

Whitehot Magazine

Essential Figures at Almine Rech:

Interview with Zio Ziegler

By Clare Gemima, October 11, 2023.



Figure: *Output: GPT*, 2023. Oil and acrylic on canvas.
71 7/8 x 48 x 2 in (Unframed). Photo courtesy of Almine Rech.

** Essential Figures requires an allocated amount of time at the gallery. Plan ahead. You will not want to leave.

In discussion with Clare Gemima, Ziegler has generously elaborated upon the backstory of *Essential Figures*, his current solo show at Almine Rech in New York City and managed to successfully captivate her within a realm of his own where form and abstraction engage in an enchanting, worldly choreography. *Essential Figures* very boldly invites the painter's audiences to deeply reflect on the very essence of existence throughout the artist's selected art epochs. Each paint stroke experienced throughout Almine Rech carries an old, new, enhanced, stripped back, historic, fresh, saturated, utterly unforgettable, and timeless sensibility. Collectively, the exhibition's paintings perform within a familial but foreign terrain - an undeniably terrifying, yet celebrated time period of the artist's own, maniacal volition.

Clare Gemima: *Essential Figures* draws artistic influence from Pollock, Boccioni, and Bacon. Do your paintings reflect the current epochal inflection point of today, or more so harken back to pivotal moments scattered throughout history?

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Zio Ziegler: The pivotal moments in history I am curious about may be a bit more macroscopic than usual. To that point, I've always enjoyed looking at the cambrian explosion maps. The scale it forces you to examine things on is pretty humbling, because in one arc and a few inches on your screen- it goes from Bacteria to Protostomes to Amphibians and Mammals etc- with just a tiny sliver for humans at the end. When you scan back through these charts and see five mass extinctions and a global ice age it makes me want to paint from a different place. The scale of what an inflection point really is seems to change at this scale, and yet the evolutionary arc seems to have a mind of its own, a larger pattern that nature seems to converge towards. I'm interested in this entropic pattern, as well as the fact that our current pivotal moment seems to be one of the most radical in history: that we are on the cusp of altering our brains with a machine interface. This seems like an incredibly powerful forcing function on the patterns of nature, and it's something we seem unlikely to return from. So to finally circle back to your question: this group of paintings is intended to summarize a symbol of our last biological era. Homo Erectus to the end of Homo Sapien. 160,000 years of genetic similarity which we are about to depart from. They are intended to be stripped down symbols with which our future selves can look back on, and still pattern match as human. I know this sounds quite ambitious, but if Boccioni and Pollock were painting as reactions to civilizational progress, these paintings are a reaction to biological progress.

Clare Gemima: Are there any female artist's that compliment your visual studies just as solidly as the aforementioned artists?

Zio Ziegler: Susan Rothenburg, Georgia O'Keffe, Wangechi Mutu, Lee Kransner, Neri Oxman, Eva Hesse, and many more. Each for very different reasons, but as of late I've been super interested in Neri Oxman's work. I like to see things that function outside of the gallery or museum context, design and art objects with a broader application. It makes me hopeful for a clearer bridge between science and art in the future.

Clare Gemima: Within your process, how do you believe the most advanced image generator technology of today benefits from prompts or input based on 21st century art historical knowledge?

Zio Ziegler: I'm extremely curious about how these products work. I'm not an engineer, which makes much of it very opaque, but to the best of my understanding, these tools index information based on tags and then assemble something based on prompts which are matched to those same tags. Like a sort of language. You have an experience and you want to tell someone about it in a story. External experience > filtered through your biases, emotions, world view, personal history > experience approximated with vocabulary > output: =story structure + voice inflection + approximation of listeners vocabulary = shared experience.

But it's not the *same* experience.

