

## Arts Publications

# Barnaby Furnas - Reviews

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### MARIANNE BOESKY GALLERY

For his recent solo debut, Brooklyn-based painter Barnaby Furnas tackled life's grand themes head-on. Love, death, and war are the subjects of the nine large canvases here, all of which brim with narrative and pictorial action. Yet the real drama lies not so much in the kissing, shooting, and running figures that populate Furnas's pictures as in the artist's knowing investigation of painterly form. Revisiting the dichotomies at the heart of modernist painting, Furnas manipulates the boundaries between figure and ground, form and formlessness, and figuration and abstraction, working in an idiosyncratic style that falls somewhere between Carroll Dunham's and Kai Althoff's. Exploring the fundamental issues of painting in scenes illustrating basic human topics, Furnas has crafted a neat coincidence of form and content that makes for exciting if not quite radical art.

Suicide III, 2002, one of the most successful pieces in the show, demonstrates the way in which Furnas casts heated narrative passages as occasions for painterly drama. A standing male figure, gun in hand, is shown at the moment his head explodes in a hail of bullets that seem to come from all directions. This instant of fracture and death (depicted on the beach, that archetypal border between known and unknown) is shown as a formless shower of red paint, spraying and pooling across the center of the canvas. Embodying rather than illustrating the man's blood, this red paint is at once mimetic and concrete and exemplifies the play of figuration and abstraction typical of Furnas's project. Here, as in the marbled grays that represent the surf behind the figure, Furnas uses paint to describe form while allowing it to twist, run, and puddle into abstraction.

The two large works that dominated the main room testify to both the strength of Furnas's pictorial idiom and his enthusiasm for the materiality of his medium. (He makes his own paint, loading a urethane base with powdered pigment.) Like the Suicide picture, Heartbreak Ridge, 2002, features plenty of splattered blood, though here the viewer is embroiled in the battle. A group of look-alike marksmen, some being shot to pieces themselves, fire rifles directly outward. The approaching bullets that dot the canvas, small circles with acid yellow halos, seem to chastise us for our delight in looking at the carnage. In Hamburger Hill, 2002, another battle scene that stages the act of painting as conflict, a soldier's hand--the body part that is the locus of artistic facility--is blown apart, turned into a bloom of expressionistic paint. Across the canvas, such painterly details attract the eye locally while contributing to an all-over agglomeration. The kind of split attention that this demands serves as an analogy to the chaos reigning in the scene.

Furnas is on less firm ground in other works, in which form and content no longer cooperate explicitly. Although two large pictures of striding figures do contain isolated passages of compelling painting (the dappled forest floor of *Deserter*, 2002, for example), Furnas's delicate chiaroscuro clearly works better on a smaller scale (as in watercolors included in this year's Armory Show). A pair of paintings titled *Kissers*, 2001, was even more problematic. The melodrama of these romantic images of couples on a beach does not make for convincing pictures, and these works were rightly relegated to the back gallery. On balance, however, Furnas's formal savvy keeps him from such pitfalls. Though Furnas is no doubt aware that the formal and semantic oppositions at the heart of the medium have been fodder for at least a century's worth of painters, here he revisits them with fresh intensity on battlegrounds of his own invention.

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