

## Zilon

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Dorota Kozinska

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# ZILON

In conversation with Dorota Kozinska

ONCE SEEN AS AN ACTION STATEMENT, A KIND OF ARTISTIC URBAN WARFARE, GRAFFITI ART HAS LOST SOME OF ITS LUSTER.

IN MONTREAL, IT IS MAINLY REDUCED TO TAGGING, MARKING PUBLIC WALLS WITH INDECIPHERABLE SCRIBBLES. INTERNATIONAL GRAFFITI

ARTISTS LIKE BASQUIAT, AND EVEN THE QUASI-ANONYMOUS BANKSY, NOW SELL IN GALLERIES FOR THOUSANDS OF DOLLARS.

ALL THIS IS HARDLY NEWS TO ZILON, AN ICONIC FIGURE ON THE MONTREAL STREET ART SCENE, WHOSE SIGNATURE —

A FACE DRAWN WITH JUST A FEW LINES — HAS BECOME EMBLEMATIC OF THE 70s.

Considered by many as a graffiti pioneer, whose drawings and murals appeared in the darkest alleys and bars, has become a fast-selling graphic artist. Still a rebel at heart, he now has numerous exhibitions to his name. Impossible to categorize, his style has been compared to everything from Pop to conceptual, from contemporary to comic strip. All and none of the above, Zilon, who is also a musician, seems to be at the height of his career, and his latest solo exhibition at Yves Laroche Galerie d'Art, *Ville Froide* attests to his original graphic talent. With a touch of Munch and German neo-expressionism, his black-and-white drawings are a visual manifesto of the new generation; bold and powerful images of uncompromising expression. His works are dark and often anguished, but always viscerally connected to a truth, and a reality impossible to ignore. Like his previous exhibitions, *Ville Froide* is presented in the form of a collection, but this time, the artistic and emotional components unify the many segments into one powerful tableau.

**VDA:** *Is the street still your main inspiration?*

**Z:** The street, and urbanity as such. And like everyone else, I am inspired by what I see in the news, this human folly, and I exaggerate it, I hone in on it. In my painting and drawings I present it as a world of hyper-realistic urbanity — I am not talking about the style of the drawings. It is about society, more like a futuristic film than science fiction.

**VDA:** *What is there of you in these works?*

**Z:** What is within are definitely emotions, transmitted through the personages that appear in my drawings and paintings, recurring alter egos.

I am often asked whether I use models for some of my paintings. Well, no. All the personages come from my imagination. This exhibition — *Ville Froide* — is a story, told in a cinematic technique; a storyboard for a film that will never be. These are sequences, images of lonely people, alone

even when in the company of others. They are alone and alienated by a society of phony modernity, and what follows, by a big technological lie; and they are beginning to depend on this lie to create relationships via the Internet, people have sex via machines, and they have become, perhaps not paranoid, but they find so much as unnerving, worrisome, and they try to put on this façade of positivism but it is hypocritical. And with this hypocritical attitude we watch “reality shows” that have nothing to do with reality — “reality shows nothing” — with third category celebrities, who collect huge fees for performing stupidities in front of our eyes, or who lose weight for our entertainment. Is this what people are really interested in? I find that people have become sanitized, it's a way of impersonalizing everything, making people passive and much easier to control. There is also the use of fear as means of control. I speak of this fear and anxiety through the medium of my work, and as I mentioned earlier, the loneliness is clear,

you can find it in the looks that gaze back at you, looks that are sad and a little lost, a little blasé.

**VDA:** *They are like the people who sit together in a café, each on a cell phone.*

**Z:** This is a little of what I wanted to show in my images. Directly, in-your-face. My canvases scream. For sure my works are difficult to categorize, and hard to adopt. It's a situation of "how am I going to hang this in my living room?" When you buy something of mine, you are buying a part of my person. You buy, you adopt a page from my intimate journal. It's all very visceral. They are like a scar, a reminder of an accident that happened.

**VDA:** *Why did you choose only black-and-white for this exhibition?*

**Z:** I accentuated black-and-white; first, because I like black-and-white a lot, and two, I like black-and-white films, like German expressionist movies for example. There is colour in certain places, especially in the paintings, but it is there to give the impression of a roll of film that has been damaged by time.

