

Barnaby Furnas at Marianne Boesky

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Barnaby Furnas's new paintings toy with volatile forces that burn, puncture, explode and flood. Three jumbo paintings shown in the rear of Marianne Boesky's new gallery are called Red Sea (Parting I, II and IV), 2006, and invoke the Hebrew God's protective wrath with 20-foot pours of brilliant red splitting open against a vast expanse of sky blue. It's impossible to know whether we are viewing this deluge from the point of view of pursuer or pursued, but Red Sea's depopulated grandeur suggests deadly force. Smaller paintings in the front rooms depict single figures spurting blood from ritually inflicted wounds. Furnas uses the wetness of paint as both a theme and a medium to perform his painterly acts of cruelty and celebration.

For all the speed of his execution, Furnas spends a lot of time torturing Jesus. Almost half of the 14 paintings of single figures in this exhibition (all these smaller works are 2005-06) depict the crucified Christ at various gory stages of his martyrdom. In Before the Cross I and II, Furnas's man of sorrows is seen through bloody slashes that seem to both emanate from and rain upon him. Two paintings called Resurrection evoke the Shroud of Turin with their puddling paint and spooky, X-ray-like inner light. Two other paintings depict the abolitionist John Brown, who, like Jesus, was a reviled and murdered political criminal.

Furnas slyly tinkers with principles of the icon, fetish and effigy by means of devotional paintings that victimize their subjects. For believers, such sacred objects possess a living, or indivisible, connection to what is depicted; behavior toward the representation is understood as behavior toward the person depicted. This assumption about the power of images is shared by iconoclasts and iconophiles, and also by Furnas, who acts as both maker and destroyer. Heart Fucker presents a florid man in a gray pinstripe suit with a tie suggesting the Confederate flag. The work's mediums, listed as urethane, dye and crayon on burned and cut stillborn calf skin, tell a story of innocence and ritual sacrifice even before we consider the heavily vandalized image. Holes cut and burned into Heart Fucker's surface seem to bleed, and irreverent graffiti defaces it. The immobile bodies of Furnas's subjects passively endure their trials, and the artwork's ecstatic splatters and spills celebrate painting as a powerful force of creation and destruction.

But Furnas's depicted bodies have no interiors; they are, like paintings, all flat radiance and dramatic effect, easily punctured. His spasmodic ruptures of fragile boundaries could also function as a metaphor for art's weakness. His paintings possess a feeling of ethical panic at a time when art's charmed irresponsibility, in the face of ominous circumstances, is regularly being questioned.