Mesmerizing study of one Montana mountain at Anglim Gilbert

Sam Whiting | November 16, 2018 | Updated: November 27, 2018, 1:05 pm

A freeze frame from the video “Moving Trees” by Anne Appleby. Photo: Anglim Gilbert Gallery

The only obvious imagery in Anne Appleby’s nature study “The Mountain and Me” is a wall-size video of snow silently falling in the trees — and even that is fuzzy, as if it could be static on a TV screen.
The eight other works in the exhibition at Anglim Gilbert Gallery are oil paintings, and you have to stare at them long and hard to figure out where the mountain comes into play.

“It is slow art,” Appleby says. “That’s the way nature is, too, very slow.”
What you see in both the video and the paintings is what Appleby sees from the window of her studio in the Elkhorn Mountains of central Montana. It is very quiet and meditative, just the way Appleby felt on the day that she started the series — which was also the day an October snowstorm knocked the power out, leaving her alone with the nearest neighbor 2 miles away.

With nothing else to do, she set up a video camera on her deck and filmed the snow fall. The paintings derive from the video, in shades ranging from gray to green to depict the trees on her mountain.

“I’m trying to convey the experience of living in wilderness through film and paint,” says Appleby, who has had plenty of practice at it. She has lived in isolation at 5,000 feet for 20 years, after earning her master’s of fine arts at the San Francisco Art Institute and a prestigious SECA Award at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

“I hike around, and I paint,” she says. “I’m just a mountain woman who is also a painter.”

For many years she has been creating paintings of the life cycle of the pine, spruce and aspen trees on her property. Her paintings are not figurative. She deals primarily in color.

“Mountain #1” by Anne Appleby. Photo: Anglim Gilbert Gallery
In “Mountain #1,” at the entrance to the Anglim Gilbert Gallery, just the very faintest outline of a mountain is visible in off-white, overwhelmed by green and gray. Appleby says the way to look at it is as if “you are bushwhacking your way through the forest. You have to make your own trail to the top.”

The video is titled “Moving Trees,” but you have to watch the loop several times to find the slightest movement under the weight of the snow.

“It’s not like an action film,” she says.

“The Mountain and Me” premiered in March at the Tacoma Museum of Art. This is Appleby’s 12th solo show at Anglim Gilbert Gallery, now at the Minnesota Street Project, and all 12 have been about trees, going back to when she taught art at Stanford University.

“A lot of people look at this as if it were abstract art, but then they look at the title and it is ‘Spruce’ or Ponderosa Pine,’ ” she says. “Then they have to do a little work to allow the art to reveal itself.”