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Photos By Steve Bennett / San Antonio Express-News

John Zurier is showing six paintings influenced by his travels in Iceland at Lawrence Markey Gallery.

Lights, colors of Iceland inform artist's work

By Steve Bennett

SAN ANTONIO — A dozen years ago, John Zurier made a horseback-riding trek in the highlands of Iceland and was taken by “the purity of the landscape.”

The California artist has returned several times since, drawn also by the light, which can take up 22 hours of a day, the quality of which, he said, is “like a big inhalation.”

“But it's not just the light and the landscape,” said Zurier, who has an exhibition of six recent, Icelandic-influenced paintings at Lawrence Markey Gallery through April 25. “The language is amazing. And it's also their storytelling and culture. It's such an unforgiving landscape, so it's amazing to me how the people have thrived there.”

Markey's elegant color studies in supple blues that can sometimes fool the eye into thinking green display an emotional resonance of the Nordic island country marking the juncture between the North Atlantic and the Arctic Ocean.

For instance, the blue in a painting such as “August and After,” Zurier said, is “a specific reference to a blue in the Arctic climate.” The copper blue of “Votilakur,” which could be considered the exhibition's centerpiece, looks as if it would be cold to the touch, like floating ocean ice.

“A lot of these are color memories that reveal themselves to me during the process of painting,” said Zurier, who was born in Santa Monica in 1956 and teaches at the California College of the Arts in the Bay Area. “It's a very intuitive process. I'm thinking about surface and light and color. The clarity of the light is what I'm interested in. I want the paintings to feel very light, even though they are very labor-intensive. I'm interested in how something comes about very naturally.”



The copper blue in the painting “Votilakur” reflects a “color memory” from Zurier's visit to Iceland.

Zurier's quiet, meditative, organically evolving paintings have been called minimalist, but he shrugs off the term, saying, “I just think of myself as a painter.”

In many works the structural supports of the canvas are evident, corner folds are tacked, and the brush strokes are clearly expressed. Edges sometimes seem unfinished.

“Sometimes I like to show how a painting was done,” he said. “But I want to keep it open-ended so the viewer can have his own experience with it.”

According to gallery owner Lawrence Markey, Zurier has cited “traditional Japanese principles of simplicity, suggestion and incompleteness” as guiding themes in his work.

“His paintings display a skillful balance between lyrical gesture and pragmatic compositional method,” Markey said. “With washes of distemper (raw pigment dissolved in rabbit skin glue), color seems to diffuse and hover in natural light.”

Lawrence Markey Gallery is at 311 Sixth St. It is open noon to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Friday and by appointment.

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