

## John Zurier: Painting Between Autumn and Spring

I WEAR A HAT AGAINST THE SUN. I am often asked why. “Why not wear sunglasses instead?” my interrogators almost as frequently ask. Plainly the unstated assumption of their follow-up question is that hats are an affectation and out of style, whereas sunglasses are practical and always in fashion. “Because sunglasses are dark,” is my reply. “Because they make it impossible for me to see color.” And while amber glasses create a more beautiful overall tonality than gray or green, the effect is the same in relation to the full spectrum that is or should be available to the naked eye. So I opt for the shade of a visor rather than that of tinted lenses.

How many of my art-writing colleagues would be content to shield their eyes from the strain of looking at unfiltered things so long as the filters upon which they rely permit them to read. Indeed, many firmly believe that looking at painting *is* a form of reading, to the extent that their exclusive concern has become identifying and deciphering its codes rather than experiencing it firsthand. Yet works of art in whatever media an artist has chosen are more than texts to be scanned and interpreted, more than images or representations. Often, in fact, they are not representations at all and images only in the sense that every one of their formal and material constituents coalesces to form a visual gestalt without necessarily becoming a picture. The quiddity of a work has its own story to tell, and in some cases it is the whole story — if you’ll let it alone to do its job and cast its spell.

Individually and in the aggregate, the paintings of John Zurier constitute a case in point. The purpose of examining them closely is not to prove that point (the defense of modern abstraction has been pursued to exhaustion from every angle) but to savor the experience of seeing such spare self-sufficiency exert its unique power over that zone of consciousness — the *imagination* — where images come into being.

Zurier’s is a frankly, confidently modernist syntax — in an ostensibly postmodern age. Its referents are undisguised. Among them are Barnett Newman’s “zip,” and Robert Ryman’s edge, that edge having been an extension or interpolation of the zip. Viewers will also find allusions to or evocations of Mark Rothko’s and Ad Reinhardt’s unfathomable inner spaces; areas of “pure” — that is, apparently nonmimetic, relatively uniform — color, tone, and surface. Understandably, this poses problems to the extent that *reading* meaning *into* works by one artist based on meanings actually inscribed in or claimed for the works of another artist (and frequently by that artist) is the most common form of art commentary these days. Much of the time, recourse to this practice is prompted by the desire to establish orderly chronologies

of influence, a sort of biblical “begetting” of style. Moreover, in places where the old Abbott and Costello “Who’s on first?” gag still befuddles critics and scholars unable to create hierarchies of “quality” without first deciding who “originated” and therefore asserts ownership rights over a given way of working, these questions of aesthetic paternity and pedigree take precedence over all other considerations no matter how obviously or subtly the work of different, distant generations is from that of their supposed forebears.

Inevitably — dare one say “naturally” — when such evolutionary models are deployed, the issue of “devolution” arises. Notions of definitive endings implicit in undisputed beginnings and foreshadowed by intimations of decadence and decline are among the overdetermining if not tyrannical analytic tropes and historic scenarios of art discourse. After all, how can painters continue to work in good faith if the doctors of aesthetic theory have pronounced painting dead? And if these experts have it right, how can a writer — this writer — blithely assert that “Zurier’s is a frankly, confidently modernist syntax” without setting the artist up for a fall?

The answers to those challenges are twofold. On the one hand, it seems safe to say that it is utterly futile to argue against those who are convinced of or longing for the “death of painting.” Experience has shown us that people who hold such views are rarely open to reasoned rebuttals of their ostensibly rigorous formal and historical brief for painting’s extinction. Nor does their position allow for empirical evidence to the contrary, even though there is abundant proof that painting continues. Painting remains sure enough of its own reasons for being that it does not shrink from confrontations with the disregard or disdain of ideologically driven “true disbelievers” who refuse to open their eyes to the wealth of examples surrounding them.

Zurier generously offers us example after example of painting imbued with exquisitely nuanced demonstrations of its own possibility. Those nuances show in detail why no other medium is capable of providing comparable experience. To explore their essence and resonances it is necessary to deal in specifics, and for that one must use specialized vocabulary for materials and tools, in short “shop talk.” Many critics avoid discussing professional procedures altogether — even my great hero Charles Baudelaire disparaged preoccupation with technical causes at the expense of imaginative effects — or they get things wrong when they try.

