

BROOKLYN RAIL

OCT 2019

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

INDEPENDENT AND FREE

Mark Dion

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John Zurier

Richard Schiff,
Reality By Chance

Art INCONVERSATION

JOHN ZURIER

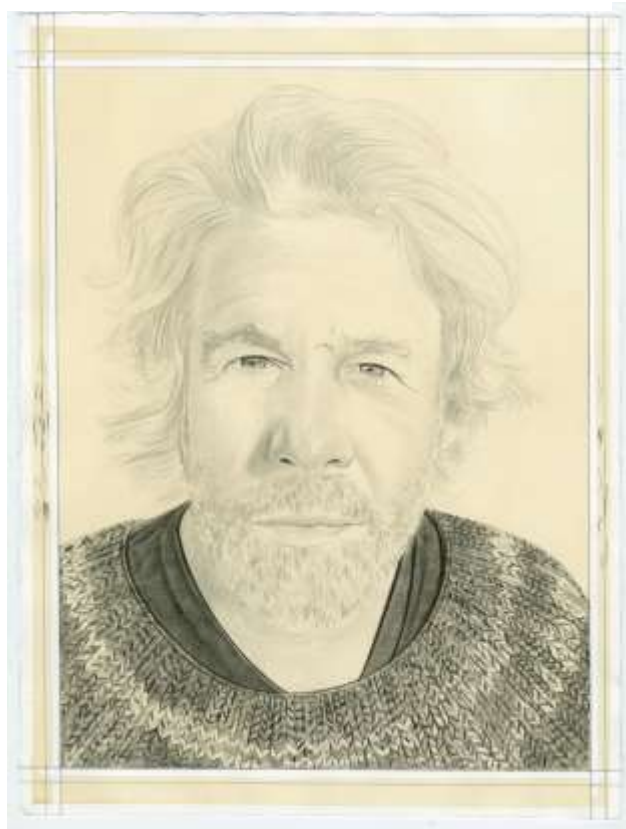
with Erik Lindman

"The thing that I want to grasp
is the thing that can't be
grasped. And air can't be
grasped—but we feel it."

October 2, 2019

I recently had the pleasure of spending a few days at John Zurier's home and studio outside of Reykjavík, Iceland—a country the California native has lived in off and on for the past 15 years with artist Nina Zurier, his wife. While Zurier's paintings are often inflected with his experience of the natural world, they are never depictions of it. These unadorned, confident, and even-keeled canvases resist arguing for, or against, any ideology. Instead, their rigor serves to bring us closer to the world. When speaking with John, it becomes clear that the deep intellect and humility present in his paintings are an authentic outgrowth of the artist's own generous character.

North from Here, Zurier's fifth exhibition of paintings at Peter Blum Gallery, New York, is on view until November 9. In the following interview, compiled from multiple conversations in Iceland, Zurier shares the life experiences that have informed his artistic trajectory, from growing up in a house full of Modernist masterpieces, to his academic training in landscape architecture. In the process of clarifying his inspirations, Zurier refreshingly defines in his own language the words frequently ascribed to his paintings.



Portrait of John Zurier, pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

ON VIEW

Peter Blum
North from Here
September 27 –
November 9, 2019
New York

Erik Lindman (Rail): The first work of art I remember seeing as a child that I both loved and recognized as art is a painting by Van Gogh at The Met, titled *Shoes* (1888), the painting of his boots. Do you remember the first painting that you saw that you loved as a child?

John Zurier: I do, but it's a little different for me in that I grew up with paintings, so they were always in my life and in my home. My parents were art collectors—it was really my father's passion. I was born in Santa Monica but we moved to Los Angeles before I was a year old. My father had been collecting before I was born and he was very interested in early American modernist painters, like Arthur Dove and Marsden Hartley, also German Expressionists and second generation Abstract Expressionists—a term I don't like—such as Alfred Leslie, Norman Bluhm, Michael Goldberg, and Richard Diebenkorn. He was crazy about Franz Kline—he didn't own any but he really wanted to. The painting that I remember at a very young age that just knocked me out was *Kirchner's Dancing Girl*. I think it's from 1911, but it now known as *The Russian Dancer Mela* (1911). It was in our living room and it had an overwhelming presence. I love that painting.

