

# Review: A photographer's portraits of Iceland, in all of its epic, impossible beauty

[latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2019-12-04/peter-holzhauer-iceland-photography-gallery-luisotti](https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2019-12-04/peter-holzhauer-iceland-photography-gallery-luisotti)

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No people appear in Peter Holzhauer's 16 photographs at Gallery Luisotti in Santa Monica, but you feel as if you're looking at portraits.

That's because portraits, whether paintings or photographs, are complex embodiments of the relationship between how someone looks and what they're really like. Questions of character and circumstance are paramount, made vivid by the artist's capacity to reveal truths missed on first glance.

That's what Holzhauer does with the landscape of Iceland. Treating it as a living being, he captures the reality of that chunk of Earth. It goes deep. Its scale and time frame make humans seem puny.

In terms of geological time, Iceland is young. By some estimates 16 million to 18 million years old, it was formed — and continues to be formed — by molten lava spewed from a crack on the ocean's floor.







“Recent Lava Formation 1” by Peter Holzhauer, 2019.

The results of that volcanic activity are visible in Holzhauer’s pictures. In five tightly cropped close-ups, terra firma appears to be roiling, more like the surface of a stormy sea than anything you’d want to build a house on. Melted ice cream comes to mind, as does the flesh of red-blooded animals.

In another group of five works, shot from farther away, nothing sits still. Every square inch of “Gorge,” “Waterfall” and “Reflection” (all 2016), as well as “River” (2018) and “Basalt Flow” (2019) seems to be moving — sometimes slightly, like a slumbering beast and sometimes violently, like a torrential river that has had the ground pulled out from under it. That multidirectional movement takes stunning shape in Holzhauer’s picture of a river that appears to be flowing north, south, east and west — forming an impossible intersection in the middle of nowhere.



“River” by Peter Holzhauer, 2018.



"Engine" by Peter Holzhauer, 2018.

(Peter Holzhauer / Gallery Luisotti)

Stillness fills the remaining six pictures. Paradoxically, each presents evidence of human activity: a harbor city, a partly constructed building, a garbage truck, a muddy road, a cat sitting curbside and a rusty engine from a military plane that crashed in 1942 and now rests in the landscape, like a misbegotten icon.

The stillness of Holzhauer's pictures of human artifacts is fleeting. Like the earth beneath our feet, it's constantly evolving, slowly and steadily or suddenly and abruptly. His portraits of Iceland move us because they do not cram the planet into an established genre so much as they expand portraiture to dimensions we're not used to seeing.

The exhibition's title, "First Stone for a Film," pays homage to Chris Marker's 1983 film, "Sans Soleil," in which time moves fluidly. Today, when time is measured in nanoseconds and impatience seems to be everyone's default setting, it's heartening to see someone paying attention to more complex ways of measuring — and experiencing — time and space.