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Cascading, 2014, 54 x 66
inches; oil on canvas.

UNDERWATER REVERIES

Known for paintings of solitary figures submerged in water, Bay Area artist **ERIC ZENER** has made swimmers the subjects of allegories of contemporary life.

by Jason Edward Kaufman





Suspended beneath the surface of swimming pools and surrounded by bubbles, the figures Eric Zener paints express solitude, vulnerability, and a feeling of escape from the world into silent introspection. The mid-career realist based in Mill Valley, California, has painted aquatic subjects for decades, typically women or men immersed in pools or the sea, or jumping off diving boards etched against the sky. He also paints lone figures canoeing, sleeping, or walking tightropes. Some of the women

are nudes, others are in swimwear, and the men tend to wear business suits. Their faces turned away, they appear consumed in personal reflection.

Considering how convincingly he depicts the anatomy of his subjects, and the light ricocheting and reflecting around their watery surroundings, it is hard to believe that Zener is entirely self-taught. Born in 1966 in Astoria, Oregon, he was raised in a cultural household in Encinitas, a surf town near San Diego. His father was a psychologist, his mother was

involved with music, and his grandmother a painter. When he wasn't surfing, Zener explored his creative side by making art, but he gave it up at the University of California, Santa Barbara, where he earned a degree in psychology, played in a rock band, and took a single art class. He picked up the brush again while backpacking around the world, creating a visual diary of his journey and honing his skills. He ended up in Sydney, Australia, where his professional life as a painter began with shows in local galleries.



He married in 1997 and settled in San Francisco, where his career took off. Now divorced, he and his former wife, Julie Condensa Zener, have three children.

Zener has completed more than 1,000 artworks, mostly oil paintings—some as large as 6 x 8 feet—and mixed media pieces in which he paints on photographs encased in sheets of transparent resin. He exhibits his work mainly in the United States and periodically in Europe and Asia. Among the notable collectors are actor Julia Roberts, New York real estate mogul

Arthur Zeckendorf, former president of Paramount Pictures Adam Goodman, Hainan Airlines founder Guoqing Chen, and New York philanthropist John Arnhold. Zener's primary dealers are Hespe Gallery in San Francisco and Gallery Henoch in New York.

Speaking from his beachside studio in Sausalito, Eric Zener told us about the near-death experience that led to his love-fear relationship with water, the metaphors embedded in his subjects, and his ongoing commercial success. ▶

From left: Surfacing, 2006, 60 x 70 inches, oil on canvas; A Launching Into, 2015, 54 x 66, oil on canvas.



Coming Back Together, 2014,
54 x 66, oil on canvas.

How did you come to focus on people in and around water?

I've been painting the water for 20 years, and the truth is, it just started to slowly sneak its way into whatever I was painting. There was a period when I painted a lot of dilettantes on the rooftops of San Francisco, women drinking wine or asleep on a chair while a man serenades her with a guitar. But in the background was the ocean, or somebody walking along the ocean. Water started to percolate into the imagery more when my former wife was pregnant with our daughter. The water started to represent something to me outside of the usual aquatic fun, swimming, and athleticism. It really became more of a platform for concepts like personal transformation, risk, vulnerability, and the ability to escape from the noise and stress of daily life by just plunging under the water.

What keeps you painting water?

I have some historical attachment to it, just because water's part of my enjoyment and daily life. I used to surf, and I try to swim at least five days a week. But I've had near-death experiences, near-drowning experiences with water. It's just lurking there all the time, and it's obviously manifested itself into how I want to tell visual stories with my painting.

What near-death experiences?

The big one was white-water rafting, which I will *never* do again. It was on the Rogue River in Oregon, about a year before I got married, so 1995 or 1996. I went for a weeklong, crazy trip with a guide and a bunch of other naïve people who got in over their heads. There were those big yellow rafts you see pictures of with everybody sitting on the edge. You could elect to do that, or you could go next to them in a two-man canoe. That's what I was in.

