

# ABATTOIR



## Cleveland artist Dana Oldfather switches wisely from abstraction to landscape in show at Abattoir

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Courtesy Dana Oldfather, Abattoir

By [Steven Litt, cleveland.com](#)

CLEVELAND, Ohio — [Dana Oldfather](#), a highly-skilled, self-taught Cleveland artist whose work has been a fixture in local exhibitions for at least 15 years, is off on a new tack, and it's a good one.

From abstraction, she's turned to figuration, particularly landscapes.

In a show on view through May 27 at [Abattoir gallery](#) on Cleveland's West Side, the 44-year-old Berea native, a graduate of Mentor High School who lives in Newburgh Heights, is showing seven paintings and five drawings of fields, forests, and waterways pervaded by a quiet sense of mystery and magic.

It's obvious from the images of solar eclipses and other telltale signs, particularly in her drawings, that Oldfather has been looking at the work of the 20th-century painter [Charles Burchfield](#) (1893-1967), an Ohio native who trained at the Cleveland Institute of Art and who spent most of his later years in Western New York State.

Burchfield's landscapes of ordinary fields, farms, and forests are made extraordinary by his evocations of pulsating rays of light and vibrant force fields of cosmic energy. He also shows attention to calligraphic mark-making of a kind that Oldfather hints at in her recent works, again, especially in her drawings.

But if Burchfield is a presence in Oldfather's work, signs of his influence look absorbed and digested thoughtfully rather than aped. She has a clear personal sense of what she wants to do, particularly in the way she lays down paint.

Oldfather's brushstrokes are smooth and flat, with curvy, crisp edges that fit together like puzzle pieces. The effect is a bit like cloisonne, in which areas of enamel are outlined by metal strips or wire.



Courtesy Dana Oldfather, Abattoir

Shapes in Oldfather's landscapes are smoothed, curvy, and generalized. Pine trees are defined, for example, by layered lobes of flat color rather than textured strokes suggesting pine needles. Grasses, clouds, ripples on smooth water, and mosses growing on masonry walls all get the same treatment as if they were somehow made out of the same material.

The style gives Oldfather's paintings a satisfying sense of flatness and integration as if her attention has been expended equally on every square inch of her paintings. That's laudable because it's a way of rewarding prolonged attention.

Color is also an important unifying factor. Painted in tones of violet, lavender, oxide greens, and pale sulfur-yellow, the paintings evoke muggy summer days when high atmospheric pressure creates temperature inversions that stick around for days, warming and thickening the air. At the same time, the shady zones in Oldfather's forests hint at a clammy coolness away from the sun's heat.

Oldfather's stylistic switch to landscape is a welcome development. Until the last few years, she specialized in making beautifully painted abstractions that always seemed just a little too facile and self-satisfied.

Through the 2010s, Oldfather's paintings were filled with slippery-looking brushstrokes in cool tones of green, violet, pale yellow, and gray — similar to her current landscapes. Her strokes seemed to glide and swerve across her surfaces in skeins and drips, and meandering gestures organized in neatly differentiated layers.

Both wet-looking and crisp, Oldfather's paintings never went muddy. But they emanated a kind of flashy facility that nevertheless felt limited. They also looked as if they were part of a visual game set up for easy wins.

It was too easy to imagine how Oldfather's abstractions could have ended up looking different had she made different choices, with consequences that didn't really seem to matter. They lacked rigor.



Courtesy Dana Oldfather, Abattoir

Then, sometime around 2020 to judge by the website of Bonfoey Co., the Cleveland gallery that has represented her, Oldfather, now 44, went figurative, and began to experiment aggressively with a different way of thinking.

In 2022, for example, she exhibited "Flyfall," a mural installed at the Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland that depicted human figures miraculously morphing into a flock of Canada geese. Painted in a flat, narrative style, the mural had the look of a children's book illustration.

The new paintings on view at Abattoir are richer and more resonant, although they also have a narrative feel. That's particularly true of a surreal forest scene in which two female figures are shown chasing one another around a strangely isolated patch of green that's lighter than its surroundings.

The other paintings, avoiding obvious references to fairies or forest spirits, nevertheless appear firmly rooted in the northern romantic tradition of deep dark mysterious forests evident in everything from the early 19th-century paintings of German artist Caspar David Friedrich to the terrain traversed by Katniss Everdeen in “The Hunger Games.”

This is a potent new direction for Oldfather, but it makes you want to see her stretch even more. She certainly has the technical chops. But should she always paint as if everything in her landscapes was made of the same texture, the same material?

If she can depict mysterious forests, can she also portray deserts and mountains? Could she populate her scenes with people? Machines? Buildings? What about winter? Could she paint ice on Lake Erie? Could she paint the earth seen from the sky? How could her work play with complex imagery and build narratives that reveal new possibilities in landscape painting?

At the moment, by hinting at hot, smoggy summer days, Oldfather could be making a comment about how carbon dioxide produced by human activity is stimulating trees to grow by feeding them the greenhouse gas they need for photosynthesis. But that’s probably reading too much into them.

Oldfather’s new direction suggests that she ought to be looking at artists including [Neil Welliver](#) and [Yvonne Jacquette](#), and perhaps even [Fairfield Porter](#) — all painters who combined novel perspectives on landscape with a very powerful sense of place. Oldfather doesn’t have that, yet.

For now, though, Oldfather’s new works are strong enough to produce a very particular kind of aftereffect that comes from looking at good art.

When I left Abattoir and looked at the Cleveland sky, it had a tinge of the kind of pale yellow Oldfather uses in her paintings. It made a slice of the West Side actually look like an Oldfather. That’s a very real compliment about some very solid paintings that are very much worth seeing.