

Enrique Azocar

A practice that strengthens sincerity and seeks depth of understanding



Enrique Azocar, *Drizzle 1*, 2018, oil medium on paper 280 gm, 50 x 70cm.

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Enrique Azocar was born during an earthquake. In the literary “magic realist” tradition of his native South America, such a fact might be cause for speculation about whether one of those events caused the other (and if so, which).

That tremorous beginning may indeed have something to do with the way his work as an artist today invokes the vibrational energies of the natural environment, and seems to navigate instabilities and redefinitions with ease. This embrace of flux and indeterminacy marks an aesthetic that is more truly “ecological” than much of our landscape-related visual culture otherwise tends to be.

The new series of abstract paintings evokes the icy mountain landscapes of the artist’s native South America, even mixing their gritty minerals into his pigments. But these are not mere place-portraits – they are expansive imaginings of the changing Earth, and full of emotional charge.

Although the physical forms are only hinted (by atmospheric bands of colour, and unusual textural surfaces “co-created” between the artist and his paint), we readily conjure the feel of the weather, and the awe of encountering huge places, deep time and momentous phenomena.

The charge is then heightened in a different way, by the artists’ naming of one piece; *Fracking*. Here lies the thematic core of the work: a cry of concern for the kind of

present-day instability and change that is of a different character altogether from the way the planet has behaved up until the stamp of the Anthropocene.

The art world is now crowded with creatives responding to biodiversity loss and climate change, but the phenomenological and non-judgemental approach that Azocar employs here is less common. These paintings work most powerfully when viewed as a series: triangulating on the topic from multiple shifts of perspective, and suggesting a kind of near-spiritual practice that strengthens sincerity and seeks depth of understanding through repetition.

“Fracking”, as we know, is a term for hydraulic fracturing, the fossil fuel extraction method that involves splitting underground

rocks to release natural gas. Vigorously opposed because of its exacerbation of the carbon emissions crisis, it is controversial for other reasons too, including concerns about seismic tremor damage. With his birth story, Azocar is perhaps more alive to this than most – but his is a wider notion of all the “fractures” at stake, encompassing our broken relationship as a whole with the world we live in, and syndromes such as the now well-known “nature deficit disorder”.

These are layers of meaning and intention to be intuited from the works rather than read in their surface presentation. But there are hints: in the carbon-black colourations, the suggested voids under the land, and the hoverings between macrocosm and microcosm that seem to be referencing the planetary scale of change, while at the same time sampling a manageable human experience of it.

The use of materials such as marble powder and Indian glass, mixed in with the paints and pigments, has made for subtly pitted and textured surfaces that might suggest the ice and lava of new lands forming for the future, or the soil-depleted lands of now-abandoned past habitation. The absence of anything resembling organic life-forms, human or otherwise, appropriately leaves this question hanging.

Other features then become apparent. The predominant horizontals always lead unbrokeably out to their assumed continuation way beyond the paper or the canvas. This is a conscious message about interconnectedness and scale, and a counter to the anthropocentric “picturesque” tradition in landscape painting (from the 17th–18th centuries) which gave as much attention to the framing and arranging of the depiction of a place as to the properties of the place itself.

There is little in the way of recognisable demarcation between land, water and sky; this may be picking up on some indigenous art traditions that take the same approach (avoiding horizons) in order to respect the integrated unity of the whole.

Thus are we led into a realm that has a similarly considered avoidance of other constraining distinctions: negative space becomes activated; figure and ground sometimes reverse, and sometimes the question as to which dissolves into irrelevance. (There are profound “ecological” and “environmental justice” questions to be considered here, if one is minded to do so, concerning the conception



Enrique Azocar, *Bio Bio II*, 2019, oil medium on paper 280 gm, 86 cm x 98 cm.

of subject and object). Light and shade, day and night, may also merge; ultimately, when the viewer reflects actively on the boundary between the inner and outer worlds, the art will have succeeded in doing its work.

As well as being an experiential and (apart from *Fracking*) a purely implicit treatment of environmental issues, this series of paintings differs from much prevalent climate change art in a further respect, namely its studied neutrality of stance. *Fracking* itself proposes neither a positive nor a negative reading, and all the repetition and layering in the images reinforces an idea of multiple viewpoints.

This is key to the work’s expansive sweep, as any hint of didacticism would shrink it. We can journey around its ambiguities, and exercise the invited independence of thought and feeling. For Azocar, this is a core tenet of his philosophy of painting, which thrives on shared openness to the possibility of what the materials themselves will communicate. This is, after all, an artistic enterprise, not a political one.

The paintings themselves, in their unbounded and “de-centred” constructions as described above, are a demonstration of the openness he espouses. In this, he is following painters like Ad Reinhardt, Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko, whose works have been seen as offering a pointedly “democratised” visual experience, and which might well now be considered (coincidentally) to reflect more

faithfully the way we should think about ecosystems.

Azocar’s focus on dancing with the unforced behaviour of materials also deprivileges the anthropic hand, producing another parallel with the more or less ecocentric practices of artists such as Ackroyd & Harvey, Daro Montag, Susan Derges, Stephen Turner and Georg Dietzler, all of whom await the results that will be produced by the other life-forms or environmental processes with which they “collaborate”. As with his pigments, powders, paints, papers and canvases, Azocar also works with his chosen (or imagined) landscapes, rather than imposing onto them any preconceived idea of how they “should” be.

Ultimately, then, these works may come to be seen as a visually-expressed way of viewing the 21st century concept of “relational values” about environmental change. More simply, however, they offer at the very least a powerful aesthetic encounter. Whether or not that could cause an earthquake is arguable, but some kind of movement is sure to take place.

ENRIQUE AZOCAR is a Chilean artist. He is based in Northumberland, and was awarded an MA Fine Art from the University of Northumbria in 2012, prior to which he studied at Central St Martins, London, and Santiago, Chile. www.enriqueazocar.com.