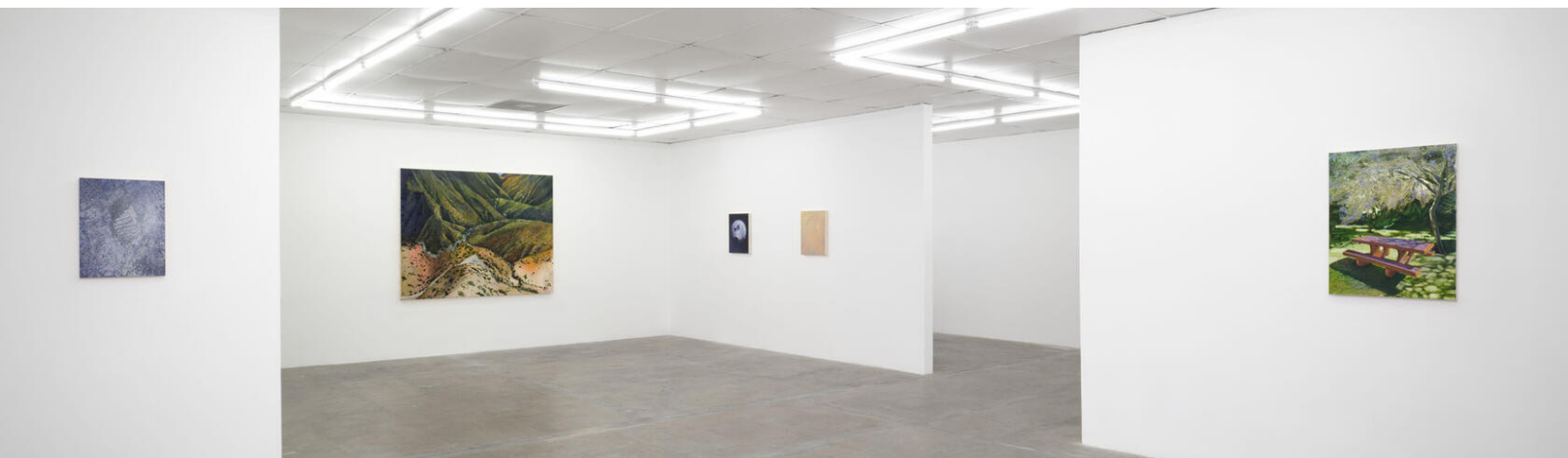


Olivia Hill's Stage-Set Landscapes

Nature and culture are inseparable in 'Strike-Slip', the artist's first solo show at Bel Ami, Los Angeles

BY JAN TUMLIR IN EXHIBITION REVIEWS , US REVIEWS | 16 AUG 22



People are absent from Olivia Hill's first solo exhibition of landscape paintings at Bel Ami gallery, but signs of human occupation can be found everywhere. Her work engenders a distinct kind of gaze, which alternates between the reverent wonder of the nature-lover and the keen sight of a trouble-shooting detective. Hill hints obliquely at this fusion with her bluntly descriptive titles, which identify their represented sites not only by name but by degrees of latitude and longitude. Take *View Point on Angeles Crest HWY 34°13'43.5"N 118°10'58.4"W* (2022), the exactitude of the numbers ironically at odds with the beauty of this scenic treasure of the Southland. On its own, the painting compels poetic description, its baroque configuration of interlocking ravines recalling folds of fabric or the looping lines of a cat's cradle. But when such free-floating impressions are aligned with those intractable coordinates once plotted by land-surveyors and mapmakers, and now increasingly generated via the telemetry of Google Earth and relayed to flatscreens from orbiting satellites, we gravitate toward a whole other order of interpretation.



