

Berkeley artist Christel Dillbohner puts on icy show for latest ArtHop

By Donald Munro

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"Lost Coast IX -- Escarpments" is a triptych of oil and cold wax on wood by Christel Dillbohner.

Humans don't move at the same pace as a glacier. So Berkeley artist Christel Dillbohner naturally has to move faster than one.

But some of the techniques she uses in her new show, "Ice Floe Journals," opening today at 1821 Gallery & Studios, seem to mirror the way that nature imposes its will as sheets of ice form and fade.

The scary thing about glaciers is the fading part.

Dillbohner's show is one of the highlights of this month's ArtHop, the monthly open house of galleries and studios in the downtown and Tower District neighborhoods. (For a list of venues, go to www.fresnoartscouncil.org.)

Her 25 works in the show include paintings on paper, wood panels and canvas. She concocted mixtures of liquefied pigments that she strained into an emulsion with various ingredients such as water, oil and wax. The result: Thick, milky liquids that she manipulates and lets dry in repeated applications.

"I use my tools and move the materials on the surface in a way like a glacier goes across the land," she says.

The result: Works that have a strong level of abstraction but that are emphatically atmospheric. It's easy to fall into the mood of her pieces, as if you've just opened a door and walked out into the harsh beauty of a brisk and encompassing Arctic landscape. You feel the foot-stamping cold.

And while there's nothing explicitly political about her works, the implication is clear: The ice is melting, far faster than it should.

Dillbohner, who was born in Cologne, Germany, has a storied history in Fresno. Her 2007 show, "An den Ufern der Zeit — at the Shores of Time" at the Fresno Art Museum, was an artistic highlight of the year. She created a large installation piece titled "The Undertow." Six hundred glazed and waxed paper cones, colored deep red and black, were suspended from the ceiling by individual strands of filament. The black cones coalesced into a poollike haze suggesting deep and murky waters.

Discussions at the museum about her 2007 piece helped spark a new direction in her career, she says. She started thinking a lot more about global warming. And she became fixated on Earth's polar regions.

"The floodgates opened up, and I was suddenly painting melting water, icebergs and snowstorms," she says.

The retreat of the world's glaciers has been well documented in recent years in photographs and video. Dillbohner didn't want to add to what we've already seen. As an artist, she wanted to add a distinctive perspective. So she took an approach that might seem counterintuitive to some: She did very little visual research about glaciers.

Instead, she immersed herself in books about the subject, tackling a wide reading list in which various authors described the sensation of cold and ice.

"I wanted to do this in my own head," she says.

The results are what she calls more sensations than landscapes.

Ice has dominated her work for years now. (She has exhibited extensively in California at various galleries and museums, including a 2009 solo exhibition at the San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art, and she recently returned from Berlin, where she held a residency at Galerie Zeit Zone.) The spark she felt back in 2007 in Fresno has had a big impact. Even the hues she uses have changed dramatically: She's gone from warmer, honey-toned, red-yellowish colors to a colder, blue-green world.

People might not always be able to articulate why her works can feel so inviting. She suspects that something deep within us is at work.

"We're losing a landscape," she says. "But we're also drawn to that empty space. It is like an existential void."

Details: "Ice Floe Journals" continues through Oct. 18 at 1821 Gallery & Studios, 1821 Calaveras St. (www.1821gallery.com, (559) 233-9992). Dillbohner will be at ArtHop from 5-8 p.m. today. She also will give a slide show and lecture at 7 p.m. Friday during an artist's reception.