

ART IN REVIEW; Barnaby Furnas

By JEFFREY KASTNER
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There has always been something vaguely biblical about the scale and character of the bloody mayhem conjured by Barnaby Furnas. In his new suite of works, this young New York painter makes such allusions even more explicit, turning his flamboyant style toward themes as unambiguously religious as the parting of the Red Sea and the death and Resurrection of Christ.

In Mr. Furnas's hands, this material is never fodder for static devotional objects but rather the basis for uncommonly persuasive pictorial drama. Most of the new paintings continue to swim beneath geysers of the red stuff, but their content confirms that the artist is less fascinated by gore for gore's sake than by the relationship between suffering and sacred states of ecstasy.

Chosen to inaugurate Marianne Boesky's new Chelsea space, the nearly two dozen works in Mr. Furnas's third New York solo are as assured and vivid as any he has produced. The exhibition is anchored by his trio of colossal 2006 Red Sea paintings (the largest is 14 feet by 30 feet), which dramatize the Old Testament miracle with cascades of crimson paint poised to engulf their sky-blue backgrounds just as they do viewers drawn into their frantic compositional expanses.

The cinematic proportions of these paintings are designed to emphasize the epic nature of their implied narrative, yet Mr. Furnas's more conventionally scaled works here -- including a series featuring an excoriated and then risen Jesus and the execution of the firebrand abolitionist John Brown -- are also compellingly ferocious.

Mr. Furnas uses drips and splashes descended from Abstract Expressionism to energize his idiosyncratic form of allegorical realism. These painterly moves are now accompanied by newly elaborated compositional disturbances: in "Bad Back (Day)" (2006), for example, a torso disfigured by scratches and bloody dribbles is further shattered by whip marks literally burned into the work's goatskin surface.

But for all their dark violence, Mr. Furnas's new paintings also contain moments of surprising delicacy. In "Christ" (2006) the figure explodes not in the usual torrents of flesh and blood but into radiant shafts of yellow light and, in a gesture of unexpected, startling beauty, a cloud of tiny butterflies. JEFFREY KASTNER