

CONTEMPORARY ART SPECIAL REPORT

Artists, auction houses and curators are exploring new frontiers, from daring subject matter to emerging markets.



IMAGES FROM SAFET ZEC, GORCIN ZEC (TOP RIGHT)



Safet Zec, above, in his studio in Venice with two pieces of work on display at his exhibition at the Correr Museum: "The Painter's Table," left, and "Jacket with Red Tie." At left, "Pillows" from 2008, and below, "Bread" from 2001.



"Departure" (2009-2010), left, echoes some of Mr. Zec's earlier works, which were direct testimonies to conflict. It is displayed at the entrance to the exhibition in Venice. Far left, an image of a boat painted this year.



A Bosnian artist's elegiac images

VENICE

The painter Safet Zec, who survived wars and defied convention, is given retrospective

RODERICK CONWAY MORRIS

"I am a figurative artist, but I am also a contemporary one," said Safet Zec. "The way we look at the world has changed and I try to reflect this in my paintings. We are bombarded with images as never before. What I aim to do is to make us stop and look more closely, to appreciate the diversity, the beauty of even everyday things."

The 66-year-old Bosnian artist was speaking at his Venice studio, a high-roofed, barn-like space that was formerly a woodworking factory. The small red-brick building is a few paces from the Palladian facade of the San Francesco della Vigna church, in a tranquil, out-of-the-way corner of the city, little frequented by tourists.

In Piazza San Marco, Venice's busiest square a short distance away, the Correr Museum had just inaugurated "Safet Zec: The Power of Painting," a grand retrospective of more than 130 canvases, watercolors, drawings and engravings that runs until July 18 and covers the last 10 years of his work.

"This exhibition," he said, "represents the completion of a circle, the conclusion of a whole cycle in my life as an artist."

Safet Zec first visited Italy in 1966 with a group of fellow students from the Fine Art Academy in Belgrade. After their bus crossed the border from Yugoslavia, Mr. Zec went to take a look around and the group accidentally left without him.

"I had no passport, no money, nothing," he said. "I hitchhiked to Venice and went to Piazza San Marco, reckoning that the others would eventually turn up there. I was enchanted by the piazza and

sat there for a long time, taking in the scene, the music being played by the bands outside the cafes, the people, the architecture — and began to dream that I might one day come back a successful artist and have a show in Venice."

One of eight children born to a poor Muslim cobbler, the artist has twice been a refugee: shortly after his birth in 1943, when his family fled the war-ravaged Bosnian countryside to seek safety in Sarajevo, and again when he left that city during the devastating siege of the early 1990s. After six years in Udine, a quiet Italian provincial town near the frontier with Slovenia, the artist, his wife, Ivana, and their two children moved to Venice.

Finally able to return and pick up the threads of his old life in Bosnia, he now divides his time between Venice, Sarajevo and Pocatelj, a historic Ottoman town near Mostar.

For all of Mr. Zec's precocious talents as a draftsman, displayed even as a young child, his artistic career was not an easy one. When he made it to the Belgrade academy in 1964, he remained something of an outsider because he lacked sympathy for prevailing artistic trends. "So I took to landscape painting, as a kind of reaction," he said. "My landscapes were deliberately faux-naïf — they didn't use the skills I had struggled so hard since childhood to master. In fact, in origin these pictures were ironic, sending up the whole system. But they were greeted with approbation, and one of my professors bought one — the first picture I ever sold — which was absolutely without precedent. Quite a number of other artists even imitated my style."

Mr. Zec went on to produce some highly sophisticated landscapes, studies of trees and of buildings and facades that remain some of his finest and most characteristic achievements.

In the 1970s, the artist created a studio home in Pocatelj, but this old stone house was sacked and gutted during the war, with the loss of decades of engravings and copper plates. Now, after several years of work, the house has been rebuilt and he

can engrave and print there again.

He said the shock of the war, the loss of some of those dear to him during it and flight from his homeland changed the direction of his art. In Udine he gave up painting altogether, immersing himself in drawing again. As almost a form of therapy, he took to drawing his own workbench, with its pens, pencils, pots and brushes, leading him eventually to a renewal of his interest in still life generally.

"In a strange way the war did me a favor. It returned me to my artistic roots. I went back to figure drawing, doing details of hands, limbs, feet," Mr. Zec said.

In the second half of the 1990s, this gave rise to some unforgettable images of figures pressed together, imploring arms raised heavenward or hanging limply, lifeless corpses and victims slumped in the embraces of survivors, human beings shattered by grief, memorializing the terrible suffering of the war.

"This was an issue I had to confront, and this was the way I found of doing it," he said.

Such raw, direct testimonies to the conflict figure much less prominently in Mr. Zec's more recent output. But at the entrance of the exhibition, which runs until July 18, there is a poignant picture that echoes it, titled "Departure" (2009-2010), of a man and woman embracing in the shadows, their features hidden in the enveloping darkness. And a sense of absence, of muted melancholy runs like a subtle leitmotif throughout the show.

The opening sections reveal to an unprecedented degree Mr. Zec's working methods, with scores of ink and watercolor preparatory sketches, miniature virtuoso passages that provide the prelude to large canvases in tempera and oil. But before we reach these, we encounter half a dozen collage and tempera visions of the organized chaos and color of the artist's studio and worktable — overflowing with the mass of materials he employs to build up his multilayered and richly textured images.

Intensely atmospheric still lifes follow of loaves

of bread, battered baskets empty or filled with potatoes or apples, the remains of frugal meals left on simple tables, mirrors, worn pairs of shoes, a white-washed storeroom heaped with old-fashioned rush-bottomed cafe chairs.

There are also images of Venice, but of an unconventional variety. Weathered wooden doorways evoke past lives, empty houses and the footfalls of solitary passers-by in narrow deserted streets.

Rather than sleek black gondolas with their polished brass fittings, Mr. Zec's eye is caught by broken-down old fishing boats moored in obscure canals, draped with stained cloths and coils of frayed rope. Many of these works are painted not directly on to canvas but on to an intervening layer of collage of old newspapers, magazines and pages of dismembered books.

The newspaper, headlines and pictures from them can be glimpsed in places beneath the paint, visual subtexts to the overlying images.

The final sections are devoted to Mr. Zec's latest figure paintings, in many of which the subjects' faces are only partially shown, indistinct or hidden; and studies of draperies, pillows and unmade beds with crumpled linen, the thickly applied white oil impasto lending them a sculptural, almost monumental effect.

"Many of my pictures might look incomplete, unfinished," said Mr. Zec. "But we no longer live in a classical age when completeness in an image is possible. I focus on certain aspects of a subject to bring out its special qualities. So, if I paint a figure, I close in on what draws my attention most, the hands, the texture of a coat or shirt. The rest becomes peripheral. The chiaroscuro concentrates the eye on particular parts of the composition. The rest melts away into darkness, into something indistinct, undefined."

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Musicien assis, 1956. Metal, cutout, painted. 28 1/4 x 31 1/2 x 1 inches. © 2010 Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York