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Zuka

1924, Los Angeles, USA  
2016, Paris, France

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## Zuka 1924, Los Angeles, United States - 2016, Paris, France

Zuka (Zenaida Gourievna Booyakovitch) was born in 1924 in Los Angeles to Russian parents, refugees of the Revolution. After being exhibited in the space of Estella Katzenellenbogen and her studies at the First Faculty of Fine Arts in the United States, Zuka, an extremely talented representative of the new American post-war art scene, became close friend with Joan Mitchell, among others. She decided to go to France at the end of the 1940s, to 'gain culture' and study at the Académie de la Grande-Chaumière, in Paris.

Zuka continue working on oil painting and collage by turns, without claiming any art lineage but Braque, Picasso and Matisse. She is in the wake of their techniques and, perhaps, insuring their posterity. With daring colors, decorative exuberance, expressiveness of characters, she displays her originality and fantasy in the series of Amerindian collages, portraits of the French Revolution, of cows, birds, strawberries, etc. Her animals are humanized, but almost with an animistic approach. She draws with scissors with no prep work, like Matisse at the end of his life. Reminiscent of Fauvism, through her use of glaring colors and simplified shapes, her paintings are above all full of life, movement and joy.

She had her first solo show at Darthea Speyer's in Paris in 1970. For her series on American Indians, Zuka uses glued papers and pieces of ordinary, prints or plain tapestries. She is interested in the rites and practices of these tribes through decorative by their colours and exuberant by their whirling rhythms works. Thus, just like her, her work is shared between a far American past and a bucolic French life, between history of Revolution and an American history as well as a revolution of techniques.

Her series on the French Revolution, presented in 1988 at the Mona Bismarck Foundation, bring a new light and a new festive and merry representation to this Epinal style images too often pompous and solemn. Zuka thinks that : *"Anyone who lived May 68 in Paris understands the excitement, joys and extreme angers of the Revolution and knows that the Revolution must have been, among other things, without any doubt, quite fun?"*

Zuka dedicates her whole last work to one theme : the cow. They are of our time, colour-cows, pictorial form-cows. The colour and the form are both used with the greatest originality. Composition and rhythm bring to life with gaiety this theme studied since the time of Cretan frescos and of friezes of the Parthenon. Exhibited in the United States, mainly in New York and Los Angeles, she is now exclusively shown by Françoise Livinec galleries.

## Selected solo exhibitions

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| 2017      | <i>Lafayette, la traversée d'une vie - Exposition Zuka</i> , Hèbre Museum, Rochefort, France |
| 2016      | <i>Amazones de la Révolution</i> , Françoise Livinec Gallery, Paris                          |
| 2015      | <i>Restrospective Zuka</i> , Françoise Livinec Gallery, Paris                                |
| 2015      | <i>Colorful Cows</i> , Françoise Livinec Gallery, Paris                                      |
| 2008      | <i>Les Oiseaux de Zuka</i> , Charlieu Museum   |
| 2007      | <i>Rétrospective</i> , Les anciens Abattoirs, Avallon  |
| 1989      | University Gallery, Birmingham   |
| 1989      | Baruch College Gallery, New York   |
| 1989      | <i>La Femme et la Révolution</i> , Lambert Bank, Brussels                                    |
| 1989      | Foundation Mona Bismarck, Paris  |
| 1989      | National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington D.C.  |
| 1976      | Santa Barbara Museum, Santa Barbara  |
| 1970-2007 | Gallery Darthea Speyer, Paris  |
| 1966-1964 | Gallery Lambert, Paris   |
| 1966-1964 | University of Southern California, Los Angeles   |

## Selected group exhibitions

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| 2017 | <i>Ailleurs est ici</i> , École des Filles, Huelgoat   |
| 2017 | Art Paris Art Fair, Paris  |
| 2016 | <i>Amazones de la Révolution</i> , Lambinet Museum, Versailles   |
| 2016 | <i>L'attrape-Feu, l'art réenchante le monde</i> , École des filles, Huelgoat                               |
| 2016 | Art Paris Art Fair, Françoise Livinec Gallery, Paris   |
| 2015 | <i>Briser le toit de la maison - Le sacré dans l'art</i> , École des filles, Huelgoat                      |
| 2014 | Art Paris Art Fair, Françoise Livinec Gallery, Paris   |
| 2014 | <i>Ramène ta fraise</i> , Françoise Livinec Gallery, Paris   |
| 2013 | <i>Colorful Cows</i> , Françoise Livinec Gallery, Paris  |
| 2012 | <i>Quel temps fait-il ? - Un climat de tableaux modernes et contemporains</i> , École des filles, Huelgoat |
| 2012 | <i>Pierre qui roule...-Les figures du paysages</i> , École des filles, Huelgoat                            |
| 2010 | <i>100 ans de couleurs</i> , École des filles, Huelgoat  |
| 2008 | 40th anniversary of the Darthea Speyer Gallery, Paris  |
| 2006 | <i>Hommage à Kimber Smith</i> , Jean Fournier Gallery, Paris   |
| 2004 | <i>Liberté et Révolution</i> , Trouville   |
| 2004 | Performing Art Center Thousand Oaks, California  |
| 1999 | <i>Animal</i> , Tremblay Art Centre, Yonne   |
| 1997 | <i>Artistes américains à Paris</i> , Mona Bismarck Foundation, Paris                                       |
| 1997 | <i>Animal</i> , Media library François-Mitterand, Oise   |
| 1994 | <i>Les créateurs font un carton</i> , La Poste Museum, Paris   |
| 1984 | <i>La part des femmes dans l'art contemporain</i> , Municipal Gallery, Vitry-sur-Seine                     |
| 1981 | <i>West 81</i> , Minnesota Museum of Art, Saint Paul   |
| 1975 | <i>L'Année de la femme</i> , Contemporary Art Museum, Paris  |
| 1967 | <i>U.S.A Groupe 67</i> , Museum of Augustins, Toulouse   |
| 1966 | <i>Ten americans in Paris</i> , American Cultural center, Berlin   |
| 1951 | American Cultural Center   |

**Public collections**

Bernard Baruch Library, New York  
France Telecom Inc., New York  
Israel Museum, Jerusalem  
Quaker Society, New York  
Lambert Bank, Brussels  
Louisiana State University Museum of Art, Baton Rouge  
Ministry of telecommunications, Paris  
Museum of Modern Art, Paris  
National Foundation for Contemporary Art, Paris  
Notre-Dame University Art Gallery, Indiana  
Rockland Public Library, Rockland, Illinois  
The Art Collection of the First National Bank of Chicago  
Twentieth Century Fund, New York

**Public and private commissions**

2008 Wine label *Domaine Vaissière* (Sauvignon)  
2006 Mural painting at the FIAF (French Institute Alliance Française) of New York  
2004 Acquisition of 7 paintings for the conference room «Chumash», City Hall, Thousand Oaks, California  
1989 Cutout fresco, *The Tree of Liberty*, French Institute of New York

**Bibliography**

2011 *L'Abre qui cache la forêt*, Françoise Livinec Editions, France  
2010 *Zuka, 100 ans de couleurs*, Françoise Livinec Editions, France  
2007 *Zuka Saint-Brancher, California*, Les Abattoirs, Avallon, France  
2007 *Zuka 6 avril - 2 juin 2007*, Darthea Speyer Gallery, France  
2005 *Zuka 14 avril - 28 mai 2005*, Darthea Speyer Gallery, France  
2001 *Zuka 4 avril - 12 mai 2001*, Darthea Speyer Gallery, France  
1992 *Zuka*, Darthea Speyer Gallery, France  
1989 *Zuka - The French Revolution through American eyes*, Mona Bismarck Fondation, France; National museum of Women in Arts, Washington, DC; Thomas Center Gallery, Gainesville, Florida; Baruch College Gallery, New York City; French Institute/Alliance Française, New York City, University of San Diego, California; Schaider Art Gallery, Denver, Colorado  
1988 *Zuka - La Révolution française - Un regard américain*, Mona Bismarck Fondation, France  
1982 *Zuka 13 octobre - 20 novembre 1982*, Darthea Speyer Gallery, France  
1979 *Zuka 6 février - 10 mars 1979*, Darthea Speyer Gallery, France



Linda Nochlin, Historian of Art, Yale University

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## The Work of Zuka

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### From the French Revolution to the Pastures of the Morvan: the Work of Zuka

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In 1988, on the occasion of a travelling exhibition of Zuka's highly original interpretations of incidents and personages of the French Revolution, I wrote: "At last! A woman artist who dares to take possession of history and to position women as active participants within the historical process itself. "I then went on to note that the representation of political events in the visual arts was usually pompous and solemn, conservative in the worst sense of the word. Above all, the conventional representation of great historical events was *serious*: there was no room for high spirits or low comedy in the creaky rhetorical machinery of conventional historical painting. There were never any pratfalls on the high road to destiny according to the average *machine de salon*. Zuka's images, on the contrary, focus on the gaiety and festive energy that were an essential part of the French Revolution. "Anyone who lived through the events of 1968 in Paris understands the excitement, the extremes of joy and anger of the Revolution", the artist declares, "and knows that the Revolution must have been, among other things, well—fun."

