

frieze

Issue 118 October 2008

Barnaby Furnas

By Michael Bracewell

'There'll be time enough for sex and drugs in heaven, when our pheromones are turned up to 11.' So sings Stephin Merritt of The Magnetic Fields, sounding irresistibly like the late Johnny Cash, on a track called 'Time Enough for Rocking When We're Old', from the three-CD set *69 Love Songs* (2000). A lullaby paean to the simple pleasure of dancing, it's a song that plays games with the rhetorical imagery of time, vastness and mortality, set to a spinning-wheel beat that just skirts the tempo of a slow country waltz.



Barnaby Furnas, *Rock Concert (Slayer)* (2007)

Faced with the clamour of Barnaby Furnas' dazzlingly pink painting *Rock Concert (Slayer)* (2007), the viewer could be struck by a similar confluence, in terms of the deadpan tension, within its imagistic language and painterly technique, of the epic, the immediate and the eternal. Just as Merritt deadpans a semi-ironical, fatalistic sagacity in the face of an old age and afterlife that are as soothingly monotonous as they are, hopefully, enhanced by unlimited, super-sized pleasures, so it seems as though Furnas has isolated the enshrinement of superlatives that holds sway within Slayer's credo of thrash metal excess and set its roaring, air-punching triumphalism against a dizzying sense of scale.

Rock Concert (Slayer) is not simply big (measuring 259x447 cm) but also engages with proportion in a manner that brings to mind the biblical and the gladiatorial, as well as forcefully conveying the actuality of a heavy metal show in a 20,000-seat arena. Cross-hatched by the urgent, multitudinous beams of their stadium-sized light show, the drum riser comprising a second layer of mean-looking speakers built upon the stage width of the first, the band members of Slayer themselves appear – as surely they would hope – like a superhuman race of lanky white American giants. Furnas' vivacious use of almost fluorescent colour within the painting serves to heighten its skewed, cartoon-like aggression – as though the Apocalyptic visions of John Martin had been rewritten by *Beavis & Butt-Head*: the colour range runs from fuchsia and cerise through Cadillac pink and dense, blood red – here and there broken by magnesium bursts of glaring whiteness and overhung along the top of the painting by a threatening, thin hemisphere of nocturnal blackness. The surface of the painting reveals the precision of the artist's building of effect: a geometry of repetition within a constantly shifting scaffolding of light, the combination of which empowers a simultaneous experience of deafening volume and cavernous silence. From within this paradox

Furnas articulates a profound intensity of action and intention – the resonance of which connects an aspect of his art to the muscularity of Abstract Expressionism.

This relationship comes to the fore in the dense, angry blackness of *Untitled (Dark Day III)* (2008), a vast (274x366 cm) acrylic on linen painting, the landscape format of which is divided across its centre by a seeming horizon line, giving rise to the sense of a storm or gathering darkness pressing down with unstoppable momentum on a desolate terrain. There is beneath the blackness a tracery of red, the trailing droplets of which making the sides of the painting appear almost as though they are bleeding. In the impenetrable darkness of this painting you might be reminded of the black paintings of Mark Rothko, Ad Reinhardt or Barnett Newman – depictions of a void, crisis or process of transformation.

Joy Division have become to contemporary painters what daffodils were to Wordsworth, but Furnas' depiction of the group in *Rock Concert (Joy Division)* (2008) is both a painting about movement and the nearest that Furnas comes to dealing directly with Pop imagery in the art-historical sense. Depicted in hues of greenish gold within a vast, balconied dance hall, beneath myriad bouncing beams from a mirror ball, the band members themselves appear pixelated, while their movements are painted as sequential images – bringing to mind early experiments in motion photography as much as Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase* (1912). The Pop aspect of the painting derives from Furnas' depiction of brand logos – in the row of identical Marshall stacks along the front of the painting and in the many sponsorship advertisements that hang from the venue's balconies: Gillette, Carlsberg, Lucky Strike and so forth. Given that Joy Division didn't last long enough to graduate much beyond playing student unions and small clubs, the painting assumes an almost ironical grandiosity – accurately reflecting the (again) epic extent of the group's posthumous significance.

Smaller paintings in the show, such as *Effigy (The Architect)* (2008) and *Bad Back (XO)* (2008) are made on burnt vellum and possess the eerie aura of ritualistic residue – reminiscent in tone and temper, at times, of the balance between delicacy and violence in the work of Francis Bacon. Seen here beside the spectacle of the larger 'Rock Concert' and 'Dark Day' paintings, these smaller paintings maintain the ambiguous assertion of critical mass, in emotional and artistic terms, that is implied in the exhibition's title and carried through by the temper of the work.