Rail: Did you make art as a kid then?

Zurier: No, not really. I wasn't one of those kids who was constantly drawing and working in a sketchbook, or being, you know, a creative type. I did try to copy things, though, that were in the house. For example, my father had this wonderful brush and ink drawing by Robert Motherwell, an abstraction, probably from the late '40s. I was old enough to polish my own shoes. The polish came in a glass bottle with a round cotton ball on the end of a little stick. The ends of the brush strokes in the Motherwell were rounded. I knew nothing about brushes—rounds or filberts or flats. I didn't know anything about painting. So I was convinced that because the lines were so black and ended in this round shape, Motherwell must have painted this with shoe polish. So, I got some typing paper and shoe polish and tried to recreate this work, but I couldn't do it. I could get the round mark to start with, but I couldn't replicate the curvy gesture of the line—even though I made a whole bunch of them.

Rail: Did your father see those?

Zurier: No, I never showed stuff to anybody. Never. But, I liked to make things, mostly in wood and plaster. I liked the physicality of stuff, and in retrospect I think I was interested in abstract forms. I also liked the idea of making paint.



John Zurier, *North from Here I*, 2019. oil on linen, 78 x 48 inches. Courtesy the artist and Peter Blum Gallery, New York.

Rail: Even at that time?

Zurier: Yeah, and I wasn't doing anything with the paint but I was making it. There's this bush called—it's one of the few Latin names I remember from landscape architecture—it's *Syzygium paniculatum*, an Australian bush cherry. They have these little red berries, and as kids we'd eat them because they were a little tart, and you could also throw them at walls and they'd make a red mark. I figured if I crushed them I could make ink. Then I realized if you crushed things you could make paint if you added water, so I would take chips of brick and stone and would go out in the backyard and grind them together, adding a little water to them. I didn't do anything with it, but I really felt like, wow, this is how you make paint.

Rail: Going back to Kirchner's Russian dancer painting, do you remember what it was that you felt connected to in that artwork specifically?

Zurier: The color and the roughness and the excitement of it. She has a mask-like face, and very pointy feet, like a ballerina on pointe. I was really struck by this intense angle of her feet coming to a point. You know, I'm a kid, I don't know anything about dancing but I wanted to dance with her. She was about my size, maybe a little bigger than me—I was 4, maybe 5—I think I was in love with her. And it has my favorite color tonalities—Prussian blue, Viridian and Chromium oxide green, white, and a pink made from Venetian red—these are colors I use a lot now. And it's got this rough stroke to it. I loved it.

Rail: And what do you think art represented to your father?

Zurier: I think it saved his life.

Rail: How so?

Zurier: It was the one place that he found complete solace and a way of nonverbally communing with something so much bigger than himself. It gave him an enormous amount of peace. I think Matisse got a lot of flack for the statement about art being a comfortable armchair for an intellectual worker or businessman at the end of the day, but that's what it was like. I would come home and I would sit in the room that had paintings that I liked a lot in it, and then my dad would come home and we would just sit together in silence looking at the paintings, and it was actually one of the



John Zurier, *Niður*, 2019. oil on linen, 78 x 52 inches.
Courtesy the artist Peter Blum Gallery, New York.

nicest times, because you know family life isn't always that way, it was kind of chaotic. Then it would start to get dark and then he might start saying something about the paintings.

I remember him specifically doing that with Arthur Dove's painting *Moon* (1935). The painting is now in the National Gallery in Washington and that was a painting that, when I look back on it now, is one of the works that meant the most to me. Also a Kokoschka watercolor that was of a standing figure, hard to tell if it was a man or woman, holding something in their hands and completely enigmatic. It had this broad stroke I always thought of as a moment of fragility and watery color, and I just loved it. I have to say I didn't understand any of this, I just looked at them—but paintings by Diebenkorn from '53—'54 from the Urbana and Berkeley series, those really struck me. Also a very small Tàpies painting that was made with canvas and sand—it looked like he had poked his fingers into the sand and I could see the weave of the canvas underneath.

