

## HK ZAMANI, *Protagonists and Erasures* – for Carl Berg – PRJCT LA

HK Zamani's work exists in a domain suspended somewhere between the purely formal and abstract and something which manages to be both physical (as in relating to the body or a kind of biomorphic shape or dimension) and spiritual. Shape is almost always a critical element—and consistently strong, pronounced; but so is the space or field, actual or artistically crafted and conceived, in which that shape is (super)imposed. To the degree that may strike the viewer (or reader) as ambiguous, I believe this ambiguity is intentional, even deliberated, notwithstanding the spontaneity with which it is rendered (and there is spontaneity—even exuberance—in Zamani's painting and constructions). Shapes and figures seem to float in spaces of parallel ambiguity, fields or subordinate shapes which themselves alternately float and sink against the surface of the panel, canvas or other support.

The shapes are in most instances simple and quasi-geometric, articulated gesturally in a kind of semaphoric manner, as if line, curve, repeated marks, or even the shape considered as a discrete entity conveyed the movement of thought, reflection, consideration or apprehension. The work, in other words, relates to the viewer as the sentient receiver of the impression it conveys. Shape is both very strong, yet generally somewhat amorphous here, drawn or extended out along simple geometric lines—in curves, parabolas, elliptical arches or the implied movement of these shapes in two- (mostly) or three-dimensional fields. (I grossly generalize here. There is endless variation in Zamani's work—indeed, theme-and-variation seems to be a significant aspect of his practiced and procedure—but one would almost have to take an inventory of his work to do justice to its range.)

It should not be surprising that Zamani has also worked performatively, even architecturally—as if extending his painting (and sometimes sculptural) practice into three-dimensional space using colored fabrics. His last exhibition at Gallery 515 (at the Bendix Building) played to some extent with (almost literally) the shadow domain between painting, the spaces beyond the work, and the (hypothetical viewer's) or quasi-reflective space between.

It should be a simple matter to talk or write about HK Zamani's work (especially after almost 20 years of viewing it), but it is not. For all its pronounced visual strength, it speaks to the beholder quietly, almost ineffably, holding the viewer in a kind of suspension parallel to the work itself.

Zamani presents two bodies of work in his show for PRJCT LA which—perhaps more literally than ever before—reference the body or figure and gesture, more specifically the human figure and gesture; but also the notion of a negative, even *nether* space. I refer specifically to the large-scale abstract figures on what appear to be unstretched canvas (or what appear to be drop cloths) that echo the large figure-shapes of his recent show of paintings at Gallery 515.

In both, what are ostensibly the 'standing' figures are in mottled black-and-gray, as if scraped to the surface of the support—a seemingly dimension-less surface that could be a wall or thin air, or even a kind of 'pavement'; and directly beneath, their 'shadows' (or simply voids—the figure 'emptied') in matte-black. In these large, installation-scale works, the 'negative' spaces or voids are as important as the 'standing' or 'lying' figures. Their 'figure' status is confirmed and redoubled by Zamani's title for them, *Inadvertent Protagonists*. The sense of extension (as well as projection and reflection) is real, but happenstance. We see the subtle distinctions in the way the blocky standing silhouettes seem turned away from each other (in their respective 'flat-hatted' and crenellated 'crown' toppers), or, alternatively, the similarly crenellated/flat-topped lying figures flare blade-like extensions towards each other's variously pegged and undulating silhouettes.

Zamani places us here in the domain of a song without words—the 'treachery of images' in their reversal, where the characterization of intention, of (active/passive) mood, of import or actual connection takes place in darkness, random and blind to impact or actual consequence, absent of narrative. ('Characterization' of such work is taken at one's peril, but I would conjecture that a political dimension is manifest in the work.)

Having risked putting forward one conjecture, I would go further and challenge Zamani's title for *Fashion Erasures*, which play on, or radically transform, fashion silhouettes as they have appeared in magazine fashion advertising—unlike any work of Zamani's I've ever seen, sheer poetry and pure delight. They are (as the artist has clearly recognized) really not so far removed from the Gallery 515 iteration of his *Inadvertent Protagonists*, while offering an opportunity for still more extensive play, improvisation, and variation on a more self-contained, intimate scale. Far from erasing the underlying 'fashion' (which even in its blotted-out dematerialization manages to assert its underlying template), Zamani has set it ablaze, magnified its gestural power (which becomes a fresh and independent gesture unto itself), and set it free from its brand, backdrop, or the page itself. 'Turn the page on this!?', the silhouette demands?

In his statement, the artist declares his intention to "cancel their conventional orthodoxies." But fashion is always both creating and destroying orthodoxies in its creative and commercial cyclical incarnations. Here instead, the resulting 'assisted' or 'negative' silhouettes defy and simply damn orthodoxy in every turn, fold, flare, gesture, swanning and spiking of their figures and costumes. (A few of the silhouettes look as if they're all but ready to riot.) An Oscar de la Renta mascot is transformed to a gypsy dancer mid-tarantella in a snowy New York street. A Bendel's shirtdress is transformed into a stegosaurus flak-jacketed figure scrambling up a grassy promontory. A 'big shirt' is made even bigger (and blacker) as if morphing into plumage fit for an Egyptian goddess whose raptor-like beaked head surveys her proprietary domain. A Valentino ensemble is blotted out to make way for a laughing lout with a decidedly unfeminine prominence. An Empire silhouette that once marched for Dior now strides purposefully leftward hoisting what looks like a large boulder—'Revolutionary is your Dior', as the advertising line once might pitched. In others, silhouettes assume the spiky cast of a *luchador* or similar combat-sport hero.

It is as if only in blotting out the figure entirely and transforming its gesture that we can render the human actuality, which is always capricious and cruel. Make poetry out of *that* —as Baudelaire and Rimbaud once dared us. HK Zamani is willing to try.

***Ezrha Jean Black***