We super capsized. We had all pulled over to go over strategy on how to get around this bend to avoid Maytagging. That's named after the washing machine, and it's what happens if you fall into what's called a "hole" where water rushes past a rock and circles back. There was a monster at this rock nicknamed Jaws. Of course, within one second, we got sucked into the hole.

The force of the water is so strong that it doesn't matter if you're wearing a life jacket or not at that point. I bounced around for a while and there were multiple attempts to get me out that failed. Basically, you just get to the point where you start to give up. It's a scary moment. You think you'll fight forever and it's weird when you stop. I was underwater and looking up through the water, and I was actually thinking

about my grandmother. I don't know why, but I remember thinking about her. I was relaxed and all of a sudden there was this head I could see through the abstract of the water. These hands come down into the water, and he pulls me out and into the raft. It was a guide on another raft. The name of the guy who saved me was Eric Zarenner—almost the same as my name. Anyway, I couldn't wait to go home.

I've also had a lot of moments surfing that have scared the crap out of me. The point is that I have a very big love-hate relationship with water. I'm a great swimmer, but I'm going to be the last guy to swim out to the buoy half a mile offshore and back. I get very uncomfortable when I'm not near an edge. It could be because somewhere in the subconscious, I've tasted the power of how vulnerable water can make you.

Most of your subjects are women in or near water. Why is that?

There's probably a couple of reasons. I know it can sound like such a fake answer to say, "Water is the womb of life." But deep inside, I think there is a maternal aspect to water. And I like the aesthetic of painting women perhaps more than men, though I do paint men for different reasons. I think the beauty of the female figure in the water stands on its own aesthetically.

You have painted nudes, but most of your women are in bathing suits, more like recreational swimmers than embodiments of metaphor.

I don't put too much thought into the bathing costume. It's more about the energy of the piece, the power or the serenity, or in some cases that sense of vulnerability and fear. I feel that everything I paint has a similar message: That water, especially being immersed in water, is a place for personal transformation. It's a place to escape, to surrender for a little bit away from the world above.

You paint mostly individual figures rather than multifigure compositions. Are you emphasizing the solitude?

Yes, that sense of vulnerability. Ninety percent of the time I obscure the faces because I want you to feel that could be you. I've done paintings of people floating on rafts and of many people in the water. Those are more about the egalitarian nature of the beach or the water. I love that fact that when you're looking down at a pool full of people or a beach full of people, once everybody's stripped of their urban costume, the millionaire laughing in the waves standing next to the house cleaner, they're suddenly the same. >

FINDING A LIFE IN ART

Was water an important part of your life growing up?

Surfing was pretty much my entire existence: surf team in high school, surf after school, before school. At the time, Encinitas was a very earthy, artistic, seaside community, a kind of posthippie, macramé- and fern-infested, surf town.

How did you become an artist?

I was around creativity a lot. My dad played a little bit of guitar. My mom played violin with the San Francisco Symphony before I was born. My aunt was a painter. My grandfather was friends with some of the Hemingways. Mariel Hemingway was my babysitter. My grandmother was a prolific painter, not a professional artist, but it was a very active hobby. I have memories of going to her studio in Sun Valley, Idaho, and staring at giant Cézanne books and all of her paintings—point being that it was a big part of life.



Counterclockwise from left: *Anonymous Time Traveler*, 2010, 64 x 88 inches, oil on canvas; *Can Opener*, 2008, 60 x 48 inches, oil on canvas; *How to Disappear Completely*, 2006, 38 x 48, oil on canvas; *Much Clearer Down Below*, 2011, 60 x 78, oil on canvas.

My family convinced me that it's okay to express yourself creatively. I entered the art world with a naïve bravado, the sense that, "Well, yeah, of course you can be an artist."

Then when I went to college at UCSB, I don't really know why, but I stopped painting. I fell into a different peer group and got caught up in college life. I majored in psychology and took one art class.

What kindled your return to making art?

When I graduated from school, I had no direction, no intrinsic ambition professionally. I moved

to Los Angeles and got a job in a department store and was completely miserable. A little lightbulb went off about my childhood and I began pouring literally *all* of my free time into painting like crazy. That's all I did. I would come home for lunch and paint. I'd paint after work. I'd paint on the weekend. I just painted and painted and painted. At the time, it was more of a cathartic reaction to not being fulfilled with other things.