Rail: When friends came over to your house what did they think of the art?

Zurier: I don't ever remember talking to anybody about it. I remember—to go back to making art as a kid, the first painting I ever made, I wanted to paint the sea. I wanted to make the rolling waves. I went to the art store and I bought a large pad of watercolor paper and I thought, "I only need to buy one color of paint and white." And I wanted it to be green so I bought Phthalo green. So I had Phthalo green and white and a white piece of paper, and I tried to paint the rolling waves and I just couldn't do it. I worked so hard on this thing and then I put it in a drawer and I never showed it to anybody. The interesting thing is that I still have that painting and in a way it's close to what I'm doing now.

Rail: In high school were you taking art classes at all?

Zurier: No, not really. I thought it would be great to take painting and drawing, but the painting teacher, I just couldn't deal with his style, he would play guitar while you're making reproductions of album covers. I tried a drawing class and they had an egg on a pedestal with the spotlights and the chalk drawing on the blackboard showing core shadows and highlights and I thought "I can't cope with this either." So I took ceramics and sculpture, with a teacher named John Riddle, and he was the first real artist I met.

Rail: What did that mean to you in high school?



John Zurier, *Urður*, 2019. oil on linen, 84 x 58 inches.
Courtesy the artist and Peter Blum Gallery, New York

Zurier: Riddle was committed to *making* art. He just exuded this sense of authority, intention, integrity—and he was the most influential (and the only) art teacher I had in high school. So it was really great, but I couldn't center, and that was what all the cool kids did—

Rail: You mean in ceramics, not emotionally—

Zurier: Yes, exactly. [*Laughter.*] Yes, in this case ceramics. Throwing on the wheel,

that was what the goal seemed to be, and I found it really difficult to center clay on a wheel. I don't know why. So I just would make coiled forms, and then I would do splash-type glazes and things like that. But then I realized I didn't want to stay with that, so I took shop classes and I'd make carved wood objects and figures, things like a kangaroo with a baby in its pouch. I also liked metalworking—especially hammered copper. I loved the idea of craft, and of being a craftsman. From there I decided to take architecture classes but mostly they were mechanical drawing, and I really liked that: the straight edge, how to turn a line—it was fantastic. I did a lot of mechanical drawings, which in a way was geometric drawing, and also architectural models. I think this interest in ceramics, handcrafted things, and geometry was building a foundation for a lot that I'm interested in now.

Rail: Was art school out of the question?

Zurier: I wanted to go to RISD to study architecture, but my parents thought I should go to Brown to get a liberal arts education first, and then study architecture. Then what happened was paying for out of state tuition was out of the question, so I had to go to school in California and I applied to Berkeley and was accepted.

Rail: At Berkeley, what were the architecture classes like?

Zurier: Well, I never actually took architecture classes, because I couldn't get in to the architecture school, but I did get into the College of Natural Resources. In elementary and high school I was active in anti-Vietnam war protests, and was also involved in the ecology movement. This was the late '60s and early '70s. Natural Resources was a brand new college at the University, and they needed enrollment there. It was interdisciplinary, combining science and sociology. I was taking Earth Sciences, Physical Geography, and Environmental courses. During the first year my interest shifted from architecture to environmental design—from building to place and space. I had always been interested in Japanese gardens, and what happened was one summer I was working with a group of people who were studying landscape architecture. I thought this takes the architecture, it takes the interest in ecology, the interest in gardens, interest in drawing, and puts it all together. So, I transferred into the Landscape Architecture department, and I have a degree in Landscape Architecture.

