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# Art +/- Geology

Contemporary artist Sarah Winkler's experimental painting technique mimics the addition and subtraction of geological processes in nature. Iceland's geological drama and Alpine-Nordic design ethos inspired her current winter series of fantastical alpine landscapes.

Words by Sandra Henderson

Photos by Christopher Mueller

It was a cupboard drawer full of Mars bars that lured Sarah Winkler into the world of art. She was five years old and lived in Manchester, England. The cache of hiking treats belonged to an impassioned artist living next door. Sarah and her brother liked to visit him and eat his chocolate. Eventually, the little girl became fascinated with the neighbor and his lifeway. The man had worked at a bank his entire life. But on the weekends, he would ramble across England, across mountains. In his seventies, even, he climbed in the Himalayas. "He was an incredible adventurer," Winkler recalls about the former neighbor, who had most of his house converted into a studio. "He would sketch all his travels and come back and translate the sketches into detailed drawings."

And that's what Winkler does today. The British-born painter remembers being "absolutely captivated" by her childhood idol's way of traveling and then documenting the things he saw along the way, his journey. "That's who this guy was, and being around him was enough to start that bug in me, the love of travel and adventure and painting."

## The Travel Painter

Much like a travel writer brings back stories from afar, this wanderlust-bitten painter must travel to make art at home. "Experiencing new things, seeing things for the first time...you're really open and raw, so you are absorbing a lot easier. I travel and then come back and work, based on the memory of that place," she says. "I take vacations in search of solar eclipses, exploding volcanoes, or the northern lights."

Just don't call her a landscape painter. "I don't want people to think I do nice little landscapes...of places that actually exist." Her invented vistas disregard human imprint on landscape. They do, however, consider what landscape does to us humans. "These are wild, untouched spaces. They almost become psychological spaces." Her scenes interpret the human relationship with the outdoors. Why do we go to the forest? Why do we climb mountains? Why do we hike trails? Why do we still go into wilderness this far into our evolutionary progress? "Sometimes, you have to go into the darkness of nature to really know yourself," the spirited artist says.

Wild, untrdden landscapes mesmerize her. "The horizon line is this boundary between what you know, your reality as it is, and what you don't know...what's coming," she philosophizes. "A strong horizon line signifies this moment when you're going off the deep end, into an abyss. It's that wanderlust kind of feeling of a journey, of traveling, of submitting to something challenging that you have to go towards and overcome." Her art tells of survival in wilderness, accented by peaceful moments of pure consciousness in nature. "You forget all the humdrum of life, but at the same time, there is a fear factor. You have to be brave, Zen-like, and really present."

▲ Contemporary artist and wanderer of wild landscapes Sarah Winkler

► Experimenting in ink on transparent foil and using the same solvents and resists as with paint media, Winkler scans the plastic swatches and prints the patterns on papers she then rips to pieces for her collages.

A strong horizon line is the common characteristic in Winkler's landscapes. That giant glaciers and rugged peaks, which inspired her current winter series, don't typically make for an obvious horizon line doesn't deter this willful woman. "Because the horizon line is very important to me, I decided I'm going to force a horizon line in these paintings, even though it doesn't exist," she says, eyes twinkling. What's more, the ebullient blonde places the horizon line dead center. "That's such a no-no in painting, I love it," she laughs. "In abstract painting, the joke, the idea is that you don't know which way is up." Realistic landscape paintings, on the other hand, always have a definite top and bottom, a rule Winkler bends. "You can actually flip these paintings one way or the other and it will still read correctly as a landscape painting."

### **"I don't want people to think I do nice little landscapes...of places that actually exist."**

Her make-believe horizon lines become a divide of above and below—the alpine reality we see above, all formed by a geology below that we can't see. "It ties in with the Continental Divide here in Colorado. It's very dramatic, two plates crushing together and mountains are growing," she says. "It's about landscape that's growing, that's forming, that's eroding, that's expanding."

#### **A Place to Paint**

With a father whose jobs in aviation moved the family around the globe, the artist lived an adventurous childhood in Africa, where her mother first encouraged her to draw her unfamiliar surroundings, and later in different places across Southeast Asia. In 1989, the world-wandering family immigrated to the United States, where the expat graduated with a bachelor of arts degree in studio art, creative writing, and earth science from William Paterson University, New Jersey, in 1994.

The environment the transplant lives in is very indicative of her art's colors and moods. Today, the forty-two-year-old lives and works in a three-story mountain home perched in an aspen grove at the summit of an 8,500-foot (2,591-meter) peak above Denver, in the Front Range of the Colorado Rockies. Husband Jason and their pooch also live in the matte black house with white trim.