The present exhibition does not include any of the large-scale, multfigured cut-outs or collages that appeared in the 1988 exhibition, works like *The Tennis Court Oath*, with its irregular, dynamically expansive shape and varied cast of characters, or *The Fall of the Bastille*, in which the release of popular energies generated by the event is suggested by the surge of wildly gesticulating *sans culottes* creating a wave of motion so inexorable that it distorts the rectangular format into an irregular diamond shape. Nevertheless,

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both the *Portrait of Beaumarchais*, in which the witty, aquiline profile of the author is encased in a marvelously activated enframement, suggesting both his quicksilver intelligence and proto-revolutionary daring of his work, and the more austere *Double Portrait of Robespierre and Danton* evoke that highly original combination of the joyous irreverence of the pop-up book combined with the seriousness of accurate historical commemoration that marks all Zuka's work in this series.

The omnipresence of women was one of the most striking aspects of the French Revolution, often noted at the time but often forgotten or suppressed in subsequent accounts. Zuka emphasized the importance of women in revolutionary activism, bringing to light and visually articulating a lost reality, whether in groups, as in the revolutionary festivals, or individually, in a series of portraits of some of the major female activists of the day. She represented the social theorist and revolutionary orator, Olympe de Gouges, author of the "Declaration of the Rights of Women" three times: here, in the portrait of a lively and intelligent woman crowned with laurel, open mouthed and holding a text, as though caught in the midst of addressing a crowd. Once more, the vividly articulated frame enhances the meaning of the image itself, suggesting both the movement of the crowd and a specific audience of women spectators ranged in the foreground. As in all Zuka's revolutionary portraits, *papier collé* deployed in a variety of ways, enhances the formal and expressive liveliness of the imagery, calling attention to the importance of the surface at the same time that it plays a role in the narrative: Beaumarchais' dancing maidens, the cut-out lace jabots of Danton and Robespierre, the multipatterned shawls of the female audience in the foreground of the Olympe de Gouges frame all have a role to play in the evocation of historical specificity and contemporary inventiveness.

This was not the first time that Zuka had animated her work with cut paper. In 1982, she created a series of large-scale *papiers collés* using scraps of commercial wall-paper, both printed and plain. Here too, she turned to an historical subject—or more accurately, an historical-mythological one: the rites and practices of the Indian tribes who had once



inhabited her native California. Brilliantly decorative in their color, exuberant in their swirling rhythms, these dynamic images recapitulate, in visual language, the pounding rhythms and electrifying energies of native ritual dances.

In *Sorcerer's Dance*, one of the wildly gyrating dancers leaps out of the boundaries of the picture itself, while others turn, their braids flying, within the limits of the pictorial space. To the right, multi-colored strips and streamers of cut out paper—red, yellow, blue—explode like fireworks animating the picture-space with an abstract energy that suggests the unknown powers the sorcerer is conjuring into life. In still another work from the series, *The Weaver*, the Native American woman, seen from the rear, is seated firmly before her loom, at work with multicolored fibers. Her vertical position sets off both the large and small spiraling forms on the loom before her and the complex, decorative patterning of the wallpaper background. Her hand movement, though calm, also suggests a kind of ritual practice in the back-and-forth shuttling of the weaving woman, creating and re-creating the time-honored patterns of her tribe.

Yet there is nothing traditional or clichéd about the work itself: on the contrary, it is modern in the fullest sense of the word. If these powerful *papiers collés* are reminiscent of anything, it is the work of Miro at his most adventurous, or some of the more energetic surfaces of Matisse. To cite the words of the late George Sugarman, who wrote about these works when they were shown in 1982: "These pictures are rare examples of the aim of all visual art; to so unite material and technique to each other and to subject matter that all three are distinct and yet cannot be separated, so that the unison creates a meaning which transcends all three."

At the beginning of the 90s, Zuka embarked on her famous cow series, based this time, not on history but on personal encounter with her bovine subjects in her beloved countryside around St. Brancher in the Morvan. Although the cow has had a long history of representation in art, ranging from Paulus Potter in seventeenth-century Holland, to Gustave Courbet in nineteenth-century France and Franz Marc in twentieth-century Germany, Zuka's cows are all her own, cows for our time. To reiterate what I wrote about them in 1992: Zuka's cattle manage to retain a specifically *bovine* poignancy—peaked

backbones, swelling bellies, outspread ears and velvety muzzles—at the same time that they vibrate as brilliantly pigmented forms across the flat surface of the canvas. In the marvelous *Coucher de soleil*, the foreground cattle at the head of the herd seem about to push their heads through the surface of the canvas in their anxiety to return homeward at the setting of the sun, figured as a huge orange presence in the background of the image. The scuttling, colorful clouds, illuminating the background, seem to echo, in looser form, the firmer conformation of the marching cows—violet, brown, blue-eared—in the foreground. At the horizon, a few lingering animals wait patiently to join the throng and mark off the space in the distance.

*Dans le champ* of 1991 presents us with a more intimate scene, featuring two resting cows in the foreground—large, peaceful animals, one white, one red, with rosy horns and violet ears—against a background of decoratively activated corn-stalks. The placidity of the cows is emphasized by the angular agitation of the stalks and tassels, as well as the active pattern of the fields behind. Imagination and careful observation, abstract inventiveness and patient attention all play their roles in the construction of these scenes of rural life, specific to a particular time—our time—and a particular place—the French countryside of the Morvan—that Zuka has conjured up for our delectation.

Linda Nochlin  
Art History teacher  
Yale University

Amy Goldin

ART IN AMERICA, JAN-FEB 1974

## Zuka at Betty Parsons (American History)

Zuka's paintings are decorative portrayals of the present-day heroes of American liberals – those nineteenth-century figures whose lives and work are interpreted in terms of blackness, femininity and ecological awareness. Since these are not portraits, but icons, the figures are presented as ritual simplifications, spiritualized dolls who stare at us hypnotically. Often they clutch their printed legendary names, which sometimes hover around their heads, like those of Byzantine saints. Yet we are not permitted to worship – the stiffness, banality and ornamental energy of flat gaudy color and collaged patterned paper forbids it. The double bind of moral seriousness thus claimed and simultaneously denied resolves into irony.

The irony is there, all right, and of a peculiarly up-beat kind, but for me it doesn't explain the fascination of this show. What makes an art exhibit interesting? Artistic quality? But that isn't necessarily involving; work can seem pointless no matter how well it's done. The stimulation of personal feelings? But why should I care about your personal feelings, or you about mine? No. Art is objectively interesting. I think, when it binds public and private matters into undigestable lumps that threaten our pigeonholes. Zuka's show is interesting because of its relationship to a recently shattered pigeonhole: women's art. Almost everything about her work – its stress on ornament, its concern with personality, the deliberate naiveté of color and line – fits perfectly into that bit of condemned housing.

Two years ago its blatant femininity would have marked it as trivial and obliterated it as art. Now the same feminine identification will signal "women's lib" and dues will be paid to its political position. It is still not likely to be seen as art. Decoration – more particularly, pattern – is rarely conceived or understood as an artistic resource.

The point of Zuka's patterns is not that they're there but what she does with them. Until we learn to pay attention to that, women's lib is artistically irrelevant. After all, if the usual artistic clichés continue unchanged, it hardly makes any difference whether the perpetrators are male or female. Equal pay for equal work is not an artistic goal, in relation to art it doesn't mean revolution – at best a changing of the guard at the same old palace.

I'm not suggesting that women are genetically, socially or morally obligated to make art that can be called "decorative." But for some peculiar set of reasons, decoration is presently associated with women, and correspondingly excluded from artistic seriousness. The role of decorative elements in "serious" art, therefore, can be exploited by women to their double advantage: it can work for them politically, and it can expand the range and power of their work.