In order to get into the Landscape Architecture department, I thought I needed to take drawing and sculpture classes: so as a freshman I took drawing with Joan Brown. She was my first drawing teacher, and she was phenomenal.

Rail: What was her teaching style like?

Zurier: Very direct, very clear. Essentially, you had a 6B pencil, no eraser, a pad of newsprint, and you made contour drawings from the still life. The most important thing was she wouldn't let you erase. Her attitude was: you have to make a line with conviction, even if it's wrong.

Rail: And sculpture?

Zurier: Beginning Sculpture was one of my favorite classes, taught by Sidney Gordon. For one assignment we had to make a caricature, and he had this sort of Mister Magoo face, and it was just so easy, he was almost a cartoon to start with, like, it wasn't a caricature, it was realism! So, I made a portrait of him, and as soon as I did, I thought, "Oh my god, he's just gonna think I'm either ridiculing him or I'm trying to suck up to him." But, he actually liked it a lot. After class he came up to me and he said, "I like your portrait and I would like to buy it." I said, "You can have it," and he said, "No, I would like to buy it and I will give you \$10 for it." I said okay. When he handed me the money, he held onto it and said, "If you accept this \$10, it means you are now a professional artist." I took more classes with him and made abstract welded steel sculptures. We became friends after I graduated, and he was a close friend of Elmer Bischoff.

Rail: Is that how you met Bischoff?

Zurier: No, I met Bischoff through Joan Brown. Bischoff was also teaching at Berkeley. I worked with him at the end of my undergrad studies and decided to apply to the MFA program to continue working with him. My first painting class was an advanced painting class with Joan Brown.

Rail: No beginner's class?

Zurier: Never had a beginning painting class—she just let me in. As soon as I started painting I knew this was what I wanted to do. Elmer was Joan's teacher at SFAI and she was always talking about things he had said when she was a student. After taking three classes with Joan, I thought, "He's down the hall, I could actually just go hear it straight from him." With Elmer, I immediately felt like I had found someone I understood—or at least *wanted* to understand. He had a wonderfully descriptive way of talking. He really helped me to *see* painting. I learned a lot from him in terms of constructing with color, and building up a painting through touch. He told me once, "Diebenkorn's so lean. He can float a color across the whole surface, but I have to touch it all the way across from one passage to the next." And it wasn't a comparison thing, he was just appreciating Diebenkorn's leanness. And you can really see this in Bischoff's later abstractions—I wish they were better known.

Rail: That makes me think of the story of when Robert Ryman started painting, he needed to cover his whole hand with paint, and waste it, in order to feel like he could get started. I don't know if "waste" is the correct word, but he needed to try not to make a painting at first and feel that texture. I was wondering: What were the first paintings that you made, and how did Joan Brown open up painting to you?

Zurier: Well, I've never heard that story, but I love it because it makes sense. It's like, here's this material and what is it? That almost sounds like the way I was out in the backyard crushing bricks to make paint. I didn't know how to grind pigment, I was just touching it and rubbing it on my hand. School was formal and Joan taught from a model and you had to work large—at least five by seven

feet—because with that size you can't hide. You have to commit to it, you have to get the material to cover the canvas, and you have to use your whole body, not just your wrist.

