

Robert Zehnder

Robert Zehnder: Ageless Machine
Brooklyn Rail, 2022
(author: Clare Gemima)
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THE BROOKLYN RAIL



Robert Zehnder, *Stone Ear Underground*, 2022. Oil on Canvas Over Panel, Artist's Frame, 48 1/2 x 38 1/2 inches. Courtesy the artist and Mrs.

An intellectual curiosity that does not turn off, but maybe churns instead, grinding... Robert Zehnder's new paintings and sculptures all possess a strong visual symbology and psychologic indexicality, evocative of his most recent trip to Europe. Returning with a critical and philosophical attachment to the idea of hidden functions of certain architectures, namely those ecclesiastical in nature, Zehnder's intrigue into how these ideas can influence one's own spatiality, both internally and exteriorly, has produced *Ageless Machine*, the artist's first solo-exhibition with Mrs.

ON VIEW

Mrs.

Robert Zehnder: Ageless Machine

September 6–November 5, 2022

Queens

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Three voluptuous and supreme arch-shaped paintings hang along the far wall of the space, unlike any of Zehnder's more conventionally shaped canvases. These gothic structures establish an immediate nod to immemorial triptychs, and the religious significance they held as artworks in the church. Zehnder's oil paintings map out a "psychological interior" and direct a new, somewhat perturbing method of way-finding. Made with cartographic gestures, the works incorporate tones reminiscent of manuscript's sepia palette. Loose illustrations reference subjects like Brâncuși's *The Kiss* (1907–08), roses, skulls, and urns—foregrounded inside of the arches inner tracing—presenting mood-tuning imagery, banal in its familiarity to most viewers. Yet, inconcert, flatly painted tree-forms have transcended, and regurgitated into dappled and distressed bronze sculptures. In a beautifully orchestrated moment, two colorful landscapes, *Blood and Steel* and *Stone Ear Underground* (both 2022), hang on either side of *Tear Tree* (2022), which sits atop a green plinth. This contrast in dimensionality spotlights Zehnder's dynamic approach to new mediums, and highlights *Ageless Machine's* recurring motifs, existing both inside and outside the canvas.



Robert Zehnder, *Tear Tree*, 2022. Bronze, 37 1/2 x 13 x 13 inches, Edition 1 of 3 with 2 AP. Courtesy the artist and Mrs.

Zehnder's rich and eclectic research is vast, and his solo-show maximizes on a number of art historical legends who similarly challenge (or challenged) pictorial and architectural spaces. Incredibly intricate works of art, like Giotto's famous *Stefaneschi Triptych* (c. 1330), shares a similar contour to Zehnder's arches, ubiquitous to many early renaissance and holy commissions. Interestingly, Giotto's work was made to be an altarpiece for Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome, and was painted on both sides, allowing the congregation and clergy an equal chance to experience its sanctity from any angle inside the church. Zehnder's belief that the cathedral was engineered to

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“manufacture a truth administered by the church” feels parallel to some of Ned Smyth’s theories that consider the significance of materials used to build holy spaces. Questioning notions of reverence for cathedrals, in the early 1970s Smyth sculpted *Renaissance Plan* (1973) and *Piazza Plan* (1974), two striking, circular arches. Although they were cast in concrete, the artist’s response to the buildings he was working in at the time led to his belief that *stone* instilled a definitive sensibility to holy sites, and embodies a commitment to (what he deemed to be), the “ultimate.” Smyth looks at the inner mechanics of the church and finds functionality and significance within its architectural matter, sharing attributes with Zehnder’s more artifactual

Pastel tones used in Zehnder’s paintings like *Mouthwash* (2022) are spritzed with Bosch’s *The Garden of Earthly Delights* colorway, and works like Bruegel’s *The Procession to Calvary* (1564), are akin to Zehnder’s compositions in their approach to the hierarchy of imagery (or lack thereof)—a technique Bruegel radicalized. In response to a series of Odilon Redon’s paintings the artist visited while at the Musée d’Orsay—*Trees on a Yellow Background* (1901), an oil painting now hanging as part of a triptych, led Zehnder to learn more about why it, and fourteen additional panels were originally created. Commissioned to decorate the entire dining room of the Château de Domecy-sur-le-Vault in Burgundy, Redon painted 15 rustic and floral paintings, varying in scale and orientation, in response to the architecture in which he was afforded. *Ageless Machine* operates in a similar fashion, from painting to sculpture, to arch. Zehnder’s borrowed Redon green accommodates his dramatic and atmospheric landscapes from floor to ceiling, ever so naturally.

Tooth for the Apple, *Arch II: Branched Heart*, and *Arch III: Vessels and Remains* (Zehnder’s arch paintings, all 2022) respond to the space of Mrs. by embracing the jutting wall that separates one-third of the series. Though this particular installation device interrupts direct references to renaissance altarpiece



Robert Zehnder, *Arch II: Branched Heart*, 2022. Oil on Canvas Over Panel, Artist's Frame, 84 x 48 1/4 inches.

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characteristics, the choice expands on Zehnder's research into responses to architecture. The jutting wall welcomes relief to the amount of works in the space, and holds two petite, multi-toned paintings on either side. *Knees at a Muted Ridge* (2022) shows a strong example of how Zehnder drags oil paint from his brush in shapely, repetitive strokes, graphically colorizing his spherical, cone-like, and wispy-shaped abstractions. Through its thickly opaque, acidic greens and inky blues, *Roots from the Well* (2022) hangs on the wall's opposite side, highlighting the uniqueness of the neighboring arch's 'wet into wet' paint application. A similarly scaled painting, *Ageless Machine*, was one of the first cartographic style works made by the artist in 2021 and represents the beginnings of the show its name has inspired. Dotted in between sculptures and eerily shaped maps, Zehnder's small paintings poetically embellish and transform the gallery into a luscious and pastoral garden-landscape.