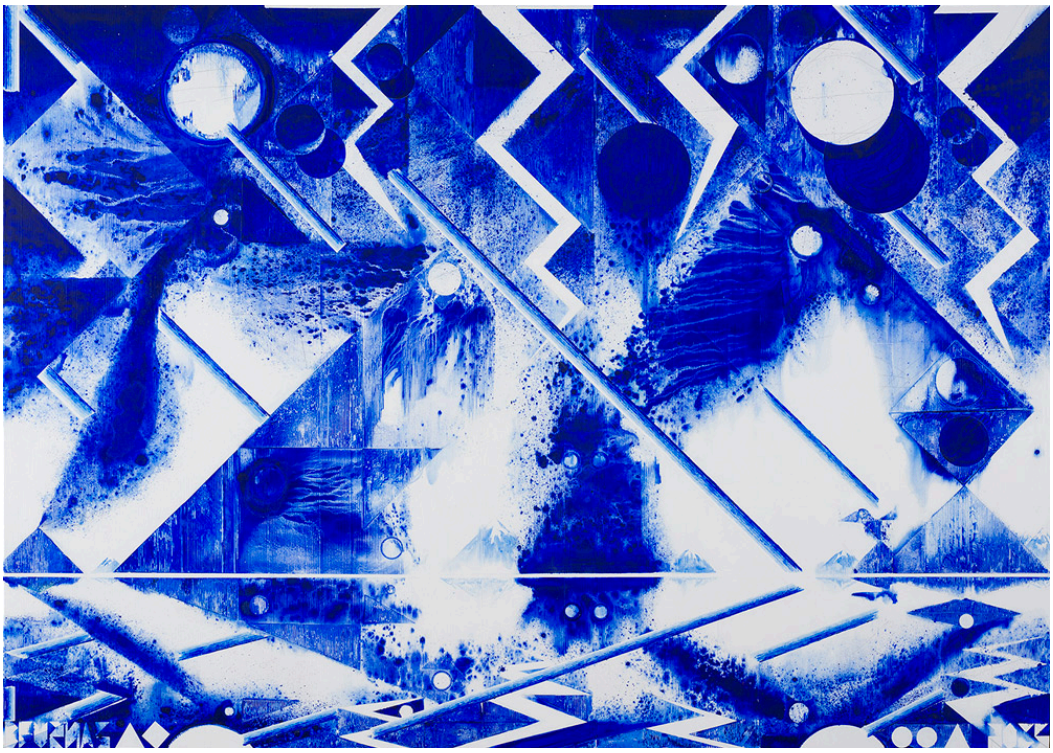
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John Reed
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BOMB — Artists in Conversation



Barnaby Furnas, The First Morning (Ultramarine), 2015. Acrylic, dispersed pigment, pencil, colored pencil on prepared linen. All images courtesy of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York.

Barnaby Furnas
by John Reed
"Our world is totally dominated by rectangles."

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In 2004, when I was walking around the Barnaby Furnas show Works on Paper, taking notes for the short review I would write for TimeOut, I had the vague notion that I should really be talking to the artist. Since then, the world has been remade in pixels—Wikipedia knows all, and we are creatures of the clouds—and Furnas' epic imagery has zoomed out, micro to macro, from the scale of the human, blood and guts, to the scale of the planetary, oceans and mountains. Marianne Boesky Gallery, too, has taken on grander proportions, still in Chelsea but now in a ground floor space, so I built up my courage to upsize my own operation, requesting an installation walk-thru of First Morning with the artist. With drills whining, hammers slapping, and big paintings going on the wall, we sauntered through Furnas' sixth solo show.



The First Morning (Scarlet), 2015. Acrylic, dispersed pigment, pencil, colored pencil on prepared linen.

John Reed It's fun to look at these giant paintings, because when I wrote that *TimeOut* review about you they were all works on paper.

Barnaby Furnas Yeah, watercolors. The paintings are basically watercolors, they still are watercolors. With watercolors every paper takes the color differently, and so, for this group of works I started putting on these thick layers of absorbent gesso and then it's combed with a pattern texture. They're made flat, or the paint would all run off. I have planks I can get so I can get to the middle of the canvas, and then the paint's supplied in puddle form, and because of the lines in the ground, everything spreads out along the combing line, like rows in a field, or sort of like corduroy. I've always been interested in capturing movement. Like the battle scenes in water, they're always about lots of things moving around. What I like about painting is it's so still, so static, so the more things that are moving, the stiller it gets.

JR It seems like looking at your work there's a kind of tension between, how do I say it? On the one hand there's a lot of movement and freedom, and then on the other it feels more like storytelling.