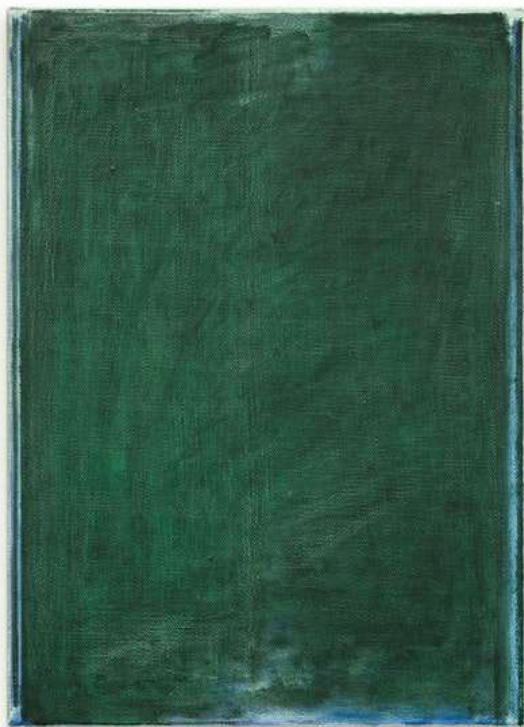
Here's Joan Brown's teaching in a nutshell: "Follow your nose." One time I was painting the interior of a room and I was trying to paint the molding at the top and get the perspective right—and I'm painting it freehand, a seven-foot long horizontal line. She comes over to me and she says, "What are you doing? Get a *ruler!*" She was very direct, encouraging, and tough. The highest praise from Joan was that something was spiritual. Which meant that it was connecting to something. Spirit. Elmer's highest praise was "this is poetry."

Rail: At this time you were making paintings that weren't yet your own. When did you start making paintings that felt like they were?

Zurier: Probably around 1994 or 1995, which is 10 years after I finished grad school. But you know, this is all in hindsight, because all the time I was working, I felt like I was making my own paintings. In 1984, when I finished grad school, I knew what was happening in contemporary painting, but I didn't want to give up an improvisational kind of painting. This was the time of Transavanguardia and analytical strategies in painting—Peter Halley, Neo-Geo—this was all happening at a time when I was making gestural abstract painting that referenced landscape. So I thought, why not be direct and actually paint a landscape. So for about six months I did plein air landscape paintings. What I discovered was that landscape was not my subject, my subject was color and movement, painting itself, and formal abstraction. I had been making abstract paintings before, but I had been using the compositional language of representational painting. I needed to make them more abstract, more two-dimensional. I needed to start over. I've always been interested in the material of painting, and going back to childhood, what I was looking at in my parents' home was how the paintings were made.

Rail: Like the Dove painting, *Moon*?

Zurier: *Moon* is a perfect example because that painting has a dry surface. It has thin washes of oil paint. It's actually painted like a watercolor, where the ground is providing a lot of the light. Then there are also areas of heavier paint. And then the Diebenkorn paintings—I was interested in how they seemed so spontaneous, and how hard it is to do that. But in two of the Diebenkorns, what I was really looking at were the supports—one was painted on a medium weight cotton duck, and the other was on a very fine muslin. The paint on the cotton duck was thick impasto, but the other was very thinly painted so that, like in *Moon*, the ground generates light.