Zuka's show is drawn from her work of the last year and a half, and it covers the period in which she first began working with collaged areas of industrially produced pattern. It is instructive to see how the integration of pattern in her paintings has affected her color and drawing, and ultimately even the ideas she works with. She has always been a highly decorative painter, as can be seen in Cheyenne Braves, one of the best as well as one of the earliest paintings in the show. Here the pattern-bearing elements are used architectonically and are absorbed into the subject matter. Flat, regularly repeated small-scale shapes of feather and costume are clearly decorative. They serve as color accents and create rows of rapid horizontal flicker against the slower repeats of the three standing figures, establishing a basic grid format for the painting as a whole.

To compare the James Brothers with John Muir and John Burroughs on opposite sides of the doorway, however, is to see the formal development accompanying the inclusion of collaged pattern. The painting of the two naturalists is conceptually more ambitious, aiming as it does at the integration of figures and landscape. Yet the James Brothers looks less illustrative and less frivolous. Here, in order to meet the requirements of collaged areas of commercial wallpaper, the artist has been forced to tighten her control of line. Edges don't bump around so much. They function more precisely as contours and less as arabesques. The range of small – and large – figured pattern has also entailed an increased sensitivity to scale. Since painted details are no longer the sole elements of rhythm and decoration, Zuka can forego their cosmetic effect and begin to integrate them.

In the earlier work, surfaces are uniformly flat and dense, except for the treatment of faces and hands. There a broken, painterly surface suggested the vulnerability of flesh in contrast to the inorganic solidity of the objective world. Now that areas of collaged pattern add new variations of density, the surface begins to open up and breathe. The color becomes more exact, less raucous, for it must be adjusted to an alien palette and a more flexible space.

With the series of small heads and Young Lincoln and His Wife, a near transformation has occurred. The pervasive textural variety and the wider psychological range make these true portraits instead of cut-out faces. The patterned papers have come to express emotional overtones as well as formal values. With Susan B. Anthony, Virginia Woolfe and John Muir II, spiritual intensity no longer depends on staring eyes. Diffused, it is carried by the thrust of a head, the tension of juxtaposed patterns and the new sobriety of color. The paintings are no less decorative than before: ornament itself has broadened the way.

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George Sugarman

NEW YORK CITY, AUGUST 1, 1982

## Zuka at Darthea Speyer (amerindians collages)

The figure seems huge. Its arms raised and spread apart, its legs open and slightly bent in movement, it is the center of frantic activity. From its shoulders a fragmented cape swirls to both sides, centered by a strikingly red headdress. Between its legs and on all sides, tiny figures, their arms raised also, repeat the disjointed movement of the cape as they dance and move. The sense of activity is heightened by spirals that swirl on and around the center figure between whose arms other irregular spirals hang suspended.

The eye adjusts and notices how this central figure, the center of activity, is also the center of stability. Although it is scissor-drawn so well and its movement so strong that it seems to be modeled, it is actually a flat, brown profile which firmly anchors the moving loincloth around its waist, the jewelry and spirals covering its body. The outline of the arm and leg on the right makes a triangle which holds the right side of the cape, also essentially triangular, as it flies from the edge of the canvas toward the headdress. Geometric, if irregular configuration between the parts of the body and the edge of the canvas stabilize the activity in those areas. Yet nothing is locked in, no movement is frustrated. Everything leads up to the head and its headdress and thence to the outstretched arms, and back to the swirling cape. One notices details and realizes that all this is done with patterned paper, commercial designs, that seem remarkably to fit just right. And then one sees they are not all "just right". What about the background? A light paper patterned with small pink and green forms – was it chosen only because its rigid regularity contrasts with the activity of the foreground? Yes – but one feels there is more to it. One looks to the title and finds out what that "more" is. "The Rainmaker" gives us the myth and the myth gives us the words to enlarge the visual experience. And we understand the mastery in the choice of pattern for the ground; the dry, dull expanse is the rainless sky. But wait. How sly it is. The tiny regular dots have also a feeling of a patterned rain. And again a twist: where the sky meets the earth (in an angular line) the same pattern is used, but in tan and brown colors. This is now the parched earth, the sparse vegetation.

Yet here is larger paradox. This is a serious subject, treated seriously. We have all experienced drought : it is a contemporary problem too. We can feel the anxiety in the picture. There is nothing ambiguous about it, And yet it is an attractive, an appealing picture, with lovely color, strong and beautifully controlled rhythms and delightful details. Can an image so pleasurable to look at and so sturdily composed also express tension and anxiety?

Zuka shows that it can, and, in the other pictures, that other pleasurable images can express other serious emotions and incidents. And it is in this that Zuka shows her real mastery. She has doubled the double entendre. She takes the material of an ordinary, every-day, commercial product, made for decorative purposes, and turns it into what? A decorative picture? If you will. But what decoration, where every inch reveals a pun on the original material and the myth, where the myth is enlarged by wit and inventiveness to contemporary significance, where the collage technique of outside-inside meaning is expanded to take in subjects of serious emotional content. For this is the real significance of these pictures. Aside from the extraordinary visual delight there is this journey of the mind as we realize that we have started from decorative paper, then gone to visual puns and returned at last to decoration so transformed that it illuminates and enlarges at every turn a serious subject matter.

These pictures are rare examples of the aim of all visual art; to so unite material and technique to each other and to subject matter that all three are distinct and yet cannot be separated, so that the unison creates a meaning which transcends all three.



Michael Gibson,  
ARTNEWS, DECEMBER, 1982

## Zuka at Darthea Speyer

Zuka is a California-born artist who has been living in France for the past 30 years. Her latest show at Darthea Speyer's gallery presented recent works done in an original medium that is admirably suited to her inventive powers. Zuka's medium is wallpaper, which she cuts out to make mostly large, animated, and extremely colorful pictures devoted to representations of the daily or ceremonial life of California Indians. She has become an authentic virtuoso at working with scissors and the infinite variety of sometimes implausible patterns found in wallpaper. The delightful aspect of her work is that she gives life to the inanimate and fantasy to the repetitive and the dull. The spirit of the work is original and playful, and the brashness of the invention of forms and juxtapositions can almost go unnoticed because of the rightness of the solutions—just as a successful piece of acrobatics will always seem easy to the unknowing spectator.

Ruth Weisberg,  
ARTWEEK, 1981

## Zuka at the Jacqueline Anhalt Gallery

Indians in the 18th century California is the title of Zuka's exhibition of collages at the Jacqueline Anhalt Gallery. The peculiar marriage of history painting and decorative collage techniques utilizing wallpaper and marbelized paper is partially explained by Zuka's status as a Franco-Californian. She grew up in a colony of Russian emigres in Hollywood, but has spent the last thirty odd -years in Paris. The tension between French decorative art and the subjugation of the Indian could tear this work apart, but Zuka's approach is both lyric and ironic rather than either elegiac or angry. It is clear that she empathizes and identifies with the Indians. Her recurring childhood fantasy, on long rambles in the Hollywood Hills, was to be an Indian. It is just as Albert Camus said "....that a man's work is nothing but the long journey through life to recover, through the detours of art, the two or three great and simple images that first gained access to his heart. These works focus on the impact of the Indian on California fauna. There is a squirrel's eye-view of the Indian in "The Hunters". In the "Coyotes" the overall shapes of the animals, created from patterned and textured collage, are particularly well drawn. The scissors can be an eloquent drawing tool. There is a keen sense of the coyote's movement and character, seen among the skeletal plant forms of the high desert. A concern for structure in both plants and animals greatly increases the profundity of a decorative art form.

Los Angeles Times, Marlena Donohue, *A Vision of the French Revolution*,  
2 august 1989

## Los Angeles Times

### A Vision of the French Revolution

By MARLENA DONOHUE

AUG. 2, 1989 | 12 AM

Those who couldn't stay awake in history class may be charmed into erudition by "The French Revolution Through American Eyes," at the Otis/ Parsons gallery through Aug. 19. The traveling show, sponsored by the French-American Foundation, crams the high ceilings and three rooms of the gallery with colorful interpretations of the philosophical founders and key characters of the French civil war.

No standard Yankee take on the Revolution, this show is the work of an American artist of Russian parentage who lives in Paris. She calls herself Zuka, short for Zunaida Booyakovitch Mitelberg. Her parents immigrated to the United States in the '20s.

