

# DARK MOUNTAIN, DEEP VALLEY

New Works by Loren Christofferson

JUNE 23 - AUGUST 14, 2022

***“I am here not only to evade for a while the clamor and filth and confusion of the cultural apparatus but also to confront, immediately and directly if it’s possible, the bare bones of existence, the elemental and fundamental, the bedrock which sustains us. I want to be able to look at and into a juniper tree, a piece of quartz, a vulture, a spider, and see it as it is in itself, devoid of all humanly ascribed qualities, anti-Kantian, even the categories of scientific description. To meet God or Medusa face-to-face, even if it means risking everything human in myself. I dream of a hard and brutal mysticism in which the naked self merges with a non-human world and yet somehow survives still intact, individual, separate. Paradox and bedrock.”***

**-Edward Abbey**

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# INTRODUCTION

Marya Osucha, Exhibition Curator

As a founding member of the now defunct Scapegoat Collective (we can thank the pandemic for the disbanding of that artistic force), Loren Christofferson has been instrumental in supporting a growing creative community in the Sierra Foothill region. It's the combination of quiet mysticism and connection to the area's natural resources that has drawn me repeatedly back to his work. We at Arts and Culture El Dorado couldn't be more excited to share with you this new body of work he's created specifically for this exhibition.

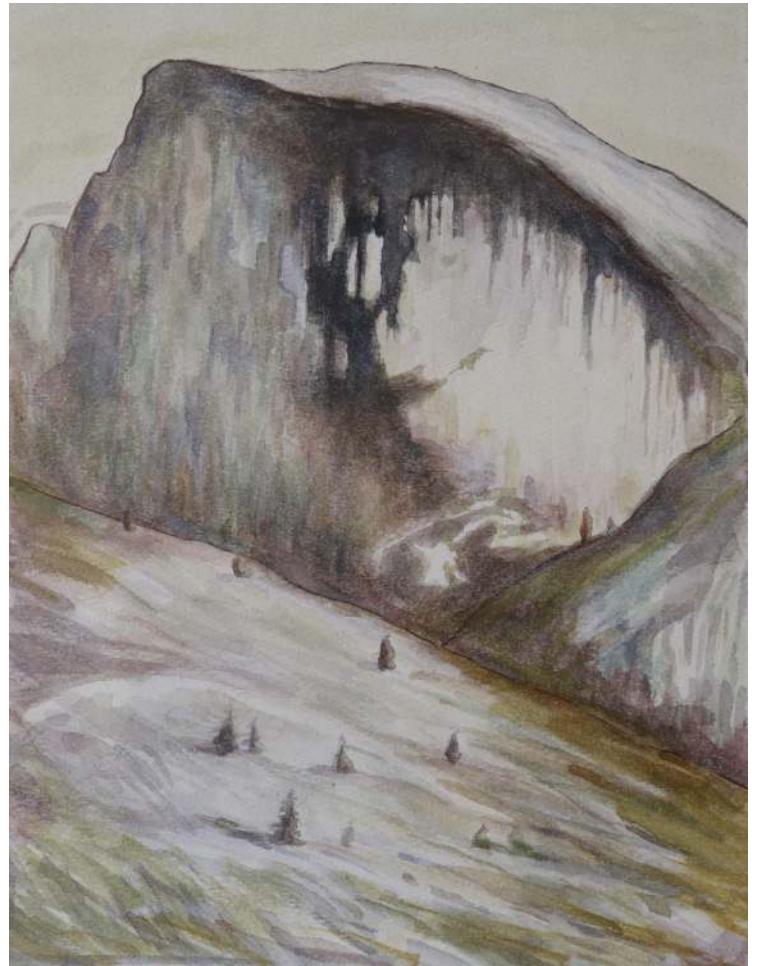
*Dark Mountain, Deep Valley* is a series of monochromatic paintings and works on paper that dive into Christofferson's own nebulous connection to Yosemite's remarkable landscape. His process as a landscape painter is unique in that he fully immerses himself in the natural environment, deeply absorbs his impressions and sense memories, and waits until his return to the studio to physically create. He's then able to bring the viewer into an experience of feeling rather than simply seeing or observing. The *feeling* in being surrounded by his work is unavoidable; it's the quiet medicine I didn't even know I'd been looking for in the chaos of the past few years.