BF Yeah. So I've been trying to figure out how to make landscapes for a long time, and it was frustrating because I couldn't have my figures, I couldn't—like how do you tell a story with a tree? And so I'm drawing with my five-year-old son and for him, he's in that phase where everything is fighting everything else. So he and I, we start drawing landscapes, and I would draw the sun and he would draw the sky and the sky would attack the sun, and then I would draw a tree, and the dirt would try to eat the tree, and so everything was constantly…and I was like, “That's it, that's what landscape is.” Really it is like this epic battle, and its timeline is just more stretched out.

JR Right, right.

BF I was like “Oh, it is a battle, a flower is a tiny explosion,” and a mountain is growing, or shrinking. And so these paintings, everything is competing, battling it out for some sort of place, this idea of place. And so that's really where these came from. My son has a set of color-forms. Are you familiar with color-forms? He just got them from his grandfather, who's an architect. But it's like, a square, a triangle, you know. If you want to make a house you put a square down, you put a triangle on top of it, then boom, there you are. And I like that. It's such an easy, efficient way to get from form into story. And so armed with those two things I'm like “I'm going to make landscape paintings, from my mind really,” and so that's where I went. And he's also into dinosaurs and volcanoes and so I'm like, “Why not have dinosaurs and a volcano?”



The First Place, 2015. Acrylic, dispersed pigment, pencil, colored pencil on prepared linen.

JR If we could speed up our intelligence, a hundred-fold, and shrink ourselves to a microscopic scale, we would have a grand perspective of stuff that seems like just, nothing. And on the other hand, if we could slow ourselves down we would see stories in the landscape.

BF Yeah. That's been the central concern of my work, since the beginning, since the battle scene works on paper you saw. They were about, like, why show one minute? Paintings don't just show one minute happening, they can show an hour of things happening. And so getting back to these lines, they suggest energy behind things, like gravity, but they also add force. Lines give this strong sense of vertical movement to everything. You can't see it but it's also sort of there.

JR It's also this transitional moment. The first impulse to put stuff up on cave walls and around in our environment was maps, you know, and then at one point someone—which relates to your bars at the bottom—

BF Yeah.

JR At one point someone decided not just to see the external experience but the internal experience. So that's when you cross over from marking geography to making art.

BF Yeah. That's true. I think that's right. That's a beautiful way to put it. So these started out, and then, as I worked, you said it, this toolbar started developing. In my studio I work flat, and I have all my colors in tubs along the wall, which is kind of what those were. It was just a way of bringing them over, but they started to take on something technological, or screen-based, which was a surprise in this work. These are really big, colorful pictures about really small, colorful pictures. And that's just something I've grabbed onto lately—this idea that they're pictures about looking at pictures, somehow. But I still feel that there's all this discovery. There's all this accident in the spills you know, like these dinosaur figures have started to come out and there's this sort of bird shape; and so there's definitely this search for this place with things in it. But there's also this meta feel that the toolbar gives to it. What I like about these pictures is: it's as if the painting was just dropped through a slot, so it has a vertical blur to it. It's really about movement, without obviously having any movement whatsoever. And it's about accident, and all these messes, but there's also this strong control—

JR Right.

BF It's all based off of a diagonal grid, like all these points map out. So there are accidents, but it always refers back to itself, to it's own architecture.

JR Yeah, the diagonal grid is not something you can really articulate. I couldn't articulate it until I heard you say it, but now I can feel that orientation.

BF You know, in the end it's all about rectangles. Our world is totally dominated by rectangles, in every way.

JR Yeah, the diagonal is a proper way to deal with a difficult aspect ratio.

BF Yeah, I was looking at Cezanne's landscapes. Those things map out pretty closely too; you can put a ruler down and those little cuts—and in Pierre de la Francesca too, I always like those kinds of paintings, where things map out, or there's an order behind it all. And I feel that that order makes all the disorder pop more, or take on more life.



The First Morning (Twin Eruption), 2015. Acrylic, dispersed pigment, pencil, colored pencil on prepared linen.

JR Shall we look at some more? This one [*The First Morning (Twin Eruption)*, 2015]?

BF This is sort of a smaller version of the same one, and the solution to these paintings ended up being white. White reinforces how thin the paint applications are. It's like the paint is barely there. One way I look at these is that they're almost like screens. You could just take them off, like something hung up on the front of the canvas.

I mean, there's been a lot of work, as you can see, there's a lot of texture. It seems like if you're thinking about work, like I said, we're all so rectangle. We're all so smooth, backlit, rectangle-obsessed, and this idea of having something—these are also kind of backlit, there's no white.

JR Even in film now, the vignettes are rectangles.

BF Yeah, if you think about it, it's like every last thing—

JR That's true, is that looking at screens all day?

BF It's screens, yeah. And it was photographs before that. I mean, I've thought of these white stripes as being the bottom of a Polaroid too, but we conform to rectangles in everything—in architecture, in our pictures—and they don't exist. They're purely our own thing. I mean in early art, there were cave walls and bumps, and they would turn the bumps into part of the thing. It was a textured world, and a world with scale. And I think that scale and texture are two of the things that painting really has and still gets to keep.

