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Arts

ART IN REVIEW; Barnaby Furnas

By KEN JOHNSON

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Marianne Boesky Gallery

535 West 22nd Street, Chelsea

Through May 24

Barnaby Furnas offers a dazzling delirium of sex, suicide and war in his impressive first New York solo exhibition.

If you had only Mr. Furnas's cartoonish pictures of a man committing suicide at the beach, his gunshot head splattered against the sky, or of a naked couple making love, their bodies disintegrating and heads exploding, you might call him clever and promising. But in two expansive Civil War battle scenes, he more than fulfills that promise.

These multiframe visions of hand-to-hand combat look something like Saturday morning cartoons on a badly tuned television. Flying bullets leave trails that slice and dice the picture, turning the whole into a patchwork of Cubist fragmentation: bodies go to pieces; blood flies; men kill, scream and die. Confusion reigns, and yet, look closely and you see that it is all as logically choreographed as a 19th-century history painting.

The frenzy of war is reflected in the varieties of form and paint application: Abstract Expressionism, hard-edged geometry and funky illustration turn the surface into a kind of all-over stylistic battlefield. Surface vies with illusory depth, order struggles against chaos.

Together, form and imagery give the impression of a psyche besieged by all its contradictions at once. And yet this crisis is embraced with Nietzschean exuberance. It will be interesting to see where Mr. Furnas goes from here. KEN JOHNSON

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