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MUSEUMS/GALLERIES

"Renovatio Imperii" and "Alone in the Woods" at Hamiltonian, Reviewed



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Sky

The surface of "Sky Stack" is so delicious, you could dip into it with a spoon, as if it were a bowl of ice cream. It's a painting by Dan Perkins, a recent American University grad who demonstrates control and precision with tone and gradient. "Sky Stack" is pleasant: a landscape oil painting, in which a

rhombus of bright blue day intersects the sky of a piney hill scene at sunset. "Sky Stack" is so good that it might just be bad for you.

"Alone in the Woods"—a show of new paintings by Perkins, and one of two exhibits on view at Hamiltonian Gallery—gets high marks on execution. Perkins fades oranges and pinks expertly in the sherbet sunsets that appear in most of his scenes, and his framing device enables him to combine colors in ways that nature never intended. In "Mountains on Mountains," an image of a mountain, distant in the horizon, is set in front an image of another mountain closer to the viewer, which rises over a lake, which is itself set over a lavender field of abstract color. Stacks on stacks.

Perkins' palette is rich but regular. He dilutes what would otherwise be a traditional landscape format by carving up the composition, splicing scenes to create geometric fissures in the space-time fabric. Yet even this touch is conservative. The landscape in "Looking Down," for example, looks like a scene from an aircraft window, depicted in a painting that also includes the plane's rounded window frame.

The landscapes might be anywhere; locale is beside the point. Control is the purpose behind these paintings. They recall something like Laura Owens' early work, but without that special thing that let her paintings turn into what they are today: wild and frothy, yet totally under her command. Perkins' paintings are too tightly wound, and they take a bit too much pleasure in their own pure painterliness to do too much. Delicious: high in calories, but low in content.

"Renovatio Imperii," also on view at Hamiltonian, is a tour through Adam Ryder's paranoid mind. Through photos and some found objects, Ryder opens a Dan Brownian investigation into the Renovatio Imperii, the shadowy fraternity that shapes Washington power and the invisible hand guiding global affairs. It's an Illuminati show illuminated by color prints.

It could easily serve as the picture round of a D.C. pub quiz tournament: Photos of rooms and artifacts from the World Bank, the George Washington Masonic National Memorial, and the Masonic Temple are easy enough to

identify. "Oculus," a photo of the oculus in the National Gallery of Art, which is rimmed by the Greek meandros symbol, looks like a thousand other photos of the skylight—but here, it's presented as evidence.

Ryder's photos look staged, like press photos, a presentation that runs contrary to the whole concept of a medieval conspiracy that has persisted through the present day. He's included an infographic, a black pyramid that breaks down the hierarchy of power within the Renovatio Imperii, but it doesn't quite line up with his offering of very known, mostly public, largely memorial spaces as true bastions of secret authority. (How much more mysterious might it've been if he'd thrown in, I don't know, a suggestion of non-ceremonial spaces—a dilapidated warehouse in Ivy City, or an unassuming restaurant on Barracks Row?)

But Ryder doesn't go far enough with his investigation to convince viewers to look past the photos to see something more, something darker. A convincing deception (or revelation?) would require something more immersive, like a multimedia performance. There are a handful of ceremonial vestiges presented in a vitrine, but that's it. "Renovatio Imperii" doesn't stand up as a playful investigation into the secret corridors of power in Washington. Without the gamesmanship, Illuminati artifacts seem simply whackadoodle—or worse, touristy.

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