Fair enough, not everyone who listens to chamber music needs to understand the details of violin fingering and bowing, nor must lovers of early piano repertoire inform themselves about the construction of the first fortepianos in order to listen to performances of Mozart, Haydn, and Beethoven on modern Steinway grands. Granted, aficionados of piano virtuosity can and do go on for hours about the eccentric cadences of Glenn Gould, his uniquely exacting recording methods, and his humming.

And neither are jazz fans obliged to learn all about the conventions of vernacular social dancing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to appreciate the metamorphosis of ragtime à la Scott Joplin into the rhythmic stride style of Fats Waller. But it doesn't hurt to know that Professor Longhair changed the way New Orleans jazz was played, mixing up traditional left-hand and right-hand techniques. As jazz historian Stevenson Palfi commented: "He'll go to the end of the octave on the left and turn back and go all the way to the end of the octave on the right with things in between. There's almost this kind of invisible barrier of a small range of piano keys that he plays within." This helps one to *hear* what the good Professor is doing; at any rate, reading Palfi's liner notes certainly helped me.

Accordingly, I will risk being equally precise about technical as well as formal matters that provide the foundation of Zurier's work before I delve into questions of style or contextual significance. I acknowledge that for the most part the physical "foundation" of his compositions is gossamer-thin. Yet that fact alone informs everything else one might say about what his paintings are and how they "mean." Their physicality is as intense as any we associate with "mainstream" American abstraction of the 1950s and 1960s — but at the opposite extreme. Zurier's is painting reduced to its barest material sufficiency. In order to avoid the negative connotations of reductive art when viewed as a chain of depletions draining an a priori fullness ascribed to other, more built-up and agitated modes of abstraction, I will insist on the last word, "sufficiency." The goals of artists to whom Zurier can be most usefully compared — Ryman first in line — are as different from those of the Abstract Expressionists as they are from the Minimalists. But may I remind readers how artists linked to both "styles" bridled at the labels imposed on them. Especially the involuntary "Minimalists," who were at pains to disown the notion that they were providing a "minimum" of anything that previous tendencies had provided in abundance, rather than *enough* of what it takes to make a painting that is entirely satisfying. Their resistance bears directly on the importance of the principle of sufficiency in the present context.

However, Zurier isn't really painting "out of" either of these American movements. Rather, the dilute tints and tones of his work recall those found in the paintings of his immediate precursors and approximate contemporaries, all of whom are European, while also differing significantly from them. Those artists include the late Raoul De Keyser and Blinky Palermo, as well as the very active Michael Krebber and Luc Tuymans. In one way or another, all of these artists have sought to make the most of painting in a minor key. Tuymans has used a blushing, sickly grisaille palette as a foil for the disquiet that hides in plain sight in the appropriated subject matter and retrospective themes of his best work, that subject matter being emblems

of Europe's reactionary past and of its abiding unconceded shame. Krebber's work is too diverse to sum up easily, but overall he has pushed back from Neo-Expressionism while retaining a stripped-down, rhetorical fluency that, as with his elder Sigmar Polke, harasses Neo-Expressionism from the margins of Neo-Dada aesthetics. For his part, De Keyser pushed off from Pop Art to explore simplified formal codes that evoke specific objects and ambiances but seldom depict them outright.

Alone of this group, and in some respects their role model, is Palermo, who, with the exception of sketchbook drawings, hewed to rigorous nonobjectivity in the service of objectifying form and color with the lightest of touches. Without becoming a member of the School of Palermo — and there is one, which briefly included Palermo's friend and fellow graduate of the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf and, during a transformative period of his career, his collaborator, Gerhard Richter — Zurier has demonstrated Palermo's light touch and evinced his penchant for nearly insubstantial supports and faintly tinted and textured surfaces. Yet he is not, as many young artists have lately become, a stylist in the manner of Palermo. Instead he has arrived at his own way of working, by closely studying his means and their capacities and then deploying them with maximum efficiency in gradual stages that permit him to scrutinize the consequences of every move he makes before making another. To that extent Zurier counts among the deftest of contemporary anti-expressionists without ever sacrificing the surprises and pleasures of the hand to the requirements of an idea or design. For if Expressionism Neo- or old-school has signified anything, it is impetuosity, the sense that paintings are the sum of sudden insights and urgent responses.