"My father came from an old Russian military family. He was a dashing, handsome soldier who fought on the side of the monarchy during the Russian revolt. As a child I heard great heroic tales about war and internal strife. I was probably sensitized early on to a historical outlook, but I never really felt like I was very interested in the past," she said.

Zuka studied art at USC in the late '40s, then went to Europe when a dealer and mentor told her she lacked culture. In Paris she married a "very foreign" young Frenchman with "long, wild hair and an ascot." She and her husband, political cartoonist Louis Mitelberg, have lived in Paris ever since.

"When I arrived in Europe I did the standard cafe scenes," she said. "Then one day my husband brought home these great-names-in-history portraits for our kids to play with. Something clicked. I thought: 'What a wonderful, ripe subject.' I started looking at all the historical imagery I could get my hands on for ideas. I used a lot of children's history primers because they had more pictures than words. My first series done in the '70s was on the American Revolution."

Like those earlier works, many pieces currently on view are done in a patchwork combination of deftly cut and collaged wall paper and paint. The effect is of grand, mural-like figures embedded in a patterned quilt. Zuka acknowledges the work's obvious nod to feminist art. "I have always visited the U.S. regularly and on a trip in the '70s I met Miriam Schapiro. That got me cutting--wall paper, book binding paper, everything. Though I'm moving toward straight brush painting, I have used collage and pattern to describe my subjects for nearly 15 years," she said.

Zuka began her French Revolution suite five or six years ago by looking at French literature for period portraits and other appropriate images, then reconstructing people and events. "The more art I made, the more interested I became. I began reading voraciously and by the time the works were completed, I'd read and incorporated into the pieces dozens of volumes on the French Revolution," she said.

Works on view depict notables and critical events in a light-hearted style that resembles children's book illustrations. Though lively as fanciful inventions, the imagery is carefully researched and as historically accurate as existing documents allow. We find the infamous Marie Antoinette and Robespierre, the passionate orator Mirabeau, the revolutionary philosopher Voltaire and a wonderful dual portrait of the King and Queen in their thwarted attempt to dress like peasants and flee France.

How do the French take to her work? "Many French don't like to talk about the Revolution in graphic detail because of the violence and mayhem. When this show opened in Paris, an 18-foot banner announcing it was torn down and stolen. But once viewers actually confronted the work, responses were quite favorable," she said.

"The French are very intellectual people, they know a great deal about history and when they don't know, they fake it. As I read and read and became more and more informed, I realized there was a great ignorance about the facts of the Revolution even among the French. For instance, few people ever mention the key role that women played in the movement. If you look at my art, women predominate because history bears out that they fueled the fires of liberty and then paid dearly for it.

"Though I deal in truth, many French people say there's the stamp of Hollywood in the work, in the dioramas set up like stage backdrops across walls, in the colorful palette and great sense of spectacle I like to create," she said.

"I thought about that observation and instead of being offended, I have to agree. My parents moved from New York to Hollywood to work in the movies. Many Russians worked as movie extras and when they weren't working they gathered at the Russian Club where they put on performances, had poetry readings and gave lectures. I was always asleep on a chair in the audience or listening to it all percolate. Maybe that's another source for my love of high drama. I'm not ashamed of it, I want to capture the frenzied, epoch-making spirit of the times."



Hank Burchard

THE WASHINGTON POST, JULY 22, 1988

## Liberated Art, *Non Fraternité*

REVOLUTION has swept the walls of the National Museum of Women in the Arts. The French Revolution of 1789 that is, as depicted in 85 recent paintings and constructions by Zuka. The artist, an American, long resident in Paris, has used disciplined wit and irresistible energy to evoke the tumultuous beginnings of Gallic democracy. The exhibit is sponsored by the FrenchAmerican Foundation in celebration of the bicentennial of the birth of *liberté, fraternité* and *égalité*. It is billed as a feminist reinterpretation of the Revolution, which does disservice to Zuka because this is not women's art, it is art by a woman. "Most history has been seen through men's eyes," she says, "so my perspective may seem unusual."

Not so. Her perspective is so self-evidently reasonable and penetrating that it makes other viewpoints seem skewed. Having seen Zuka's "Charlotte Corday Assassinates Marat," one may never again look at Jacques-Louis David's famous "Death of Marat" without feeling that something's missing.

What is not missing from Zuka's version is a sense of the real tragedy of the assassination. David's painting is superb hagiography, Zuka's is powerful historiography. It captures the moment when the fire-eating editor has breathed his last and Corday, a poor but comely and well brought-up young provincial, has just begun to realize what she has done.

The painting also works as allegory. Corday was no less idealistic and patriotic than the revolutionary Marat, and she symbolizes the ancien régime, striking out fearfully at this monstrous new thing, freedom, whose spores have come from the New World, clinging to the uniforms of the French soldiers and sailors who fought alongside the American revolutionaries.

David's Marat is a pallid, noble martyr; Zuka has given us an ugly, scrawny, scrofulous corpse consistent with history (Marat was soaking in his tub to relieve an agonizing and disfiguring skin disease). Never shy in her choice of colors, Zuka has made Marat gray-green with blue undertones.

Color is central to her style, but seldom such vivid strokes and shades as she has used here. "When you deal with the French Revolution you can drown in red, white and blue," she said. "Rosettes, sashes and cockades were everywhere. It was necessary for my other colors to be strong, to keep them from being submerged."

Rather than submerged they are buoyant, and the paintings are so well mounted that the collective effect is of sharing the streets with these people who are learning to be brave and free. The works are all of a piece, so that in the most lighthearted scenes there are mad faces that foreshadow the horrors to come, and in the midst of the Reign of Terror there are flashes of drollery and delight. Dozens of portraits make real and readable the faces of Robespierre and Danton, Madame Roland and Olympe de Gouges, King Louis XVI and the Marquis de La Fayette. For those of us who have grown a little vague about French history, there are excellent historical sketches.

Here and there, hardly in undue proportion, there are women. Women pamphleteers, women speakers, women in the streets, women of the streets. And here is one of the most astonishing of all the vivid scenes of the Revolution: 3 000 women of starving Paris, marching on Versailles to demand bread. Whether Marie Antoinette actually said "Let them eat cake" is doubtful; what is indisputable is that these fiercely determined women forced the king and queen to come back to Paris and attend to business. Thus the principle was established for all the world to see that the will of the people was paramount.

There is a story in most of the paintings – "The point is always to express something," Zuka says – and a story behind many of them. Her powerful and subtle rendering of Marie Antoinette approaching the guillotine in a farm cart grew out of a sketch by David. "It painted itself," she said. "Most paintings develop, but I knew before I started this one just how it would be." The blade of the guillotine forms the apex, from which a Jacob's ladder of blue-clad soldiers snakes down the canvas to the white-clad queen, sitting in a farm cart with her hands bound behind her. Featureless, she seems a ghost already, yet every inch a queen.

If the NMWA can consistently mount such exhibitions as this, there will be an end to the carping over whether a museum dedicated to the promotion of art by women can ever be first-rate.

Paula Harper

ART IN AMERICA, October 2001

## Zuka at Darthea Speyer (cows)

Most of the news about cows these days is bad, but Zuka's visions of them provide a happy alternative. Zuka has been painting cows for about 10 years; firsthand observations of the white Charolais cattle around her summer home in Burgundy have been steadily transformed by her gift for fantasy, caricature and the folkloric. In her recent works the brushwork is broader and more expressionist, and the cows more intensely colorful—orange with green horns, for example, or magenta with yellow. They dwell in larger landscapes, likely to be red meadows patterned in tiers of blue, turquoise, violet and lime green. In purely formal terms, these paintings are sophisticated arrangements of color and shape in the tradition of the Fauves, particularly Vlaminck with his wild facture. They also owe a debt to the artist's Russian forebears, bold Goncharova and dreamy Chagall.

Zuka's subject recalls medieval calendar pictures, which typically include farm animals in the familiar round of seasonal activities. The subtext promises that everything takes its proper place in nature's grand cycle, and all is right with the world. Incredibly, this stable, rural world still exists two hours south of Paris in the village of St. Brancher, where small farms lie on the hillsides, and cows drowse and forage. Zuka refashions the timeless subject into a contemporary painter's dream of color and movement suffused with a satirist's wit. Some of her compositions wryly refer to the religious significance underlying medieval domestic landscapes: in *Sunset at St. Brancher*, golden clouds of glory over the herd suggest a Transfiguration or Assumption; in *Angelus*, the cows seem mildly attentive to a bell in the church tower; in the crêchelike *Dinner Hour*, multicolored cows crowd around an iconic hay bale in a shed. These images suggest the pretensions of humans, of course, who have granted cows a role in our drama. Cows are hardly pious, and they have their own rituals.

