

# canvas

ART AND CULTURE FROM THE MIDDLE EAST AND ARAB WORLD

## SMOKE AND MIRRORS

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Nazım Ünal Yılmaz. *Toiletpapier*. 2022. Oil on canvas. 50 x 40 cm. Image courtesy of the artist and Harkawik

## BEWARE THE VISITORS

In his recent New York exhibition *Brushman* at Harkawik, **Nazım Ünal Yılmaz** mixed nightmares with fantasies in a thought-provoking take on life through painting.

Words by Osman Can Yerebakan



Nazım Ünal Yılmaz. *Old Furniture*. 2023. Oil on canvas. 50 x 40 cm. Image courtesy of the artist and Harkawik

Is *dreamnesia* an official word? Who cares – because no other could perhaps describe the paintings in Nazım Ünal Yılmaz's recent New York exhibition *Brushman* at Harkawik (ended 23 July). What lingers in the Vienna-based Turkish painter's universe is a feeling of waking up with evanescent snippets on the tip of your tongue but unable to explain what you've just dreamt: were you falling into a sly manhole, contorting in a flesh-ridden orgy or running with a handful of lavatory paper?

The liquidity of failing remembrance renders anything possible – staircases stretch, paintbrushes have faces and snowmen care. Yılmaz's own paintbrush operates with a similar runniness. While

erratic brushstrokes assure to define bodies and things, he suspends his finishing touches at the right moment, leaving the feeling vague. Determined juxtapositions yield loose scenarios. Just like a flaky dream, the visible remains fluid. Rather than believing, seeing becomes imagining. The paintings, therefore, do justice to the very idea of painting, stemming from a reference of life but veering away to mythical territories through the potential of oil dye seeping into the canvas.

*Toiletpapier* (2022) captures an oh-so familiar frenzy, an urge so recent yet somewhat vague: the globally collective craze to store toilet paper during the early days of the pandemic. The bouncy rolls hugged





Nazım Ünal Yılmaz. *Brushman*. 2022. Oil on canvas. 50 x 40 cm. Image courtesy of the artist and Harkawik

by the central figure embody humanity's absurd unpreparedness for a catastrophe and the eventual unveiling of the beast inside us in the face of a lack. His rapid gesture hints at a race, perhaps to grab as many provisions as possible while dodging a hideous virus. In *Old Furniture* (2023) farce is performed autonomously. An upholstered nightmare, an otherwise naked man in white socks and black dress shoes, is sandwiched between two ruthless couches, their velvet cushioning pressing him like the filling in a sandwich. The man's fully folded body is helpless while the tips of shoes poke his eyes.

Yılmaz's mise-en-scènes are like dreams – or nightmares – that we cannot tell, mainly because they escape us like a thief but also

sometimes because they sound too grotesque when uttered aloud. The force of the paintings stems from their rubbing of shoulders with aspects of our contemporary surroundings: life-threatening TikTok challenges, awkward dating app chats, unfathomably violent live streams and mouthwatering zucchini pasta recipes all scroll in front of our eyes. Between numbness and jadedness, we soak it all in. If myths are not written but recorded today, paintings can soak them into the bizarre. In the show's titular painting (2022), the artist – Yılmaz himself or any – is summarised into a paint brush, larger than life yet too small to possess autonomy. Limbs are bygone, he is helpless over a table, waiting for a hand's attempt to utilise him to colour. Above the human



Nazım Ünal Yılmaz. *He Is Fine*. 2022. Oil on canvas. 50 x 40 cm. Image courtesy of the artist and Harkawik

and paint brush hybrid is another normal-sized man, perhaps yet another painter, hinted by the long and thin paint brush he clutches. A contemplative expression on his face blurs his creative stimuli: which brush to use or should he even?

The installation of 27 modest-scale paintings in one long continuous line inside the rectangular gallery allowed for a full spin. You could spiral as fast as possible, until all could blend into a chaotic crescendo, of angsty celebrations, overjoyed agonies and every indescribable feeling innate to painting today. *Baby Me* (2022) portrays the artist when only a few years old, yet with an adult face, holding a paint brush in one hand and a pen in the other. A pair of droopy eyes and a foetus-

like position signal an urge to return to ages when responsibilities were minuscule and unconditional love was abundant. A hand over the baby's grown-up eyes tries to cover his sight, while attempting to control his hand's scribbling onto a paper. Crushed between surrender and control, the man baby solemnly persists. Humiliation turns into caress in *He Is Fine* (2022). A loving snowman hugs a naked blond young man while another evil type bites one of the boy's feet. More men appear in the back in ambiguous bodily gestures. The ice-cold saviour does a peace sign towards the biter while his carrot nose and charcoal eyes put on a cunningly questionable grin. Maybe the snowman is the real villain? ■