



John Zurier MATRIX 255 SEPTEMBER 12–DECEMBER 21, 2014
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY ART MUSEUM & PACIFIC FILM ARCHIVE

Not unlike abstract painter Robert Ryman, Berkeley-based artist John Zurier (b. 1956) is concerned with “the stuff of painting”: the weave of the canvas; the expression and movement of the brush-stroke; the thickness of the stretcher; 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.¹ In other words, Zurier’s interests lie in all the matter and minutiae involved in constructing a painting. Every crease left visible in the surface of his canvases is considered, and no mark or line is arbitrary, although it may have been spontaneously or incidentally formed. In short, everything perceptible in a Zurier painting is an essential component of it.

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.”² 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 ensconced in the “stuff of the world,” simultaneously immersing himself in 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.³ To explain this difference, he cites a passage in the book *The Atom Station* by Icelandic novelist 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.”⁴

This past summer, Zurier produced a series of paintings in various sizes on an Icelandic horse farm called Héraðsdalur 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. **MATRIX 255** features many of these works, as well as others Zurier painted during or after previous trips, thus bringing together a generous selection created in response to his experiences in Iceland. The palette of these paintings ranges from subtle, muted

earth tones to vibrant saturated hues, each work striking a unique, sensitive chord. *Héraðsdalur 12* (*Lighthouse*) (2014), for instance, is characterized by a rich, yellow-orange distemper paint—the color found on lighthouses and in lichen growing on rocks in Iceland. Zurier often makes his own paints (although sometimes he works straight from the tube). To make distemper—a medium associated with medieval and Renaissance wall paintings—he mixes dry tempera pigments with animal glue. For Zurier, the thin, sensitive surface of distemper makes it ideal for capturing all the individuated marks and gestures of the artist's hand.

Blue tones predominate in the paintings in the exhibition, but no two are alike, revealing the infinite range of the hue. In the small canvas *Héraðsdalur 17* (*Stars Without Distance*) (2014), five short, horizontal flecks of white oil paint are set on a soft, sky-blue ground, with multidirectional brushstrokes swirling below. In *Cold July* (2014), Zurier applied a layer of cobalt distemper to the entire linen surface, and then eventually scraped away the center, yielding a field of translucent white between two vertical cobalt stripes along the edges.

Zurier's process often develops in relation to the material elements that comprise each individual work. For instance, he painted *Héraðsdalur 13* (*Avalanche*) (2014) very quickly over the course of a single afternoon: after stretching the canvas and applying a layer of white distemper, Zurier saw three horizontal lines emerge in the surface, and immediately painted them. In contrast, *Afternoon* (*S.H.G.*) (2014) evolved over a period of about six months during which the artist repeatedly returned to the work. In this picture, white distemper paint mixes with the earth tones of the linen canvas to reveal distinct gradations and patches of white activated by drifting horizontal and diagonal strokes. A gray-blue, vertical band center-right runs distinctly over the white, while another blue line near the left edge bleeds into it. Both lines float inside and over the brushy surface, creating an atmospheric depth within the painting's confines.

In the small composition *Icelandic Painting* (*12 Drops*) (2012), 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," Kirk Varnedoe said of Ryman's paintings, "the more you have to look, the more you have to be in the picture."⁵ 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.

Apsara DiQuinzio

CURATOR OF MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY ART AND PHYLLIS C. WATTIS MATRIX CURATOR

1. Kirk Varnedoe, *Pictures of Nothing* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006), 242.

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

3. Ibid.

4. Hálldór Laxness, *The Atom Station* (London: Vintage Classics, 2004), 39.

5. Varnedoe, 243.

Works in the exhibition

Lýsuhóll

2011
Distemper on linen
78 × 48 in.
Collection of Paule Anglim

Icelandic Painting (*12 Drops*)

2012
Watercolor on linen on panel
16½ × 11 in.
Collection of the artist

Kross

2013
Watercolor on linen
21 × 15 in.
Collection of the artist

Vatnshellir

2013
Oil on linen
72 × 44 in.
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Nordenhake, Berlin and Stockholm

Afternoon (*S.H.G.*)

2014
Distemper on linen
28 × 35 in.
Courtesy of the artist and Peter Blum Gallery, New York

Cold July

2014
Distemper on linen
25½ × 16½ in.
Courtesy of the artist and Peter Blum Gallery, New York

Finnbogi

2014
Distemper on linen
72 × 44 in.
Courtesy of the artist and Gallery Paule Anglim, San Francisco

Héraðsdalur 5 (*Across the River*)

2014
Oil on linen
21¾ × 25¾ in.
Collection of the artist

Héraðsdalur 9 (*Hross*)

2014
Oil on jute
27½ × 19¾ in.
Collection of the artist

Héraðsdalur 10 (*Holurt*)

2014
Oil on linen
17¾ × 25¾ in.
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Nordenhake, Berlin and Stockholm

Héraðsdalur 11

2014
Distemper on linen
23¾ × 15¾ in.
Courtesy of the artist and Gallery Paule Anglim, San Francisco

Héraðsdalur 12 (*Lighthouse*)

2014
Distemper on linen
25¾ × 17¾ in.
Courtesy of the artist and Peter Blum Gallery, New York

Héraðsdalur 13 (*Avalanche*)

2014
Distemper on linen
27½ × 19¾ in.
Courtesy of the artist and Peter Blum Gallery, New York

Héraðsdalur 16 (*Listening to Grieg*)

2014
Oil on jute
19¼ × 15¾ in.
Courtesy of the artist and Gallery Paule Anglim, San Francisco

Héraðsdalur 17 (*Stars Without Distance*)

2014
Oil on linen
21¾ × 25½ in.
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Nordenhake, Berlin and Stockholm

Héraðsdalur 19

2014
Oil on linen
29½ × 21¾ in.
Courtesy of the artist and Peter Blum Gallery, New York

Héraðsdalur 21

2014
Distemper on linen
17¾ × 21¾ in.
Courtesy of the artist and Peter Blum Gallery, New York

Héraðsdalur 23 (*River*)

2014
Distemper on linen
23¾ × 15¾ in.
Collection of the artist

Hólavallagarður

2014
Oil on linen
21 × 15 in.
Courtesy of the artist and Peter Blum Gallery, New York

Hvalsnes (*S.H.*)

2014
Distemper on linen
18 × 22 in.
Collection of the artist

Summer Still (*The Same Shadow*)

2014
Oil on linen
72 × 44 in.
Courtesy of the artist and Peter Blum Gallery, New York

Votilækur

2014
Distemper on linen
72 × 44 in.
Courtesy of the artist and Lawrence Markey Gallery, San Antonio

The exhibition also includes a selection of watercolors, all made in Iceland in 2014, courtesy of the artist and Gallery Paule Anglim, San Francisco.

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