

## GLADSTONE GALLERY

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### Victor Man

TIMOTHY TAYLOR GALLERY

The most explicit work in Romanian artist Victor Man's exhibition "The place I'm coming from," *Untitled (1939)*, 2006, comprises a pair of paintings: a film-still image of Dorothy's ruby slippers, and a blurry, demonic female Santa, crushing underfoot the head of a man lying beneath her. The subtext is the disturbing contemporaneity of two events in 1939—the escapist Hollywood fantasy *The Wizard of Oz* and Europe's definitive succumbing to Nazism. As ever with Man, the connection between the images is never overt, although a peculiar parallel is drawn between the delicate pose of the glittering red shoes and Santa's slick white boots, positioned on the man's head with almost dancelike precision.

This work exemplifies Man's compelling sense of image and history, an unresolved combination of memory, the media, distance, and desire. His artworks—usually irregular, small-format paintings

executed in layers of muted tones, sometimes accompanied by drawings—are conceived as groups of two or three pictures more often than as single works. These clustered sets of images are hung at some distance one from the next, so that the art-viewing experience becomes a series of deliberate, ponderous episodes, like stations of the cross. But instead of a didactic journey, they offer loaded suggestions, detailed yet left unexplained, producing



different associations in each viewer, like Rorschach blots. What sense can be made, for example, of the three paintings forming *Certain to fade away . . .*, 2005, showing two men lying face down, seminaked, in the snow; a masked or faceless man standing in a deep hole; and a pair of black-necked geese? There is something about impaired vision; about burying oneself; about necks and vulnerability, but meaning never rests as we shift our vision from one painting to the next.

Victor Man, *Untitled* (1939) (detail), 2006, assemblage of two paintings; oil on canvas mounted on board, 11 1/4 x 15" and 11 1/4 x 11".

Man is a master at capturing the tentativeness of human gestures, recalling the nineteenth-century realists or Degas, with his accurate, photographic suddenness. Something of this observational immediacy is even evident in the comic strip he drew in 1984, at the age of ten, *Mihai Viteazu* (Mihai the Brave), 2006, here vastly enlarged and hung like wallpaper. This elaborate, cartoonlike work depicts the adventures of a sixteenth-century Romanian hero. The huge gridded frame of the comic becomes an enormous architectural structure, like a multistoried modernist building, viewed in section. In one room the great knight surveys his troops, while in the adjacent apartment the cavalry advances, or traitors are stabbed and burned at the stake—all drawn with the unflinching, innocent violence of a talented schoolboy.

"The place I'm coming from" is a title as complex as the artist himself, drawing together the isolation of Man's practice and the confusion of a generation born into Communism and maturing with consumerism. His *Suburban Hobbyist*, 2004, perhaps a veiled self-portrait, is an exquisitely painted figure of a hooded man, his face hidden behind sunglasses and a smear of paint erasing his mouth. His bare feet are painted with the detail expected in a seventeenth-century miniature. The young man stands deliberately and somewhat menacingly, trapped between the painted lines of the institutional wall markings behind him (similar wall borders are painted on the gallery's real walls). As the artist explains, suburbs in Romania do not connote the abundance and ennui they do in the US but are underprivileged non-places existing parasitically on the edges of towns. There is no center in Man's work, only ever-shifting margins—of history, mass culture, the gallery space itself, photographs, sexual proclivities, world geography—

which the artist occupies with courageous, incisive precision.

—Gilda Williams