

# LOWELL RYAN PROJECTS

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### Pick of the Week

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by Jody Zellen

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**Michael Harnish**  
***Shangri-La***  
**Lowell Ryan Projects**  
**October 15 - 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), six per side, by Fullerton based painter Michael Harnish. Another suite of ten smaller paintings (48 x 36 inches) are installed along one wall in the upstairs space. Presented as a sequence, but not necessarily a narrative, these idiosyncratic works have abstract as well as representational elements. Titled *Shangri-La*, the exhibition references that idealized utopia of James Hilton's 1933 novel *Lost Horizon*.

In Harnish's paintings, utopia is a collage of disparate elements juxtaposing

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paintings of printed representations of nature with ocean views, sunsets and flowers. Searching online for past works and information on the artist reveals a 2020 webpage that showcases his collages. Both carefully cut, as well as torn pages from decor/style magazines filled with flowers, textures and patterns are assembled into works that layer and fragment real and imagined spaces and explore color and different styles of paint application. Harnish uses these collages as a point of departure for his paintings and carefully transforms the printed elements into paint. While there is not necessarily a one-to-one correspondence between the paper collages and the paintings, the works on canvas do retain the collaged referent, especially as Harnish depicts torn edges and white borders often found in reproductions. He also combines different styles and materials— oil, acrylic and spray paint — to convey these varied sources.

*Paved Paradise* (all works 2022) depicts concrete steps leading up to an area of lush green trees painted with loose expressive brushstrokes. This landscape is interrupted by a sideways fragment of what appears to be a Japanese woodblock print featuring rolling hills or ocean waves outlined in black. Below this is another image fragment with white edges, painted in black and white. In the center of *I Try* is a headless figure in a bright yellow coat probably culled from a fashion magazine. It is surrounded by other irregularly shaped elements ranging from illustrations of flowers, patterns and receding landscapes that coalesce in a unified composition.

*Soft Landing* is a jumble of disjointed snippets from myriad sources painted in varying thicknesses and degrees of veracity that are casually arranged on the canvas as if thrown up in the air and allowed to fall randomly. In contrast, *Withstanding the Elements* feels more structured and deliberately arranged. Here, an abstracted representation of movement (reminiscent of a Japanese print) is centered in the composition bisected by 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 the specifics, or a clear sense of space.

Traversing the paintings in sequence is like a journey through a seemingly familiar yet completely unknown 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 reinforce the notion of collage. Harnish's montages are not about past and present, but rather explore the relationships between reproduction, observation and memory/imagination. His version of Shangri-La is an inviting yet ambiguous place filled with an array of styles and references, more fragmented and dystopic than an image of paradise.