

VAS VISUAL ART eNEWSLETTER

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Michael Harnish, "Shangri-La," installation view

Michael Harnish, "Shangri-La" by Jody Zellen

Lowell Ryan Projects, Los Angeles, California
Continuing through November 12, 2022

Lining opposite walls and filling most of the long, narrow gallery space are twelve large-scale vertical paintings (72 x 60 inches each), six per side, by Fullerton-based painter Michael Harnish. Another suite of ten smaller (48 x 36 inches) paintings are installed along one wall in the upstairs space. Presented as a sequence, but not necessarily a narrative, these idiosyncratic works freely mix abstract with representational elements. Titled "Shangri-La," they refer to the idealized exotic land of James Hilton's 1933 novel "Lost Horizon."

For Harnish, utopia is a collage of juxtaposed painterly responses to printed representations of nature with ocean views, sunsets and flowers. Indeed, these paintings originate as collages (not part of the exhibition) carefully cut and torn pages from decor/style magazines filled with flowers, textures, and patterns that layer and fragment real and imagined spaces. Harnish uses these collages to explore color and different styles of paint application, freely translating the printed elements into paint. While there is not a one-to-one correspondence between the paper collages and the paintings, the works on canvas do retain the collage referent, especially as Harnish depicts torn edges and white borders of the torn paper. He also combines different styles and materials — oil, acrylic, spray paint — to convey these varied sources.

"Paved Paradise" depicts concrete steps leading up to an area of lush green trees painted with loose and expressive brushstrokes. This landscape is interrupted by a sideways fragment of what appears to be a Japanese woodblock print of rolling hills or ocean waves outlined in black. Below this is another image



Michael Harnish, "Paved Paradise," 2022, acrylic, oil, collaged paper, acrylic spray paint, oil stick on canvas, 72 x 60"



Michael Harnish, "I Try," 2022, acrylic, oil, collaged paper, acrylic spray paint, oil stick on canvas, 72 x 60"

fragment with white edges, painted in black and white. In the center of "I Try" is a headless figure in a bright yellow coat culled from one of those magazines. The figure is surrounded by other irregularly shaped elements that range from illustrations of flowers, patterns, and receding landscapes that deftly coalesce into a unified composition.

"Soft Landing" is a jumble of disjointed snippets from myriad sources painted in varying thicknesses and degrees of veracity. It's all casually arranged on the canvas as if thrown up in the air and allowed to fall randomly. By contrast, "Withstanding the Elements" feels deliberately structured and carefully arranged. Here, an abstracted representation of movement, reminiscent of a Japanese print, is centered in the composition. Bisecting it is a section, torn from another Japanese print, of a bright blue and green landscape. While the background suggests mountains and sky, it is impossible to pinpoint a clearly defined space. created scanned objects as photographs, Fischer may be the first to explore the nuances of combining these scans into animated videos.

Traversing the paintings in sequence is like taking a journey through a seemingly familiar yet exotic and disorienting landscape. Between what is recognizable — flowers, trees, leaves — and the abstract shapes and swaths of color and textured paint that allude to the natural world are reproductions of images with white borders or ragged edges that insistently reference the works' collage origins. These montages are not about the past or present of the source material, but rather amount to an immersive exploration of the relationships between reproduction, observation, memory, and imagination using good old hand applied paint rather than digital special effects. Harnish's version of Shangri-La is an inviting yet ambiguous place, filled with an array of styles and references. But it is a country more fragmented and dystopic than the title's promise of paradise would indicate.

Jody Zellen is a LA based writer and artist who creates interactive installations, mobile apps, net art, animations, drawings, paintings, photographs, public art, and artist's books. Zellen received a BA from Wesleyan University (1983), a MFA from CalArts (1989) and a MPS from NYU's Interactive Telecommunications Program (2009). She has exhibited nationally and internationally since 1989. For more information please visit www.jodyzellen.com.