

LENNON, WEINBERG, INC.

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Joseph Zito

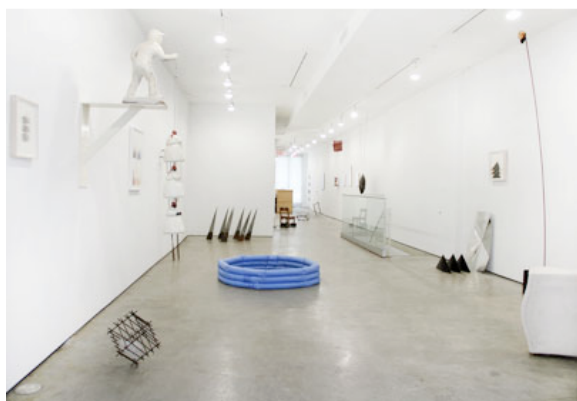
Stevenson, Jonathan. "Stern Verve: Joseph Zito at Lennon, Weinberg." *Two Coats of Paint*, August 19, 2015, <http://www.twocoatsofpaint.com/2015/08/stern-verve-joseph-zito-at-lennon.html>

SHARON BUTLER

TWO COATS OF PAINT

Stern verve: Joseph Zito at Lennon Weinberg

Contributed by [Jonathan Stevenson](#) /



Installation view at Lennon, Weinberg

The artist's weight in ominous lead slabs, a combat helmet spilling with rose petals – in another artist's hands these conceptual pieces would probably seem trite or overbearing. But Joseph Zito's unerringly fine calibrations of irony combined with his formidable technical range and astutely Gober-esque deployment of different materials – all on full display in installations cagily concatenated for a thirty-year retrospective at Lennon Weinberg in Chelsea – enables him to steamroller cliché and proceed directly to cool-eyed poignancy.

The practically unliftable slabs of *My Weight in Lead* (1992) are strung together like rungs in a rope ladder, amplifying their uselessness and perhaps anticipating a weary, post-Serra point of view. Indeed, a key to Zito's efficacy is his controlled infusion of what he calls "primal emotions" into objects he admits are outwardly Minimalist/Conceptual. Zito uses size and especially negative space to lend nuance to his angst. *Adrift* (2013), a tiny bronze dory, created in an "edition of one," fixed in a southeasterly slant on an expanse of white wall, embodies not just objecthood but solitude and its perpetual nature. In *Stand Still God Damn It* (2012), an hourglass with unmoving red sands imparts the creeping agony of time's passage.

A virtuously restless artist, Zito also drills into more particular political and social issues such as war and race. The helmet of *Untitled (helmet)* (2005) is not a genuine soldier's cover but rather a translucent facsimile made of cast glass laid on a truncated steel



My Weight in Lead, 1992



Stand Still Goddamn It, 2012

pedestal: sprinkled with flowers, it's a sardonic comment that a helmet's protection is substantially illusory, and that military death, while dutifully beautified and memorialized, remains mainly unseen, at foot level. The seven metal points rising aggressively from the floor nearby, resembling a missile array, are notably higher, as are the infant body bags fading heavenward in *Ascension* (2005). Three painted copper cookie jars shaped like black housemaids hanging on a tether from a lawn jockey's hand in *Mammy* (1996) sound a sweet note when struck, signifying the disguised corrosiveness of whites' subjugation of blacks, and prefiguring work like Nick Cave's.

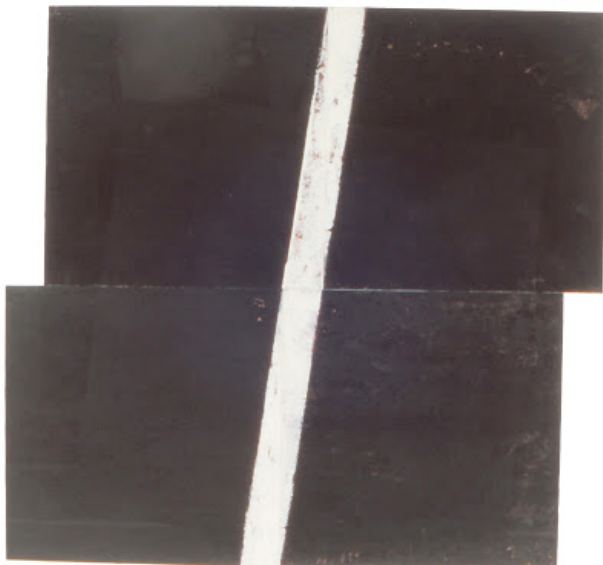
Zito's work on paper is comparably penetrating and resourceful. Gunpowder drawings trenchantly capture the morbid transience of war. In the magisterially economical oil-on-paper *For Max* (1988), two

staggered, imperfect black rectangles intersected by a bold white line suggest at once the temporary utility and the ultimate futility of manmade order.

