

HYPERALLERGIC



ARTICLES

How Robots Can Help Painters

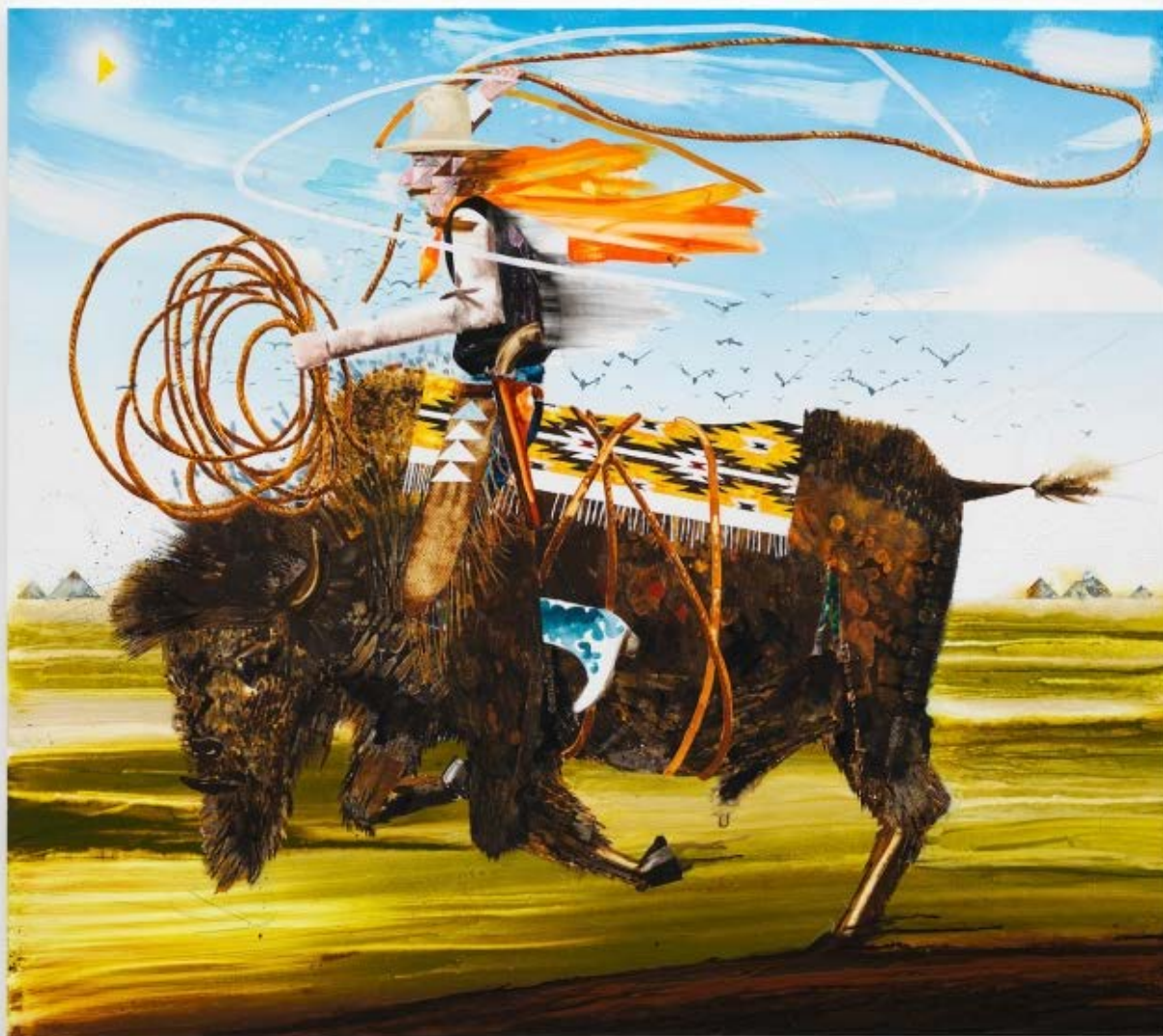
Barnaby Furnas’s latest paintings, which deconstruct American myths and symbols, were made with unusual studio assistants.

Ilana Novick April 11, 2018

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Barnaby Furnas, “The Wrangler” (2018), dispersed pigments, acrylic, colored pencil, pencil on linen, 64 1/2 x 73 in (courtesy of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen; © Barnaby Furnas; photo by Object Studies)

Artificial intelligence has arrived in a Chelsea gallery, its traces cleverly disguised as stylized, gestural, figurative painting. The scenes of the American West in [Barnaby Furnas](#)’s latest show at Marianne Boesky Gallery, [Frontier Ballads](#) — buffaloes, cowboys, open prairies, and the carnage along the way — resemble takes on the visual tropes of traditional Americana. But they were created with the help of very untraditional studio assistants: robots.

Perhaps it was only a matter of time. Robots have been making our lives easier and more efficient for years. We’ve gotten used to telling the iPhone’s Siri to give us

directions, look up restaurants, and remind us of appointments. A machine named Alexa sits in many homes, turning appliances on and off, playing music, and occasionally laughing maniacally for no reason. Why shouldn't artists be able to take advantage of this technology and apply it to painting?



