

## **Colour as optical sponge**

### **A great, intense painting experience - Trond Borgen writes about John Zurier's paintings at Gallery Opdahl.**

Painting is an astonishing artistic medium; in a way it is completely exhausted of new possibilities because all strategies and methods have already been tested and achieved. And yet it is constantly being renewed, not through radically new, unprecedented approaches, but through the quiet, thorough work done by the most accomplished painters as they advance painting with individual variations and distinctions. It is this that can continue to give us that which we have never seen before, as well as great experiences of pure painterly concentration.

At Gallery Opdahl the viewer can get just such a great, intense experience of painting from only seven moderately sized paintings. American John Zurier's nonfigurative paintings appear immediately simple, in some cases coarse, as if they were to be painted rather carelessly or almost in distraction. But do not be fooled, as soon as you sink into this exhibition, the distinct qualities of these paintings slowly begin to emerge. The colour in each painting is a somewhat thin, fragile skin; the pigments are applied as thinned paint, partly with oil, and with rabbit skin glue as a binder. It renders a rather matt, dry surface, a veil that absorbs the light in the room.

## **Anti-heroic**

The effect of this is double: I see Zurier's painting in the extension of Modernism's quest for purity of the medium, yet completely without the heroic overtones, which were so typical of parts of American Abstract Expressionism. Zurier instead gives us anti-heroic painting, where the apparent vulnerability and lack of force of the work are turned to its strength. What strikes me is the physical sensuality of these paintings, where they fill the exhibition with a pure sensory experience.

The diffuse light invites me into the works, constantly inward, towards a landscape experience that lies deep within. In every painting there is breathing room, a resting pulse; It is borne by the colour and the simple compositional strategies, from which a small stroke, some cautious dabs and small forms create life and balance on the surface. In some of the paintings, the edge around the blind frame has its own colour, which whispers softly towards the colour of the front, as in the green abutting the ochre of "Late Summer 2." The result is that the almost ethereal transient colours of the paintings float in front of the white wall, which emphasises the object character of the paintings.

But only so far, since these rather spartan paintings are almost about to dissolve in front of our eyes. What's more, Zurier offers painting as the bearer of raw of colour on the imperfect state of the surface and in the material's fragile vulnerability. It seems to me that this apparent carelessness the result of a slow, thoughtful application of paint, in which the drying process of the pigments leaves traces on the canvas that evidence the patience of the artist, combined with his great experience and technical knowledge.

## **Optical sponge**

Zurier's period in Iceland can be perceived in his paintings as careful landscape impressions, with titles such as "Helgafell" and "Héraðsdalur." Perhaps we find suggestions of snow, stars in the night - but never direct, never concrete. The thin layers of

paint allow Zurier to see landscape and nature through a veil of colour; instead of light bringing forth the form of the landscape, it is the colour that sucks light in from the room in which one stands - he uses the colour as an optical sponge. It creates a strange translucency when the light enters the painting, and it contributes to the ephemeral character of these works. It is a paradox, of course, because just when I think these fields of colour will collapse, they draw me into a world of remarkable rich, spatial, textural and emotional depth.

It is the light abstracted in these distinctive colours, more than his experience of the physical landscape. So Zurier demonstrates that his painting is equally subtle meta-painting, which displays the painterly devices that give the transient quality its distinctive weight and materiality, colour balance, and which contains the painting's own existential pursuit. A landscape painting without landscape; it is ambiguity's enigma.