

Iceland native Arngunnur Yr's modern landscapes

Victoria Gannon

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Oakland painter Arngunnur Yr knows where she is.

It's a place where the edges of sky and land overlap and cloud formations mimic mountains' crests. Icelandic fjords mingle with Sierra Nevada landmarks like Mount Whitney. It's an amalgamation of Iceland - where Yr was born and grew up and returns during the summers to lead hikes - and her adopted home of California, where she's lived for 25 years.



Arngunnur Yr

That place exists only in her oil paintings. Yr is nostalgic for her homeland, but she is also compelled to make work that transcends the picturesque. Her most recent paintings question the notion of a stable location, as they meld Iceland's ice and volcanic rock with iconic California peaks.

"I generally spend my summers in Iceland, out in nature, which partially explains why the starting point (of the paintings) tends to be from there," Yr explained. "That's where I have the deepest and most frequent experiences in landscape. But now I'm working with these recognizable silhouettes of specific Sierra Nevada mountains and shapes. But I shift them around, so they're almost like pieces on a chess table. It's very playful and also ridiculous." Yr takes her approach from Hudson River School painters such as Albert Bierstadt, whose luminous depictions of Western mountain ranges drew people into the frontier. "If you're a landscape painter, in California, it's almost mandatory to recognize the history here, of the Manifest Destiny painters, and Ansel Adams, and Bierstadt, and the Hudson River painters from the East," she said.

But she's also inspired by contemporary landscape artists whose work subverts their predecessors' romanticism. "I think maybe that's the only way to really approach landscape in

a contemporary setting. Because there is such dense and heavy history, one has to approach it from a new angle," she said.

Yr's paintings both celebrate nature's sublimity and intentionally disorient the viewer's sense of place. "In all my work, I like there to be a certain sense of ambiguity, of uncertainty, that the work leaves some questions unanswered," she said. "I think every artist should be after a personal statement, and that has to reflect the world we live in now."

Yr's landscapes do just this, building on past painting traditions while reflecting our increasingly globalized sense of geography. As new technology refines and confuses our sense of orientation (Google Maps gives us satellite images of our exact locations, but also lets us pretend we are everywhere at once), artists remain inspired and confounded by the simple question, "Where am I?"

Yr seems to have found her answer.

11 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Tues.-Sat. Through Jan. 23. Hosfelt Gallery, 430 Clementina St., S.F. (415) 495-5454. www.hosfeltgallery.com.
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