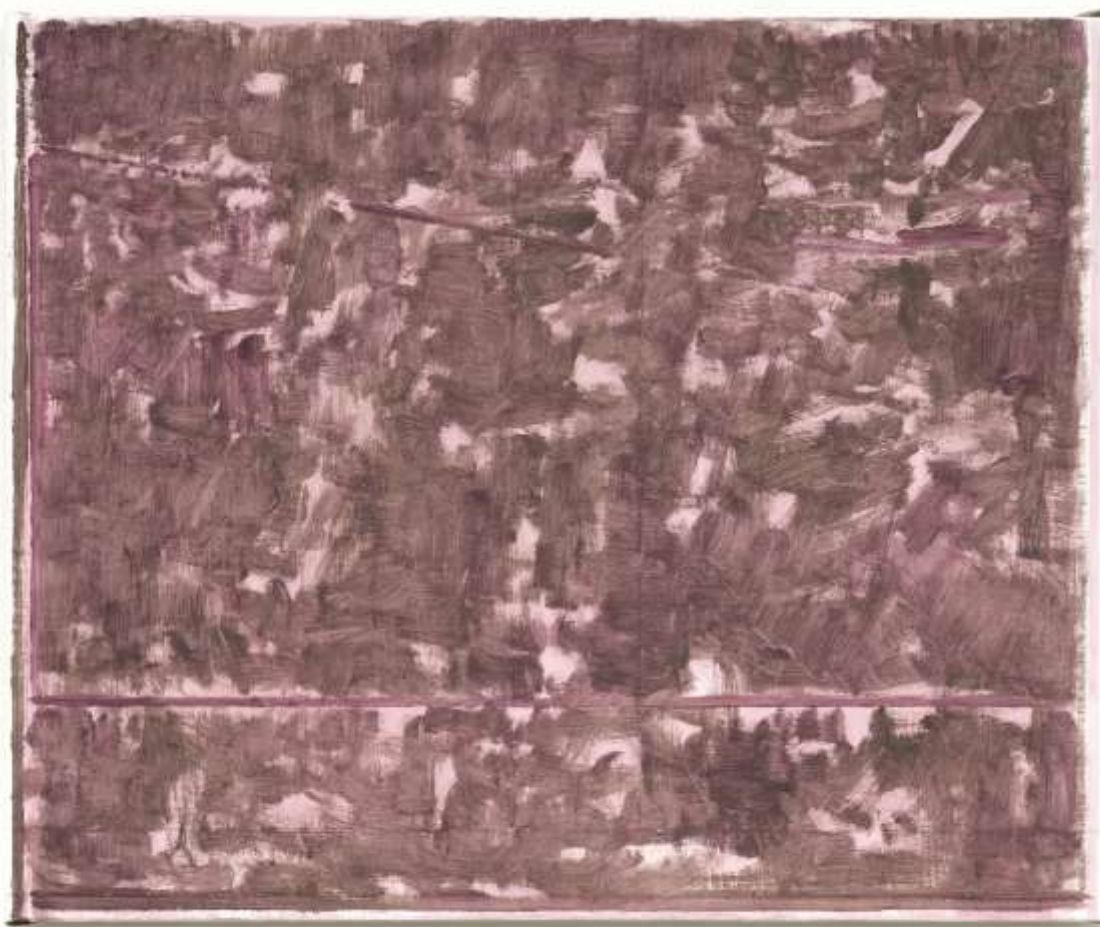


John Zurier, *Hill*, 2019. oil on linen, 15 3/4 x 21 3/4 inches. Courtesy the artist and Peter Blum Gallery, New York.

Rail: In the Hartley painting you grew up with, *The Warriors* (1913), the white in the painting is the ground coming through.

Zurier: Yes, it's also thinly painted. As a kid I thought it must be unfinished. "Okay, if this painting is finished, why is this not painted?" As a child, there's no conceptual or art-historical framework for this, I'm just looking, and what I see is that when you look at the center of the painting, you can see the underpainting of the drawing, and then as you get up to the top, there are more unpainted areas. So, the ground color creates a light as if the forms are disappearing. The energy of the painting is perfectly complete, so he doesn't have to fill everything up because it's sparking. When I first saw a Cézanne painting up close, I understood how the color is moving over the empty unpainted spots. It's something that I still look at a lot, this aerated surface, the use of unpainted areas, "unfinished" areas. And I have spent a lot of time learning to make the proper grounds for my paintings. And what I've been talking about with the paintings I loved early on, is the question of how to make a painting that's halfway between a sketch and a finished painting.

Rail: These days, learning to making your own grounds is very adventurous as a painter.



John Zurier, *Hundasúra*, 2019.oil on linen, 18 x 22 inches. Courtesy the artist and Peter Blum Gallery, New York.

Zurier: To me it's just so basic. I knew that I wanted to work with traditional, conventional material: a stretcher, fabric, and paint. So, then how do you get these together and then what does this mean? I started with acrylic grounds because that's what I was using on wood panels and then I realized how much the ground was affecting what I was doing. I started making line paintings on a ground in which I would mix iridescent pigment with chalk, so they had this reflective surface. Then I would draw a line down it freehand, vertical. If that felt okay, I would draw another one, if that didn't feel right I would erase it, then I would add another. The tone or the surface color of the painting was developed through erasure, and then I would continue. What making these paintings actually did was broaden my vision. Because I was standing back from the painting, using a brush stuck in the end of a six, or even eight foot, bamboo pole, I was able to see the whole surface, not just focusing on the point where the brush was. It was complete focus—in vision, mind, and body.