JR Well, rectangles are bricks, and bricks are the most interesting piece of technology that's never changed. But in a way, the rectangle itself predates brick. The rectangle is the tile—

So this is more of an ocean landscape? Or lunar? It could be lunar.

BF I got really into this blue, which is ultramarine blue, a synthetically produced color. It's very rich. Yves Klein is sort of famous for using it. In all the pictures, if you notice, there's the thing and then its own reflection. They're like the first landscape looking at itself. I've been obsessed with pre-mirror cultures or societies, because basically the pond was it, before the looking glass was invented. That was certainly not a rectangular world. These are all the first places checking themselves out, I think for something to exist—for us to exist. We all need visual confirmation, which we get from our rectangles.

JR Yeah. Well also rectangles somehow signify crawling out of a hole. I'm trying to think what rectangle you see in nature, and in a way it's the horizon.

BF Yes, the horizon line, which has been something that's been in my work, literally that was the first thing I figured out. You draw a line across the thing and then you've got—

JR Sometimes when you're sleeping in a canyon, there are rectangles, because you see the sun, or the shadow of the sun, come over the edge of the canyon.

BF So I finished this last night. And this one has a roostery—these are sort of volcanoes, but then I've got this kind of rooster shape emerging. And again that blue, it's very heavy. These are poured, again. All the painting techniques are essentially the different uses of liquid dynamics. There's not a lot of me getting in there. That's why I like watercolors, because it conceals the hand, unless you go dry brush; but you're still dealing with puddles, which kind of erase their own making. And I needed that at some point in my art-making life. I found that with too much control I'd get too fussy, and so watercolor was this way of erasing myself from the process. What I think I'm good at is watching things. I think it goes back to my Quaker roots. I was always taught you sit and you wait for things to happen. They call it the "way opening," I don't know if you remember it from school—

JR I don't remember.

BF "The way opens." So if you've had difficulty, you must be patient, you wait. You meditate and things become apparent. And so all these paintings, they're made flat but I can't control how they dry, so there's this wonder in the physical properties of the medium and how they're affected by whatever tortured device that I'm using. You can see the triangle shapes; those are these pieces of square plastic. So I put the puddle down, and I put the triangle on it, and it instantly conforms; the triangle impedes drying. And then you end up with these almost lunar textures. It's almost a monotype. There's a strong printing aspect, and again it goes back to this color-form idea, just basic building blocks. We've been talking about rectangles, but nothing sets off a rectangle better than a triangle.

JR Well I was thinking that, as we were talking about it. Triangles are the shape that preceded the rectangle, whether they were scrapers or arrowheads or axes, they were all essentially triangles.

BF And you can find those in nature, those triangular forms. This is fascinating, you know, so I'm like now a triangle is a mountain. Triangles are mountains, circles are trees, or moons, or suns, and I really pared it down. Even when I

was doing all my figurative stuff. People were always like, “Why do the figures look the way they do?” And I was always like, “We're all just rudimentary.” I didn't really care about the figures, but I felt like I needed them. Now, there's something really freeing about not having figures and just having a triangle be a mountain. It is super rudimentary. What's interesting is trying to build narrative space.

JR Well the one thing about fictive or text narrative space is that it's easy to deal with large increments of time. “Ten years later” is very simple. Whereas most people in imagery don't deal with big increments of time well. You found a way to do it here. On the one hand, you've always been using time in your narrative, but this was landscape.

I have to change my ISO again. It's interesting to see it through the sensor side of a camera because the sensor's reading the paintings in a completely different way.

BF What we found photographing the works is that the ridged paint totally accepts light differently than the flat, because there's a depth to it and the light’s bouncing around in there, so it’s been hard to get the color right. I like the idea that they'd be hard to photograph. What I like about this one [*The First Morning (Fire Toads*), 2015] is that it’s flat. These are like Pac-Man forms, these green mouths.



The First Morning (Fire Toads), 2015. Acrylic, dispersed pigment, pencil, colored pencil on prepared linen.

JR Pac-Man palette

BF Yeah (*laughter*). I made a conscious decision to use a lot of color, to have color be a factor in these paintings.

JR It has a bit of a Hollywood teal color.

BF Yeah. I keep joking, it kinda looks like one of those Celestial Seasonings tea boxes—are you familiar? It's like the Sleepytime one. There's a funny new age-y thing with it, which I think is surprising. But I like it. And I think the paintings are funny, in a way. They almost don't exist, but, and this is unintentional, they do kind of have an iPhone, tech-y quality to them.

JR They have a Quaker practicality. There's something nice about just having paintings sit against the wall, like how they are now, but there's also something weird about it.