Nevertheless, in *The Hale-Bopp Comet*, Zuka finds a connection between heaven and earth, between cosmic phenomena and lowly cow life that seems perfectly just. The sky is an energetically brushed jubilation of blobby stars, comet showers and Hale-Bopp itself. Below, the earthy, companionable animals lie, some sleeping, others alert. Neither alarmed nor amazed, they peaceably coexist with other forms of nature, like cows in Paradise.

Paula Harper  
ART IN AMERICA, February 1994

## Zuka at La Maison Française, NYU (cows)

It's tempting to call Zuka an "outsider artist." Her paintings are quirky, original, maverick. But she is not self-taught or nonprofessional. On the contrary, she is formally sophisticated and has exhibited widely in the United States (where she was born of Russian parents) and in Europe, especially Paris, her home of many years. She has excelled at the most ambitious genre of art, history painting, and in 1989 toured an exhibition of her ebullient revisions of the events and personalities of the French Revolution. But she is certainly outside contemporary mainstream trends. Her work connects to the oldest, deepest current in the history of painting—the tradition of placing highly developed pictorial skills entirely at the service of a subject matter—an egoless immersion in the "it." The homely subject of her present series—cows—makes her virtuosity as a pure painter particularly visible.

The Charolais cattle that graze in the fields of Burgundy are white, so the vivid colors Zuka gives them begin with her perceptions of how their bodies reflect the changing light, perceptions then magnified and condensed by her painter's imagination. The light slanting across her meadows is made of thick and creamy paint, in intense and saturated colors. The cattle that materialize from the succulent pigment are the result of keen observation and incisive drawing. Zuka sees them with the intelligence of humor, as members of a herd and as individual creatures who react to her observing them. They look mildly annoyed or puzzled or curious, they surge forward to sense the intruder. Their tails switch, their heads lower. Then, satisfied or bored or both, the cows go about their own business, placid and self-contained.

Simultaneously, they form lively patterns on flattened surfaces—brushy, energetic patches of color and generous strokes of paint made by the whole, athletic arm of the artist. The pictures move back and forth across the border between color abstraction and painterly figuration, each mode giving its own kind of pleasure.

Cows can be a touchy subject for some feminists. In the past, they have served as symbols of women's submissive enchainment to nature's round of breeding and nurturing, in contrast to the higher male world of culture. Zuka blithely makes these notions of masculine transcendence and feminine immanence seem outdated and irrelevant. Her cows have no interest in being symbols in our system. Sensual, solid and powerfully present, they are available to physical empathy and intuition but not to ratiocination. Subversively, they remain outside our frameworks of dominance and submission, ambition and guilt. Cow culture will probably continue to be excluded from multiculturalist constructions.

If the real vanguard still continues to exist on the fluctuating margins of the art world, then Zuka's paintings are worth considering for what is now "marginal" in them: their willed simplicity, their humor, their absence of anger and ego. The artist's attitude is one of humility and awareness in the face of a separate reality. The paintings offer an experience described by Zuka's Russian countryman, Nabokov, as esthetic bliss—"the sense of being somehow, somewhere, connected with other states of being where art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm."



Linda Nochlin

Professeur et chercheuse en  
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## Zuka's Birds and other Creatures: 2007

On first glance, the range of paintings in Zuka's 2007 exhibition seems invariably bright, cheerful and reassuring. These richly colored, exuberantly interwoven canvases, uniting a profusion of birds, animals, foliage and flowers in decorative harmony would seem to constitute a contemporary version of the traditional Earthly Paradise theme, conditioned to the jumpier rhythms and more measured optimism of the present. Certainly, this impression is far from a deceptive one. But there is more at stake in Zuka's paintings, a greater ambiguity of meaning and expression woven into the colorful, edgy patterning of her formal language and thematic choices. First of all, in terms of iconography, Zuka's subjects are far from universally cheerful. She tends to depict the more unpopular, common birds: pigeons, sparrows, gulls, magpies. Some of these, are in fact, considered by most people as pests rather than charmers. Zuka depicts these avian outsiders as birds of character, as it were. At times, as in *Les corbeaux et le champ labouré* (46 x 31,9 in.) she contrasts the dark unloveliness or outright menace of the protagonist bird, perched menacingly on a rail in the foreground, confronting the spectator almost eye-to-eye, with the decorative scattering of smaller crows against the pink plowed field in the background and the two wheeling birds in the sky. At other time, the crows may simply function as contrasting motifs in a snow scene, as they do in *Corbeaux sur la neige* (23,6 x 47,2 in.), where the black forms of the birds, strikingly deployed against the white drifts on a horizontal surface at once recall Chinese painting and Monet's exemplary *Pie dans la neige*. Still another variant of the crow theme, very different in both format and expressive effect, is the vertical canvas, *Matin enneigé à Saint-Brancher* (39,4 x 25,6 in.), where the dark, angular birds are set off against the rounded colorful shape of the perky robin, amid marshmallow drifts, the whole strikingly foiled in the background by the flat, pink wall of the artist's studio.

Human beings add to the complexity of meaning and decorative intensity of the two largest canvases in the show, both 77,1 x 51,2 in. In *Béatrice et le forestier*, a magpie with outspread wings, like the Holy Spirit in an Annunciation, comes zooming in at the left-hand upper corner, to join the tightly packed confluence of birds, flowers, foliage and cats flanking the two principal figures. Beatrice, on the left, a sort of sexy, purple pants-clad Virgin, carries a basket of logs; the Forest Ranger on the right, a handsome, green-eyed green-shirted angel of the Annunciation on the right carries a long-handled sickle and has an electric saw hanging from his belt; both are enmeshed in a tangle of yellow, red and orange flowers and dark, angular branches, a posse of black-and-white cats at their feet, bright yellow chickadees perched on the tree to the right. Yet despite the brilliance of the color and the buoyant plenitude of the composition, all is not perfect harmony in this contemporary hortus conclusus. The annunciatory bird is a magpie, traditionally connected with bad tidings rather than joyous ones; the Forest Ranger holds a scythe, an attribute of Father Time symbolizing inevitable death, as well as a saw, instrument of nature's destruction in today's ecologically minded ideology, and the virgin-figure displays, beneath her ample bosom, the fruits of destruction: freshly cut logs. And at the very heart of the piece, a white and black cat looks up hungrily at three little birds on the winding pathway. The composition itself, far from rehearsing the serene formal surface harmony of the medieval tapestry it first brings to mind, is aggressive, spiked by eccentric assonances and jagged, emphatic brushwork.

The cat plays a starring role in two other memorable canvases. In one, *Ezrael chasse le papillon* (35,9 x 25,6 in.), her son's adolescent feline, Ezrael, long of leg and slinky of torso, stands on its hind legs in a field of goldenrod, eagerly hunting an elusive butterfly. In another, *Ezrael voit le chardonneret* (39,4 x 19,7 in.), the same cat, who had never been loosed in nature before, looks up longingly at a goldfinch perched on a giant sunflower. The presence of the cat, though charming rather than ominous, hints at the disharmony underlying the apparent perfection of the natural order.

In still other canvases, it is the dynamism of bird life, avian soaring and wheeling rather than the birds' sedate existence as part of a stable floral tapestry that is the theme: this is particularly true of the artist's take on sea-birds. In a big canvas of *Vol de pélicans et de mouettes* (35 x 45,6 in.), a California theme, both species are shown wheeling over a run of fish. The grotesquely heavy seagull throws its prey up in the air and the lighter, faster seagull catches it in his beak. The textures of the two opposing birds contrast, heavy, richly textured brown feathers against lightly adumbrated white ones, foiled by the dark green background of water. In still another California sea-bird canvas, *Les mouettes arrivent* (39,4 x 39,4 in.), a theme Zuka deployed for a memorable mural at the New York Alliance Française, the energy of the painted strokes and the plunging perspective at the top, impart a sense of uncanny dynamism to the wheeling, plummeting, zooming gulls, rendering their movement palpable in formal terms.

While many of Zuka's canvases depict groups of birds, either in the company of their own kind or in conjunction with other species — I am thinking particularly of another California painting, *Le matin à Hermosa* (39,4 x 39,4 in.), with its seductive troop of sandpipers in the foreground, gulls well back against the ripple of sandy, pink shore and the blue water — other pictures can only be thought of as individual bird portraits: the three little canvases of individual orangey-pink, black-beaked flamingo heads are indeed sophisticated decorative close-ups of members of this photogenic species. For a full-length flamingo portrait, Zuka elongates the support into a long, vertical format to accommodate the subject's long legs.