Rail: Is that when your work began to engage more with what we think about in terms of “monochrome”?

Zurier: Yes, actually it is. I would put this ground down and then I would put the canvas up on the wall to start painting on it, and then I would think, “I can’t paint on it. This is really too interesting the way it is.” But I couldn’t accept it as a painting. That took awhile. By this time I was not just using white grounds, I was mixing pigment into them, so my first monochromes came from the grounds I made for the line paintings, or as a result of the painting out of the lines. Most were from painting over things. It wasn’t about making a painting with a single color. Once I painted my way into monochrome I thought I needed to make a decision about figure ground relationships, until I realized I didn’t have to. It is not an either/or position for me.

Rail: It seems very much like the work you’re continuing to explore today.

Zurier: Yes, it is. I can have lines, shapes, fields of color, make one as different from the other as possible, work in groups, variations—it’s wide open. I’m thinking about the surface and light, and the way that light seems to be attached, or floating, or hovering off the surface and the way the color—a very specific color—is activated in each painting. The color of the painting is the content, not an attribute. And the color is related to things I have experienced in the world. The paintings also have associations: to weather, natural phenomena, landscape, places, and things. I can use a direct source or not. I can actually do that now because rather than try to deny the world, I have realized that I’m not separate from the world. It’s actually okay to have those associations. The kind of naturalness I’m after is like water running downhill—it is what it is. But if you try to talk about it, it’s no longer natural, but conceptualized, and I wanted to get away from that.

Rail: A number of the words you described your teachers using to talk about art are often still used to describe certain aspects of your painting today. Would you continue to describe “poetic” in the same way as Bischoff?

Zurier: Yes, I would—I *mean* poetic. In painting the word “poetic” is often used to mean lyrical—or something vague, soft, misty, and emotional. But I think poetry is hard and clear—condensed sensation. It opens up something unexpectedly. So that’s the definition of poetic I ascribe to.

Rail: And how about “tone”?

Zurier: Well, tone is like the definition of the word “atmosphere”—the tone of this room is comfortable, the tone of this room is energetic. I think of tone as air. When I’m painting, I’m looking for a mood which is connected to air, which is connected to light, which is all connected to a color and to the brushwork that delivers it, and then all of that is attached and enmeshed in a surface.

Rail: And air is something that we feel but don’t see?

Zurier: Yeah. Like the wind. We see the effects not the cause. I think about air and wind constantly.

Rail: But you said you can see air, can you talk a little bit about that?

Zurier: The thing that I want to grasp is the thing that can’t be grasped. And air can’t be grasped—but we feel it. You and I have just been up in the north of Iceland, in Skagafjörður, which has this stunning light. There’s a story about a 19th century Danish landscape painter who came to Skagafjörður for the summer, to a town called Sauðárkrókur, to paint because it’s known for its beautiful light. And so, he got there, set up his easel, he would try to paint, but he left after a week because he couldn’t capture the light. So, it’s a romantic story about trying to catch the thing we see, feel we can almost grasp, but can’t quite reach. When we were driving up there, we saw the light caught in the air between us and the mountain across the valley. It’s easier to see air when there’s something in it, you know, like dust, or the drizzle making that light we saw so spectral, or the mist and fog, or the air colored by the reflected light off buildings in the Bay Area. But then sometimes the air is just so clear it’s startling. I can see that. To make these sensations tangible—that’s the thing.

Rail: You haven’t picked up your bags and left.

Zurier: I still have a lot of work to do.



John Zurier, *Esjubeig 2*, 2019. glue-size tempera on linen, 23 5/8 x 15 3/4 inches. Courtesy the artist and Peter Blum Gallery, New York.

Contributor

Erik Lindman is an artist based in New York. This year he will be recognized at the Hirshhorn Museum gala, an honor he shares with John Zurier.