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Ice in the Desert

Artwork conveys Las Vegas's concern over climate change, future of glaciers

By CAROL CLING
REVIEW-JOURNAL

what: "Withering Heights," new paintings by Elizabeth Blau
when: 10 a.m.-9 p.m. Mondays, 10 a.m.-7 p.m. Saturdays (through Feb. 8)
where: Winchester Cultural Center, 3130 S. McLeod Drive
admission: Free (455-7340)



Artist Elizabeth Blau combines natural and man-made images in "Withering Heights," currently at the Winchester Cultural Center gallery. Photos by Jane Kalinowsky.



Inspired by global warming, artist Elizabeth Blau considers climate change -- and disappearing icebergs -- in "Separation Anxiety."

Icebergs in the desert?

That combination may seem more than a bit incongruous. Except, perhaps, to artist [Elizabeth Blau](#), who explores the ironic juxtaposition in "Withering Heights," which continues in the [Winchester Cultural Center's](#) gallery through Feb. 8.

Icebergs, after all, exemplify the notion of things hidden beneath the surface.

And Blau, a [Las Vegas](#) native, hopes her artwork -- which focuses on disappearing glacial ice -- triggers "an inner dialogue" with those who see it, to inspire them to "talk about these things under the surface."

Visiting Blau's show inside the intimate Winchester gallery, true to its subject matter, is a bit like venturing into an ice cave. (Without the subzero chill, of course.)

In part, that's because all but one of Blau's seven paintings (plus one Plexiglas sculpture) come alive in various shades of shimmering blue and its cool-hue counterparts, from purple to gray to green.

"There's so much mysticism in blue," observes Blau, who clearly has an affinity for the color. (It doesn't hurt that her surname, in German, means "blue.")

The frosty colors also inspire contemplation of an "issue that's been at the forefront of a lot of people's minds," she notes. Including hers.

After spending some time in Alaska, she was struck not only by the glaciers' "magnificence" but by the notion that ongoing climate change may mean "these

things aren't going to be here much longer."

In Blau's view, her exhibition depicts that "element of romance" in the Arctic landscape.

The show's title also reflects a sense of romance; Blau acknowledges that "Withering Heights" is "a blatant nod" to Emily Bronte's "Wuthering Heights."

Not only is Blau a fan of Bronte's 19th-century literary classic, but its focus on "loss, and dealing with loss," struck the artist as appropriate for a series depicting endangered ice.

Despite the urgency behind her work, however, the images themselves float serenely above worldly concerns.

That includes "Avalanche," the lone painting done not in shades of blue but in vibrant reddish orange. (And let's not forget that orange is blue's opposite on the color wheel.)

But "Avalanche" -- and its bluer-than-blue sister painting, "Escape Velocity" -- feature not only jagged crags of ice but spiraling hydro tubes that look as though they've escaped from a water park.

They're not the only signs of civilization snaking through Blau's pristine Arctic landscapes, however.

The diptych "Hydro-Glacier 1" and "Hydro-Glacier 2," done in delicate watercolor pencil, shows tubes bursting through the base of a jagged ice wall, reminiscent of pipes at Hoover Dam.

The contrast between natural and man-made elements is far from coincidental, Blau admits.

Although "I'm not here to lecture," she says, "what if we did consider the impact

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of what we're doing?"

The sculpture "Trans-Arctic 747" -- which depicts a silhouette of a jumbo jet encased in Plexiglas -- also suggests humanity's lofty, above-it-all position.

Yet another diptych, the acrylic "Separation Anxiety," renders expanses of white ice studded with dark blue icebergs, resembling glittering sapphires set in platinum-white settings, drifting inexorably apart.

And in another acrylic, "Refraction," icebergs rise like geometric sphinxes from the surface of the icy sea.

Unlike some artists who create for themselves, without regard for those viewing their work, Blau likes "to spark dialogue," she says.

"I think there's a level of confrontation when you are a solo artist," she adds. "There's just something that happens between the viewer and the artist. That's why I spend so much time making sure the image is appropriate."

Blau finished the paintings featured in "Withering Heights" over the past four months; she made "Trans-Arctic 747" in 2003.

The 26-year-old artist graduated from the Las Vegas Academy of International Studies, Performing and Visual Arts in 1999 and earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the California Institute of the Arts in 2004. Blau's post-graduate work took her from the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, Calif., to the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, where her father once taught.

Initially, Blau returned to Las Vegas to reconnect with her family for a few months, but she "started getting so many job offers" she decided to stay -- especially because, she says, "I could give so much more" in Las Vegas.

"I instantly started working in arts administration," says Blau, who spent two years with the Las Vegas Arts Commission.

She recently resigned from the commission, but plans to work with an arts education program sponsored by Las Vegas' new downtown performing arts center. (The center isn't scheduled to break ground until late 2008, but the arts education programs already are under way.)

Blau also teaches privately.

And she plans to continue the series of paintings featured in "Withering Heights." She's just begun a large painting, titled "Calving," that depicts floating icebergs.

"There's a lot of irony there," Blau admits of a Las Vegas artist focusing on disappearing icebergs. But "I paint what I care about."

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