What is striking, then, about this group of paintings by Zuka is not merely its decorative and coloristic exuberance, although there is plenty of that to be sure, but rather the range and variety of the artist's approach to the life, habits and appearance of birds, or

of nature more generally. I am referring to the varieties of formal languages deployed, to the moods evoked, and not least important, the scale and format of the canvas supports themselves, which move from the near-miniature in some of the bird portraits to ambitiously large-scale, from exaggeratedly horizontal to assertively vertical in accordance with the compositional variables of her subjects. In insisting on the visual and sentimental value of the despised pigeon, as in the wonderfully all-over patterning of *Midi: boulevard Pasteur* (25,6 x 35,9 in.), or the aesthetic seductiveness of the lowly sparrow, as in the inventive *Moineaux dans l'althea* (39,4 x 19,7 in.) or the poignant beauty of the maleficent crow, as in the large-scale *Deux corbeaux dans la glycine* (39,4 x 39,4 in.) with its Far Eastern spareness of linear décor, the crows shining out darkly against the pinkish mauve foil of the background, Zuka is making a kind of covert political statement as well as an aesthetic one. She is making a plea in paint on canvas on behalf of a marginalized but visually fresh and appealing group of denizens of the natural world. Attention must be paid, as it must to human beings in the same circumstances.

Linda Nochlin

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Paula Harper  
ART IN AMERICA, 2007

## Zuka at Darthea Speyer (birds)

Zuka continues to follow her own path, an unconventional one relative to contemporary trends. In two previous shows at Darthea Speyer, she explored the pictorial possibilities of cows. Her new paintings (all 2006; most oil on canvas and around 40 inches square) display the same intense colors and lively brushwork, but the striking compositions spring from observations of a different subject: birds. Unlike cows, birds are not heavy or earthbound; they're small, quick and airborne. Some images feature tiny birds flickering amid dense flowering foliage, as in a Persian tapestry. In others, seagulls sail above spare, extended planes of sea and sand. Expressively abstracted, Zuka's birds zoom in from the top and sides of the canvas or hop up from the bottom, flattening pictorial structures into all-over patterns and activating the images from edge to edge.

When in Burgundy, Zuka studies the common country birds that live in her garden there, such as crows, sparrows, jays and chickadees. In Paris, she concentrates on the most ordinary city birds: the blue-gray pigeons that congregate sociably on the cobblestones of her Montparnasse neighborhood. Since she often visits Los Angeles, where she was born, the exhibition included paintings and watercolors of the flocks of seagulls, terns and sandpipers that share Hermosa Beach with humans.

All Zuka's birds are busy with daily routines of feeding and flying, sometimes competing rapaciously for food and space in their overlapping territories. She depicts their forms and movements with accuracy and empathy, sensitive to the life of each individual as well as the dynamic of the group. Occasionally, her knack for witty caricature infuses an individual bird with what our species labels "personality." In two large paintings of her country garden, she includes figures of humans who tend the land—a local gardener and a forester. They merge into their painted paradise in happy symbioses with the flora and other fauna.

Zuka's images evoke the gaiety and innocence of folk art. In this, they recall Paula Modersohn-Becker's deliberately rustic treatment of simple country scenes, a style that declares its difference from cosmopolitan sophistication. Zuka's own approach is also compatible with her subject matter: she chooses not the exotic or flamboyant, but the most humble birds, numerous to the point of invisibility, that share our environment. Her paintings convey the delight she takes in discovering the little lives of creatures that inhabit a world right before our eyes but often go unnoticed.

Sarah Perves

Sarah Perves is an art history lecturer at Ecole Polytechnique and H.E.C

## Nobody paints birds nowadays!

For some time now blackbirds, chickadees, goldfinches and seagulls have landed on Zuka's paintings, creating unexpected articulated forms and revealing Zuka's gift for caricature once again. The vision is intimate or even aerial but it is always "sauvage". The brushwork is sometimes broad and rough, at other times delicate and fine, for instance the tiny goldfinches with their stripey rounded stomachs caught in the lacey web of cosmos flowers. The spectator is drawn into the paintings through their rhythm - see the close up of a robin red breast perched in the furry buds of an ash tree in springtime which reminds us of the strokes of an orchestra conductor's baton. The gestures are always precise, even when they are ample and free.

### Sarah Perves: Nobody paints birds nowadays!

Zuka: Newspapers have currently been showing great interest in the subject: recent scientific studies on cognitive behavior reveal that birds' brains are much more flexible than was once thought. It is now established that parrots are capable of inventing syntax and pigeons can memorize. The latest research on the DNA of chickadees shows they have their own extrovert and introvert personalities within their own type.

### S.P. Have you always done drawings of birds?

Z. In my childhood I was always looking out of the window of my house in Hollywood; I am an only child... Then at the ocean I observed the seagulls and the sandpipers. My country house in Burgundy is surrounded by trees. The slightest flit in the corner of my eye and I know it's a bird and I start looking. I have been drawing them for years with unwaning enthusiasm, I admit! And I am fascinated by their habits.

### S.P. Have you ever painted them before?

Z. In California I did a big painting of a roadrunner and behind, a group of little Indians. Ironically the title is "When the Red Man Came", instead of "When the White Man Came".

### S.P. But there is a great tradition of ornithological painting in America.

Z. I am very interested in John James Audubon, a 19<sup>th</sup> century french naturalist painter who lived and painted in the United States. I have just read his biography written by a French author, Yvon Chatelin. I was surprised to learn of the large number of birds that Audubon killed in order to paint them. It didn't occur to anybody at the time to say "don't do it"; the idea of extinction hardly existed. One mustn't forget that at the time American pioneer farmers were trying to eke out a living and flocks of seed eating birds were a real menace.

### S.P. This takes nothing away from Audubon's gift as an artist.

Z. He had an extraordinary talent for painting their attitudes. They were stylizations of what birds do, so he was much criticized for his lack of naturalist precision. He had so many rivals since there were bird painters in every American city.

### S.P. What is your approach?

Z. It is different because it involves my desire to express something that is birdlike and not manlike. In a way I am always telling stories. I have a sketchbook constantly on the go in which I note down everything I see and everything I intend to do.

### S.P. How do your paintings get under way? (What is your painting process?)

Z. I sketch trees, bushes, flowers in my garden and in the countryside throughout all seasons. When I started to draw birds I already had the poplar tree, the cherry tree, the virginia Creeper in my hand. I could place the birds where I saw them. One day while walking I saw some wild flowers covered with butterflies. The wings were closed and looked like leaves with veins. Then another one of the same species opened its wings and there underneath was a bright orange triangle and little black dots. I thought: when I get home I'm going to put them on canvas. Then I added a hawk as a counterweight for something which might have appeared a bit mawkish.

The notion of density is important in Zuka's work for coming to terms with the weightlessness of birds. Although she has opted for bright colours, Zuka has remained faithful to the precise colours which characterize each bird type. But why not seagulls with cobalt blue wings? Each yellow, each green, each black, each red expresses a single urgent note. The sensual and generous pigment creates an intensely irresistible light of its own. Hence a single chickadee pecking away voraciously at the yellow cadmium of a giant sunflower under a turquoise sky. Without forgetting the birds of Picasso and Braque in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and those of Monet, Morisot and Cassatt in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Zuka's work, going beyond the naturalists, creates a new language of form and colour within a great pictorial tradition.

