

46 General Idea

1969 – 1994

Untitled (Ziggurat Painting #1)

acrylic on canvas, on verso signed General Idea on the tacking margin of the stretched canvas and dated 1968
106 x 72 in, 269.2 x 182.9 cm

PROVENANCE

By descent within the family of Felix Partz, a member of the General Idea collective, Winnipeg

LITERATURE

John Bentley Mays, “Hot Pink Pyramids: Antiques of the 60’s,” *The Globe and Mail*, September 18, 1982, page E15
General Idea and Jan Debbaut, *General Idea 1968–1984*, Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, 1984, page 25
John Bentley Mays, “The Power of the Brushstroke Continues,” *The Globe and Mail*, January 1, 1991, page C3
Denise Leclerc and Pierre Dessureault, *The 60s in Canada*, National Gallery of Canada, 2005, page 82
AA Bronson, *Ziggurat: General Idea 1968–1994*, 2017, page 7

THE INTERNATIONALLY CELEBRATED Canadian collaborative General Idea (active 1969 to 1994) was composed of AA Bronson (b. Michael Tims, Vancouver, 1946); Felix Partz (b. Ronald Gabe, Winnipeg, 1945, d. Toronto, 1994); and Jorge Zontal (b. Slobodan Saia-Levi, Parma, 1944, d. Toronto, 1994). Together they produced a powerful body of work ranging from video to performance, painting, sculpture, installations, public interventions, magazines and an array of editions and multiples.

Each separately gravitated to the counter-cultural underground in Toronto in summer 1969, and soon began living and working together. Initially they were active in Rochdale College’s adjunct Theatre Passe Muraille, producing a number of set designs and their own performance work. In the beginning they were less a troika, but a fluid, amorphous cultural “happening,” in the parlance of the 1960s, part of a veritable army of collaborators. By the mid-1970s Bronson, Partz and Zontal had established themselves as General Idea, a three-man collaborative who stated, “Our three sets of eyes perform a single point of view.”

The focus of General Idea’s early seminal work was an exploration of how the artist, the creative process and the art industry—i.e., the museum, the media and critical inquiry—interact to create “culture.” To explore these they created a labyrinthine fictional narrative: Miss General Idea, then The 1984 Miss General Idea Pageant and The 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion, centred on the construct of the beauty pageant as a simulacrum and critique of the art world. That extraordinary narrative defined their work from 1971 to 1977, during which they created installations, performances and video/audio works. In 1977, General Idea destroyed their Pavillion and from roughly 1979 to 1985, they effectively became archaeologists searching the ruins for artifacts. Their work then focused on the object, and the performance dimension vanished.

By 1987 General Idea shifted its focus to the AIDS epidemic. Appropriating Robert Indiana’s iconic painting *LOVE* (1966), General Idea created an AIDS logo and began a publicity campaign for the previously unmentionable disease, producing paintings, installations, public interventions and more, until General Idea’s

dissolution after the deaths of Partz and Zontal from AIDS in 1994. Since then, AA Bronson has worked as a solo artist.

Untitled (Ziggurat Painting #1) is a rare important early work, painted in 1968 by Gabe (Partz) in Winnipeg, before he actually met his partners. Like the seven others in the series, this historically significant painting consists of interlocking ziggurat motifs, each identical, which together fill the field, leaving no background. It uses four flat colours, placed so that no two ziggurats of the same colour are adjacent to each other. One of those colours is unprimed unpainted canvas; a second is a standard artists’ acrylic; a third is a fluorescent acrylic; the fourth is a designer house paint, a special line of latex paint of more intense colours that most manufacturers were producing at the time for more design-conscious clients. Bronson explains the genesis of the idea: “Whether it was the stepped structures of Mesopotamia and Egypt or the woven intricacies of tribal carpets is unclear; but the pattern had established itself in his mind.”

Bronson also recounts that from 1973 onwards the ziggurat motif was “woven into the fabric of much that we did together and so we decided at a later date [1982] to claim the series as General Idea paintings, although they were executed immediately before we actually began together. At that point we named each painting after one of the ‘female’ characters in our ongoing semi-fictional narrative.” The ziggurat motif was also incorporated as a patterned decoration in The 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion, “massing studies” for the fictional structure as realized in the *V.B. Gown Series* (1975) and as the overall ground plan for the Pavillion itself, as outlined in *The Ruins of the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion* (1977).

The titled paintings were first shown unstretched, pinned to the walls, in *Ziggurat Paintings 1968–69* at Carmen Lamanna Gallery, Toronto, in 1982. Art critic John Bentley Mays wrote that “these six canvases are proof that the perversity and arrogance, arch mannerism and attention to history and architecture were in the work of General Idea right at the obscure outset,” and “best read as burlesques of the dead serious minimalist and hard edge painting of the late 60s.” In this titled group, *Mimi* is Mimi Paige, Miss General Idea 1968; *Granada* is Granada Gazelle, Miss General Idea 1969; *Carmen*, titled for dealer Carmen Lamanna (all collection of Art Gallery of Ontario); *Honey* is Honey Novick, Miss General Idea 1970; *Marcel* is Michael Morris, Miss General Idea 1971 (both private collection, Toronto); *Pascal* is Stuart Murray, who performed as the “chanteuse” in *The 1971 Miss General Idea Pageant* (National Gallery of Canada).

In 1986, General Idea revisited the ziggurat motif in *1968 General Idea Series* and *1968 General Idea Shaped Ziggurat Paintings Series*, which were based on Gabe’s initial 1968 drawings. New York’s Museum of Modern Art acquired *Untitled (Ziggurat Painting #2)* in 2018.

We thank Fern Bayer, guest curator for and author of *The Search for the Spirit: General Idea 1968–1975*, Art Gallery of Ontario, 1997–1998, and of *Catalogue Raisonné, Editions 1967–1995*, included in the book *General Idea Editions: 1967–1995* by Barbara Fischer, for contributing the above essay.

Untitled (Ziggurat Painting #1) will be included in Bayer’s forthcoming publication, *General Idea Catalogue Raisonné of Works 1967–1995*.

ESTIMATE: \$70,000 – 90,000