This funnel has so many holes in it and so many assumptions, how on Earth would I tag my own emotions with words? What lens do I view external events through? How do I choose to package those events? It would seem that you get two critical issues: the mismatch between language and experience, and the mismatch between intentionality and

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expression. For instance, what you can describe in a prompt is not necessarily what you think you are looking for. What you view is not necessarily something you can describe accurately in a way that can be reproduced, either. The whole exercise becomes one of approximations, and “how can I best approximate what I think the viewer is looking for?”, and “how can I best approximate what I am experiencing?”, sorts of questions. Run this same process through ‘art history’, or any other data set and you get more tags, more options, more variables, but less accuracy in my opinion. The more we choose certain pathways, the more these pathways are reinforced. This ultimately steers us away from innovation and towards predictable funnels instead. The way that we synthesize history to make something new is still something I look at as a miracle, and while these tools can reassemble things in a surprising, (and hallucinatory) way, they seem to lack the inspiration that comes not from larger libraries, but from the qualitative experience that is currently very difficult to quantify.

Clare Gemima: I noticed a lot of your figures are illustrated in a stance similar to how the Egyptians once depicted their own idyllic positions in profile, with both feet pointing in the same direction. Are your forms idyllic, or idolised at all?

Zio Ziegler: The forms are intended to be universal. You’re spot on with the Egyptian reference. I like where pictograph meets art, where Language meets expression. There is something about Early Etruscan art, Cave painting and prehistoric megalithic art that feels more earnest. I trace this all the way up to the advent of the camera obscura, when our perception of form was aided by technology. The transformation between byzantine forms and early dutch painting - it’s a majorly radical shift in perception. These paintings are non-technologically aided intuitive forms that likely steer more towards Idols, but once again we could go back to the differences between perception and reality. They’re meant to be *felt* rather than thought about.

Clare Gemima: I was so spoiled to get to see the show all to myself recently! What punched the most was the saturation of color that spread across the gallery, so wet, so raw, and beyond mercurial - actually insane Zio. How did you establish such a richness in your color system, and how do you justify the inclusion of each pigment?

Zio Ziegler: Thank you. I’m color blind, so color becomes something that I map across painting with a bit of intention. It was simpler when I used to just work in black and white, and I have to say that my thinking on color is probably quite traditionally flawed. I still use it as a device to ramp intensity. I try to keep the palette somewhat contained in the underpainting, and then I will get a little more liberal as the layers are added. I am hoping to create a rhythm of impact around the edges of a form, and I try to use color like a structural component to create this movement.

Clare Gemima: You’ve described your essential figures as relics that provoke the nervous system rather than the intellect. Can you enlighten me as to how you’ve arrived at this diagnosis?

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Zio Ziegler: About four years ago I started going to a kind of therapy called somatic healing. My therapist who is quite extraordinary got me out of my head and into my body. It took her a while to do that. What I realized is that all the reason and logic in the world doesn't compete with the sensation of feeling something. It's ineffable really. Biologically, the body while in its sympathetic nervous system tucks your kidneys up into your rib cage, and triggers different chemicals in your brain to economize for survival. I lived in that state for way too long, and my experience in learning to train my nervous system has been that my body has a larger tolerance for discomfort while in my rest and digest. As we enter an age where most things can be mapped, I sort of think about work that provokes the nervous system as something that is technology-proof. The machine can't feel yet, and if feelings are just incredible condensed fitness functions, then it's going to take a bit of evolution until the synthetic equivalent of us has sensations it experiences as feelings. You've probably heard that our gut contains many more neurons than the brain, so these paintings are designed as a reminder to the gut, and as a provocation to something more fundamental than reason. I've always liked that quote by Pascal, "*the heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing of*"- it's not only a nice turn of phrase, but a motivation in these paintings to recreate that sensation.

Clare Gemima: How does your physical practice mimic or differ from AI's generative imaging processes?

Zio Ziegler: My neural net runs on burritos, not tokens.

Clare Gemima: The most compelling work to me at least was *Yetzirah (Symbol)*, 2023, which references the third of four worlds from the Kabbalah's Tree of Life. May I pry the painting's title?