Of course, this was mostly myth in the first place. Joan Mitchell's canvases seem consistently agitated and it is hard not to imagine that they were painted in a fever of activity, but the truth is that for all that minutes or even hours may have passed in furious brushing, hours upon hours, if not days and weeks, went by with the artist seated in a chair — a burning cigarette in hand and an ashtray of butts at her side — in front of a painting in progress. A home movie of Willem de Kooning at work shows the housepainter and commercial artist turned bravura technician of the bodily sublime realizing one of those flaring lines that appear to streak through his compositions from the 1940s on — it's a trick he learned from the master craftsman Arshile Gorky — but on film de Kooning's fingers and arm move with the slow, steady deliberateness of a letterer inscribing a name on the glass door of a bank executive's office. Speed lines in comics are a device for making us see what is not actually happening — after all, what can be more static than a frame in the funny pages — but they are also a demonstration of painterly sleight of hand in art.

In this regard, New York School-style "gestural painting" is no less illusionistic than its action-packed representational antecedents. Like de Kooning (or for that

matter Agnes Martin), Zurier knows how to pull a line down or across a vacant undercoat of paint. In his work the mere fact of its being painted guarantees that there is graphic as well as material incident worthy of note, although it requires no extra “wrist.” In *Light-tone* (p. 35), the variable intervals between the vertical stripes and the variable weight and opacity of the strokes that make them cause each to quiver within its own resonant zone at its own tempo, while the canvas as a whole assumes the aspect of a veil fallen between us and a space of indeterminate expanse and depth. In *Abstract Painting #1 (Green)* (p. 32), the lines are the same width as the green gaps separating them, effectively occluding the space “beyond” and drawing our attention to the things closest to view, namely the flickering effects of the loose edges and, in a couple of instances, the interrupted extension of the lines. If *Abstract Painting #1 (Green)* is an object on the verge of dissolving, *Light-tone* describes an area that eludes our full apprehension. *Untitled #2 (Grey)* (p. 33) might be said to be the synthesis of the two, an object yearning to be pure space but quite literally barred from becoming so. As for *Idylwild* (p. 31), it points in other directions altogether, inasmuch as the bifurcated “zip” that dominates its center also throws the precise location of that center into doubt, a doubt rendered insistent by the boldness of the converging lines against the background and by the tuning fork reverberations they set off around themselves.

In short, “pulling a line” is a far from simple matter, with inconsistencies in execution being the lifeblood running in the veins of these paintings. Zurier accomplishes the task with the same assurance and radiant clarity as de Kooning, since traces cutting through the void invariably throw sparks. But Zurier’s lines don’t swell and contract with Baroque animism as the Dutchman’s did. Instead they establish and stabilize the plane they traverse while providing a relatively declarative formal referent against which to measure more subdued visual incidents. Those other incidents may consist of the delicate unevenness of very liquid pigment of the palest hues washed or scumbled over a white ground. Or — almost as frequently — it may involve clear-rabbit-skin-glue-primed linen that contributes its own warm browns to the image as a whole.

The fully articulated or ever-so-subtly suggested lines, as they travel through powder blues, deep indigos, warm and cool grays, daffodil yellows, plum purples, and all the other muffled, generally matte but still luminous colors of Zurier’s palette, evoke the celestial matrices of early astronomy, and it is hard not to project the sense of vastness we see in the evening or night sky onto these diffuse chromatic fields. Fairly often — as in *Oblaka (for Mark)* (p. 65), *Two Days from Now* (p. 69), *Rauma* (p. 78), *Night 35* (p. 79), *Night 38* (p. 80), and *Esja 1* (p. 110) — Zurier leaves those fields loose at the margins, and in others — for instance