Barnaby Furnas working with Artmatr's technology (photo by John Romano, courtesy ArtMatr)

In practice, this means that the curls of the horse fur in “The Wrangler” (2018) and the swarm of birds pursuing the cowboy rider were created with the help of tools like robotic hypodermic needles, programmed spraying devices, masks, and pours that allowed Furnas to apply the paint more quickly and efficiently than either he or human assistants could. The tools were created in collaboration with Artmatr, a start-up founded by artist and entrepreneur (and Furnas's one-time School of Visual Arts roommate) Ben Tritt, working with MIT's Media Lab to develop new technologies for artists.

“We can see how bad the human brain is at both statistics and randomness,” Tritt told me. “Sometimes you want to exploit the ability to impose order on something, and sometimes you wanna break it. It's easier for a robot to break it.” He hopes Artmatr's systems will stand out from existing fabrication tools like 3D printers, creating what

he called “2.5D” — a middle ground between the objects that 3D printers create and more conventional processes like photocopying.



Installation view of *Barnaby Furnas: Frontier Ballads* (courtesy of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen; photo by Object Studies)

This ability to render three-dimensional objects in a (relatively) two-dimensional medium is deployed in “Mt. Rushmore” (2018). The faces of the former presidents are rendered in triangles, making them look almost sculptural as if you were standing in the great outdoors of South Dakota. It’s a rare moment of calm and majesty in a show that’s wrestling, in paint, with the desire to embrace the textbook grandiosity of America while



Barnaby Furnas, “The Quartet” (2018), dispersed pigments, acrylic, colored pencil, pencil on linen, 38 1/2 x 51 in (courtesy of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen; © Barnaby Furnas; photo by Object Studies)

acknowledging the violence and hatred underpinning it. That tension and anxiety is even more prevalent in “The Quartet” (2018), which features Dorothy from the *Wizard of Oz* looking like the definition of innocence in her blue and white checkered dress; except there are four of her and one is carrying a pitchfork.

Where I greeted the concept of machine-assisted art with the same sense of anxiety I felt looking at the four Dorothys, Furnas and Tritt are optimistic about the technology’s practical applications. “Every artist is working with digital technology, but there’s virtually no way to take those digital products and make them real,” Tritt said. This is especially true for painting, which Artmatr’s website calls the “last creative domain to be transformed by digital technology.”



One of Furnas's paintings being worked on in Artmatr's lab (photo by John Romano, courtesy ArtMatr)

Furnas sees the robotic painting technology not as a way to forfeit control of his art, but as a way to broaden its scope and make his process more efficient than using existing printers and fabrication tools, or hiring armies of assistants. “Ben’s making tools, I see them as any other tool in my studio,” he said as we walked through his show.

For example, the hypodermic needles used to create the blood splatters in pieces like “Untitled Remains” (2018) are automated, programmed versions of the syringes he last used 15 years ago. “Ben’s been able to automate [the process],” Furnas explained. “It would take me 10 minutes to fill up eight syringes, and then a second or two to spray them,” but ArtMatr built him “self-feeding syringes that can just keep going forever. I could have 1,000 blood splatters if I wanted, which I wouldn’t be able to do by myself. It would take me a really long time.” When I pressed him on whether there was a chance of robots taking over his job, or at least taking over his assistants’ jobs, Furnas said: “It’s basically like [Tritt]’s helping me be me. ... He can take some of the labor off of my hands, and just open up my process.”



Barnaby Furnas, “Untitled Remains” (2018), dispersed pigments, acrylic, colored pencil, pencil on linen, 51 1/2 x 65 1/2 in (courtesy of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen; © Barnaby Furnas; photo by Object Studies)

Tritt has a broader view of robots’ potential to change how artists work in their studios. “In the fabrication space, you have a huge gap in the technology,” he said. “You have printing processes that are amazing for things that are only one layer, and painting is not only one layer, even if you have just one layer of paint. It’s still building things one on top of the other. There’s no printer for that.”

For now, ArtMatr is testing the services and



Barnaby Furnas, “Rally No. 2 (The Octopus)” (2018), dispersed pigments, acrylic, colored pencil, pencil on linen, 65 1/2 x 51 1/2 in (courtesy of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen; © Barnaby Furnas; photo by Object Studies)

devices with a small group of artists, including Furnas, but Tritt hopes to distribute them far and wide. Whether artists (and their assistants) will see these tools as Furnas does — a welcome break from enormous labor — or a more sinister force, remains to be seen.

Barnaby Furnas’s [Frontier Badlands](#) continues at Marianne Boesky Gallery (509 West 24th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through April 14.

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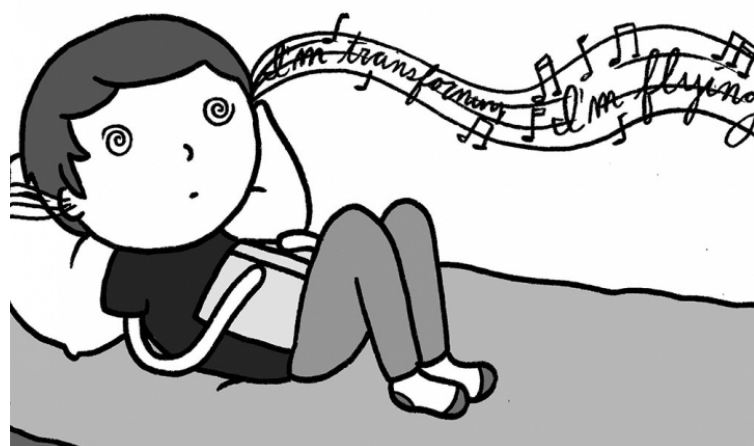
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