Perhaps the crowning set of pieces in the retrospective consists three spare watercolors – one of a spectrally white chair tilted on its side and floating near the top edge of the frame, another of a toppled ashen black chair situated near the bottom edge, and a third of a blood-red chair similarly positioned, all titled *The Red Chair* (2015)– hung near an identically named hydrostone cast of the studio chair Zito used for decades. He obliterated the original chair in the very act of making the sculpture. If that is the chair's grave, the images in the paintings represent its physical absence, its ghostly presence, and possibly its lasting inspiration. These pieces may be Zito's way of saying that artists must get up and move on, while never forgetting. As he does himself, with stern resolve and passionate verve.



Adrift, 2013



For Max, 1988



The Red Chair, 2015

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Joseph Zito

Haber, John. "Growing Up With Minimalism." Haber Arts, July 29, 2015,
<http://www.haberarts.com/2015/07/growing-up-with-minimalism/>.

GROWING UP WITH MINIMALISM

John Haber in New York City

I remember *Mammy*. I wish I remembered Joseph Zito some other way, but this work has a way of getting under one's skin.

Three cookie jars, in a form still recognizable from the likes of Aunt Jemima, hang like a single chain from the hand of a strikingly white lawn jockey. Willie Cole has since brought that icon up to date, as an African divine messenger, but Zito's has never left planet earth. Rest assured that he has cast those jars in bronze, and, his gallery swears, they "yield a lovely bell-tone when struck with a wooden mallet." I can hardly wait.



In fact, Joseph Zito has been getting under one's skin for some time now, while revitalizing Minimalism, in what a show calls "The First Thirty Years." The very title has the phony ring of birthday reassurances to the elderly, although the artist is still in his fifties, with room to grow. He also chooses his targets carefully, at Lennon, Weinberg through September 26, based on what gets under his skin. Zito grew up as an Italian American in the racial mix of Brooklyn, where he still lives and works, and he hit upon *Mammy* while nursing his outrage at the racism disguised as scholarship of *The Bell Curve*. A seeming abstraction of five rectangles from 1992, *My Weight in Lead*, is just as impersonal and just as close to home. They, too descend from a single point on the wall, connected by

steel wire that trails off unnervingly close to the floor.

Does *Mammy* hurt so much because it appeared in 1996, between the all-absorbing irony of, say, Richard Prince and the greater cynicism of Jeff Koons? It came between two distinct bodies of work for Zito as well, neither one much concerned for popular appeal and neither one simply appropriation. Taken together, they challenge one to make connections. They begin in 1985, with *First Cut*, maybe because the first cut is still the deepest. It consists of a single slit in the wall, barely three inches wide and eighteen inches tall, lined with

steel. Yet things really get going in the early 1990s, in what became his first show with his present dealer, then in Soho.

The rusted steel and lead share their edge and materials with **Richard Serra**—but also their intimacy with **Richard Tuttle**, their care with **Martin Puryear**, their deliberate clumsiness with **Joel Shapiro**, their semblance of household furniture with **Robert Gober** or **Doris Salcedo**, and their body imagery with Post-Minimalists like **Eva Hesse**. Seven spikes rise from the floor, leaving one to decide between focusing on the danger of their points or the regularity of their tilted rows. The bottom few inches of each spike has lost its sheen, connecting them by an imagined polyhedron in brown. Two weathered copper disks, bound together, could be primitive armor, lethal weapons, or a body coming apart. In each case, though, imagery is at most implicit, and metaphor is out of the question. All that changes after *Mammy*.

The concern for raw materials does not change, and neither does the damage they can suffer or inflict. A ball of shining steel rests trapped in a network of rusted steel rods. They do, though, become instantly recognizable—and pointedly unlike the thing that one recognizes. The gap between image and object may lie in materials, as with rose petals spilling out from an opaque glass helmet onto a steel slab. It may lie in the dimension of time, as with an hourglass with red sand that refuses to trickle down to a matching red base. It may lie instead in scale and space, as with small chairs poised unstably.

The materials and their scale may allude to childhood, like a drapery of infant body bags and an inflatable backyard pool holding only iron weights. They may allude, too, to an always uncertain passage to adulthood, like the hollow keel of a single ship as *Adrift*. They most certainly draw on the artist's everyday surroundings, like a red armchair from his studio cast like statuary.

They may border on the obvious, especially when the artist reaches for words and one learns that the hourglass is *Stand Still Goddamn It*. Another chair turns slowly on its side, the time of its descent taken from bodies falling on 9/11. They are spare and pointed all the same—enough that I may finally forget *Mammy*.