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Iceberg theory

Desert-locked artist hypothesizes arctic landscapes

by JARRET KEENE
AT FIRST GLANCE, THE MOUNTING CRISIS of global warming doesn't seem to influence the limitless, ice-blue imagination of Las Vegas artist Elizabeth Blau. She has created vast frozen tundra bordering on the epic, yet revealing a distinct sense of vulnerability. Titled *Withering Heights* -- a play on Victorian author Emily Brontë's novel, *Wuthering Heights* -- Blau's show, in its own distant way, mines the thematic terrain of thwarted love and doomed passion. Given the nature of her glacial images, the artist asks viewers to look carefully in an effort to discern subtle emotional tremors and seismic philosophical shifts. Indeed, gazing at something like "Separation Anxiety," a large, two-part acrylic painting, one comes away with the notion that even glaciers must somehow feel the pain of saying goodbye.

OK, maybe Blau's message is global warming is a serious problem, after all.

In any case, the experience of absorbing *Withering Heights* isn't akin to watching icecaps melt. It's more like watching glaciers cry, even if there's a conspicuous absence of tears and nothing is exactly melting away here (though there's plenty of water around). That would be too much of a cliché, and Blau is content in letting the surface of these works communicate whatever turbulent emotions are roiling beneath -- love, grief, hope. The latter is initially apparent in a bright piece like "Avalanche," a sunset-orange series of tubes winding its way across the canvas like a children's play area. But then, like every single one of Blau's images, there's also another way of looking at "Avalanche." Is the reddish-orange color meant to suggest heat? Is the sun, with a little help from man's negative



"Refraction"



"Separation Anxiety 1 & 2," by Elizabeth Blau

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environmental impact, grilling the arctic like a batch of Oscar Mayers? This is the fun in gazing at Blau's canvases. Everything is open to analysis; ideology is what you bring to the Winchester Gallery rather than what the art brings.

Perhaps "Hydro-Glacier," then, is nothing more than the children's water park it appears to resemble. Fashioned with watercolor pencil, this two-part piece possesses a ghostly wispieness that doesn't exactly grab your attention. But once you immerse yourself in its thin, barely discernible surface, its beautiful contours and wry architecture hit like a lo-fi indie pop song. This is the only work that initially feels a tad off-putting until you allow its frigid tentacles to envelop you and let the icy water spewing from one of the tubes wash over your mind. Sure, there's a bit of horror to these proceedings, and it's easy to visualize a sequel to John Carpenter's arctic bloodbath *The Thing* being shot among some of these landscapes, yet there's also a Victorian elegance, an aesthetic loveliness, permeating this fractured, endangered world. Again, the fact viewers can spend so much time inhabiting these images and visualizing different scenarios makes *Withering Heights* a towering achievement. In this critic's estimation, minimalism rarely abides by its own maxim that "less means more." Sometimes less just means less, and Blau does an admirable job of refusing to let her work slide into rote simplicity.

One way she does this is by mixing genres. For instance, there's the inclusion of the Plexiglas installation "Trans-Arctic 747," a five-foot airliner squatting on the ground in the center of the gallery. What does this passenger plane have to do with the rest of the show? Does the 747 represent the ideal vantage from which to view the arctic? If so, why is it stuck on the runway? Whatever Blau's reasons for adding this mechanical creature to a landscape exhibit, "Trans-Arctic 747" fits perfectly in terms of communicating a cool, remote sensibility that's in keeping with its surroundings. Although the piece completely devoid of emotion, its presence seems justified given the overall mood of epic isolation. After all, what is modern air travel but a metaphor for loneliness and longing? Even Irish rock band U2 recognized this with cover art (shot by Anton Corbijn in the Charles de Gaulle Airport in Paris, France) to the smash-hit album *All That You Can't Leave Behind*. Blau takes it one step further by letting the plane itself -- a glorified sardine tin -- symbolize human alienation.

Withering Heights comes down Feb. 8, so make sure to stop by the Winchester Cultural Center before then to feel a real winter chill settle in. Though not exactly an eco-art exhibit, it should appeal to folks who enjoy politically minded work as well as to pure aestheticians that prefer their art to be free of any overriding ideology. Soon winter will be over, and Las Vegas will gradually heat up again, becoming the devil's playground that it is every summer. If only we could each store a chunk of Blau's heights in our freezers.

Withering Heights: Recent Work by Elizabeth Blau

Through Feb. 8

Winchester Cultural Center Gallery

3130 S. McLeod Drive

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