The works in this series range from traditionally descriptive landscape paintings to heavily abstracted, minimal forms that reduce the peaks and valleys of Yosemite almost to a new language of symbolism. This range allows a viewer to understand the artist's process, and through this the series' conceptual evolution is laid bare. The more abstracted works can then be understood as describing the impression of being in the presence of such immense beauty – an experience that humans have struggled to put into words and analyze for thousands of years in a branch of philosophy called aesthetics.

The idea that such an experience is beyond words lies at the foundation of Christofferson's Dark Mountain series. That is what Arts and Culture El Dorado seeks to achieve in featuring Christofferson's remarkable paintings at Confidence Firehouse Gallery – a visual invitation to quiet all intellectual thought, to suspend analysis, and to simply feel beauty. This exhibition is the space of calm after a storm, a break in the clouds, a hushing of all extraneous noise. It is an ode to the importance of our community's relationship to our natural surroundings.

We invite you to sit in the center of our gallery and allow yourself to suspend your rational intellect. These are works that you don't have to "read", there's not some socially critical message you're supposed to tease out and articulate to anyone. The purpose of this series and of this exhibition is respite, reflection on the experience of beauty, and continued gratitude for and awe at our local proximity to such a sublime natural landscape.

*Face of a Woman Stained with Tears 3*  
2021, Watercolor on paper



*Plunge to the Poloti, 2021*  
Graphite on paper

# DARK MOUNTAIN DEEP VALLEY

Loren Christofferson

Human beings have seemingly always gone out into the wilderness to contemplate their existence and to seek answers to life's deepest questions. There seems to be an inherent need imbedded within the human soul to want to understand and tap into something vaster than themselves; the very ground of Reality, if you will. Whether it be on high mountain peaks, in a lonely hermitage, or in the depths of dark forgotten caverns, this fundamental drive within the human experience to understand something that goes beyond birth/death, light/darkness - something that transcends culture. This series is one such endeavor; it's both a glimpse into my own artistic practice and an examination of Yosemite National Park as a doorway through which we can experience a more subtle layer of experience.

Since I was a young boy, Yosemite National Park has been very dear to my heart, as I'm sure it has for many other people. I was born in the Central Valley, only a short drive from its southern entrance. One of my earliest memories was in the Valley when I was two, my parents were engaged at the top of Yosemite Falls, and the Valley was where my grandparents spent their honeymoon many years ago. It has been a constant teacher for me, a trickster spirit of sorts, and a constant reminder that, as Kierkegaard beautifully stated, "Life is not a problem to be solved, but a reality to be experienced."

The title for the show, *Dark Mountain, Deep Valley*, most immediately refers to the Yosemite Valley and (one of my biggest muses) Half Dome. On another level, the show's title also comes from a concept within Buddhist philosophy, called "Yūgen" in Japanese. The word Yūgen has no English translation, but in my understanding it could be best described as the profound beauty, mystery, and ineffable dynamism underlying nature.

A similar idea is found in Western contemplative traditions in such texts as "The Cloud of Unknowing" and "Dark Night of the Soul," as well as the mystical literature of great philosophers and poets like: Dionysius the Areopagite, Meister Eckhart, Hadewijch, and John of the Cross. This type of direct perception into the Mystery is referred to as the "Dark Knowledge of God." This "dark" knowledge is not an intellectual knowledge, nor is it dark in the "evil" sense, but refers to a literal dimming of intellect, reason, and rationality. It is a complete immersion into an "Unknowing" and stripping away of the "Known."

In one sense, these paintings are landscapes. But, I would also consider these works as icons and "mindscapes." I'm wanting the viewer to participate on multiple levels simultaneously and in the realm of the sacred which, to me, is more akin to the non-objective. I don't want to make any distinction between the sacred and mundane; I'm presenting a view of every aspect of life as the Sacred. I appreciate both objectivity and conceptuality, but when we only live in one domain of experience an imbalance sets in. My work is an attempt at maintaining a sense of balance between the two.



*Face of a Young Woman Stained With Tears (study)  
in Black, 2022*  
Sumi ink on paper



