

# MICHAEL HILSMAN: OUTSIDE IN

by Carmen Winant

When I was ten years old, I spent a lot of time trying to break my arm. I'd known several other people who'd fractured bones that year (my sister had broken both wrists falling out of a top bunk the previous summer), and became fixated on the goal myself; I repeatedly climbed to the tallest magnolia tree in my front yard, and dropped like a stone. I wasn't successful, amazingly, but that didn't deter my fascination in testing the limits and possibilities of my own rapidly changing body. In order to understand injury, I had only to measure it on myself.

I recognized my studied falls and bruised knuckles in Michael Hilsman's paintings. I see in these large, saturated canvases the eventual broken bones that I *would* suffer (not on purpose but every bit as curious) in the years to follow. In Hilsman's detached, fleshly limbs – a hand, a penis, a bicep? – I locate the reliquary finger at the Met, the blown apart limbs from Syria, Pakistan and Yemen that I see printed in the newspaper, learning how to deliberately (playfully) lose consciousness as a teenager, the time I took hallucinogenic drugs and sensed that I was exploring the inside of my organs, the video I saw on YouTube of people falling from the Twin Towers playing in reverse, as though they were rising toward the sky. Each experience detached a part of the body from itself, relocated it, declared it unfamiliar and in progress. These works describe the same threshold I was desperately trying to locate in my own body as a pre-teen: somewhere between fragility and indestructibility, violence and inquiry, sensation and dullness.

There is something clumsy about these works that exceed the accidental (falling from a branch, banging a knee, etc). They reference a larger gracelessness of the body as a form and a vessel, lumbering through space and coming into contact with food, weapons, prophylactics, other bodies. Hilsman describes his own paintings as making reference to the ways in which “*our absurd bodies can hold us back.*” We joke about how to dress them, what they emit, how to contain their trust. If we were for a moment to see them anew, as if for the first time, we’d surely recognize our bodies as both belonging to us and being totally foreign, as both totally efficient and ludicrous things. Sartre, a writer who thought a lot about the body in relation to itself, wrote about social and physical clumsiness (under the auspices of ‘embodiment theory’ or ontology of embodiment) in *Being and Nothingness*; however universal, the feeling for him was inseparable from shame.

The problems of embodiment and fragmentation have something to do with each other, of course. With net-art and neo-formalist paintings on the rise – art that, in its most reductive terms, describes a certain numbness or passivity – Hilsman’s work prompts us to confront and name our bodies. Recently a friend told me that, when surfing the internet or while on the computer for long stretches, she tends to forget that she has a body altogether. These paintings surely promote and describe the opposite feeling: a sensitivity toward the body, even as (or perhaps because) it comes apart.