

Arnie Zimmerman: *The Well is Deep*

Ongoing by Appointment

Izzy's Room | 84 Green St., Hudson, NY 12534



The Towers

2003

Stoneware and porcelain, glazed
70 x 23 x 25 in. (177.8 x 58.42 x 63.5 cm)
ID # 0383

Zimmerman made *The Towers* in response to the 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York. In the work, a cluster of tall skeletal structures tower the toiling figures down below. These mortals, some of whom are submerged in the foundations of the building, are dwarfed by the results of their industrious labor.

In an absurdist twist rich in allegorical possibility, the towers appear to be leading to nowhere. The surreal nature of the scene together with its laborious and realist detail – the strained facial expressions of the figures are even discernable – is reminiscent of Bruegel's *Tower of Babel* paintings, an important art historical reference for Zimmerman.

The Towers depicts a scene mid-action and, formally, gives the impression of a work still in progress, despite having undergone the transformative and permanent processes of glazing and firing. Reflecting on works produced around this time, which are suggestive of impermanence and fragility, Zimmerman remarked there is “metaphoric correspondence to 9/11 in this pushing of the limits of the ceramic process.”



The Lift / Mountain Lifters, 2003
Soda fired stoneware
17 x 15 x 16 in. (43.18 x 38.1 x 40.64 cm)
ID # 0440

The Lift / Mountain Lifters is motivated by a powerful conceptual and formal tension that arises as a busy group of figures use their collective strength to hoist a colossal form above their heads. The form, the peak of a mountain, appears to have been cut and extricated from its natural environment. The lifters strain their muscles and contort their limbs to share in the weight of this monumental burden.

Zimmerman emphasizes the collective energy and dynamism that is intrinsic to labor and human activity, artistic and otherwise. Yet the task of the mountain lifters borders on the Sisyphean. The scene is ambiguous and decontextualized; it is not clear as to why or to what end the mountain must be lifted.

Donald Kuspit notes that “there is a sense of futility and folly as well as seemingly senseless idealism and innocence built into Zimmerman’s parables of the all too human.” Zimmerman’s interest in grappling with the age-old themes of finiteness, fragility, and folly make clear the influence of Erasmus and Bosch on his work, and bring to mind modern referents such as Beckett.



In *Untitled*, a series of colorfully glazed cartoonish figures adorn a container-like form. A range of contrasting carved patterns in unglazed stoneware clay can be seen around the base of the form, recalling the surface treatment on Zimmerman’s monumental pot-shaped sculptures from the 1980s and on the extruded coil sculptural planters he began making the year this work was made.

The humorous and unwieldy figures appear trapped in the vessel, flailing their limbs as if to get the attention of the viewer. These characters are fantastical; part human, part mythical creature. A governing figure sits atop the lid of the container, with a stoic expression and hands on hips, suggestive of its superiority.

As is characteristic in Zimmerman’s

Untitled, 2018
 Soda fired Stoneware
 13 x 13 x 13 in. (33.02 x 33.02 x 33.02 cm)
 ID # 0576

renderings of groups of figures, especially in his series' of works dealing with folly and futility, the narrative is ambiguous and open to interpretation. What is the relationship between these variegated figures? Are they fellow captives and if so how did they end up in this uncanny predicament? What kind of a society do they belong to? The domestically sized container form ties the work and the narrative back to earthly existence, however, making the stratification and oppressiveness observable in the work poignant and familiar.



Ship of Fools borrows its title from an allegory found in Book VI of Plato's *Republic*, an early work of Western political philosophy that deals with power, justice and governance. In Zimmerman's rendering, as in the Platonic dialogue, a battle for control is unfolding. A group of faceless and abstracted figures appear on first instance to struggle and wrestle with one another atop a small row boat-like vessel.

The scene is both familiar and alien, and the composition equal parts awkward and harmonious. The boat and the figures are uniformly glazed, in a chalky white mild gloss with minor blue and red details. This works to expressionistic and playful effect, as the components of the work meld together and prove formally indistinguishable as a series of interconnected bulbous shapes and lines.

Ship of Fools, 1995
 Stoneware, glazed
 52 x 66 x 36 in. (132.08 x 167.64 x 91.44 cm)
 ID # 0603

Zimmerman's rendering of a multiplicity of figures rather than a monumental singular form separates this period of artmaking from his work in the 1980s. Here, Zimmerman imbues the ceramic medium with a physical and pictorial absurdity, pitting our expectations against the complexity of the actual forms. As with many of the works in this show, *Ship of Fools* asks us to suspend reality without doing away with the gravity of human experience.