Sarah Perves



Lydia Harambourg

LA GAZETTE DE L'HÔTEL DROUOT, 15 AVRIL 2005

## Zuka la couleur en liberté

Une peinture de Zuka respire la joie édénique. L'artiste américaine travaille par thème et pour sa septième exposition à la galerie Darthea Speyer, elle offre un florilège de volatiles dont la diversité des espèces enchante ses dons de coloriste. La galerie s'est transformée en une volière. Ses murs, loin d'épingler, comme des papillons, les oiseaux, leur confèrent un espace devenu mouvant. Un bruissement d'ailes l'anime, alors qu'un flot coloré nous submerge. Zuka est une artiste généreuse. Elle nous fait partager son émerveillement. Éblouie par l'étonnante palette offerte par les plumes, elle transmet à ses peintures la saveur visuelle et tactile, magnifiquement rendue par une matière sensuelle et lumineuse. Voici des pies, des huppés, des chardonnerets, des fauvettes capucine, des geais, des faucons pèlerins, des loriots, des rouges-gorges, tous familiers de la campagne bourguignonne où elle travaille. Mais aussi les oiseaux de mer observés sur les rivages de sa Californie natale. Tout commence par des croquis. Le trait décrit, attentif à saisir les particularités de l'oiseau, avant d'être repris à l'atelier par un pinceau alerte et sûr. Assurance de la main au service de la justesse du regard. L'artiste connaît bien le travail d'Audubon, célèbre dessinateur naturaliste du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle qu'elle admire. Elle délaisse son caractère encyclopédique, pour n'en garder que l'expression artistique ajustée à l'exakte configuration qui nous fait identifier ces oiseaux. Mis en scène, voici le ballet des fauvettes dans la vigne vierge, les merles piqués dans les iris comme dans une tapisserie millefleurs, les étourneaux qui ont pris possession des buissons jaunes alors qu'un merle noir, au sol, devise avec des mésanges jaunes sur les bouddleias mauves. Zuka est ainsi. Elle transcrit ce qu'elle voit, mais son sens créatif lui fait élire des situations inattendues. La fréquentation assidue, l'observation patiente et amoureuse de la nature lui font voir ce qui peut passer inaperçu. Elle opte souvent pour une verticalité et une perspective étagée, comme le montrent les miniatures persanes, que sa peinture évoque parfois avec ses tons en aplats, fortement contrastés et sonores. De petites toiles complètent l'ensemble. Ce sont des portraits d'oiseaux, mis dans la cage de la peinture.

Beaux-Arts Magazine, *Cherchez les femmes*, avril 2019

## BeauxArts



Télérama, *Zuka : amazones de la Révolution*, octobre 2016

# Télérama

Peinture

## Zuka : amazones de la Révolution

Cet événement n'a pas été vu par la rédaction

★★★★★ (aucune note)

Du 17 octobre 2016 au 26 novembre 2016  
Galerie Françoise Livinec - Penthièvre - Paris

## Lieux et dates

📍 Galerie Françoise Livinec - Penthièvre  
24, rue de Penthièvre, 75008 Paris

Du 17 octobre 2016 au 26 novembre 2016

Zuka revisite la Révolution française avec l'optimisme et la joie qui caractérisent son œuvre, et un attrait tout particulier pour les femmes révolutionnaires. Son exposition dans les galeries Françoise Livinec fait écho à celle du musée Lambinet de Versailles "Amazones de la révolution, des femmes dans la tourmente de 1789".

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**Robin des Arts**, Robain Massonnaud, *Zuka ou le bonheur dans les prés*,  
15 septembre 2015

## ROBIN DES ARTS

Le blog de Robin Massonnaud

### Zuka ou le bonheur dans les prés

le 15 septembre 2015 11h54 | par [marcho-de-l-art](#)



Une vache curieuse de Zuka



« Tempête de sable » de Zuka, collage de 1982

Si vous arpentez l'avenue Matignon, vous ne pourrez pas les manquer. Des vitrines de la galerie Françoise Livinec, elles vous regarderont. Rouges, bleues, jaunes, vertes ou roses, parfois noires, elles vous détailleront d'un regard curieux et étonné. Elles viennent du Morvan et découvrent pour la première fois la capitale. Elles, ce sont des vaches. Joyeuses, insouciantes, optimistes, elles gambadent dans les prés, s'observent, nous contemplent comme elles le font des trains qui passent ou nous tournent le dos bien trop occupées à brouter l'herbe grasse ou à profiter des charmes de la campagne, boudant ainsi l'agitation parisienne.

Ces vaches, ce sont les dernières œuvres de Zuka, une artiste américaine d'origine russe. Agée de 91 ans, son œuvre est une véritable bouffée d'air pur, un manifeste d'optimisme dans ce monde un peu noir.

Zuka s'est intéressée aux vaches dans sa maison du Morvan. Avec humour, elle explique qu'elle était alors en train de peindre une série sur les hommes marquants de sa vie. Puis distraite, elle s'est mise à regarder la campagne environnante et toutes ces vaches paisibles et tranquilles. Elle venait de trouver de nouveaux modèles !

Sa série de vaches colorées est un véritable pied de nez à une tendance de l'art contemporain qui se veut cérébral et tourmenté pour être pris au sérieux. Avec les jolies vaches colorées de Zuka, c'est tout le contraire. Devant elles, on est envahi par un sentiment de joie et de bonheur. On retrouve une pêche extraordinaire.



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Une vache rouge de Zuka



« Olympe de Gougues au club des femmes » de Zuka, œuvre de 1966.

C'est ce qu'explique une collectionneuse qui a installé une vache de Zuka dans sa chambre, en face de son lit. Tous les matins quand elle se réveille, elle commence sa journée pleine d'allant. Les vaches de Zuka, c'est de l'optimisme sur toiles, une déclaration de confiance en notre monde. En fait, en regardant ces tableaux, j'ai un peu la même impression qu'au sortir du salon de l'agriculture. Après m'être ébahi sur tous ces animaux bichonnés, soignés, chouchoutés, je quitte la porte de Versailles gonflé à bloc avec une certitude : la nature est belle ! Les animaux qui nous entourent sont superbes ! Il faut savoir apprécier cette beauté dans tous les moments de notre existence. « Carpe diem » c'est le message que Zuka nous transmet avec ses vaches enjouées et placides.



Son œuvre ne saurait cependant se réduire à la race bovine, si coquette et pimpante soit-elle ! La galerie Françoise Livinec consacre donc à Zuka dans son espace de la rue de Penthièvre une rétrospective en une trentaine d'œuvres. On y voit ses petits portraits révolutionnaires déjà exposés à la fondation Mona Bismarck. Toutes les personnalités de cette période troublée de notre histoire y sont représentées dans des couleurs claires. Les cadres réalisés à base de collages sont joyeux. Que la Révolution Française est belle avec Zuka !

Ses collages de la série des Amérindiens sont parfois immenses et souvent magnifiques. Très graphiques, aux teintes éclatantes, ils illustrent des danses, des rites initiatiques avec une vigueur et un dynamisme contagieux.

Bref, vous ressortirez de cette exposition avec un moral inoxydable !

Dernière précision : si vous souhaitez mettre de la bonne humeur à votre domicile, les œuvres de Zuka sont accessibles dès 500 euros et peuvent atteindre 35 000 euros pour ses grands diptyques amérindiens.



Zuka dans son atelier au milieu de son troupeau de vaches colorées.

**« Zuka toujours plus à l'ouest », expositions galerie Françoise Livinec jusqu'au 10 octobre.** Rétrospective au 24 rue de Penthièvre et « vaches colorées » au 29/33 avenue Matignon, 75008 Paris.



AMA, Un optimisme plein d'esprit, 27 august 2015

## UN OPTIMISME PLEIN D'ESPRIT

**Z**uka est une artiste d'origine russe née aux États-Unis, voilà 91 ans. Sa dernière exposition à Paris, à la Fondation Mona Bismarck, remonte à 1989 et portait alors sur « La Révolution française vue par une Américaine ». Cette fois c'est au tour de Françoise Livinec de lui consacrer une rétrospective qui se tiendra du 10 septembre au 10 octobre 2015, « Zuka, toujours plus à l'ouest ». L'exposition se répartira sur ses deux galeries parisiennes du 245, rue de Penthièvre – où quelques rares tableaux de l'exposition sur la Révolution française seront visibles – et au 29/33 avenue Matignon – espace consacré à cette occasion au sujet de prédilection de Zuka, les vaches... Art Media Agency est parti à la rencontre de cette artiste à l'optimisme coloré.



*Rétrospective et Diderot (1984)*  
Zuka

Courtoisie Galerie Françoise Livinec

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## INTERVIEW • ZUKA

**Vous avez connu une riche carrière et, à 91 ans, une exposition vous est consacrée. Comment vous sentez-vous ?**

Je me sens bien mais j'étais sans doute plus heureuse avant : il est difficile de vieillir. Faire de la peinture est une activité fatigante. Avant, je peignais debout. Aujourd'hui, je suis assise devant mon tableau et, au bout de deux heures, je suis fatiguée. Dès que je suis fatiguée, je ne peux plus peindre. Ma manière de peindre s'est donc modifiée avec l'âge.

