

Fireflies and Fireworks

By Janet Goleas

(09/12/2007) “As I’ve grown up my subjects have too,” Hernan Bas remarked on the morning after his exhibit at the Fireplace Project in Springs opened to throngs of collectors, artists, and onlookers. Since his appearance in the 2004 Whitney Biennial in New York, Mr. Bas has ascended in the art world ranks at breakneck speed. At 29, he is already renowned as a painter, but his art also includes video, performance, and installation.

His paintings are modest in scale. Thickets of brushwork cascade over the canvas like tiny Dutch haystacks. His imagery thrives in the low light of dusk and midnight skies lit by fireflies and harvest moons.

While his male protagonists dabble in nihilism and large and small seductions of all kinds, Mr. Bas depicts not so much the indolence of youth as the trajectory of it. He has developed an eclectic foundation for his art based largely on the subconscious mythologies that chronicle the life of his own mind. The subtitle of a decade of work from Hernan Bas might be “A Boy’s Life.” Never mind that the boy in question might be Edgar Allan Poe — it’s a boyish Poe, nonetheless.

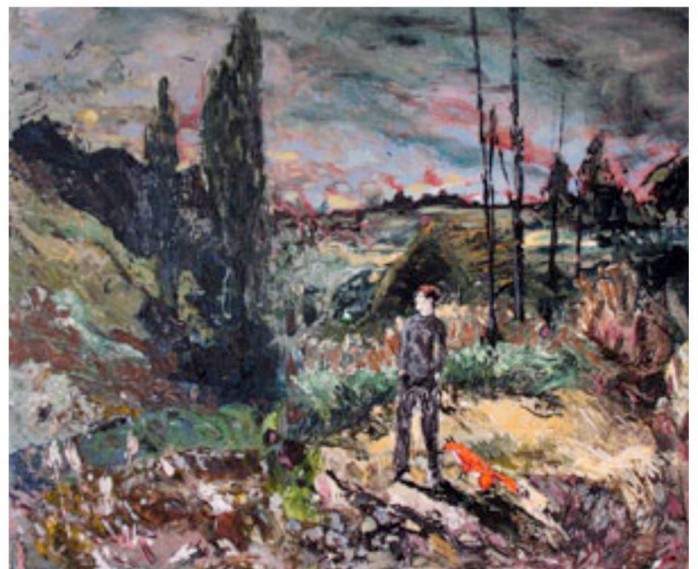
The new paintings are filled with dreamy reverie, pastoral landscapes, and explosive devices. His stories ramble inward, staggering through logic like a loose hose wagging midair, jumping wildly through places and things. The art of Mr. Bas is complex, moving well beyond storytelling.

The artist has mounted an installation of self-designed wallpaper throughout the gallery. Derived from various labels on fireworks packaging dating back to the 1860s, the repeating harlequins, starbursts, and graphic blasts create a dizzying optical intensity behind the show’s title, “Evening Amusements.” The title is borrowed from an 1894 encyclopedia of parlor games that offers advice, techniques, and guidelines for the sorts of tricks and diversions typical of Britain’s Victorian era. Chief among them: how to make fireworks.

Outside, along the rows of underbrush and raspberry bushes, dozens of fireflies flickered against the broad fields of Talmage Farm Lane. But these particular fireflies came courtesy of fireflymagic.com, a company specializing in L.E.D. lights that replicate yet another of the vanishing species in our diminishing ecosystem.



“Blooming at just the right time” by Hernan Bas



“A fox and his friend” by Hernan Bas

“Come to think of it, I didn’t see a real firefly the whole time we were installing,” murmured the young artist.

Near his “fireflies,” the artist has installed the remains of a virtual fireworks event on the cement footings behind the gallery. “I found a cache of spent fireworks stored in my fireplace at home in Miami,” Mr. Bas said. The vestiges are displayed in a faux aftermath of what appears to have been an extravaganza of pyrotechnics.

“I sprinkled graphite around them so they would look like we exploded them here,” he explained. And just how did this infatuation with explosives begin?

Mr. Bas spent much of his early childhood in distinctly Gothic circumstances, surrounded by the dense woods of upstate Florida. “Outside our front door there were just fields — as far as you could see,” he recalled. Though he and his five siblings were cautioned not to play near the alligator pond behind the house, there seemed an otherwise limitless freedom to wander the forest.

He busied himself playing with gopher tortoises and other creatures that roamed the grounds. “There was a panther loose in our forest. One night it followed me and my sister home, we could hear it breathing behind us in the dark.”

He traces his first exposure to fireworks to this period, too. “Our neighbors were kind of rough,” he said. “They threw firecrackers at me, shot me with BB guns.” He paused. “Actually, the BB is still here,” he said, pointing to the fleshy part of his hip. “Every Fourth of July they’d invite us to watch them explode fireworks in the woods.”

A number of canvases here celebrate such nighttime shimmer. In the painting “Blooming at just the right time,” a pensive youth glowers at the backyard inferno of firecrackers he has just detonated. Sullen and slightly detached, he slouches into the firestorm from his high-backed lawn chair. In the foreground, thick sprays of white flowers similarly burst upward, backlit by the fiery blaze located midground.

It is a testament to young adulthood. The furrowed brow, hair slanting awkwardly across the forehead — this brooding youth could be counting the automatic weapons concealed in his high school locker, or rhapsodizing over the teenage blonde down the street. Such is youth.

The male protagonists in Bas’s paintings engage in varying degrees of repose and reverie, tumult and quiet tragedy. The artist has developed an ornate personal folklore that is fueled by hallucinatory visions, free association, and contemporary aspects of the Romantic tradition.

He recalled being transfixed one Saturday morning by the 1950s science fiction classic “Creature From the Black Lagoon.” “I became completely obsessed by it. I was horrified, but I couldn’t stop watching,” he said. It turns out much of the film was shot at Wakulla Springs, a state park not far from his childhood home. Later this month, Mr. Bas will travel there to shoot his next video piece.

Hernan Bas paints fast, as if his images are so fleeting they need to be captured like wild butterflies (or fireflies). “I don’t paint with oils because I don’t have the patience for the drying time. Sometimes I literally stand at a painting with a blow-dryer — I just can’t wait to see the painting finished.”

In “A fox and his friend,” the artist lays down paint in narrow strokes that charge across the surface. Luscious mauves and lime green mix with ochres, pinks, and dabs of yellow as a smoldering landscape descends into the distant twilight. In the foreground, a young man peers due south as if startled by the ghost of Tintoretto or a sudden burst of light. One foot appears to be midtap — or maybe he has a limp. To his side, a carrot-colored fox sniffs at the ground.

The landscape swarms with energy while spindly cypress trees and defoliated stalks slice upward across the turbulent skies. Think El Greco’s “View of Toledo” meets Huck Finn, with the little fox alluding, perhaps, to Huck’s redheaded sidekick, Tom Sawyer.

Mr. Bas's paintings are fiercely literate and rife with imagery one might find in the Southern Gothic tropes of Tennessee Williams, Flannery O'Connor, and Truman Capote. Their stories seem to live here among the swales and overgrowth of greenery, the pale young men, and sloping fields.

The artist admits to being seduced by both literature and literary cliches. He gravitates to the images more common to the Northeast than to the tropics in which he grew up. Although the family returned to Miami when he was 5, the flamingos and Art Deco facades of Dade County have not yet managed to infiltrate his art.

In "Night fishing," a boy leans into his fishing pole at the foot of a thrashing river. Surrounded by fallen timber and fiery twilight, he is lost in thought as the world appears to collapse around him: a fitting metaphor for this new century.

This explosive show is on view through Oct. 9.