Holy Cup Tree, 2016
 Soda fired porcelain, steel, epoxy
 72 x 40 x 36 in. (182.88 x 101.6 x 91.44 cm)
 ID # 0681

Holy Cup Tree was inspired by a residency at a porcelain factory in Triptis, Germany. Over 150 porcelain tea cup forms hang from their handles by small hooks, arranged concentrically around a large steel structure the height of a tall adult. The shape and style of the vessels is domestic, yet they are unglazed and have patterns and holes carved out of them which renders them nonfunctional.

Zimmerman uses the medium of ceramics to connect, and ultimately subvert, cultural histories. The work contains references to the royal porcelain tradition, Christianity, and the rise of mass production. The multiplicity of cups bears reference to the commercial factory production line yet holes are punched in the cups rather than in the timecard. The title of the work connotes the (most likely clay) communal drinking vessel used by Jesus at the Last Supper, and in so doing has the work border on the iconoclastic.

The work encapsulates an important shift in Zimmerman's artistic trajectory. He began his career making wheel-thrown functional pottery, but diverted from this path early on after spending some college summers carving monumental blocks of limestone in the south of France. He shifted toward large scale sculpture but chose to maintain the visual vocabulary of craft-based methods, often in a way that encourages imperfection and emphasizes, as he says, "the hand in the process of the craft."



Untitled, 2008
Stoneware
23 1/2 x 3 1/2 x 6 in. (59.69 x 8.89 x 15.24
cm)
ID # 0949

“I’m interested in bringing in to focus what is seen in one’s peripheral vision on the streets of a city – pedestrians, workers, homeless people, accidents, parades, crimes, police actions to name a few... This periphery is an important existential terrain from which I pour narratives of everyday life into my clay work.”

— Arnie Zimmerman, 2010

Untitled depicts two male figures on a ladder: one is beginning to climb up while the other looks down from the top rung, as if in cahoots or collaboration. The figures are dressed in the historical horizontal striped blue and white prison jumpsuits, which appear to have caught on fire. While inconclusive, the scene is suggestive of a jailbreak in action, an attempt to escape danger, or possibly a depiction of the precarious conditions within which the two inmates are forced to labor.

The work reflects Zimmerman’s longstanding interest in illuminating, through a realist lens, the experiences of working class city dwellers and other marginalized figures cast aside and consigned to oblivion by the relentless processes of gentrification and urban renewal. In such works, he cites as inspiration Gilfoyle’s *A Pickpocket’s Tale: The Underworld of Nineteenth-Century New York*, Scorsese’s *The Gangs of New York*, and Lang’s *Metropolis*, as well as his own observations of New York in the 30-odd years he lived there from 1980.

The work was exhibited in 2008 as part of a large installation titled *Walled City*, wherein it formed just one component of a sprawling matrix of urban vignettes and architectural fragments rendered in clay.

t A N J A g R U N E R T

Arnie Zimmerman (b. 1954, Poughkeepsie, NY; d. 2021, Hudson, NY) was best known for creating ceramic sculptures that redefined ambition and scale in the field of ceramics. His work, ranging from the monumental to the miniature, from the figurative to the abstract, embodies his fearless exploration of surface, color, and form. For Zimmerman, “clay is the mother of all physical art materials. Humans used it first for utilitarian objects and to express the mysterious connections to the spirit world. They processed it with water, shaped it by hand, dried it in air and made it permanent with fire.” He was a lover of history and the ways in which ceramics can provide a deep connection to humanity as a form of historical record. His lifelong commitment to clay was his continued endeavor to “walk in the truth of the infinite ways humans have used this material.”

Zimmerman’s art is included in the permanent collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Smithsonian American Art Museum, and Brooklyn Museum, among others. In 2021, his work appeared in the Metropolitan Museum exhibition, “Shapes From Out of Nowhere.” He received fellowships and awards from organizations including the National Endowment for the Arts, Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation and New York Foundation for the Arts.

Izzy’s Room was founded by Zimmerman and Ann Rosenthal, his wife, in 2016 to honor their daughter, Isabel (Izzy) Rosenthal Zimmerman (1992–2016). The space is dedicated to showcasing select works created by Arnie Zimmerman spanning more than four decades of artistic practice in ceramics. Every year a new exhibition is installed at Izzy’s Room, which is free and open to the public by appointment. Standing in front of Izzy’s Room is one of Arnie’s ceramic fountains, “Fool’s Fountain,” installed in a pool designed by the artist.