In Winkler's current body of work, the influence of her new mountain domicile converges with memories of a pivotal journey to Iceland. "A very geologically dramatic island...the colors, black and cobalt blues, and these very stark, surreal, empty landscapes," she reminisces about the volcanically active country. The artist's painted Nordic landscapes use neutrals and calming spots, an aesthetic she discerned during design week in Iceland. "They usually have pops of color or strong moments of interest, and then everything is quite calm and minimal around it."

The worldly-wise Brit and her travel companions drove in Jeeps over glaciers, watching the northern lights. She photographed nature's night spectacle with long exposure. Afterwards, the pictures revealed what happened between the aurora borealis displays. "I saw these very dark, cobalt skies, and then this amazing landscape in





◀ Using different techniques in different sections she masks off, Winkler works with solvents, resists, and carving tools to mimic geological effects in nature.

the middle was popping out, because the bright snow and the glacial moraines and the ice were overexposed, of course. So working from that imagery was how I came up with this winter series.”

Winkler’s landscapes, fantastical and abstract, don’t depict real places. The outlines of mountains aren’t existing ranges or peaks one could pinpoint on a map. Yet Instagram followers from Iceland instinctively recognize their country when the artist posts snaps of her latest works on the site.

Rather than the likeness of real-life scenery she surveyed, Winkler wants to render the emotion a landscape evoked in her. “Working from the memory of those forms and colors and textures is how I came up with the sketches, and now I am translating them into really abstract paintings,” she says. The winter series draws on Winkler’s memory of Iceland’s Blue Lagoon in particular, where the artist bathed in the warm, otherworldly milky-blue water. “You have the black lava fields and the bright turquoise tide pools, and the ground is covered in the white silica minerals from the water.”

**“This whole painting process is about adding and subtracting, like the erosion process in nature.”**

Each scene takes time to ferment in her mind. “Because I am not painting realistic scenes, nostalgia is always a little bit more interesting than what’s fresh in your mind, when you know all the details,” she says, admitting that forgetting a few details helps her get down to the essence of an experience. “Remembering only the most interesting part makes it this haiku moment in the landscape. Boom.”

Winkler’s creativity is fueled by a sense of place within her surroundings. At the time of her Iceland travels, she still resided in California—and painting icy Nordic landscapes in such an agreeable one-season environment felt incongruous. “Iceland was such an extremely different experience, a very Nordic, alpine, Arctic Circle kind of place,” she says. “When I came back to California, I couldn’t get my head into it. It was the wrong place to work on it.” She shelved the Iceland-inspired series. But when she and her husband relocated to Colorado in early 2015, the artist absorbed a wintry experience, and the alpine wilderness there that reminded her of Iceland’s rugged terrain. “That’s how these colors started coming back to me. It made sense now, and now it just flowed out.”

#### **Emulating Geology**

Winkler at first experiments in ink on transparent foil, using the same solvents and resists she later uses with the paint media. When “something interesting” happens, she scans the plastic swatch, magnifies it, and prints it in archival inks on acid-free coated papers she then rips to pieces. Each landscape begins as a small collage made from those paper scraps. When I comment that these collages she calls her “sketches” are beautiful small works of art in their own right, the creative says this was indeed what she sold as her final pieces for many years. Only this year





▲ A strong horizon line divides the alpine above from the geological below. The paintings read correctly as a landscape flipped one way or the other.

she began translating the collages into large-scale paintings. But could she simply paint a landscape that's not copied from a paper-assemblage sketch? "I've actually tried a painting without any collage references, without any sketch reference at all, and it was a total disaster," she admits. "The collage creates the look of a painting. This hard-edged torn-paper effect gives a very graphic feel to the painting. It's very painterly, but it's very graphic at the same time."

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Winkler's final paintings are acrylics on wood panel. Each large wood board is first treated with a sealant and several layers of the artist's own mix of ground marble dust gesso, and then wet-sanded between applications to attain a polished, ice-like finish. She works in stages, using different techniques in different sections, which

she masks off. Her experimental approach involves solvents, resists, and carving tools to mimic geological effects in nature, such as abrasion, corrosion, sediments, wind ripples, pooling water. It's yet another layer in her abstract interpretation of landscape. "It's not just that I am painting geological textures. It's digging deeper into the process of the landscape, because the minerals I use in my paint mixes, the marble, the mica, the iron oxide, all come from the rocks."

**"This whole painting process is about adding and subtracting, like the erosion process in nature."**

Winkler immersed herself in the study of geology and quickly discovered that the colored pigments in her paints also come from crushed rock and the earth. "What if the pigments in the paint would do the same thing as rocks and dirt and landscapes do in nature?" The artist manipulates textured paint media with water, oil, salt, wind, heat, and sanding tools. "You apply a layer of paint, and then you take some of it away," she explains. "This whole painting process is about adding and subtracting, like the erosion process in nature." ▲

▼ Winkler's torn-paper collages serve as sketches for her abstract landscape paintings.