**Comment avez-vous découvert la peinture ?**

Mes parents sont venus habiter à Los Angeles alors que j'avais trois ans. La Californie a toujours été à l'avant-garde du changement dans les mœurs de l'éducation. On avait des cours de peinture et de « music appreciation » qui n'existaient pas dans les autres écoles du pays. J'avais notamment un cours de dessin avec une très bonne professeure, c'est là que j'ai vu ces deux garçons qui faisaient des portraits au fusain. Cela m'a intriguée et j'ai fait cela presque toute ma vie, des portraits au fusain. J'avais toujours dessiné des petites choses, des choses piquées dans les journaux, des photos mais, là, il s'agissait d'art. La professeure était intelligente : je me souviens encore aujourd'hui de choses qu'elle nous disait. Je me souviens aussi d'elle comme quelqu'un qui aimait Van Gogh et appréciait même l'art abstrait.

**Par la suite, vous avez fréquenté les Beaux-Arts ?**

Un ami de mes parents connaissait une personne aisée qui finançait notamment des bourses à l'université de Californie du Sud. À l'époque, cette dernière n'était pas très cotée et le niveau était plus bas. Mais j'ai, tout de même, reçu une bourse, ainsi que deux autres amies russes. C'est ainsi que nous avons pu aller à l'université. Il était évident pour moi que je voulais être artiste. Mon beau-père estimait, de son côté, que je devais faire de l'architecture. Quant à ma mère, elle estimait que si je voulais être peintre, je devais me lancer.



Zuka dans son atelier, 2015

Coutoiste Galerie Françoise Livinec

Finalement, j'ai fréquenté les Beaux-Arts. C'était la première université des États-Unis à avoir un cursus dans cette discipline. Nous avions des cours de dessin, de sculpture, de peinture... Un de mes professeurs était un très bon peintre. Il travaillait également pour une université d'été dans le Michigan. Pour pouvoir participer à ce programme, il fallait payer, ce qui n'était pas possible pour moi. Par chance, mon professeur avait la possibilité d'emmener un étudiant boursier et il m'a choisie. C'est là-bas que j'ai connu Joan Mitchell ; nous sommes restées amies jusqu'à sa mort. Elle était alors élève du Art Institute of Chicago.

**Cette rencontre avec Joan Mitchell a été décisive...**

Il est vrai que j'ai été influencée par l'école de Chicago dont l'approche était totalement différente de ce que je connaissais : l'école de Californie était en retard sur certains points. Nous étions alors au début de l'expressionnisme abstrait et mon amie faisait partie de ce mouvement. Pour ma part, ce que je faisais à l'université était assez figuratif et nous utilisions beaucoup de vert. Quand j'ai vu les couleurs qu'utilisaient les élèves de Chicago, j'ai commencé à en mettre dans mes créations.

**Quelle est l'histoire de votre première exposition ?**

J'ai fait ma première exposition alors que j'étais encore à l'université : dans une salle de classe, elle présentait des aquarelles que j'avais ramenées de mon voyage dans le Michigan. Je me rappelle qu'un film avec Deanna Durbin m'avait marquée, à cette époque. Elle jouait le rôle d'une adolescente qui trouvait du travail très jeune. C'est ce qui m'a poussée à chercher une galerie pour présenter mon travail. J'ai pris mes aquarelles et je suis allée à la rencontre des galeristes de la ville. En ce temps-là, il y en avait très peu de galeries à Los Angeles. Je suis entrée dans une galerie qui était une filiale d'un établissement new-yorkais. La galeriste était une Allemande, réfugiée de la guerre. Elle cherchait de jeunes artistes californiens. Quand je suis entrée, elle avait Kandinsky sur les murs et même des aquarelles de Cézanne... J'y ai fait ma première exposition en galerie.

Tempte de sable (1982)  
Zuka

Coutoiste Galerie Françoise Livinec





## INTERVIEW • ZUKA



*Les vaches roses (2015)*  
Zuka.

Courtoisie Galerie Françoise Livinec

*Trois vaches américaines et bretonnes (2015)*  
Zuka.

Courtoisie Galerie Françoise Livinec



### Qu'est-ce qui vous a poussée à venir en France ?

Je suis venue en France avec ma galeriste de l'époque et j'y ai fréquenté une école d'art près de Montparnasse. Une Américaine, Darthea Speyer, travaillait à l'époque pour l'ambassade des États-Unis ; elle gérait un espace culturel que possédait l'ambassade, Rue du Dragon. Elle organisait un événement consacré aux jeunes artistes américains et elle m'a contactée. Je ne sais pas comment elle a connu mon travail. Par la suite, elle a ouvert sa propre galerie et nous avons travaillé ensemble pendant 40 ans. Je me rappelle avoir fait toute une série sur les oiseaux et, plus particulièrement, sur les pigeons. Elle l'avait exposée dans sa galerie. Malheureusement, je ne crois pas qu'elle ait beaucoup vendu : personne n'aime les pigeons. L'idée m'est venue alors que je me dirigeais vers le Louvre. Quand je l'ai vu, tout était sale ; les statues du jardin des Tuileries étaient sales et recouvertes de pigeons.

### Votre dernière exposition en France portait sur la Révolution française... Comment vous est venue l'idée de travailler sur ce sujet ?

Les costumes en bleu, blanc, rouge, et leur beauté m'ont inspiré. Quelle effusion de couleurs ! Comme j'ai précédemment travaillé sur la Révolution américaine, mon entourage n'a eu de cesse, depuis, de me demander quand j'allais aborder la Révolution française.

J'ai toujours pensé que les Français n'aimaient pas leur Révolution. Ils restent dans le souvenir de l'ancien, de l'horreur, de la terreur et de la guillotine... Lors de mon exposition à la Fondation Mona Bismarck, en 1989, presque tout le monde me demandait pour quelles raisons j'avais décidé de peindre la Révolution et ce qui m'intéressait dans cette période... Je leur ai répondu : « Je suis peintre de l'histoire ».

### Parlant d'histoire, comment avez-vous rencontré Françoise Livinec, votre actuelle galeriste ?

Nous avons été présentées par une connaissance commune, Roland. Actuellement, je ne travaille qu'avec Françoise. Je ne cherche pas beaucoup d'autres galeristes car cela ne m'intéresse pas. Au fond, cela m'est égal : ce que j'aime avant tout, c'est peindre et passer du temps sur mes tableaux.

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### Le travail, en lui-même, importe plus que le sujet ?

Au cours de ma vie, j'ai essayé de faire de l'abstrait. Presque tous mes amis sont peintres abstraits ; j'ai donc essayé. Mais cela ne m'a pas convaincue car j'aime beaucoup le sujet. Cependant, ma théorie est que le tableau est abstrait. Lorsque je peins, je regarde mes tableaux comme le font tous les artistes figuratifs : je les retourne pour estimer si mon travail est réussi ou non. Pour que ça marche, il faut que ça fonctionne abstraitement. En outre, j'aime beaucoup l'humour et ce qui est positif. Par exemple, j'apprécie énormément les œuvres de mon mari qui sont très drôles. Je suis une « Mindless optimist », littéralement une optimiste dénuée d'esprit. Mon voisin m'a dit que l'on traduisait cela par « idiot » mais je ne crois pas que cela me corresponde.

### Pourquoi peindre des vaches ?

J'aime beaucoup les portraits mais cela reste très difficile à réaliser et je trouve que la ressemblance est angoissante. Peindre des vaches est totalement différent : elles ont des formes simples, il n'existe pas un impératif de ressemblance comme c'est le cas pour le portrait. Mon intérêt pour les vaches date de l'époque où mon mari et moi, avons acquis notre maison de campagne. Elle se situe en Bourgogne, dans un petit village d'une cinquantaine d'habitants près d'Avallon. Dans cette région, il y a beaucoup de vaches, des charolaises sur fond vert. Cela m'a tout de suite inspirée. À cette époque, je faisais beaucoup d'aquarelles : j'allais beaucoup dans la nature pour peindre.

### Vous dites qu'avec les vaches, il n'y a pas d'impératif de ressemblance et pourtant, les vôtres sont sympathiques voire semblent humaines...

C'est plutôt que je les comprends mais je conteste le fait qu'elles soient humaines. Elles nous ressemblent dans la mesure où elles ont des besoins comme nous, tels que la faim et la soif mais la ressemblance s'arrête ici : une vache n'a pas de besoins culturels. ♦

*Les vaches vertes (2015)*  
Zuka.

Courtoisie Galerie Françoise Livinec

