

Chronogram

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ARTS & CULTURE

Portfolio: Ion Zupcu

by Beth E. Wilson, January 25, 2008



February 13, 2006 by Ion Zupcu.

Visitors to Ion Zupcu's home and studio in Hopewell Junction are greeted by a series of intimate portraits of Zupcu's daughter Christina—a series he began when she was four, interrupted by his emigration to the US from Romania in 1991, but which became an annual ritual when she rejoined him here at age 11. The careful attention to detail,

immaculate gelatin-silver printing, and very organized, aesthetically sensitive approach to his subject evident in this series are qualities that carry over to all of his fine art work as well, including his most recent series, *Works on Paper*.

Inspired by the paper models Christina was making a few years ago in her architectural studies, Zupcu began photographing tiny, carefully folded and lit bits of paper—the largest actual subject is no more than one inch across—using his square-format Hasselblad camera. Enlarged to 15-by-15-inch prints, the play of light and shadow in these images takes on an unexpected power, creating abstractions that at times seem like the photographic rival of the slashed canvases of Lucio Fontana.

This newest series of Zupcu's work has now been published by Park Island Press in a beautifully produced book, *Ion Zupcu: Works on Paper*, which is available at the Merritt Bookstores, or through the photographer's website, www.ionzupcu.ro. As this goes to press, Clamp Art gallery is planning a solo show of his work in New York City, set to open in late March.

—Beth E. Wilson

Ion Zupcu on his work

Drawn to the square

I use photography to express my drawings. I don't have any knowledge about painting, and I don't know how to make big drawings, so what I was doing was very small drawings, just trying to get down the masses, get to an idea about how just a simple line will respond within a square, based on the format of my camera. I use photography to give life to that drawing. It's not what we all know about photography; it's a bit different. If you try the spiral [one of the images in the book], starting from other parts of the square, it's not going to end up as beautiful as from there. The square is a very challenging format. It's a very balanced size. Whatever you put within the square, there are other forces that you have to fight. Don't get it too balanced, or formal, which I've been told I was [doing] at one point. I've had many fights with the square.

Works on paper

Two of my galleries helped [in] producing the book. One of them just kept asking that I should have a book of my works on paper. At that point, the first half was already done, and then I did the design for the book, and realized there weren't that many photographs for it, just 20 images.

I knew that I had about six months in front of me, and I decided to do another body of work based on works on paper, too. I made a schedule of my life: every day, from 8 to 12 or 1, I was to be in the studio and just shoot. From 1 to 5 I was doing drawings, from 5 to later that night I was processing the film. So after six months, I came up with 20 images [to add to the book]. [The second series of photographs are] a response to great artists, whose work I admire. For example, [pointing to the image *Woman* in his book], this is a response to Willem de Kooning's *Women*. I cannot reproduce the ugly woman, but at least I can use the title and respond to that title differently.



The seduction of sepia

I was using sepia tone on the previous works I had been doing. When this came [work on paper series], I did the first half with the sepia. For the newer part I felt I needed a cool tone, so black-and-white worked better. I've been perceived as a sepia-tone photographer. It has a romantic sense. It has an older, sort of vintage look. I've always thought that people got tired of it, but now I had this new body of work coming out, and now people keep asking, "Why isn't it sepia?" They love sepia, actually. But I don't see the new images as being sepia at all. Why? Because most of them are on the dark side, believe it or not, most of them were photographed on a black background, black paper. And then through exposure, some parts are becoming lighter. If that was toned sepia, that would turn into very dark, very dramatic images. Which is not my intention. My intention is just the shape.

Western promises

I was exposed to Western music and art and everything else way before I came here. Radio Free Europe, which was on 24 hours a day, had music, art, politics, everything. So I was exposed to Western music, I knew all about jazz in the 1970s, probably as good as you. It's my favorite kind [of music].
The US is my favorite country. I've been a citizen for the past two years. I can't wait to vote now. It's my first [presidential] election. We don't just happen to be here. We really respect and love this country. When I came here, I discovered ICP [the International

Center for Photography in Manhattan], AIPAD [the major fine art photography fair], and that's what photography was doing. I always felt like I had something to say. Even now, there's only one or two galleries in Romania that have photography. When I left my country in 1991, there were no galleries there for photography. You can't make a living as a fine art photographer there. There's much more opportunity here.

A good pencil

I haven't done much with digital [in my fine art photography]. I use digital now for my commercial work, but I'm just not interested at this point [in using it for the fine art work]. I don't care about what Canon and Nikon are delivering to people. I'm not about buying cameras and equipment. When you switch to something else, it could take years. If you're going from a square [format] to a rectangle, that takes sometimes at least a year to get used to that shape. You're editing, and whatever you decide to have in that image should get into that square. So you're framing things that you have in your mind that fit in a square. And all of a sudden, you decide to frame everything that you have in your mind in a rectangle. I'm not about that. I'm more concerned about getting creative than in trying to figure out how to format with the technology that they're using these days. Good photography is not about the camera. It's about the eye, and what my thoughts are. The camera doesn't say anything.



Birds in Moonlight 2007 by Ion Zupcu

The equipment is like a pencil. You get used to this pencil, it writes well—wonderful, just keep it. Don't change it. If you have to change, you have to change up here [pointing toward his head], you have to be creative. I would like to see totally different things than other people, I hope. That's what I love about this job, being creative.

Photographic memory

With the early images in the book, it's a diary of who I am at those different times of my life when I was taking photographs. The circle, it's just March 6, 2004. It's when I took that photograph. It doesn't need a title. Being abstract, it shouldn't have a title, it should be untitled. That's the beauty of photography. Photography creates memory. Without memory we're not living. That's why we know who we are, because of memory. It doesn't have smell, it doesn't have anything. So it's just memory. A photograph—that's time. A slice of time.