

Mayhew: Turning Scenery into a Colorful Sherbet

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Local scenes seem to be constructed out of multi-colored scoops of sherbet in *Essence of the Landscape*, a vivid series of mixed-media watercolor and pastel creations from Santa Cruz artist Richard Mayhew, currently on exhibit at the Triton Museum of Art.

These are obviously all landscapes although their representational significance is limited. Most of them have a hazy feel, reminiscent of dreams or of dawn. In fact, the collective title for this body of works not only explains what they are but also provides a powerful clue as to how they can be interpreted: *Spiritual Indigenous Space Series*.

Although the moods of the paintings vary widely from cheerful to bleak, they all share a numinous quality. The landscapes are clearly Northern Californian but the colors are not of this world.

In some of the works, the sky is on fire and the plants seem charged with electricity. In others the scene seems dingy and dismal as though cloaked in a funereal shroud.

The textures in *Spiritual Indigenous Space Series #18* convey the frothy feeling of stirred up seawater while the colors make it seem like turbulent lava.

Number 17 seems like a hedgerow at sunset. The top half of the work is on fire with red-based color while the bottom looks like bushes, a blur of cool green punctuated by pointillist pink and red dots that could easily be roses.

Because the titles of these paintings vary only by their numbers, there's a temptation to conclude that when you've seen one landscape you've seen them all. And there's little doubt that some visitors will be bored by the exhibition's apparent uniformity. If you walk into the gallery with the goal of simply identifying each work then you're bound to be disappointed. What counts is not the region depicted but the relationship of the colors that comprise each scene. The result is a wonderful mixture of raspberries, limes, and lemon chiffons.

Unyoked from the burdens that representational art can sometimes create, you're suddenly free to contemplate the colors, to go beyond the banal process of identification – that's a tree, that's a rock, that's an old oak at sunrise, that's a park I know near Santa Cruz – and move instead to the *Essence of the Landscape*.