

John Zurier

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John Zurier's work has been moving toward a sturdier sense of individuality, complicating his frequent categorization as a monochromatic painter. The works in his current show—the Berkeley-based artist's fourth at Peter Blum—assert themselves as a cast of characters. The 14 oil and distemper paintings (all 2014 and 2015) move between the concrete and the suggestive, as indicated by their titles: half refer to specific locations, and the other half to seasons or times of day. Zurier has long worked in a range of sizes, and only two paintings here have the same dimensions. They are not vast and ungraspable; even the largest, around 78 × 48 inches, feels approachable in scale. Human-sized and firmly material, these paintings function as equivalents, pieces of weather brought inside as figures, each with an insistent specificity of format and surface character.



John Zurier, "Stapi" (2014). Oil on linen, 20 x 24".
Courtesy the artist and Peter Blum Gallery, New York.

The emphasis remains on vocation rather than evocation. The frequent appearance of carefully ruled lines, as in “Before and After Summer” and “Héraðsdalur 3,” inflect the paintings’ surfaces with man-made deliberation, without which the images might fall into misty vagueness. These sharp horizontals and verticals are countered by the soft edges of the paintings, their corners often folded. Such details project the artist’s awareness of the cumulative force of decision-making; intention betrays itself at every moment. In total, the finely calibrated choices communicate beyond intention. The play between deliberation and chance echoes the paintings’ perpetual alternation between the clearly visible and the possibility of something latent, recalling the dilemma expressed in Wallace Stevens’s “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird”—whether to prefer “The beauty of inflections / Or the beauty of innuendoes, / The blackbird whistling / Or just after.”

“Before and After Summer,” one of the largest paintings, demonstrates Zurier’s sensitivity to temperature and touch. The densely brushed vertical expanse shifts from cool blue-green to a warmer earth-green and back, while two opaque areas at the top edge, painted in milky blues of distinctly opposing temperatures, suggest pieces of sky. The whole field feels surprisingly close-at-hand. In other works, hints of horizon lines tease the perceptual inclination to read landscape elements. This happens most overtly in “Stapi,” where a dark central band asserts itself initially as a field of trees. From farther away, though, the central frieze dissolves into a change in temperature and surface inflection.

The paintings often suggest weather events poised on the edge of arrival, like a bank of fog or a snowstorm just offshore—especially where the images appear off-register, wrapping partly around the edge of the canvas, as in “Afternoon (S.H.G.).” The bolder colors of “Héraðsdalur 12 (Lighthouse)” and, in the back room, the pink “Héraðsdalur 19,” serve to reveal by contrast the greater lushness here of more reduced color situations. In “At Halvalsnes,” the sparest painting, a thin distemper ground yields a densely varied air mass, grounded only by fingerprint-sized blue-green marks on either side, like handles—handheld weather.



John Zurier, “At Havalsnes” (2014). Distemper on linen, 24 x 28”.

Courtesy the artist and Peter Blum Gallery, New York.

John Zurier’s paintings benefit from being seen in a group. They make each other intelligible, the way our experiences of different seasons and times of day are revealed in relation to each other. Certain experiences are made most visible in moments of incremental change, as each new state reveals the previous one. It feels necessary then that this group be somewhat uneven, with seemingly literalist outliers like “Héraðsdalur 12 (Lighthouse)” offering fewer rewards for close-up engagement than are available elsewhere. “Lighthouse”’s impenetrable opacity acts as a signpost pointing you back to the other paintings.

Richer paintings like “Before and After Summer and Untitled (Spring)” exist in a realm of fluctuation less certain than the typical progress of seasons and daylight, except in those extremes common in Iceland, where the artist has spent a significant amount of time in recent years. The alternately dissolving and resolving clarity of these paintings recalls extremely short winter days, when it might be unclear at any given moment whether the day is ending or still beginning.

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