

Todd Bienvenu Halcyon Days

Jun 19 — Aug 8, 2020 | Shanghai

Almine Rech Shanghai is pleased to present *Halcyon Days*, an exhibition of recent work by American artist Todd Bienvenu, on view from June 19 to August 8, 2020.

What do our memories look like now the future has disappeared? The risks and rewards of physical life have seldom seemed so far away, freighted with a new kind of yearning and anxiety. In these days of contagion – intimacy now our enemy, paranoia shadowing human contact – we're stranded in a culture whose nostalgia now serves a survivalist cause. Never has satire seemed more useless, or a real-estate reality TV vulgarian for president so incoherently lethal.

In 'Halcyon Days', Todd Bienvenu resurrects a fragile world of touch and sensation, of people drawn together and forced apart – all experienced through the longing and loneliness of having a body.

A guy crowd-surfs in a moshpit, held aloft by a sea of hands. The paint looks nimble, energetically applied, mimicking the hazy abandon of the crowd. (Remember them?) A Courtney Love-a-like, her mouth lipsticked scarlet, plays a bright yellow Fender onstage. Collective energy seems radical – the opposite of lockdown's entropic drift – and yet impossibly utopian, swept away by enforced isolation.

Motion, conveyed in thick, giddy brushstrokes, becomes a forgotten – and self-forgetting – pleasure. A couple pillow fight on their bed, the woman's midriff poking from her crop top. Is this a brief moment of quarantined bliss? Or lovers gone stir crazy? Elsewhere, we see a tropical beach with a woman peeling off her top; a waterpark as a monument to longed-for, brainless fun. You can almost hear the bright laughter shading into melancholy, imagined now from four white walls.

Technology becomes an impostor of intimacy. A woman lies flat on her bed, lit in the muted glow of her laptop. A closely cropped canvas shows a man holding up his smartphone, his features ghosted by the same ambient wash of murky blues and aquamarines. Stuck in different time zones or trying to reach each other from elsewhere, our romance with technology offers its own dangerous seductions: a virtual connection perhaps easier than the real thing.

Bienvenu captures the comedy of these surreal times. We see a sneaky hand trying to wedgie someone, exposing bare butt cheeks. Elsewhere, a guy in white Y-fronts does home yoga, standing on his head. Are we more ourselves, caught off-guard in our own skin? Or are we always wearing our flesh as a kind of theatre, glimpsed through screens even in solitude?

The scenery may have changed, but the pitfalls remain the same. In Bienvenu's world, success and disappointment are always two sides of the same flipped coin; human emotion a kind of bruised and exhilarating contact sport. Three football players crash-land in a heap, the blurry crowd cheering. Elsewhere, a cyclist face-palms the sidewalk, a dramatic coda to the free-spirited lovers zooming (rather than Zooming) on a bicycle through the streets.

A woman gazes out onto the city's skyline, but does anything remain the same? Can it ever? Life appears to be random chaos: exploited as an opportunity for some, and merely ridden out as an unpredictable obstacle course by others.

– Daniel CULPAN