

Philip Hanson

JAMES COHAN GALLERY

For "It is too difficult a Grace," his first New York solo show since 1997, Philip Hanson exhibited a dozen paintings made between 2014 and the present, along one with one dated 2010. In these works, the Chicago-based painter takes as his subject matter words—to be specific, lines from the poetry of Blake, Dickinson, and (in the earlier painting) Gerard Manley Hopkins. Those are, needless to say, formidable names to conjure with. Is it really wise to insert oneself into such exalted company?

To a great extent, these engaging works manage to assuage such qualms—mainly by determinedly putting off turning the viewer into a reader. That is, it's never less than obvious that there are words in the paintings, but Hanson pulls out all the stops to keep you more involved in experiencing them visually than in construing their sense. It's like listening to an operatic aria in which the singer's trills, grace notes, and melismata emphasize the abstract sonic substrate rather than the meaning of what's being sung—possibly serving as mere ornamentation, but in some cases allowing for a kind of intuitive translation of the song's sense into a more abstract register. Or maybe it's like listening to a conversation in a language you know just a bit: You can pick out some individual words, but can't follow the connections sufficiently to reconstruct what's actually being said. The language becomes "estranged," as Viktor Shklovsky would have put it—and, for that very reason, poetic. Hanson exploits neither handwriting as an expressive gesture, à la Twombly and Schnabel, nor the graphic punch of representations of block lettering, as with On Kawara and Richard Prince. Instead, he seems fascinated by the somewhat counterintuitive notion that the shapes of the letters can be used as painterly marks to build up forms within what almost amounts to a traditional pictorial space, though one without volume, just layer upon layer of translucent intervals.

Surprisingly, there is a distinctive Pop inflection to the way in which Hanson has transformed this visionary poetry. The packed, cacophonous spaces evoked in the modestly scaled yet grandiose paintings recall



Phillip Hanson,
*I'm nobody! Who are
you? (Dickinson)*,
2014, oil on canvas,
60 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 48 $\frac{1}{8}$ ".

Venetians. Hanson's generation of Imagists were all about a linear, graphic style; they might have steeped themselves in Surrealism and outsider art, but they reinterpreted it with an almost classical sense of precision and elegance. Hanson appears to be more of a romantic, though one who knows that poetry is just as connected to the everyday as it is to the transcendent. These paintings can sweep you up into powerful rhythmic waves of color; only later does it dawn on you that they are filled with darkness as much as with ecstasy. And that's the poetic message Hanson relays—indirectly, perhaps, but full force.

—Barry Schwabsky

neon-lit carnivals or funfairs at night, the larger words—DOOM, SOMEBODY, JOY—blaring out like flashing signage against velvet darkness. This brassy, demotic aspect of these works is probably the one thing that connects them to Hanson's background as one of the second-generation Chicago Imagists of the late 1960s (alongside Roger Brown, Ed Paschke, and Christina Ramberg, among others). Yet Hanson's vibrant lines are woven of fine touches and manifold coloristic nuances, and his current work, at least, looks back to the earlier generation of Monster Roster artists in being far more painterly than the work of, say, the artists who showed under the rubric of the Hairy Who or, with Hanson, in the "False Image" exhibitions at the Hyde Park Art Center—and beyond them, to Delacroix, Géricault, and the