

Eli Hill: *Some Days I Taste the World*

30 Orchard St, Gallery 2 ▪ Jan 12 - Feb 18, 2023



“Materiality in its entangled psychic and physical manifestations is always already a patchwork, a suturing of disparate parts.”

—Karen Barad, *Transmaterialities*

Harkawik is pleased to present *Some Days I Taste the World*, an exhibition of new paintings by Eli Hill. Comprised of nine mid-size works, *Some Days* evidences Hill's fascination with the way in which humans order and classify the natural world. His paintings speak to the problematics of anthropology, the subversion of the naturalist's impulse to categorize, and the painter's age-old communion with nature. Hill proposes a fascinating configuration of personal, political, and

scientific concerns and draws parallels between the transgender body and planet Earth. Hill's canvases merge figurative and landscape traditions, calling attention to the ways in which bodies—celestial, earthly or otherwise—are routinely subject to binaries, alienation, hierarchy and the struggle for survival and self-actualization.

The majority of the exhibition's paintings are derived from the artist's long distance runs and environmental work in the leafy Queens oasis of Forest Park. Here, we bid farewell to the gray grit of the city and emerge into a landscape that is simultaneously natural and hallucinogenic. Verdant greens and earthy browns mingle with pale lavenders and silvery blues. The umber shadows of trees streak the soil, basking in the blood orange glow of an artificial sunset. Fluid brushstrokes waterfall down the canvases. Hill's paintings of the natural world are borderline devotional; he is imploring us to worship the beauty and drama of nature in its fullness. Not unlike the still-lives of Rachel Ruysch, insects creep out and leaves decay and decompose back into the earth. *Split* depicts a tree the artist passes by, an image so striking you can almost hear the sound of bark cracking. The branches are split in half and upheld by the flora around it. Community, mortality, and the life cycle are omnipresent.

While some of Hill's paintings engage traditional modes of depiction, others shift between recognizable and unrecognizable subjects. In *Wineberry Sight*, the invasive wineberry shrub masquerades itself as a raspberry bush to ensure survival. But are we peering through an eye of vines or veins? By creating images that refuse us easy associations, he provides an opportunity to find pleasure in images we cannot name or categorize. Under every branch we find trickery, performance, preservation. The notion of the "invasive species" itself calls attention to the ideological structures at play in our understanding of what's "original," "natural," what has a right to proliferate and thrive.

The exhibition title is a line from a CA Conrad poem, as well as an homage to the influence of the poet's writing and spiritual practice in Hill's work. Revolutionary care permeates Hill's depiction of the figure; whether his own body, a tree, or a friend, he actively opposes mining, objectifying, or exploiting his subjects. In *The Artist as a Naturalist*, a self-portrait is accompanied by two paintings within a painting of colorful moths. The work demands time and effort, as awkward cropping abstracts the body, consequently resisting commodification and denying easy consumption of the work from a historically cisgender gaze. Like German-Swedish figurative painter Lotte Laserstein's *Portrait With a Cat*, Hill consolidates naturalistic observation with a figure that gazes back at the audience. The painting itself possesses a sort of agency, as multiple pairs of eyes appear, aware we are observing them, and throwing into uncertainty the subject of the examination; them, us, something else?

Some Days I Taste the World is like walking through a Ralph Waldo Emerson essay, where beauty takes on a cosmic quality that transcends the experience of individuals. Hill offers us a fascinating configuration of previously known quantities, suggesting a natural place for things like radical queer joy. Through a dense canopy sunlight streams through, lighting up our faces.

—Lauren Gagnon