



**DEEP TIME: MICHELLE MACKEY  
AT HOLLY JOHNSON GALLERY**

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Looking intently at the surface of one of Michelle Mackey’s abstract landscapes, the viewer may find portals leading into the earth itself, feel the unseen forces churning beneath, and trace the unfolding story of the land stretched over the geologic time scale. Mackey’s growing interest in geology and “deep time,” bolstered by a journey to Iceland and an arts residency in Wyoming, is fully evident in her latest body of work, which draws inspiration from Enchanted Rock, the fabled pink granite dome in the Texas Hill Country.

The solo exhibition Michelle Mackey: Beyond Measure (Nov. 19, 2022-Feb. 11, 2023), at Holly Johnson Gallery in Dallas, is in many ways a homecoming for the artist. For the last decade Mackey had divided her time between her studios in Brooklyn and Dallas, but with the pandemic as a catalyst and the draw of family in Texas, she made a decisive move back to her home state in 2020.

As her interest in exploring the idea of geologic time grew, Mackey had a desire to locate it here in Texas. She kept returning to Enchanted Rock. “It’s this oddball batholith in the middle of Central Texas. I felt this was a good locator for me for all the thoughts I’ve been working on in my mind, a specific place to talk about the larger abstractions.” A geological phenomenon of monumental proportions, the largest batholith in Texas was created over a billion years ago when molten magma cooled into granite far beneath the earth’s surface, then was gradually exposed and shaped through uplifting, erosion, and exfoliation.

The constant tension inherent in geology is also an essential element in Mackey's painting process. "I'm an abstract painter using landscape imagery. I'm staying in between what I can believe, something I have perceived in nature, and the kind of abstraction that speaks to unseen forces from gravity to time." She seeks to make visible both the past and the present, and perhaps the future as well, in her paintings. "On the human scale we perceive landscapes as very still or peaceful," says Mackey, "but it's also true there are multiple shifts happening and I want that reality to be present in the paintings as well." How does she realize these abstract ideas in a physical language like paint?

Mackey usually works on several paintings at once so that all of them are in conversation with each other. "There is a lot of intent looking and staring at the surface, almost more than the actual act of painting," says Mackey of her process. One painting became the talisman for this body of work. "This one took months and there are many layers, but when it emerged, it became my director." In *Uplift*, fluorescent pink and warm purples glow through translucent red oxides, and a mysterious yellow element seems airborne amidst the otherworldly landscape. "Even though I'm rooting myself in *Enchanted Rock*, I like to push away from any depiction that stays so terrestrial," explains Mackey. "I'm trying to create a surprise element in the work, because nature surprises me. There's this crazy motion and this projectile and this light. Is it a sunset or a dream or Mars?" Mackey invokes both a slow and a fast time here, referencing mountain building and invisible forces. It begs the question, "what happened here?"

Sometimes Mackey intentionally obliterates most of the recognizable imagery in the landscape. In *Tilt*, there are lines of formation that read as outlines of ghost images of rocks. One senses a facet of a rock face hit by reflective light or traces of a buried rock shape being pulled into the foreground. "These forms are flickering in and out of existence," observes Mackey. "I'm talking about collapsing a long time period onto this one surface." The clouds in this painting look both ephemeral and more solid than they should. "We think of clouds as temporary," says Mackey. "Could I render them like traces of themselves or be more solid like a chunk of rock or a fossil? How do I make the traces in the sky seem monumental as they are dissolving?" Mackey is playing with tension again, between motion and stillness, formation and deformation.

The visible alchemical changes activated on the large-scale canvas of *Imbued* overwhelm the senses with its variety of textures, richness of colors, and the complex play of layers. "In nature, so many things act on you at once. You'll notice the colors in one moment, feel the breeze in the next moment, and notice you are blinded by the sun in another. Your memory is also a part of it. I'm thinking about how to present such a full palette and organize it like we do our experiences." Sometimes Mackey wipes out something or buries it underneath another layer. Sometimes she puts a thinner layer on top of a thicker one to create resistance. Sometimes she uses a glazing liquid or spray to create passages of semi-gloss or high sheen. Mackey believes painting is a good medium for expressing the unfolding of multiple time periods at once. "It takes the marks of the history of your past decisions and past colors and records them. Even if you wipe them away there's still a residue." The build-up of layers in painting mirrors the formation of layers of rocks in geologic time.

In *Imbued* there is also a play between brushwork and spray. The beauty of brushwork lies in seeing the gesture of the painter. Mackey wanted to juxtapose this human element with something that did not

evidence a hand. By invoking a conversation between these two elements, Mackey is alluding to forces much greater than us and time that is much longer than our life span.

In *Repose* the juxtaposition of the muted quietness on top of the dome and the rapid, almost liquid motion in the foreground (in deep magenta) seems inexplicable at first glance. It references the exfoliation that occurs when the natural heating and cooling processes cause the granite to flake off in curving layers. The rocks littered around the edges of the batholith are a by-product of this phenomenon. Mackey describes her depiction of these rocks as suggestive of “almost humorous cutouts.” Their angularity is exaggerated. “Some of the shapes are jarring looking, like they don’t all fuse into this one smooth bucolic landscape,” she adds. “They are pieces from multiple time frames.”

*Radiance* reads like an abstraction of elements, with white, pink, and yellow swaths forcefully intruding the space in diagonal motion. *Evenfall* glows quietly in the distant gloaming. Several smaller works explore the theme of geologic time from various perspectives as potently as the larger works in the exhibition.

Mackey doesn’t often use earth tones in her landscapes because she wants the viewer to sense something off-kilter or otherworldly about them. Her colors are heightened, intense, fluorescent. They glow and shimmer with a radiant sheen, sometimes soft, sometimes metallic.

The large-scale painting *Ember* is the only piece in this exhibition that uses predominantly earth tones. Even here, she manages to make the browns glow. Nuanced layers shine through a surface of satiny sheen. “I’m working with translucencies of the darker colors so I can still let the lighter colors, the fluorescent yellows and oranges, peek through.” The work is rich in texture. One can sense the abundance of elements in the soil and the earth. A warm glow seems to emanate from the earth itself and the viewer bears witness to it. A soft light glows on the horizon. “It’s not so much the time of day in terms of the horizon,” explains Mackey. “I’m talking about anywhere from a moment to an epoch; I’m talking about buried layers of time and history. This glow is less a reflective light and more an inner light radiating out.”

Mackey has succeeded in revealing the essence of *Enchanted Rock*, beyond the facts and numbers, beyond measure. These works invite viewers to look deeply, to experience the mystery, to alter one’s perception. Mackey likes to surprise herself and the viewer in her works. I asked her what surprised her about this body of work. “The glow is the first thing that surprised me,” muses Mackey. “Instead of articulating shapes by the edge, the glow is starting to articulate for me. It represents what is beyond me, any of those forces that are larger and more powerful than me.”

—SHERRY CHENG

Sherry Cheng is a music educator, free-lance pianist, and artistic director of the HCC Chamber Music Series.

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DETAIL: Michelle Mackey, *Repose*, 2022, vinyl and acrylic paint on canvas wrapped on wooden panel, 31 x 71". Photo courtesy of Todora Photography.