where every dot is different, but trivially different; this is an attitude that relates micro units to a grand compositional format. This is the atomized process picture, or the hybrid of Mondrian and Pollock.

Philip Larson

KES ZAPKUS

At right:
Kes Zapkus,
Phthalocyanine Tint,
1975. *Oil, acrylic, and
vinyl screen on canvas, 6
x 5'. Courtesy Paula
Cooper Gallery.*

Below:
Kes Zapkus, *Black
Bottom*, 1975.
*Vinyl screen, acrylic, oil
on canvas, 8 x 8'.
Courtesy Paula Cooper
Gallery.*