BF It's a little too casual.

JR I go back and forth.

BF I do both. Usually at this size I wouldn't frame them.

JR Should we sneak a little closer look at that one?

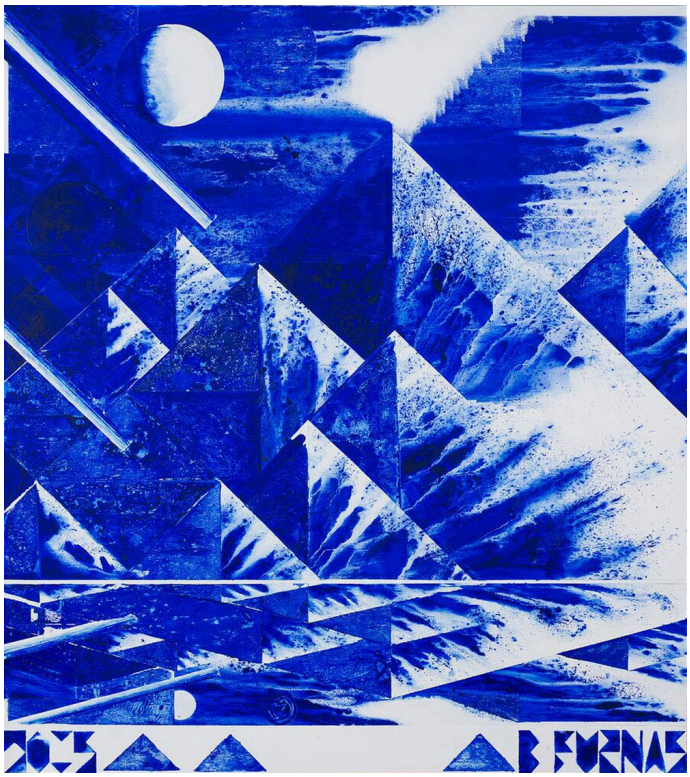
BF I think that having that perfect geometry around them sets off that perfect geometry inside it.

JR I feel that this is a different white.

BF Yeah, this blue has been sprayed. So all the red forms, all the puddling and all that was done first, and then I masked it out and then just did the strip of blue across the top and the bottom. Something I've done in my work for years. It's like one of those reality effects that I like, those perfect gradations of the sky. I've always liked it, and it's used a lot in advertising, like for cars.

JR How long do you plan and consider before you mask it out? How much composition?

BF That's the whole ball game when I do the blue backgrounds. First, I go around with Gesso. Gesso is this hugely important substance that's in my studio. I maybe have a thing of Gesso out—it's basically an editing tool and there's probably a gallon of it on this painting, and half a cup of red paint. That's really where the real thing is, it's finding everything on the canvas, and when it all feels right, the sky comes in after that. Again it's all on one level; if it was over the blue, the reds would all be purple, so everything still requires that white. And the names at the bottom right, that's definitely a new thing. It's a really funny font. It's kind of futuristic, but in a dated way. It's almost like Star Trek, but it's almost letters being put through the same process that the forms are put through. A triangle is still a thing that has to be filtered through.



The First Morning (Blue Mountains), 2015. Acrylic, dispersed pigment, pencil, colored pencil on prepared linen.

JR It's a pedestal.

BF Yeah, that's a real interesting way to think about it too. For years, I didn't want to put my name on the front because then it becomes about me and I want it to be about the picture or the image. I think it was all those big Picassos they had in Chelsea last—and his signature is just so perfect, it does so much compositionally. Often, it balances the composition, or it creates a tension between the thing and the image. So you have this smooshy woman's face, with another smear that's a tree, and there's this penciled line that was probably the first thing he did, and then the signature; and it just, it pulls your attention away from the subject and you have to accept them both at the same time.

JR Yeah, I've never thought about it like that, but it stands in for the empty bowl, or the dog, or the small child in the corner of a Renaissance painting, drawing you in.

BF Yeah. It just seemed like way too good a device to not incorporate. And so, I've gotten used to it. In many ways, the white bar at the bottom was so I could have a place to put my name without having to go over the picture.

JR It's also interesting because it changes your relationship to the shape, because it's somehow now two shapes.

BF Well it's three, if you consider the reflection too. It's like there are three zones for the picture to be in. I've got this sort of multiple, like why have one sun when you can have three? They're so fun to make and they're so good. The suns are also holes. The moon could literally be a hole in the sky. I like this idea, that everything is just a screen and you get little glimpses and there are things behind it.

JR A lot of holes. But that's us in the beginning. We're all just made out of holes.

BF There's that famous Zen Buddhist ink drawing, I can't remember his name, but he was asked to draw a picture of the universe, and he just did a square, a circle, and a triangle. Then he signed it and was like, "That's the universe." If you look it up online, you'll have thousands of people who have gotten the tattoo.