**VDA:** *How did your career begin?*

**Z:** To start with, I am self-taught, and have been interested in art early on. I was drawn to comic books. I bought them, even though I couldn't understand what was written in them – for the most part they were in English – and then it was Tintin books, *Fluide Glacial* comics, and so on. But this was nevertheless the first revelation, and it is also why I continue to draw. Whether it's a Zilon in spray paint, a Zilon entirely linear, a Zilon like my drawings in ink and charcoal, just a few lines with some shape for the image, or whether it's my paintings, quasi German neo-expressionism, or what I call "techno" style, one can recognize Zilon in all these works, there is always that signature.

**VDA:** *Where did that signature, Zilon, come from?*

**Z:** The Zilonese signature, the iconographic personage found on street walls and in the windows of this gallery, was created by accident. I actually had an accident and broke my right hand, which was put in

plaster for several months. I started to draw with my left hand, doing some lines, and it was like a flash, from that very first drawing it spoke to me, this is really me. Before that, as someone self-taught, I was exploring, trying pointillism, painting like Pollock, I did abstraction, fauvism. When my hand was healed, I came upon some spray paints in my uncle's garage and I started drawing the personage on large cartons, the backs of posters, and I liked the sensation. Those were punk days, the end of the '70s and the beginning of the '80s, and that genre suited me. I can still feel it, it's an energy that keeps me going, that keeps me alive in some way when it comes to attitude. The kind of attitude that made you buy an electric guitar for \$25, or maybe find a discarded one and fix it, and then pick up a microphone and scream out what it is that you had to say. Today, in this world of what I call franchises like the reality shows, *American Idol*, *Star Academie*, franchises no different from *MacDonald's*, we change the rhythm, the style like clothes. I find it a little sad, because there are young people who are growing up in it and they are becoming accustomed to this depersonalizing, they live without questioning, while I come from a generation, like many others, that asked questions, and this is what punk was about, where we posed questions, we sang loudly and clearly: "no future!"

Today, "no future" is printed on \$200 T-shirts by Jean Paul Gaultier.

**VDA:** *Do you still have some anonymity?*

**Z:** It's finished. The camera stole my soul and put my picture on the pages of newspapers and magazines. There was a time when I was anonymous, now I am "synonymous with..."

It's a little strange to be stopped on the street, although it doesn't happen often, or to be recognized on the bus by people whom you don't know, not sure if they are a friend or an enemy. And people seem to know me when I still don't even know myself; how can a complete stranger tell me "I know you."

**VDA:** *Do you miss it?*

**Z:** Yes. I find myself now, at 51, trying to give myself back to me. I like the portable

aspect of what I do; I can be on a plane and pick up a napkin, I can work on the spot, ask for a pencil or a lipstick from someone and do a drawing. That is still there. I always have pens on me.

**VDA:** *Are you ever tempted to pick up can of spray paint and draw on a wall?*

**Z:** Sometimes I get commissions to paint on the walls of clubs. I am asked to do it, because it's worth something. The one thing that I miss about my anonymity is that then I had that sort of mythical persona, whatever that is.

I am happy with what I do in the galleries; I am more conscious, a little less naïve, but I still keep a naïveté when it comes to my work. But I am aware that it becomes framed, framed also by the gallery space. I can understand that in a gallery I have limits, I can't go too far. But the street remains the best gallery for me. I still love what I do on the street level. I will, for example, do a drawing inside a toilet cubicle of a nightclub; I leave a face that is, as a friend tried describing to me, like an apparition, partly angelic, partly demonic perhaps, drawn against the background of sickly wall paint, among other graffiti and obscene messages. It becomes this kind of installation, there's a toilet bowl, it's dirty, it's sticky, there's someone having sex in the next cubicle, others doing drugs, with the dull thud of the music in the background. I could redo this in a museum, and I am certain some do, but I find that phony. Completely phony.

**VDA:** *What would you like to do next?*

**Z:** I would like to exile myself from Montreal. Leave to return, with a new vision.

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EXPOSITION

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