

Prism Break

Artist's dreamy and sublime photography await travelers passing through SFO.

BY LEILANI MARIE LABONG



From left:
"Psychscape 73,"
[Mount Downs,
Calif., Calif., 2017]
and "Psychscape
18," [Banner
Ridge, Calif., 2017]

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Oakland artist Terri Loewenthal's (terriloewenthal.com) *Psychscapes*, single-exposure photographs of pristine California wildernesses suffused with prismatic hues, have been exhibited alongside Ansel Adams' majestic black-and-white vistas of Yosemite. "That is just crazy to me," says Loewenthal with a hint of disbelief. The juxtaposition emphasizes the timeless beauty of raw landscape, but also draws attention to the trajectory of landscape photography over the last century: Adams' work has formality and grit, while Loewenthal's pieces are dreamy and sublime. The first impressions of the *Psychscapes* are universally about their magical gradient of color, achieved in the moment through a homemade contraption of filters that sits in front of her camera lens—mystical transmissions coming in strong thanks to a strictly analog thingamajig.

"I put myself in a place where I'm surrounded by 360 degrees of



PHOTOS COURTESY OF TERRI LOEWENTHAL



beauty, so it's harder to fail," says Loewenthal, who often ventures with her husband and son to the untamed California backcountry in a white Volkswagen Eurovan affectionately named Vanna White. "I wait for the sun to be the right position, and then... click." A single snap of the shutter reveals an enchanting, rainbow-hued utopia: Gold Lake off Highway 89 in the Western Sierras, for instance, glints through a palette of vibrant magenta and blue. Mount Olsen, located off U.S. 395 in the Eastern Sierras, radiates an aura of orange and gold. Lone Pine Peak, also accessible from the old highway, shimmers with opal iridescence.

"When you close your eyes for a long time and you keep them closed, you 'see' these vibrant colors blending together. I'm trying to channel that," says Loewenthal, whose history of camera-hacking includes jury-rigging a Spectra Polaroid to create a series of double-exposed portraits—her subjects included the Fugees' Wyclef Jean and Mark McGrath from Sugar Ray—that were exhibited in the early 2000s at DDC Lab, a since-shuttered boutique on New York City's Lower East Side. "For me, the *Psychscapes* are not about documenting a place, but, rather, using elements we're comfortable with—color, nature—to put us in a relaxed and open state of mind."

That said, some might view the Bay Area's rich counterculture as an obvious inspiration for the work. "Terri's use of bright, intensely hued colors nods to the history of psychedelics in California," says gallery owner Aimee Friberg of CULT Exhibitions in NoPa. "She shifts our experience of the natural world and gives us an opportunity to view it from a new perspective." For the record, hallucinogens aren't a portal to Loewenthal's mind-bending visions, although her experiences are similarly religious. "Nature is my church," she says.

Last Spring, Zoe Taleporos of the San Francisco Arts Commission visited Loewenthal's *Psychscapes* show at CULT and purchased two large-scale photographs for the public-arts project at SFO, which includes the Harvey Milk Terminal 1 expansion, new long-term parking garage, AirTrain stations and the

Grand Hyatt at SFO hotel. Funded by SFAC's long-established Percent for Art program, in which up to 2% of construction costs for civic buildings are set aside for public art, the SFO project includes 49 works from local artists such as Robert Minervini (a tile-mosaic mural depicting a still-life of California native plants, a tiki totem and representations of the Golden Gate Bridge); coming in 2020 will be Andy Vogt (a trompe l'oeil sculpture of bronze tubing) and Dana Hemenway (a suspended sculpture of wood, ceramic and fluorescent light that references the Bay Area's golden hills, billowy fog and wild ocean).

For their "sense of wanderlust and romanticism," says Taleporos, and the way they "encourage that lifted psychological space that people are seeking in travel," says Friberg, Loewenthal's "Psychscape 18" (Banner Ridge, Calif., 2017) and "Psychscape 73" (Mount Downs, Calif., 2017), both mountainscapes shaded in a shifting spectrum of blue and violet, will hang in the common spaces on the second floor of the Grand Hyatt at SFO.

"If people see a utopia in my work, maybe it's because they can't help but have a vision of something better," says Loewenthal. "I really think that humanity wants to believe in possibilities for improvement. If we can conjure these finer places in our minds, then maybe they're attainable. *Psychscapes* are full of hope."

While utopias are a perfectly lovely ideal, they're almost too otherworldly for Loewenthal's deeply considered work, which seems to better capture the spirit of frontierism, right here, on this particular planet. Presumably, this is why *Psychscapes* have also been likened to the photographic expeditions of post-Civil War geological surveys, in which possible settlements for a relatively new nation were scouted. Through the imaginative use of color and some superimposed elements (trees mostly, maybe some clouds, and the occasional outline of a mountain), *Psychscapes* convey the boundless spirit of the frontier, too dreamlike to depict actual conquest. And, yet, optimism abounds in the work. If you look closely, you may even detect a silver lining or two. "I am able to find hope in beauty," says Loewenthal. ■