

HYPERALLERGIC

Art Reviews

The Essential Nature of John Zurier's Art

With *The Future of Ice*, John Zurier manages to reduce each painting to what is essential only, yet he maintains an incredible specificity in each.

By Jason Stopa

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John Zurier, "Glacier" (2021), oil on linen, 78 3/4 x 55 in.

In a 2019 Brooklyn Rail interview with Erik Lindman, John Zurier recalled that the first painting he made in childhood was from a desire to paint the sea. With his current show, *The Future of Ice* at Peter Blum, it appears that this desire to paint nature remains fully intact. These are not literal translations of the natural world, however. In a significant departure from Zurier's previous shows, the sparse architectural notations that ornament his near-monochrome paintings have now become line and form, encouraging figure/ground relationships he has previously eschewed. While past exhibitions displayed a consistency of touch, at times dense, at times light, the 20 paintings on paper and linen in this show vary widely in paint application, surface, and pressure. Audiences witness a mature artist revealing all the tools in his toolkit. The results do not disappoint.

American painting can be famously loud, frontal and unapologetic. Zurier, who maintains a studio in Iceland, is more aligned with certain European painting sensibilities, which consider

understatement a virtue. A number of associations are drawn from this quiet body of work: the elegant imperfection of Wabi Sabi, the endlessly varied surfaces of Robert Ryman, the climate of Iceland, and the color of Fra Angelico's paintings at San Marco, all of which are touchstones for the artist's trajectory. Linking these diverse interests is Zurier's concern with time and impermanence.



John Zurier, “Untitled (Morning)” (2021), oil on linen, 29 1/2 x 21 5/8 in.

What is surprising about the works in *The Future of Ice* is how the artist manages to reduce each painting to what is essential only, yet he maintains an incredible specificity in each.

“Untitled (Morning)” (2021) is one such work. It is a modestly sized oil painting on linen composed of a green-on-green colorfield. The paint is applied in a thin, rough wash, of which two layers are discernible. A thin, white L shape on the right side of the canvas stops just shy of the top and bottom. Also on the left side are three dash marks placed at equal intervals from the top and bottom. Zurier paints these small architectural forms where there are perforations in the weave, or creases in the linen, which come across as intuitive mark making. The L shape creates a figure/ground relationship, something the artist has only hinted at in previous bodies of work. The value contrast between the green and white allows for a punchy, graphic quality; the shape reads less as a letter or sign, and more as a floating signifier.

Zurier is interested in the ambiguity of form, the trace of pigment on linen, and the pressure with which it has been applied. The palette indicates that this painting is not about the color of morning per se, but about the phenomenal experience of time passing at a particular time of day.

In “Untitled (Bolagil)” (2021), Zurier paints a deep brownish-red T form centered on a pale green ground. The green has a matter-of-fact quality, painted in thin, transparent horizontal strokes, while the T form is incredibly evocative. It is narrow, opaque, and nearly feels incised. Its isolation on the green ground gives it an elemental character: it lies somewhere between a letter, a lintel beam, and a cross. The lintel beam is one of the most basic forms in construction, yet the artist has imbued it with an emotional resonance rarely seen.

Zurier gets as much out of addition as subtraction, often with uncanny results. He wipes away paint, often leaving stains and residue, only to paint again. Paintings like “Glacier” (2021) and



John Zurier, “Untitled (Bolagil)” (2021), oil on linen, 27 1/2 x 19 3/4 in



John Zurier, "Indigo Note" (2021), ink on lined paper, 9 7/8 x 6 7/8 in

works on paper such as "Indigo Note" (2021) feel closer to the material surface of a Piero della Francesca fresco than anything that paper or linen traditionally offer.

Yet, reduction is not all that he is after. Zurier is not a Minimalist. Neither is he trafficking in the vestiges of Postminimalism explored by Agnes Martin. Minimalists contend that only physical objects and properties exist. It's a convenient position for the artist who wants to dispense with any metaphysics or intangibles. This is not Zurier's intention.

James Bishop once described himself as "an Abstract Expressionist of the quieter branch." Zurier might fit on that branch as well, but with a healthy dose of skepticism. In an art world obsessed with artists' personas, Zurier remains committed to an alternative vision. He maintains visual clues: a fragment of architecture, impasto, brushwork, and erasure, all of which are traces of personhood. Yet his paintings are anti-ego.

His touch has something to do with a desire to lose oneself in the act of painting, where the artist's handiwork becomes impossible to accurately map, but a physical presence remains. What first appears as quick, expressive paint handling is, rather, deliberate. These paintings prod us to figure out how to actually see by slowing our desire for quick reception. Zurier stakes a claim for contemplative experience.

John Zurier: *The Future of Ice continues at Peter Blum Gallery (176 Grand Street, Manhattan) through November 13.*