

The Agency

John Hodgkinson

3 May – 7 June 2025

The job description said “You MUST be comfortable playing a Russian Soldier – you may be asked to act ‘dead’ on the floor”, and I guess John was. In October 2024, he got the role as an extra, or what some people call a background actor, or background talent, or even a supporting artist. Some people just call them *background*. Or *atmosphere*.

One of the paintings in John’s exhibition is a self-portrait in camouflage while on the job. You see a bit of neck, but really it’s a portrait of John’s disguise. The fabric is stretched, folded, pouched and pleated. Green disintegrates and fragments across his body. He doesn’t blend into the background here. You’re seeing the fabric of the illusion. What’s more, you’re seeing how each individual brushstroke maintains it. It’s part camo jacket, part artist’s smock. It’s a canny game John’s playing. I think it’s a painting about both the job as an extra and his work as an artist. I think it’s about going unnoticed as a ‘supporting artist’ and standing out as a painter. I think it’s about his Russian soldier outfit and about the illusion of painting – about what some paint on canvas or fabric can simulate.

Most of the works in this exhibition are “landscapes”, a word that suggests both the natural and the painterly. “Camouflage” is a particular crossover of the two. In the First World War, it was artists who spearheaded the development of camouflage in warfare by painting the illusion of landscape on clothes and fabrics. The French artist Louis Guingot patented painting on water-resistant fabric for military uniforms, and sent a prototype hand-painted coat, much like John’s, to the French army in 1914. Those painters – *camoufleurs* – were artists whose artwork could become a job in war. John did the reverse. His job became his artwork in a war, albeit a pretend one, like an unofficial war artist for wars that aren’t real.

So it makes sense that many of these landscape paintings convey a belief in realism, only for that belief to be upended. There are works here that appear willingly conventional. They anchor the project in a historical lineage of landscape painting, asking us to trust in some romantic idea of an artist standing in nature and trying to record its straightforward beauty. But in John’s world these landscapes are also the nondescript backgrounds that he blends into when filming, the banal backdrop for whichever scene needs shooting today. And yet this does not seem to diminish the individual experience of them as meaningful fragments of the natural world. The works seem to snap back and forth as a result – seriously admiring a tree in its natural habitat before metamorphosing into a land of illusion and fantasy where anything is possible. A painting will show us dirt then tree then sky as if they were the most obvious things in the world. In the next painting a nook in the armpit of the tree has been prised apart to reveal a portal to some psychedelic spiritual awakening. Before you know it, a group of helmeted guys seem to be burrowing into it faster than the speed of light. Many works feel unsteady or awkwardly angled. Sometimes the foliage is lit like a supernatural crime scene. Bizarre reflections obscure lines of sight. And often the works hold too much speed. Most of these are based on phone snapshots John took from a minibus rocketing through the English countryside to a shoot location at dawn. They’re smaller than instants, they’re not even moments that could be registered with vision alone. Points of detail in leaves emerge



291 Grand St, 2nd floor

New York, NY 10002

Tel: 929.334.9219

above onrushing masses of soil. There's a single coffee break, then it's back to the races. One after the next, the paintings scream *here no here no here* like sprayed machine gun fire.

Yet the war itself is never seen. There's a war on – there's always a war on – it's just not here. There is no war-torn landscape. It's just the English countryside. It's Hankley Common in Surrey, a former D-Day training site for Operation Overlord and backdrop to the films *1917*, *Napoleon*, and this TV show on Paramount+ called *The Agency*.

Text by Adam Hines-Green