

## **HERNAN BAS at The Fireplace Project**

“As I’ve grown up my subjects have, too,” Hernan Bas remarked on the morning after his exhibition at The Fireplace Project opened to throngs of collectors, artists and onlookers. Since his appearance in the 2004 Whitney Biennial, Mr. Bas has ascended in the art world ranks at breakneck speed. At 29 years old, 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, Bas does not so much depict the indolence of youth but the trajectory of it. He has developed an eclectic foundation for his art based largely in the subconscious mythologies that chronicle the life of his own mind. The subtitle of a decade of work from Hernan Bas might be called “*A Boy’s Life*”. Never mind that the boy in question might Edgar Allen 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 mid-air, jumping wildly through places and things. The art of Mr. Bas is complex, moving well beyond storytelling.

For the first time, the artist has mounted an installation of self-designed wallpaper throughout the gallery. Derived from various labels on fireworks packaging that date back to the 1860s, the repeating harlequins, starbursts and graphic blasts create a dizzying optical intensity that reveals the nature of the show’s title, “*Evening Amusements*”. The title is borrowed from an 1894 encyclopedia of parlor games that offers advice, techniques and guidelines on 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 flicker against the broad fields of Talmadge Farm Lane. But these particular fireflies come courtesy of [fireflymagic.com](http://fireflymagic.com), a company specializing in LED lights that replicate yet another of the vanishing species in our diminishing eco-system.

“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,” said Mr. Bas. The vestiges are displayed in a faux aftermath of

what would appear 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 climbing on gopher tortoises and playing with the 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 recalled. "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 4<sup>th</sup> of July they'd invite us to watch them explode fireworks in the woods."

A number of canvasses 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 mid-ground. 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. Taken altogether, 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. Ironically, much of the film was shot at Wakulla Springs, a state park located not far from his childhood home. Later this month, Mr. Bas will travel there to shoot his next video piece at that very lagoon.

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 throngs of 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 mid-tap -- or maybe he is slightly gimp. 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 or Truman Capote. Their stories seem to live here among the swales and overgrowth of greenery, pale young men and sloping fields. The artist admits to being seduced by both literature and literary clichés. 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 five, 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 to this new century. Don't miss this explosive show, on view through October 9<sup>th</sup>.

**Janet M. Goleas**