*El Cap, 2021*  
Graphite on paper

*Face of a Woman Stained with Tears 2*  
2021, Graphite on paper

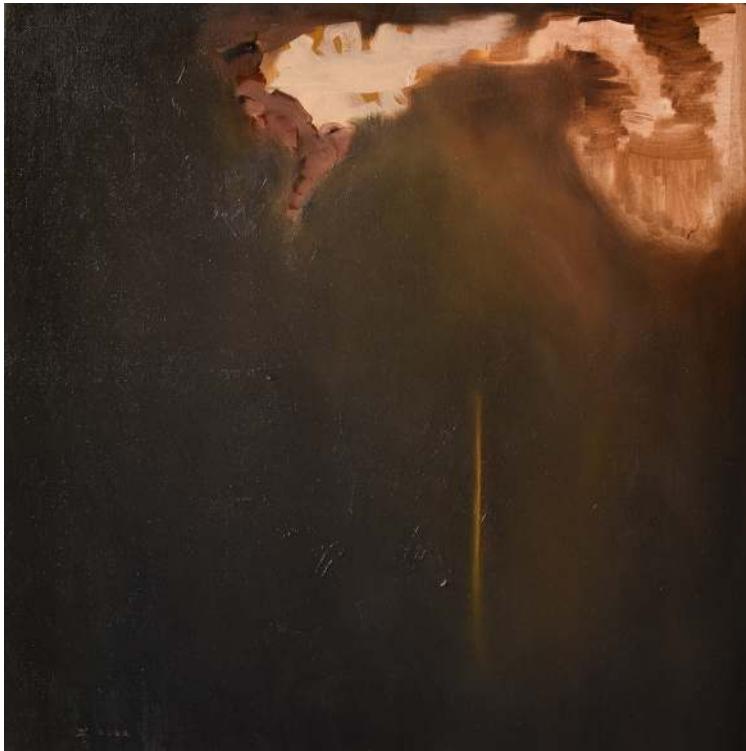


*“Some people think or expect that you should make the same kinds of art forever because it creates a convenient narrative... I want my work to embody my inherent contradictions.”*

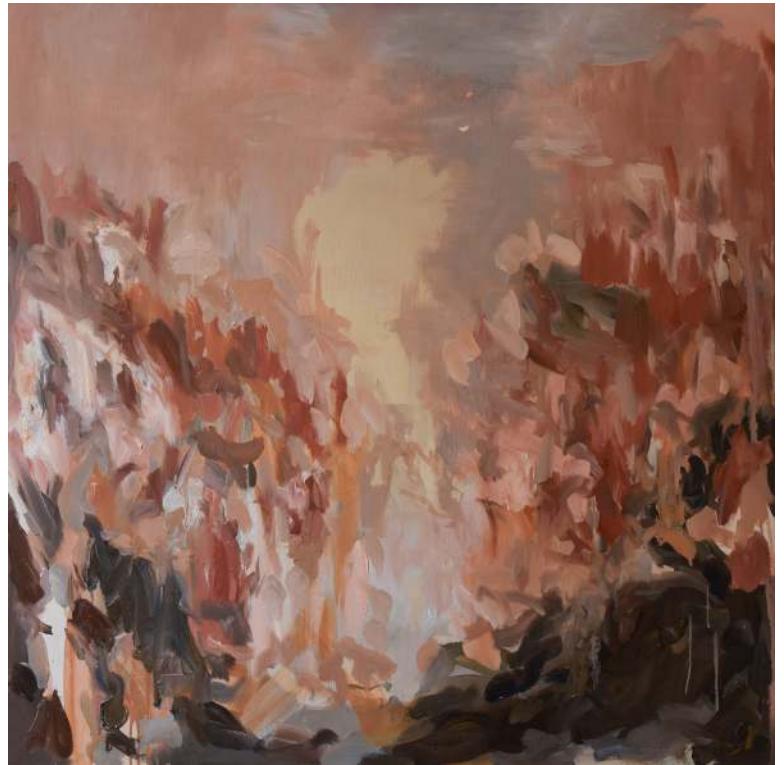
-Kiki Smith



*Range of Light (Triptych), 2022*  
Oil on canvas



*Fire in the Sky, 2022*  
Oil on canvas



*North of Eden, 2022*  
Oil on canvas



*Face of a Young Woman Stained With Tears  
in Black, 2022, Oil on canvas*



*Nanutak in Yellow (Apparitions and Glacial Ghosts)*  
2021, Mixed media on paper

*White Winds, 2021*  
Oil on canvas



*“Society must accept some things as real; but he must always know that visible reality hides a deeper one, and that all our action and achievement rest on things unseen. A society must assume that it is stable, but the artist must know, and he must let us know, that there is nothing stable under heaven.”*

*-James Baldwin*



*Primordial Sound (Center of the Universe)*, 2021, Oil on canvas



*From a Pool of Serpents*  
2021, Mixed media on paper

*Nanutak in Black (Apparitions and Glacial Ghosts)*  
2022, Oil on canvas



# DARK MOUNTAIN, DEEP VALLEY (CONT.)

Loren Christofferson

For several years, I found myself in a very dry and sterile time in my life, prior to starting this body of work. I had lost my joy for painting and mark making of all kinds, and I believe the expectations I had placed upon my work wouldn't allow for the freedom I was seeking.