Through a little bit of luck and support through friends, people started validating the work and started buying it. I started getting little shows, but it was really

unintentional. I wasn't out there purposefully trying to create an art career. Then after about a year, I realized, "Wait a minute. I really like doing this, I'm not that bad, and people are wanting more." I pulled the plug at about 22 or 23 and sold everything. I had very little experience with museums and traveling outside of my little bubble in California, so I backpacked around the world for a year and a half, visiting the major museums, and immersing myself in cultures, experience, and life. Not to overdramatize it, but it was like a spiritual awakening—that this is my calling, hell or high water. >



Can you speak to having no formal training as an artist?

I have no training in art history or studio work at all. Along the way, I was painting and painting, using whatever I could find—watercolors, tempera, whatever they had in some little town. I was trading little watercolors for accommodations at pensiones and youth hostels. I painted my trip. They were usually pastoral scenes of some Greek village or the Maasai in Africa. It was more of a visual diary. They're not my best work. If I had them now, I wouldn't show them to anybody. But I was finding myself as a young man, and also finding myself as an artist.

What was life like when you got to San Francisco?

I had ended my trip in Sydney, Australia, where my parents had moved. My mom championed me, and it was encouraging. Maybe a year later I came to San Francisco. That's when this whole professional successful journey started and grew, and grew, and grew. I had two studios in San Francisco from the early '90s until about eight years ago. I was about two blocks off of Union Square in the Tenderloin. Charles Hesper had a small neighborhood gallery and was the first guy to give me a break. I really liked the energy of the city, but I got married in '97 and lived across the Bay, and now that I have three kids I've moved my studio to Sausalito nearby.

Your subjects are not all people in water. There are men in suits, rowers, beach panoramas. You've also painted sleeping people, a nature series in the woods, brightly colored water slides. Can you take me through the trajectory of the different subjects and how you came upon them?

The way I look at it, they're all really about the same thing. They're all about being alone and shutting your eyes for 10 minutes on the bus and just letting yourself disappear. We talked about the solitude in water. Sleep is, to me, very, very similar. The sheets are like the tide.

Do your dreams influence your work?

Not directly, but I'm a massive dreamer.

What other experiences have impacted your work?

When my first kid was in elementary school they sent them off for a week to nature camp. I volunteered as a chaperone. It was in this gorgeous part of Northern California. All the parents had something to do, but for some reason there was no job for me. There was no coffee, no cell phones, no radio, no TV—basically, a week of solitude. In the day, I'd walk for six hours through this beautiful forest and draw, read, or take pictures. It wasn't like I was stuck in the wilderness. I could walk back to the camp in 20 minutes. But to be alone in nature for a week, that great stillness affected me. I found it relating to these other subjects, and it's a reason I make paintings of nature.

Have you been influenced by David Hockney, another California painter known for pictures of pools?

I've been looking at Hockney's work forever. I can appreciate and relate to his sense of California light. I can relate to his sense of the quintessential lifestyle of Los Angeles pool dilettante-style living. It's part of my culture here on the West Coast. He's the maestro.

Do you listen to music while you work? What music inspires you?

All the time. I love Radiohead. The lead singer and songwriter, Thom Yorke, is an artist that I relate to. A lot of his lyrics are about loneliness, struggle, searching for your personal truth, being vulnerable, and trying to find the answer with all of your limitations. They deal with love. They deal with loss. They deal with searching. I just relate to it, and plus, I like that music anyway.

I'm attracted to the fragility of the human psyche. I like those moments where you're forced to be introspective when you're alone, when you're scared, when you're the guy on the tightrope, when you're alone in the woods, when you're the little head in the giant sea just treading water. I'm attracted to that weird space when you're a little kid, and you're standing at the end of a diving board. You want nothing more than to jump, but you're paralyzed with fear. You're stuck there. I think that's when we're so profoundly human and vulnerable. ▶



From top right: It Takes Two, 2012, 30 x 40, oil on canvas; The Choice, 2002, 12 x 54, oil on canvas.

