

Half Flush

John Thomson

Mark Hilton's drawing of the ace of diamonds assumes the form of a radiant, multifaceted jewel that could be a kaleidoscope or a circular Cubist painting. He sees it as a blood diamond, a beauty that belies suffering and death; its sharp-edged planes are shards ready to slice us. The ace of clubs, likewise, cuts both ways: the massive plume of an atomic bomb detonating is a sight of both ultimate destruction and powerful beauty.

Each drawing in Hilton's series *Half Flush* adopts a duality that tends to stir something in the viewer. Using the standard pack of cards as his organising principle, Hilton mixes desire, degradation, contamination, zealotry and violence into a brew often sweetened by humour. Each suit has a theme that works more as a starting point than a defining rule: diamonds are class; hearts are religion; spades are nationalism; clubs are the environment.

Using graphite pencil on white paper, Hilton employs a range of styles, from highly intricate realism to cartoons and simple line sketches. In the spirit of playing card design, all his drawings have a direct, emblematic quality, not unlike the illustrations in old books and magazines.

In addition to this, Hilton uses the two-way design of the playing card as the basis for the series' double-meanings and double-readings, although unlike conventional cards, most of his do not contain perfect mirror images. The ten of clubs, for instance, shows an overweight person on a scale. From one vantage, we read his or her weight; from the other, we make out the word "obese". The design on the back of the cards is also irregular – while it shares the intricate patterning common to many packs, it seems to depict a bell-shape entering a flowery hole (and there's no prize for guessing what that alludes to).

Half Flush recalls William Hogarth's skewering of 18th century English society, except not all of Hilton's images are as legible as Hogarth's, lacking the clarity of his moral intentions. The more esoteric cards have personal meanings, and some even have connections with earlier works: the ten of diamonds has an opium poppy plant with ten stalks that, in reverse, spell the name of Hilton's friend who died of a heroin overdose, and who was memorialised within Hilton's earlier work *dontworry* (2013). Many cards can be read like the myriad scenes within Hieronymus Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (c. 1500–05) – we don't know exactly what's going on and how everything interrelates, but it's alluring and disturbing all the same.

Humour is notoriously difficult to pull off in art, but the darkness and ambiguity of Hilton's drawings help him succeed. Cancer, for example, is not usually at the top of most people's joke list, but his seven of clubs is wryly comical, picturing a packet of Marlboro with what seem to be coffin nails instead of cigarettes. It bears the warning label: "Nobody likes a quitter". His satire, though, like Hogarth's, is not always funny. The king of spades shows, on one side, President Obama (pun probably intended) adjusting his tie in a self-satisfied manner, and a black man with a noose around his neck on the other. The image has such a troubling rawness to it – particularly in the context of the deaths of so many black American men in encounters with the police in recent and not-so-recent years – and such a lack of dogmatism that its sheer audacity has to be admired. Hilton confronts race head-on in other drawings too. A slightly less charged image – of a Caucasian man making a slanted-eye one way, and an Asian man making a rounded-eye the other – pokes fun at both racism and racial difference.

Nowhere in his series does the artist make things easy for us. Many of his drawings are confronting: a Star of David fashioned from police batons or the Muslim Brotherhood insignia, with its swords dripping with blood over the Koran, will most likely offend some people. His queen of clubs figures the earth with the sad and twisted words "I wish my mom was this dirty" – a message that seems both outraged and happy to outrage. For most satirists, beneath the hardened skin of irony lies anger about injustice that has been distilled and refined into razor-sharp depictions of human frailty. But the lack of a conventional moral voiceover that could

subdue or counteract Hilton's harshest images leaves them open to multiple interpretations and moral indignations.

The pack of cards is so ubiquitous and unremarkable, with its suits and numbers and picture cards and jokers, that it's rarely seen for what it is – a system upon which other systems (such as other games) are based. Like Marx's idea of the "base" and the "superstructure", cards are the building blocks for structures determined by a game's rules. Hilton is interested in how systems intertwine and, in particular, how they include and exclude people. Some of his most elemental images, of barbed wire or a section of chain-link fencing, mark inviolable divisions. His drawings are witness to how people respond to exclusion – through escape into drugs, gangs or fundamentalism. Nowhere is this more palpable than in the figure of a female Tamil suicide bomber who has blown herself to bits for her beliefs and has probably taken others with her. She has made the ultimate identification with a cause, effecting her own and others' disintegration.

Identity and its loss is a consistent theme. A number of cards present addiction – teeth are ravaged by methamphetamine use, two young guys ingest aerosol fumes – providing harrowing evidence of physical and psychic decay, of losing oneself under the influence of drugs. Hilton's drawing of the Dharma wheel, which, according to Buddhist teaching represents the path to enlightenment – where the ultimate realisation is that there is no "self" – flies in the face of enlightenment values about self-actualisation to the extent that it is, ironically, perhaps the most radical card of them all. Or it may be the seven of diamonds: an alarming death-mask-like self-portrait of the artist with an idiotic smile and the "loser" L hand-sign to his forehead. He's like an alternate joker, a court jester who confronts the king with the bald truth of things under the guise of innocent merriment.

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