*Summer (Ochre)* (p. 129) — open within the interior. *Nothing to Add* (p. 50) hints at the way these gaps come about; they remain when the painter reaches a point where the act of merely filling a space seems redundant, or worse, seems the willful destruction of a serendipitous graphic compositional “ready-made” that emerged in the process of covering the canvas. The “empty” margin of *Nothing to Add* is also framed by a scored green line of a sort that appears nakedly in *Icelandic Painting* (3) (p. 104) along with short notational strokes of a sort that run up and down the right side of *Angels and Drunks* (p. 103) and are accented by the unpainted indentation on the left side of the canvas. Similar marginal notations appear in *For Nina* (p. 86) and *Return Again* (p. 125), making them an increasingly pronounced part of Zurier’s structural vocabulary. In such cases the classic “grid” of modernism is only a vestige of its formerly rigid uniformity, but that template has been inscribed on the mind’s eye so many times that most viewers will reflexively “complete” the paradigm and project it back onto the picture plane in ways that make the offhand asymmetry of Zurier’s markings all the more arresting. In this way his work resembles a round of hide-and-seek with Piet Mondrian and other modernist titans, but he is not playing postmodernist tag so much as claiming those parts of the tradition that are useful to him and putting them to work for his own ends.

Now, when I say “diffuse” I don’t wish to imply that the artist is engaged in creating Neo-Romantic dreamscapes or consciously trying to fool the eye. In fact, this is where the graphic or material incidents I previously spoke of come in. For if at first glance the transcendental aura of Zurier’s paintings seems to hint at worlds beyond our own, his completely tangible way with paint application — right down to the anomalies in the weave of the canvas, the variable degrees to which oil pigments embed themselves or skip over the warp and weft, and the undergirding grid that they combine to make — incessantly brings us back to the emphatic “here-and-nowness” of what we are looking at, even when, as with the grid canvas threads, it disappears under one or more layers of oil pigments.

I have mentioned washed and scumbled paint, and perhaps this is a good time to list a few of the many other ways that Zurier’s tones and tints go down: rubbing in, scraping back, allowing the brush to skip when it meets a “road bump,” making sure that it glides over lumps and knots in the taut fabric. I should also say more about what those tints and tones are made of. As mentioned before, Zurier works without haste. This allows him to gauge the size and proportion of his support and permits the slow incubation of a visual concept, the equally slow gestation of any actual form even in situations where the execution is rapid, and the still slower “curing” of the pigments once applied. For the fact is that oil colors and other admixtures

of chromatic particles and the various binders available to artists — vehicles selected with the utmost care in light of past experience — take time to dry, and change character and intensity as this is happening.

Traditionally, varnishes were used to even out pictures that suffered from dull patches or overly shiny ones. Zurier eschews such ex post facto editing solutions, exploiting instead the very discrepancies between the fully dried state of this paint or that when juxtaposed as distinct, usually expansive areas.

Such that the suavity of one will yield to the grittiness of another, marking the distinction between them, which other artists might be tempted to accentuate with a line or an abrupt change in color. Not that Zurier avoids such contrasts entirely. *West* (p. 118) makes the most of a stark division between the upper dark greenish-blue and the lower slate-blue zones, but by its very nature the distemper paint Zurier deploys over the whole canvas ensures that there will little if any difference between the light-absorbing qualities of the dark blue oil paint above the cool pale blue distemper below.

The preponderance of distemper as opposed to oil since the end of the first decade of the new millennium would seem to signal a deliberate emphasis on the wholeness of surface that Zurier is striving for and for which he has recently identified the best method of achieving. Before 2010, virtually all of his paintings were made with oil pigments from which the oil had been stripped to the utmost degree possible — and here is another point of procedural contact with Gorky the alchemist, who managed to steal the ideas of Joan Miró and Pablo Picasso and make them over in his own idiom largely by pushing the medium to extremes they never tested.

It is not the extreme beauty of Zurier's generally unshiny finishes that one sees when the wet brush leaves its mark, but rather an awaited outcome, a result anticipated when the chemistry of desiccation has worked its magic. Zurier is a connoisseur of different kinds of paints, and different brands, stockpiling those on which he counts the most like a wine collector filling his cellar against the day when drought or rain or frost will ruin a vintage or several. A connoisseur and hoarder of brushes and paints even in the depths of the Great Depression, the impecunious Gorky did much the same, so that no matter how poor he was and no matter what he had to sacrifice to achieve self-sufficiency, he always made sure to have on hand whatever it took to realize his work with total mastery. On walking into the treasure trove of Gorky's studio, de Kooning recalled, he felt that "the atmosphere was so beautiful I got a little dizzy."<sup>1</sup> One can well imagine it was not only the marvels that Gorky was then in the process of creating that had this effect on de Kooning but also the wealth of materials at his friend's disposal, suffused as they were by the aroma of oils and solvents, an aroma that must have intoxicated de Kooning.

