

# EONS

Essay from the catalogue

DUDLEY ZOPP: *Ground/Underground*

Lord Hall Gallery, University of Maine

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With her installation *Ground/Underground*, Dudley Zopp has created a meditation on time. We know we are in a place of meditation immediately upon entry, as we hear the sound of bells and are invited to light a candle to images of the Virgin. This is a prayer and we are inside its space, seeking intercession. But for what?

In addition to prayer, bells signify death and time. They mark the hours, the very human way in which we measure out the days. The opposite wall of the entryway tells the tale in another way. It contains three black-and-white snapshots from earlier times. One suggests the 19th century with elaborate hats on the women; one contains an image of men watching something unseen, and another might be a man touring an excavation. These are tiny, fleeting glimpses of time, one of them in fact referencing an even earlier moment in time, the past within the past. Like bells, they mark the hours, at least the hours of human time.

But as we move into the main gallery space, we are introduced to other versions of time, both organic and geological. High, outsized watercolor paintings loom above us, evoking Chinese landscapes and sky but also the flow of water, as if dripping down from the painting itself. In fact Zopp poured water on her work to create the effect, accepting the risk and randomness of what would happen to her art, as if to suggest that it is nature that has the final say. The water theme recurs in a virtual river of paintings. 700 of them, creating a silted stream on the floor that we cannot cross, a dark channel of mud and green-gray sediment. Again a random element seems apparent on the surface of these paintings, a squiggling of wet paint to create constantly varied textures. As we walk back and forth and around, a persistent windy sound in the air ducts fortuitously heightens the effect of something ongoing, ineluctable.

Gazing at Zopp's watery reminders of the constantly changing organic world, we begin to apprehend yet another version of time, that of geology. Glacial

erratics that have characterized her work in the past loom above us on the wall, tumble down into a pile in the corner, and cluster up and down the interior room. Fashioned of builders' paper bearing indecipherable writing, they simulate boulders, uncontrolled trajectories, and perhaps ruined civilization. Even in a relatively small gallery they convey the power of scale, evoking eons. As if to remind us, several paintings of simple clay vessels arrayed near the floor locate incipient human culture amidst this overpowering rush of time. Their lowly position suggests that these pots were carved out of the earth, to which they will eventually return. Ground/Underground.

Geological time, the biological time of organic life, and human chronological time (bells, photos) all suggest the relative nature of these markers. Time seems to alter with the scale, from massive geological movements, to layers of soot and soil in a riverbed, to the sound of bells, which has no mass at all. Nothing stands still here. There is the recourse, certainly, of praying for intercession from an eternal world, but Zopp's three depictions of the Virgin take the shape of beans, as if to situate the Madonna firmly within natural processes.

With this installation Zopp has fashioned an impermanent record of impermanence, arresting the flow of time only long enough to make us aware of our impotence within these larger forces. She has employed sculpture, painting, photography, and sound to this end, but the effect is something like music: it is in motion, ongoing. Think of an unending version of Arvo Pärt's *Cantus in Memoriam Benjamin Britten*, the background constituting slow and remorseless movement punctuated with the sound of bells. It is telling that Pärt, who wrote this piece in the 1970's, found his inspiration in early music, while Zopp, using the very postmodern form of an installation, evokes primitive civilization with earthenware pots, as well as the eons that preceded them. This is art that represents the very opposite of "objecthood." We are not outside the work gazing at a self-contained image, a geometric shape on a wall. We are inside, moving through gigantic and minute processes over which no one, not even the artist, can ultimately prevail. But through her agency we may apprehend, beyond the gallery and beyond culture itself, this vast, unfinished journey.

-Mary Joe Hughes

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