Zio Ziegler: Thank you. As a Jew, last year during the rise of antisemitism globally, I went back and reread Viktor Frankl, something I had admittedly not done since highschool. I spent hours listening to books about World War II, astonished how there could still be so much hate in the world after all of those horrific events. It ultimately brought me deeper and deeper into a never ending rabbit hole of reasoning. It made me think that mysticism, and Kabbalah, had been a method of divining order from disorder. The same experience I was personally seeking in trying to understand the hate that was rising in the world. Clearly, there is a deep tradition of seeking order in ancient mystical texts of all different denominations, but what impressed me the most from the tiny amount I learned about Kabbalah is its reliance on the universal foundation of numbers and mathematics. It created the sensation that the grand precision of our universe could be glimpsed in the smallest proofs, as though we got a small peak behind the curtain at this marvellous complexity. Yetzirah - or as it is sometimes interpreted "the formation of the child"- felt like a perfect reference point for the painting, and something that had mirrored my own journey. The paintings are intended to sit at the threshold between two poles; abstraction and figuration, just barely sneaking over the line where the minimum viable amount of signifiers are there to tell you "this is a human form". I approximate it to the article on Giacometti by Sartre, in which the philosopher compares the experience of viewing Giacometti's work to Zeno's paradox.

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As far as you travel, if you divide your distance by half each time, you never get to your destination. You're stuck in the infinitely divisible experience of pulling order from chaos. Sartre put's Giamotti's sculptures at this moment- neither close nor far. This threshold of formation, as pure as numbers make it- still feels the same, it becomes a hydra of definitions and approximations. So these paintings, much as our experience of viewing clouds, or events, or emotions is intended to be ephemeral and sit at that tipping point between just enough, and the infinite complexity that lies beyond. Intangible, impossible and mystical. When I reread Frankel, these horrifying scenes from the Holocaust gave me the sensation that I was just witnessing one formation of something that could manifest itself in infinite ways, and that the endless dimensions of an experience can only be felt, not reasoned. I'm not saying that the paintings are about that, but they arose during my research into this history, and they arose as a manifestation of the layers of emotions that came as a byproduct of that experience.

Clare Gemima: Your works embody a type of urgent imperative that could emerge during a time of crisis, familial within painting's traditional lineage. In what ways do you believe your work challenges today's monotony of visual debris?

Zio Ziegler: This is a really good question. I have frequently struggled with why I am not painting in relation to immediate culture. I think it's because I feel as though it's impossible to catch up with a culture that is ever accelerating, so I wanted to back up and look at larger trends. It just so happens that the trend which most caught my imagination was a species level paradigm shift, and the patterns that drive these smaller behaviors. I don't know if it's an artist's imperative to have to respond to something so immediate anyhow. You could use the- seeing the forest through the trees - analogy, and maybe it's too bold to assume I am even qualified to pursue an examination of that scale, but it certainly has my attention. Of course, each artist is drawn to their own course of action, their own motivation to get up everyday and answer the questions we ask ourselves. I think it comes down to a process that contains a lot of research and learning. The process of creating the work is really just an excuse to study captivating ideas and behaviors, and then provide them a physical incarnation. I had another artist by my studio last year that I had admired for years. His process is very different from mine, much more immediately linked to American culture. He suggested that I pursue a process that was more in line with the new tools at our disposal. To expedite, move things along faster, to Americanize the work. It's not a bad idea at all - it's just not me. The strip malls, and protests, and news cycles and post truth, post-post modern whatever roiling churning frothy culture, is way too fast. It's not what I want to talk about. I don't want to be ironic or nihilistic or even immediately relevant. I just want to make things that feel urgent to a summary of all this volatility; to look at the trend line vs. the individual components.

Clare Gemima: It feels like you're tackling, or even embracing a certain sense of 'crisis' in the exhibition. What global crises are you responding to in *Essential Figures*?

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Zio Ziegler: I think it was Arthur C. Clarke that said if past generations could imagine something, then it wasn't really progress when we got **there**. He used some idea of being born in the late 1890's, and by the late 1990's steam ships had become aeroplanes, although it was within the realm of believable progress.

I believe we live in an exponential era, and I think it's very challenging to really understand a true exponential because we are not wired that way. The work is a summary for our future selves, a memetic distillation of human form to its essence because we're moving faster than we ever have, towards a world which is pretty unrecognizable.

Essential Figures will run at Almine Rech from September - October 28, 2023. WM