1. Willem de Kooning, letter to *ARTnews*, January 1949, in George Scrivani, ed., *The Collected Writings of Willem de Kooning* (Madras and New York: Hanuman Books, 1988).

All of which brings me to the delicate issue of painterly “cuisine,” that word often used pejoratively in reference to the delectable “Frenchness” of School of Paris picture-making. As if each artist were known not just for his or her imagery or format but for the trademark sauces in which they were drenched. To a certain extent this was true of Georges Braque, Chaim Soutine, and later, Jean Dubuffet and Alberto Giacometti — but less so of Picasso, Henri Matisse, and Fernand Léger. And so it was of School of Paris–besotted New Yorkers such as Gorky and de Kooning. Indeed, there would be no Gorky or de Kooning without the liberties they took with the traditional recipes of Parisian cuisine, not to mention the Tex-Mex admixtures of Jackson Pollock. Bay Area painters David Park and Richard Diebenkorn produced their own *nouvelle*, even as in earlier gestural works such as *Untitled* (p. 24) and *Untitled (Boboli Gardens)* (p. 25) Zurier managed to develop his own way of mixing paints without the thick béchamel or béarnaise of these French chefs. Having started out refining his own versions of rich Franco-American recipes, Zurier has on the whole preferred dry pastes, delicate reductions, and savory broths, and lest anyone, including the artist, balk at this extended metaphor on the grounds that a good painting is not the equivalent of a well-prepared dish, consider the advances in American taste in the culinary arts over the past fifty years and the resulting change in their status.

Over many years but more than ever of late, the hues Zurier has favored tend to drift away from the saturated “pure” primaries of Bauhaus and De Stijl modernism — those paradigms having been the main source for much pared-down nonobjective painting of the sort Zurier practices — toward exotic shades of ultramarine, ultramarine ash, cobalt, cerulean, azurite, lapis lazuli, indigo lavender, green earth, malachite, turquoise, cinnabar, madder lake, Pompeii red, antimony red, iron oxide, red ochre, raw sienna, yellow ochre, Naples yellow, raw umber, burnt umber. I am culling these names from the online catalog of colorants sold by Zurier’s New York–based supplier, Kremer Pigments (a branch of the German company Kremer Pigmente, which specializes in rarefied colorants). One might easily add others from that inventory, as well as various tube colors found in his studio. To those who know color well and truly love it for its own sake, this list should read like concrete poetry while producing synesthetic side effects. But even with such information at the ready, it is often hard to specify the exact tint or tone used in a given painting because of Zurier’s constant tinkering with these already ambiguous choices. Part of that tinkering consists of mixing them “down,” that is to say, diminishing their intensity with optically unstable additives that draw attention to themselves precisely because we can’t quite name them or hold them in our mind’s eye. The other part of this tinkering results from keying colors “up” by introducing shades

from the same section of the spectrum into their midst, to create contrasts that subliminally accentuate their basic chroma, as in *For N* (p. 52), *Marguerite* (p. 63), and *Turku* (p. 71). Thus, rather than juxtapose complimentaries, Zurier will drop a cool blue into a warm blue, a cool violet into a warm violet, a cool red into a not-quite-hot red, and a chill Bay Area–fog gray into a spring haze.

That Zurier has increasingly resorted to water-based media — hand-mixed acrylics, casein and distemper (raw pigments suspended in rabbit-skin glue) — rather than oils goes a long way toward explaining how such effects are achieved. Light bounces off the surface of an oil painting as much as or more than it is absorbed by it, whereas water-based media transform the painted support into an optical sponge. And while particles of pigment float in amber oils and varnishes, the same particles may be virtually naked before the eye once the basically clear fluid vehicle of water-based media has sunk into the weave of the canvas and dried. Which means that the natural radiance of even the most minuscule trace of the mineral dusts or crystallized dyes that lend “artists’ colors” their specific cast is unaltered and undimmed by the binder that adheres them to that surface. In practical terms, this can entail extraordinarily exacting balancing acts in which chromatic differences at the margins of perceptible temperatures teeter between the warm and cool yet never lose their mutually reinforcing contrasts, never become tepid.

