John Zurier

Not unlike abstract painter Robert Ryman, Berkeley-based artist John Zurier (b. 1956) is concerned with “the stuff of painting”: the wave of the canvas; the expression and movement of the brushstroke; the thickness of the stretchers; the area of the compositional plane; the relationship of the picture to the wall; the ingredients and variants of paint; the hardware that binds the work together; the marks embedded in layers of paint; and the infinite possibilities of surface texture. In other words, Zurier’s compositions often begin in relation to a specific color he has seen, or a memory of that color. He describes this process as “being haunted by a color; and that color is elsewhere.” Yet this is not an ideal notion of color, in the Platonic sense; instead, it is a process of discovery that brings him back to the physical elements he experiences in the real world.

Unlike Ryman, however, who uniformly restricts himself to white-on-white monochromes, the color spectrum is one of Zurier’s primary concerns and motivations. In fact, Zurier’s compositions often begin in relation to a specific color he has seen, or a memory of that color. He describes this process as “being haunted by a color; and that color is elsewhere.” Yet this is not an ideal notion of color, in the Platonic sense; instead, it is a process of discovery that brings him back to the physical elements he experiences in the real world.

Just as Zurier is absorbed in the object quality of his paintings, so too is he enrobed in the “stuff of the world,” simultaneously immersing himself and observing his natural environment while he works. This might involve reading a stack of poetry books at his home in Berkeley, studying Japanese rock gardens, or following the weather patterns of a remote valley in Iceland. As a result, his surroundings, and the effects of them, infuse his work.

In recent years, Iceland in particular has had a profound impact on the artist’s paintings and watercolors. It is a place he has been visiting regularly since 2011, often spending his summers there, working in a studio, or leading a group of his students. Zurier describes his interest in the land as being complex—it is about inhabiting the natural landscape and observing how time and light constantly change within it. He makes a distinction between working in the landscape and rendering a depiction of the landscape. For him, the latter would be impossible. “To explain this difference, he cites a passage in the book The Atom Station by Iceland’s Nobel laureate Halldór Laxness: “Certainly Nature is in front of us, and behind us; Nature is under and over us, yes, and in us; but most particularly it exists in time, always changing and always passing, never the same; and never in a rectangular frame.”

This past summer, Zurier produced a series of paintings in various sizes on an Icelandic horse farm called Hráðabúðar in the northern region of Skagafjörður, the titles of which all bear the name of the location where they were made (as do many of his other paintings with Icelandic titles). These luminous abstractions evoke the ice, fog, skies, ground, water, and light of the landscape while also tapping into more timeless, poetic states.

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In the small composition Icelandic Painting (12 Drops) (2014), Zurier nails a swatch of linen canvas directly to a board (here the visible nature of the hardware echoes Ryman). The presence of each silver nailhead plays a critical part in the composition: reflections of their metallic surfaces heighten the airiness of the thin washes of watercolor that envelop the short strokes of royal blue that hover, then recede into an indeterminate space. “The less there is to look at,” Zurier explained, “the more you have to look, the more you have to be in the picture.” This is equally true of Zurier’s, and to be in Zurier’s pictures is to luxuriate in painting—in all of its objecthood and poetry.

John Zurier, conversation with the author, August 5, 2014.

3. Ibid.

Apsara DiQuinzio
CURATOR OF MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY ART AND PHILLIS F. WATTS CURATOR MATRIX 255

September 12–December 21, 2014
University of California, Berkeley Art Museum & Pacific Film Archive
The exhibition also includes a selection of watercolors, all made in Iceland in 2014, courtesy of the artist and Gallery Paule Anglim, San Francisco.

Biography
Born in Santa Monica in 1956, Zurier received both his BA (1979) and MFA (1983) from the University of California, Berkeley. Over the past several years Zurier has had solo exhibitions at Peter Blum Gallery, New York; Gallery Paule Anglim, San Francisco; Lawrence Markey Gallery, San Antonio; Galerie Javier Lopez, Madrid; Galerie Nordenhake, Berlin; Patrick de Brock Gallery, Knokke, Belgium; and Galeria Javier Lopez, Madrid. In 2010, he was featured in the 30th Sao Paulo Biennial, The Imminence of Poetics. Other recent group exhibitions include Annual Report: A Year in Exhibitions, The 7th Gwangju Biennial, Gwangju, South Korea (2011); El Genet Blau (The Blue Rider), JIM Contemporani, Barcelona (2011); 2010 California Biennial, Orange County Museum of Art, Newport Beach; UC Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAM/PFA) (2010); and the 2014 Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. The artist lives in Berkeley and works in Oakland, California. MATRIX 255 is Zurier’s first solo exhibition in a museum.