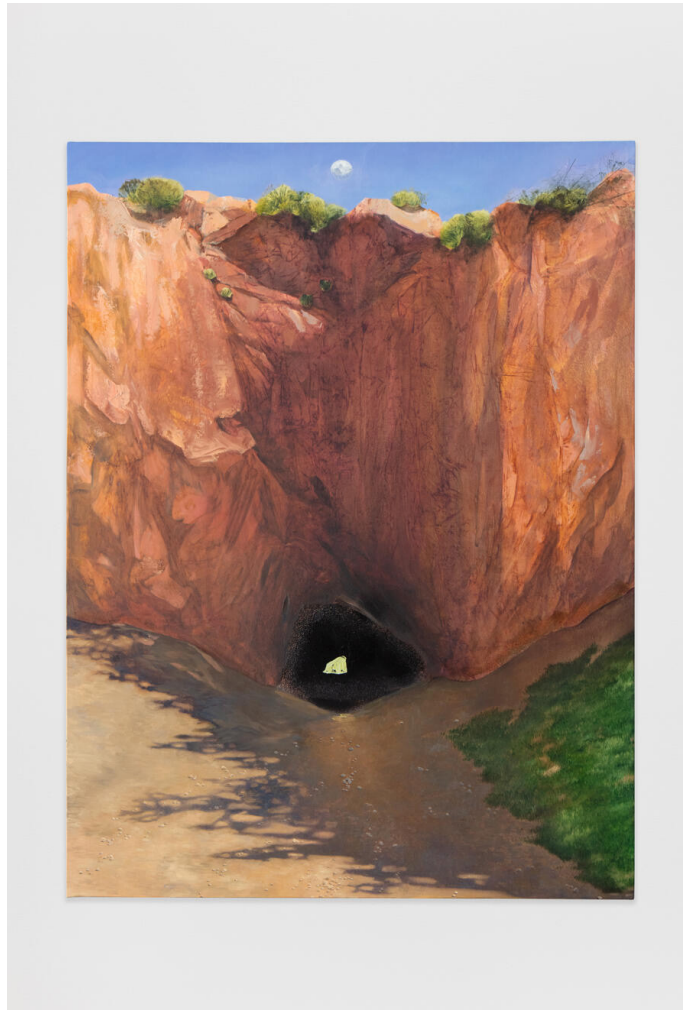
Olivia Hill, *View Point on Angeles Crest HWY 34°13'43.5N 118°10'58.4W*, 2022, oil on canvas, 152.4 × 182.9 cm.
Courtesy: the artist and Bel Ami, Los Angeles; photograph: Evan Bedford

Two small (51 × 41 cm) paintings openly acknowledge the distant source: *Man in the Moon 40°N 25.00°E* (2022), a depiction of the celestial body crudely anthropomorphized as a damaged face shrouded in darkness, and *Man on the Moon -00.57,023.49 E* (2022), which zooms in on the footprint of the astronaut who long ago accomplished that ‘giant leap for mankind.’ A third, identically scaled painting of the tracks left by a car on desert sand, titled *Tire Mark in Yucca Valley 34°12'27.9"N 116°26'17.2"W* (2022), returns us to a cosmically charged earth, reminding us that the high desert is a choice spot not only for enthusiasts of off-roading but rocket launching, as well as a perennial setting for budget sci-fi cinema.



Olivia Hill, *Tire Mark in Yucca Valley 34°12'27.9N" 116°26'17.2W"*, 2022,
oil on canvas, 50.8 × 40.6 cm.
Courtesy: the artist and Bel Ami, Los Angeles; photograph: Evan Bedford

Certainly, Hill levels a critique at the relentless subsumption of natural terrain to the human imperative of (largely recreational) use. The most pronounced formal element of the aforementioned Angeles Crest painting is a swooping, sometimes broken white brushstroke that simultaneously lays atop of and cuts through the composition, following the winding course of the road that was blasted through the mountains for our picturesque drives. Similar lines appear in two paintings of local ski slopes – *Mammoth Mountain Looking South 37°37'48.7"N 119°01'35.7"W* (2022) and *No Snow, No Problem, Mammoth Mountain Facing Northwest 37°37'57.0"N 119°01'25.0"W* (2022) – which trace snow ploughs' zigzagging 'cat-tracks.'



Olivia Hill, *Cave Painting, Bronson Caves 34°07'17.4\"*
118°18'51.9W\", 2022, oil and acrylic on canvas, 121.9 × 91.4 cm. Cour-
tesy: the artist and Bel Ami, Los Angeles; photograph: Evan Bedford

Rather than solely an argument against natural despoilation, however, this exhibition clarifies the impossibility of separating nature and culture in any aspect of the environment that catches our fancy. In *Cave Painting, Bronson Caves 34°07'17.4\"N 118°18'51.9\"W* (2022), Hill's ruggedly majestic treatment of the man-made cave employed as Batman's secret lair in the 1960s TV series clinches a point about the triumph of artifice over the real. Paradoxically, it is also from this constructed second nature that the artist's brush gains permission to stylistically slip away from its referent. Upon close inspection, the purported realism of her work openly proclaims its fakery: land masses dissolve into faux finish, passages of paint are hurriedly scumbled and flicked from the brush. From such pedestrian techniques of set-painting illusionism, Hill coaxes a vast repertoire of painterly gestures that are as formally inventive as they are conceptually fraught. These are works that keep you looking long after you've seen through them.

'Strike-Slip' is on view at Bel Ami, Los Angeles, until 17 September.

Olivia Hill, 'Strike-Slip', 2022, installation view. Courtesy: the artist and Bel Ami, Los Angeles; photograph: Paul Salvesson