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THE CREATIVE LIFE
THE POUR

At five o'clock on a recent Monday afternoon, the artist Barnaby Furnas was in his Brooklyn studio, getting ready to start what he called "the pour" on a very large painting. Twenty-seven feet long by eleven and a half feet wide, propped horizontally on sawhorses of graduated height so that one end was about three feet lower than the other, the canvas virtually filled the room, leaving only a foot or so on either side for Furnas and his two assistants, Sarah Eaves and Jared Preston, to maneuver. The painting, called "Red Sea," had been requested by Marianne Boesky, Furnas's dealer, who hoped it would be the largest work at the Armory Show, the international art fair that opens on March 10th. Like "Apocalypse," an equally vast Furnas painting, which was displayed in the window of Lever House, on Park Avenue, last fall, this one's dominant color would be a dark, visceral red that looked startlingly like blood.

"I think these big blood floods are absolutely timely," said Furnas, whose red hair is several shades lighter than the glass of red wine that he was holding.

"For some time, I've been doing battle pictures, and people shooting people, and now this—which is about as clear as I can get. It's about things going wrong, everything collapsing. In a way, that's reassuring, at least in painting, because there are no boundaries, there's no abstraction versus representation—everything can be both." He said this cheerfully, without apocalyptic overtones. Furnas, who is thirty-two, seems to like talking about his work almost as much as he likes making it. "It'll take us about an hour to do the pour," he said. "We'll come back when it dries, in a day or so, and do a couple more pours, and then, once the red is all down, we'll mask it off

and do the sky. The whole thing will be done by Thursday."

Furnas and his assistants had already done a lot of work on the canvas. Stretching it and priming it with four coats of gesso had taken a couple of weeks, and the whole middle section, from front to end, was covered with a tracery of meandering, thread-like lines in several shades of indelible ink—green, blue, black, yellow—which would bleed through the washes of red paint as it dried. "We did this today, with hypodermic needles," Furnas explained. "They're quietly selling them in drugstores now. The needles are cheap, but they make this gorgeous line, very rich. I sent Sarah to Duane Reade for them last time, and I also asked her to pick up baby formula for me"—Furnas and his wife, Andrea Rooke-Ley, have a fifteen-month-old daughter—"and they gave her this look, like 'Oh, you poor girl.'"

Barnaby Furnas

A young blond woman arrived. It was Marianne Boesky, effervescent with anticipation. She put on disposable white coveralls and prepared to join in the pour.

Furnas started at the high end of the canvas, not pouring but slathering on water-based Mars Black with sweeps of a wide brush. He switched to a dark red, laying it down quickly, and sometimes flinging it out in Pollock-like arcs. Sarah and Jared went into action with plastic spritz bottles, spraying water on the paint to make it spread and flow down the inclined plane. Boesky, equipped with a bottle of her own, followed their lead. The canvas began to look like a river of blood, dark and murky at the bottom, shading to a brighter and more lurid red in the middle. It was happening very fast, and changing from one second to the next—streaks of different red combining and separating, and running down to the lower end, where they dripped off the canvas into pails and

other receptacles. After fifteen minutes, the whole midsection of the canvas was covered. The hypodermic ink lines had vanished. "I think that's good, Sarah," Furnas said. "Let's stop with the water."

Furnas surveyed the canvas and tried to explain how blood had become his motif. "Basically, I wanted to do history paintings, and battle paintings," he said. "But I was having trouble painting figures. I was particularly frustrated with the faces and the hands, and as a way of getting around that I'd paint someone being shot, and then I didn't have to worry. Like, I'm having trouble with this hand—*splat!* And that was interesting. It's red paint, and it's also blood. And then I was off and running, because it became like a game to me. When I was a kid, growing up in a kind of ghetto commune in Philadelphia, I would do elaborate battle pictures. I'd lie on the floor with my little pencil and draw all these men and cannons. I could just set it all up and then actually shoot—fire the guns, play it. That's still the basic idea here. You pour red paint and have this incredible formalist experience, and you can also play the picture. You've got a foot in both worlds. It's really happening."

"And he was raised by a Quaker," Boesky observed. "Which adds to the naughtiness." Furnas's naughtiness has deep roots. As a teen-ager in Philadelphia, he was arrested so often for spray-painting graffiti in subway tunnels that he had to do a thousand hours of community service—most of which took the form of scrubbing off graffiti.

Furnas started moving around the canvas again. "We lost a lot of ink," he said. "It got picked up by the paint. No big deal. We'll do the sky in one or two coats." A faint image of a yellow sun was perceptible in the area where the sky would go. "The sun keeps it out of the realm of abstraction," Furnas said.

After a few more slatherings of paint, Furnas was ready to knock off. His wife and Boesky's husband, Liam Culman, were expected any minute. "My husband is a total philistine," said Boesky, whose father is Ivan Boesky. "Liam is a Wall Street trader, but he loves Barnaby, and Barnaby loves the bourgeois life my husband loves. They play squash together at the Racquet Club." When the spouses arrived, everyone went off to Peter Luger for a celebratory dinner of rare steak and red wine.

"I'm going this way," Furnas said, examining the layers of red paint on his hands. "I'm not going to wash it off."

—*Calvin Tomkins*