ALMINE RECH

Michael Hilsman
Man On Bed

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Los Angeles, city of mirrors, what Jean Baudrillard called a "paradisiac and inward-looking illusion," is everywhere and nowhere in Michael Hilsman's paintings. The Southern California landscape in which the artist was born and raised – and where he lives and works today – appears in his work as a space for self-reflection. Like the fabricated façades of a movie set, the works' primary illusion is their appearance of flatness, which only enhances their metaphysical depth. Bodies study their own contours in a limitless expanse. Loneliness is as abundant as sunshine. Lush gardens and empty horizons, bathed in crepuscular light, are places where the subconscious will roam.

Man On Bed the work from which this exhibition takes its name, is deceptively flat in both form and title. Like an analyst's couch, the titular lounger is a device for day-dreaming. Its pink upholstery is a ground upon which Hilsman has rendered – with unsettling detail – a man's feet protruding from beneath a blanket. Light glints off each nail and the second toe on the left foot bends at the tip, revealing a broken phalanx. Bony and elongated with sallow skin, these alien appendages are a metonym of modern man's estrangement from his own body, a corpus increasingly objectified and pathologized. They illustrate what Hilsman describes as his effort to "foreground the physical in order to highlight the unseen." The blanket, meanwhile, occupies central ground in the painting, a white surface applied to a canvas that's no longer blank, its many folds inviting the projection of our mind's eye. Like the Shroud of Turin, it bears the impression of an otherwise invisible body, a talisman of art's power to stimulate the imagination in the midst of alienation and spiritual emptiness.

The shroud, or a proxy for it, recurs in Hilsman's paintings, obscuring the face of a figure much like his own. See how, in *Man In Orange Tree At Night*, the leaves of an orange tree halo the man's head so that we can no longer distinguish his features, like René Magritte's *Son of Man* (1964). Or how, in *Man In Landscape With Water*, a red towel hangs like a stage curtain, behind which the figure has slipped out of view. Above him, a hammer and pair of shears hang from a clothesline. By covering the man's face, Hilsman turns his body into another tool, a fleshy wrench grasping at loose screws. These are scenes of man comically adrift in a once-familiar place made strange.

The fragmentation or occlusion of the body also invests it with greater spiritual power. For a year, Hilsman lived in Pakistan, where the tradition of aniconism – deeply rooted in the abrahamic and particularly Islamic tradition – forbids the depiction of human faces. While ensuring the avoidance of idolatry, this prohibition also encourages us to see ourselves as our own ontological center. Hilsman was equally inspired by the delirious coexistence of different perspectives in sixteenth century paintings from the subcontinent. Classical Indian painters were able to depict scenes from multiple points in the same story within a single frame, usually on alternate planes, stretched both forwards and backwards, up close and at a distance. The scenes in Hilsman's paintings play with time and scale in much the same way: notice, for instance, the water droplets falling from a shower head above the man in his garden, each one so perfectly whole it seems as solid as crystal, splashing into a pool that does not ripple. "Painting is a better representation of life," he says, "because perspective is not fixed." Time and space are always in flux, and our perceptions of them are constantly changing. Hilsman's lost and lonely everymen, anonymized by their shifting surroundings, need only look to themselves to be found.

— Evan Moffitt, writer and critic