PAINTING PROCESS

What is a typical day for you?

I have the kids every other week, and those days get chopped up with their activities. I usually deal more with the business side of my art practice those weeks. When I don't have them, I can shut the door of the studio, crank the tunes, and just be an artist. The studio is right on the water, a 5-minute drive from home. It's around 2,000 square feet with a large space on the second floor with windows. It's a quiet, idyllic setting. I open the door and there's a beach maybe 100 yards away, a little French restaurant, sailboats.

Do you work on more than one piece at the same time?

I wish I could. But I get so obsessed on one thing at a time. I might take a break and go varnish another finished painting, but I can't create two things at once. I can't do it. I tend to work in series. For example, the water slides, or the businessmen, or some splash paintings, or the girl in the water. There is a chunk of paintings, so I'm in that space.

Whatever it is, I will usually do a fresh photo shoot if I don't already have photos. I have a library of thousands of pictures by now from all the photo shoots. I don't have a pool, but I have lots of resources with homeowners and recreational places that have pools. I'll get models in the pool, or the ocean, on a bed—whatever it is, and take 500 pictures in three hours. I basically just get in the water and hold the shutter down with some plan. I'll have them do what I want them to do, but it's not set up perfectly. I just get in there and float around with them and take a bunch of pictures. Ninety-five percent of them are throwaways, but within that shoot there's going to be usually a handful of really nice references.

Then I use the photograph sort of like a police-chalk outline. I don't care about the lighting in the pool. I just want the figure. If you were sitting in a chair in front of me, I can draw you, but I can't draw underwater, and it's hard for the brain to really see how the anatomy works of somebody swimming above you. I need something to look at, so I'll use the



photograph as my starting point, and change things. If the leg or the arm is not perfect, I'll change that in the drawing on the canvas.

When you transfer the image to the canvas, do you project it?

I don't. I use hand-drawn grids so I don't lose my sense of scale when drawing. I don't need to project it because I'm just really drawing the outline. I use a pencil, really light with maybe the anchor points a little darker. They're very anemic drawings.

There's no muscle tone, no detail, just an outline to say, "Boom. This is my core element." I'll get a little more detailed if it's a commission.

Can you describe the painting process?

I tend to paint the painting three times. First, I do a thinly painted version usually in some sort of gray scale, a bluish gray or black and white. That's just to lock everything in for me to start to define where the shadow is, where the light is. It's really rough,

like a drawing with paint. I wait for the paint to dry and usually can jump back on it again the next day or so.

I paint everything from back to front, which isn't unusual for most figurative realism artists. I'll paint the background—the water or sky—first, wet on wet, and really get those nice blends in there, and start to direct the eye where the light is coming from. Sometimes there's a lot more than just a blue background. It could be a painting of one of the divers where you have clouds and maybe some



From left: *Cradle*, 2010, 66 x 88, oil on canvas; *The Great Escape*, 2010, 48 x 60, oil on canvas.

landscape or architecture. Then I work on the figure. Then usually the bubbles, or whatever is in front of the subject. This next step brings it pretty close to what it's going to be. At a quick glance, it might even look done. Then you just stare at it like a madman for a couple of days.

The final stage of painting is more like editing. You're adding things, changing things, and you look at stuff that you hate and change it. I think it's the most creative part, because up until then you're still married to your original photograph. When you abandon all that, that's when you start to get more creative.

How do you choose the models?

Everybody wants to be painted, so it's not hard to find people. I have like 10 or so people who keep coming back, guys and girls. They're usually friends who feel really comfortable with me, and I feel comfortable with

them. There have been times when I've hired somebody for something specific, like when I was doing some diving pieces a few years ago, and I wanted somebody who really knew what he or she was doing. It's not that hard finding people.

Do you manipulate the images digitally?

I make the composition digitally at times. I'll drag the pictures into the computer, and if I find one I like I can play with it a little bit. I can crop it and Frankenstein things. I'll see I got lucky with a beautiful shot, but her legs are all wacky, so I can use legs from somebody else or another moment in the shoot. Photoshop is great for doing the Frankensteining. I'm not that good, but I can do it. Then I'll print it and square it up using the grid. I'm not beautiful at drawing, so I'd rather lock in the blueprint and draw with paint. That's what I know how to do. ▶

You have a real talent for depicting bubbles, reflections, and splashes of light in the water. Painting those details must be almost second nature to you by now.