It wasn't until I really immersed myself in poetry, ambient music, and my love for this landscape, that my joy for abstraction became ignited once again. I had pursued abstract art quite ardently nearly a decade ago, but stopped after becoming discouraged with my work. Prior to this show, I had been working on a series of drawings and watercolors that I've included in this series. It was through these drawings that I remembered my love not only for drawing but also for abstract shapes, limited color palettes, and minimal design-driven compositions.

The drawings then gave birth to a form of "Visual Haiku": simple shapes created unconsciously, using a method that the Abstract Expressionists called "Automatism." Just as a poet might use the stream of consciousness method to write a poem, so too is my approach. What makes this approach unique, is another layer of experience I would drop into, as the mind becomes quiet. If the pencil drawings could be comparable with the surface appearance of things, the "Visual Haikus" would be a layer below that, penetrating the essence/nature of appearances.

Form and formlessness are two themes I pursue throughout this series. These two constructs are complimentary to one another; without one, there would not be the other. This is demonstrated in the title of the show, as the dark mountain represents form, and the deep valley as formlessness or space.

I've never been much of a plein air painter and it's rare for me to even bring my sketchbook on hikes. I prefer to fully engage with wherever it is that I'm at, taking time to focus on walking, hiking, climbing. This cultivates a natural openness, where raw sensation invigorates the senses. I've found that sometimes just having the intention to "create" something, actually blocks the creative process. So, to have the intention to enjoy being in nature and not put any expectation on myself to create, I've found is very freeing. It's not until I got back to the studio that effortlessly and spontaneously images arise.

I call this method a type of "superpositioning" where multiple elements are interwoven all at once, when I consciously revisit memories, dreams, and experiences while in the Valley. For example, what type of color comes to mind when you hear the sound of Yosemite Falls? How do the shapes of shadows in granite slabs relate to clouds overhead? How might they look if they were combined together visually? This is one technique I use when I'm back in the studio; to conjure up experiences and enter fully into them.

There are other times, however, when I see a specific shape of lichen, or a group of lines in granite, and I just have to depict it as it is. There have been countless times where these "eddies" or concentrations of energetic patterning are naturally evident. The shapes of rocks and the bending of trees suddenly take on a life of their own and in some mysterious way, a hidden language of rich symbolism erupts unexpectedly.



*Spirit of the Puffing Wind, 2022*  
Oil on canvas



*Poloti, 2022*  
Oil on canvas



*Visions in a Dark Mirror, 2022*  
Oil on canvas



*Granite Cathedrals and the Campaniles of Cassiopeia, 2022, Oil on canvas*

*Granite Cathedrals and the Campaniles  
of Cassiopeia (study)*  
2022, Sumi ink on paper



*Visions in a Dark Mirror (study)*  
2022, Sumi ink on paper

*“For me the world is weird because it is stupendous, awesome, mysterious, unfathomable; my interest has been to convince you that you must assume responsibility for being here, in this marvelous world, in this marvelous desert, in this marvelous time. I want to convince you that you must learn to make every act count, since you are going to be here for only a short while, in fact, too short for witnessing all the marvels of it.”*

-Carlos Castaneda



*Untitled, 2021*  
Watercolor on paper

*The Death of a Cloud (Arising, Abiding, Returning.  
The Same Unutterable Place), 2022*  
Oil on canvas





*Silent Dawn*, 2019, Oil on canvas



Arts and Culture El Dorado's mission to promote, connect, and empower arts and culture throughout the county is achieved by targeted programs and services, a vibrant gallery exhibition series, and a focus on initiatives which support and sustain the cultural life of the region.

## STAFF

Terry LeMoncheck, Executive Director  
Jordan Hyatt-Miller, Development and Program Associate  
Marya Osucha, Exhibitions Curator  
Caitlin Thompson, Graphic Designer  
Anton Nemeth, Gallery Manager  
Nia Henderson, Intern

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## SPECIAL THANKS

Opening reception live ambient music by Revenge of the Lawn:  
Jacob Mingle, Darin Coelho Spring, Dustin Koupal, and Paul Godwin

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Arts and Culture El Dorado | Confidence Firehouse Gallery  
487/489 Main Street, Placerville, CA 95667  
(530) 295-3496 | [ArtsAndCultureElDorado.org](http://ArtsAndCultureElDorado.org)