

Michael Hilsman

Man, Water, Flowers, Fire

Apr 19 — May 25, 2024 | Shanghai

Almine Rech Shanghai is pleased to announce *Man, Water, Flowers*, Michael Hilsman's third solo exhibition with the gallery, on view from April 19 to May 25, 2024.

It is tempting to take the apparent simplicity of Michael Hilsman's paintings at face value: a green cactus reaching up into a midblue sky, a dog, a lemon tree, a man holding a vase of flowers. We might think that these are untroubled and untroubling motifs. Hilsman's frankly descriptive titles – *Dog in Landscape*, or *Man in Lemon Tree* – seem to encourage this uncomplicated read.

Hilsman lives and works in Los Angeles, a city that is superficially inclined towards a lifestyle of ease and simplicity, but is in fact tenuously constructed on a network of unseen fissures – psychological, cultural, historical, and geological. It is a place that proliferates in clichés, which are themselves just simplifications based on far more complex, nuanced truths.

While Hilsman often paints on a large scale, he is paradoxically influenced by the Mughal miniature paintings he first got to know while living for a period in Pakistan. In these intricate traditional pictures, forms are tightly arranged and economically represented, while flattened, multi-perspectival sections allow for numerous timescales to coexist simultaneously. In short, they are masterpieces of narrative subtlety.

Hilsman is not a narrative painter; rather, he sets up situations in his work in which narratives might take root and flourish. He works with a recurring lexicon of familiar motifs – cacti, fruit, flowers, blankets, scissors, hammers and loose teeth all feature commonly – which he deploys as potential plot points around his paintings. In *Man, Water, Flowers, Fire* (2024), these motifs interrelate: a box of matches flaming up to catch alight the stem of a flower; a vase of flowers dripping water down into a cup beneath. The relationships are not logical (Why would a floating flower stem catch fire like dry kindling? Why would a vase leak water?) but instead conform to a kind of dream logic, operating in an imaginary, psychic space rather than a three-dimensional Euclidean space. Hilsman has spoken of his interest in the space of the theatrical stage: a shallow, box-like field, boundless in its imaginary possibilities but, in reality, hemmed by flimsy, temporary panels.

The actor – or dreamer – in Hilsman's paintings is always a bearded male figure, stocky of frame and bald of head, who – even if we have never laid eyes on the artist – we might guess resembles Hilsman himself. In that assumption, we would be both right and wrong. While the figure is based on Hilsman's body, these are not self-portraits, nor even autobiographical representations of his dreams. Instead, the figure is a kind of “armature,” according to the artist, on which objects (and events) can be hung.

Even in the paintings without a figure, there is a vivid sense of human presence – the cups and glasses left out in the rain, the domesticated plants growing in pots, the abandoned items of clothing. In perhaps the most perplexing painting in this exhibition, a shaggy black dog stands alertly looking off-canvas, within an indeterminate field of chrome yellow. At top, we see a distant range of sunbaked mountains; at bottom, a geometrically flattened blacktop road, abstracted almost beyond recognition. There is something Beckettian about this scene: its strangeness and artificiality coupled with its humdrum familiarity (the empty Ziploc bag, that old boot) but also its silence, and the almost unbearable expectation that something must be about to happen.

Just what will happen, however, is left entirely up to us, the viewers. We complete these paintings. As if to signal their lack of resolution, Hilsman leaves painterly clues, like the patched areas of background blue, or the thinly painted jeans that show where the figure's legs were extended beneath the horizon. As with magical realist painters like Rene Magritte, Frida Kahlo, or Leonora Carrington, Hilsman knows where to draw the line between illusion and the fantastical. He has said that he sees the elements in his paintings as "fraught, in a state of dissolving or coming apart." It is Hilsman's achievement that he makes these fragile, tenuous constructions feel so much like contemporary life.

— Jonathan Griffin, writer and art critic