I don't need the photograph for that stuff. I could just hang people by ropes in the studio and I would be fine. I just need the pose. Everything else I make up. The bubbles are all made up. I might be influenced by my own photograph, but it would be really hard to photograph exactly what I'm painting. The lighting is what I love painting. You can really move the viewer's eye and create mood with light and shadow. To try to plot and plan all that in a swimming pool or the beach would just be a fool's errand. Weather, coloration of the water, that's a mess for photographers to sort out. Not me.

Do you always work in oil and not acrylic?

Only oil on canvas with a gesso ground. Twenty or 30 years ago I worked in acrylic, but I prefer oil. It's just habit at this point. I love the ability to blend wet-on-wet. It's much harder to blend with acrylics. I also like the fact that there is a luminosity and a transparency to oil. It's not profoundly opaque, so you can layer after one coat is dry. You can work with different ways to layer and be able to see what's below, which is difficult with other mediums. I suppose you can with watercolor. And I like that it takes a while to dry, because you can keep manipulating it while it's wet. Then I usually varnish them.

Can you talk a bit about the mixed media works you do with Trillium Graphics?

They're somewhere in between printmaking and painting. I don't like to paint two paintings that are essentially the same, but there are some beautiful photographs that never become paintings. We'll mess around in Photoshop to get rid of unwanted background elements, and print them on giant, clear transparency film, typically 4 x 8 feet, almost the size of paintings. Then I build a panel box out of wood, and on the surface of that box I usually do some sort of reflective background like pearlescent paint, or gold or



Left: Zener in his Mill Valley studio. Below: *Taken by the Current*, 2015, 48 x 60 inches, oil on canvas.



silver leafing, to give it a little bit of reflection. Then I pour a layer of clear resin over that, like surfboard resin. Then the transparent film is put on top of that resin after it dries, and then sandwiched with another layer of resin poured on the film. The image is floating in between two layers of resin, and beyond is that reflective surface. These resins capture light better than

the oil paintings, because they're backlit. It's like you're looking at an image on a screen and they always look so beautiful in 1080 pixels or whatever the latest thing is, because light is shining through. Then I take color lithographic ink and really dilute it with drier and turpentine, and I'll paint on the resin. It's the equivalent of Photoshop with your hand. I'll say,

"You know what? I'm going to put a bathing cap on her. I'm going to change the color of the businessman's tie. I'm going to add some clouds."

They don't take as long as painting because you basically have a giant coloring book right in front of you that's essentially finished. I can make more of those, and it's a nice way to satisfy the demand of the galleries. It's impossible for me to produce enough oil paintings. I just can't do it.

How did you come up with that method?

It was Hung Liu when we were working at Trillium. She's a great artist and definitely a business mentor of mine. Her paintings fetch six figures. One day she's like, "You know what? Let's pour some resin on this stuff and paint on it." We were like, "Yeah, cool. Let's try it." She technically invented it, and she's been kind enough to let me borrow it. We're good friends.

COMMERCIAL SUCCESS

What is the price range for your works?

Standard paintings retail for mid-\$30,000s to mid-\$60,000s. When I do commission work and really large-scale work, then obviously it can go much, much higher. Resins are about half of that. Prints are about \$1,000. I do print-on-demand. If somebody wants my imagery and it's not in his or her budget, I make digital prints on nice paper. I have an assistant >



This page from top, Zener's newest collection of work: Deep Nova, 2017, 48 x 48 inches, oil on canvas; Escape Hatch, 2017, 70 x 60 inches, oil on canvas. Opposite: The Crossing, 2008, 12 x 40 inches, mixed resin.



who helps with the business side of the studio and she also manages my printing.

In addition to your website, you have a lot of images represented in online gallery sites, like 1stdibs, Artsy, and Artnet. And thousands of pictures on Pinterest. Is that a source of sales?