Zurier’s preoccupation with what traditional Japanese artists call “killed colors”<sup>2</sup> quietly bespeaks the benefits of this shift in painterly approach, since the less saturated a hue is in its natural state, the more its unique degree of luminosity depends on light falling upon it without reflection or refraction. The implicit if not explicit symbolism of such a muted palette links its use to the aesthetic of *wabi* (isolation, immediacy) and *sabi* (withering, rusting), ancient Buddhist concepts that emphasize the beauty of natural — therefore imperfect and impermanent — things. According to this credo, that which shows the wear and tear of everyday life in the world is more beautiful than ideal forms in unmarred states since the beauty evoked is not merely physical but spiritual; it is, in effect, the acquired simplicity and grace of such a form’s “old soul.” And without disowning allusions to the preparation of food that were previously employed — Japanese aesthetics are holistic rather than compartmentalized, such that *wabi* and *sabi* manifest themselves in all domains — this concern with the flawed and the faded alludes to existential states of being and philosophical states of mind of the most fundamental kinds.

In musical terms one might say that it is a matter of teasing out resolving or even dissolving chords rather than of striking fully resolved ones. Which means that the experience of the work always stops short of catharsis. However, one cannot say that such a work *falls* short of it. Instead, its function is to lead us to the verge of an ultimate

2. Zurier’s interest in the concept of “killing color” stems from a lecture delivered in 1972 by Toshihiko Izutsu titled “The Elimination of Color in Far Eastern Art and Philosophy” and published in Susan Haule and Robert Weening, eds., *Color Symbolism: Six Excerpts from the Eranos Yearbook 1972* (Dallas: Spring, 1977), pp. 176–177.

release, yet to hold us in perpetual nearness to it, not cheating us of a climax we have a right to expect or promising us that it will still happen, but gently reminding us of more dramatic emotions without making us regret them or long for their return. In certain ways such art homeopathetically mimics loss and mourning but is blessedly devoid of anguished melancholia. Flux is its essence. In it, material “presentness” evokes but also eclipses the past.

Thus a dialectic of presence and absence hinging on paradoxical evanescence is at the very heart of Zurier’s poetics. In this context “evanescence” signifies not only “Now you see it, now you don’t” but also “Now you see it, now you see more, now you see less.” Meanwhile, the constancy of “presence” ensures that one never loses sight of the space in which these memorably unstable effects occur or of that zone’s capacity to produce others. As visual phenomena, presence and evanescence are grounded in a heightened alertness to painting’s material reality as conveyed by the refinement of every physical dimension of an artist’s work and as revealed to viewers in their groping discovery of the contingency of their own perceptions. The slow pace of Zurier’s realization, the lightness of his touch, and the physical attenuation of his materials all contribute to this awareness. Mapping out the surface of canvases, whether relatively large or relatively small, with the same concentration, making few moves during any given working session, marking intervals with steady or stuttering strokes, filling the voids with sweeping, seemingly effortless gestures — Zurier takes the measure of the space he has chosen and establishes his coordinates with the same respect for the doctrine of “Less is more” that the old-school modernists who clarified American aesthetics in the 1940s and 1950s professed, but with an unhurried, unargumentative devotion to the task at hand characteristic of the monks who have for centuries raked the gravel gardens of the Ryoan-ji temple in Kyoto.

Parenthetically, and polemically, one might add that the “posthuman” postmodernism of which Jeff Koons has become the poster boy is the categorical antithesis of *wabi* and *sabi* — Koons’s embalmed vacuum cleaners being a perversely Pop (i.e., time-sensitive) way to imagine timeless (forever virgin and immortal) material culture in the consumer age — just as the calm but vital pulse of the lines scored in shifting stones by rakes of Buddhist monks is the opposite of the lifeless inertia that so much art of the moment seems to aspire to. It is almost as if the twentieth century, which began in furious simultaneity, in always accelerating motion, had spent its energies and, finding itself unable to sustain the drive any further, had willed itself into a deathly stasis. Early in this headlong rush to catatonia, Mondrian warned against the dynamism of diagonals and with them the temptations of futuristic abstraction as a representation of modernity, holding out instead for an art of transcendent equipoise.

