



## CULTURE SHOCK

PRESENCE AND ABSENCE IN THE  
LANDSCAPE

## Local painters take on climate change in diverse works

By Maggie Grimason

"It's amazing that the power that structures a landscape can be exposed through the little intervention of painting," Beau Carey told me just a few days before the opening of his exhibit, *Rise*, which is currently being shown alongside Scott Greene's *Bewilderness* at 516 Arts (516 Central SW). The dual exhibit is part of season-long programming titled *HABITAT: Exploring Climate Change through the Arts*.



"La Bajada Bluff" by Scott Greene

SCOTT GREENE

Carey, whose works in the show are primarily arctic landscapes, talked about days of isolation and seasickness, of sitting in the doorway of his cabin in Denali National Park and looking up at the northern lights, painting the phenomenon with cramped hands and frozen paints. "We talk about the high Arctic as being the canary in the coal mine for climate change, but for most people it is such an abstraction. That doesn't mean it isn't still symbolic," Carey stated. Carey brings the vulnerable underbelly of what seems to be a tough landscape to light in *Rise*, which features paintings from residencies he has completed in Svalbard, an archipelago in the Arctic Ocean, and Denali National Park, as well as a small selection of other local scenes. When they succeed, there's something not quite right, something unsettling, in Carey's landscapes. "There's an uneasy beauty in them," he said, "I want people to be drawn into the landscape, but to have an uneasy feeling about the choices I've made."



"Fata Morgana" by Beau Carey

BEAU CAREY

Echoing other contemporary naturalists, Carey mused that "when we affect the climate, there is no more untouched wilderness." This resonates strongly in the Arctic, yet it is the absence—of permafrost or substantial ice caps, for example—that makes these spaces undeniably altered by humanity; that idea is a striking one. "I found that so strange," Carey continued, "that an area could be two things at once—the very definition of human intervention and also virgin wilderness. It occupies both in our minds and that's complicated."

Where there is a felt absence in Carey's paintings, Scott Greene approaches the topic differently, explicitly incorporating man-made detritus into his compositions. "I see artificial constructs everywhere and try to include a vestige of what's natural,"

Greene stated of his works in

*Bewilderness*. Cell phone towers masquerade as trees and animals take up residence in their metallic snags; a fire built of PVC pipe blazes, with s'mores ready to be prepared nearby—this is just some of the dystopian imagery present in Greene's work.

Greene, too, spoke about the canary in the coal mine, saying that New Mexico can be read as such, "not only because we have a lot of coal mines and are very dependent on big gas and oil to support our economy, but because we're at the bottom of the country's socioeconomic ladder. Poor places get exploited ... The rugged high desert looks tough, but it's a delicate environment."

Both painters use landscape to explore a complex topic, incorporating abstraction and metaphor into their respective pieces to foster reflection and discussion. "I try to get people to look a little below the surface," Carey said, "to examine the space—how we look at it, how it moves us around, how it is shaped and owned and used ... rather than present data. Maybe the role of the arts is to present information in a different way to affect change." Greene, who also believes that art in its many manifestations is a useful avenue toward a shift in our collective and personal policies and actions, declared, "Art is about communication and sharing, and I can't think of anything more worthwhile than to engage with others and exchange ideas about beauty, humor and tragedy."

I asked Greene why these topics are pressing on a personal level, he replied emphatically, "I'm not alone, these topics are urgent and important for everyone." Just as Carey suggested in our conversation, the thought is conjured again, this time more powerfully—when we change the climate, we change the whole world and life as we know it. On the grandest scale possible, we're in caustic motion toward a frightening future. As Greene said near the end of our exchange, "We are probably now witnessing the tipping point for all life on this planet. So, better get out there and say what you're going to say." The more voices added to the chorus, the better.

Carey and Greene's works will be on display at 516 Arts through January 9.

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