I didn't even know I was on Pinterest. I never look. I'm just not really into social media. I know I probably should be more. I have an Instagram page that is totally anemic. Every blue moon, I'll put a picture on there. My daughter says I'm stupid to not do it, so she makes me. She's 19 now and, of course, knows everything. I have a Facebook page that also is relatively unused. I can't remember ever selling anything through my own social media.

Who buys your work and where do they display it?

I rarely know who, how, why a transaction's gone on through the gallery. If it's a commission, I'm intimately involved, and repeat collectors that I've known for years who have bought 20 paintings, I know when they've bought one. But I really don't know most of the collectors.

Can you talk a little about your commissions?

I absolutely love doing commissions because I enjoy getting to know the people that live with my work. I make these paintings, they go to galleries, then they go to somebody's house, and that's it. They're gone. It's really neat to get to know the owners and they end up having a better experience with the work because they get to know me. It makes the painting live better.

What kind of commissions have you done?

It's a big part of my business. The commissions are usually some sort of cousin of the paintings in the galleries. Somebody will say, "God, I really, really love that piece. I'd love to have something similar, but bigger or smaller." Or, "Would you consider painting my wife in that pose?" Sometimes, it's a completely fresh and unique idea that we will come up with together, but I have a hard



line that I won't make anything for somebody that I wouldn't make anyway. If it's a great idea, then I'll go outside the box a little, but usually it's a version of something they've seen before.

Have you gotten many commissions for commercial environments?

Lots. Last year I did a commission for Le Méridien, a big hotel in Washington, D.C. It was massive—a 15 x 8-foot painting of a lonely businessman walking across a tightrope. It's hung right above the bar with all the Scotch bottles below. It was a really cool picture. I'm in a lot of corporate and institutional places, but they're not household names.

You have a piece in the Walt Disney collection in Burbank. Any other big corporate collectors?

That's the one area that I really would love to expand into more—institutional collections and museums. That's a really tough nut to crack. I'm doing just fine in the commercial residential world. I'm actually pretty happy with that part of my career. But all artists dream of the next big thing. It's human nature to aspire to what is possible. It could just be ego as well, but I would love the validation of more historically significant museums and important corporate collections putting a feather in my cap.

Many realist artists paint beautiful pictures, but the work is not considered cutting-edge.

That's the curse of just making pretty things. I believe my imagery has a long shelf life in terms of its aesthetic and its message, but it doesn't have the shock value that often grabs the interest of a museum that's looking for what's hot right now.

Your visual language is akin to photorealism. Do you think of yourself in relation to that 1970s school?

No, not at all. I appreciate the compliment sometimes, but this is another fallacy of the Internet. When you're looking at one of my paintings as a 4 x 3-inch backlit JPEG on a laptop, people always say, "Well, I can't believe it's not a photograph." When you see it in person, from 15 feet away, at a glance, you could relate it to a Robert Bechtle or Richard Estes, but they're full of imperfections and the human hand. I don't want them to be photorealistic. I'd like them to be more under the general heading of just realism. They're certainly not hyperrealistic. They're like the cousin of photorealism. I want them to not be perfect. That's what I appreciate.

Your last issue had a beautiful article on Gerhard Richter. He is my hero. In the massive library of work he's done over his career, there

are some pieces that are just crazy borderline hyperrealism. In a glance, they're really perfect, but up close they're not. You see the struggle. You see the human hand. As artists, we love to investigate things. You can see the changes that are buried in there. I appreciate that way more than somebody who can just fool me into thinking it's a photograph. I may be amazed by the technique, but I don't care.

Do you always spend weeks or more on a painting?

I wish I could go a little faster. My dealers would be a lot happier, but I paint something like 20 or 25 paintings a year. So that's around every two or three weeks.

Do you have any plans for new series or subjects?

I plan on doing more metaphorical narratives, mainly with the man in the suit. I like the allegory of insecurity in the world these days. I also want to play with different palettes.

Are you surprised to have developed such a thriving career?

I know that good fortune landed my way, and I appreciate that. I don't take it for granted. ♦