Like Mondrian's, Zurier's paintings tend toward rather than away from such equipoise and, like Mondrian's, without ever schematically locking in or locking down. Of course, Zurier permits himself many options that Mondrian strenuously eschewed, half-tones and secondary and tertiary colors being only the most obvious. But after all, faith in universally applicable "primary structures" of art has been shaken to such a point that there is no going back to them. Moreover, subsequent generations of artists — from Mark Rothko to Brice Marden — have demonstrated beyond any reasonable doubt that ambiguity and doubt itself are more fertile aesthetically than certainty can ever be again.

To dare abstraction in this day and age is to contend with all of these precedents and with all our reasons for questioning their value to us. But questioning does not mean implicitly or explicitly rejecting something we no longer agree with or accept automatically, any more than "critiquing" that thing means debunking it. To the contrary, a critique sheds light on its object of scrutiny. In that fashion, like any serious and sustained body of work, Zurier's art sheds light on all that came before it but that it is not, while emitting light in corners of abstract painting yet to be fully explored. In that regard the verb "dare" is not too strong, even though practitioners and commentators who think they have figured everything out without having much if any stake in the game will tell you that abstraction after 1970 has essentially been devoid of risk or ambition, a style among others rather than a quest. But suppose one was determined to enter the game just as such oddsmakers had decided to fold their hands, count their depleted pile of chips, get up from the table, and exit the casino?

In such a context an intelligent painter will forgo competition with those who remain at the table vainly going through the motions and instead make the most of the difficult pleasures of solitaire played according to rules of his or her own devising for stakes of his or her own choosing. Every bit as intelligent as he is talented, Zurier seems content to do so. Furthermore, he appears to be determined to pare painting down to a new set of "essentials" with that endeavor being its own reward, one in which anyone who spends time with the work can freely share.

To conclude, I will double back to an earlier reference made to Bay Area fog and characterize Zurier's more expansive canvases past as well as recent in terms of the atmospheres they evoke or, rather, create. I do so because when I first encounter them in the studio or in galleries not only do they cause my eyes to blink and my fingers to tingle, they register in my chest like the intake of my breath in differing, highly specific climates. Accordingly, *Light-tone* (p. 35) feels like a lungful of warm, moist sea air, as does *Muuratsalo 2* (p. 75), while *Åkeshov* (p. 72) is invigoratingly crisp like inhalations on a late fall morning. Perhaps the title is responsible, but *Lower (Giacometti's Studio)* (p. 89) is mildly suffocating, as if one had entered a cloud

of clay or plaster dust, even as *Mt. Hiei — Late October* (p. 91) and the much earlier oil *Ode to Honeybunch* (p. 27) seem to be suffused with brick dust. Meanwhile, *Öxnadalur* (p. 127) has a wintry, blustery impact, as if gusts of a cold wind were blowing toward the spectator, left to gasp for air when they abate.

Of course, Zurier is not depicting any of these conditions and my reactions probably have nothing at all to do with what was on his mind when he made the works. Still, the physiological response his paintings trigger says a good deal about their powers of suggestion. The multiplicity of allusions they make to the natural world and the sensorial polyvalence of their materiality counts for more than any particular analogy one might draw, or any specific interpretation one might propose. Doubtless, other viewers will experience aspects of these paintings that I have neglected or concentrate less than I on those I have chosen to stress. That is as it should be, given the sensory and allusive richness embedded in their apparent austerity. In this instance my task as a critic is less to judge the work — if I did not think very highly of it I would not have accepted the invitation to write about it — or to justify it — though I have speculated on its *raison d'être* relative to current aesthetic discourses — than to recommend that people unfamiliar with Zurier's achievement take notice, and that those who have previously encountered it renew their engagement. Of one thing I am certain: From whatever angle one approaches Zurier's work, it fully merits and amply rewards the close scrutiny it requires.