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Miami Artist Hernan Bas Captures Hedi Slimane, Gets Personal with Madonna

By Ray Rogers

The dandies in the underground that the celebrated Miami-based artist Hernan Bas has painted in the course of his young career have had an air of dark, fantastical flights of fancy—larger-than-life swans carried lone dreamers away, the former Dior Homme designer Hedi Slimane was given exalted status in a work titled “Floating in the Dead Sea with Ghost Ship Pirated by Hedi Slimane.” These pieces, currently on view at a retrospective at the Brooklyn Museum, have given rise to brighter, bolder colors, and a new cast of characters making their way in the fertile landscapes of uncharted territories. A newfound interest in Futurism can be seen in his new body of work, “The Dance of the Machine Gun and other forms of unpopular expression,” on view at [Lehmann Maupin Gallery](#), all of which was produced on the heels of the election of President Obama.

The end of the Bush years is informing artists across the board. The shining optimism in Shepard Fairey’s graphic “Hope” is already an icon of the era, but it is just one example of how the political and social climate is affecting artists today. Bas’s languid, large-scale paintings also offer hope and optimism—as well as confusion, questions, and dreams of what’s to come.

BlackBook’s Editorial Director Ray Rogers caught up with the toast of the Miami art world the day after his show opened. A faint whiff of the previous night’s libations on him, Bas, sporting a slightly oversize top with skinny jeans and Dior sneakers—“I call it ‘ballet-dancer-going-to-rehearsal chic’”—took us on a tour through his new works.

While there is definitely a through-line, the new body of work has a different feel from what’s on view across the bridge at the Brooklyn Museum. The whole show is based on a newfound interest that I had in Futurism and 1920s Absurdist performance. The title of the show is Unpopular Forms of Expression. I feel that after the last eight years, a lot of things have been suppressed. As silly of a reference as it is, I was watching RuPaul on The View and she was talking about how she disappeared for a couple of years. She said that during the Bush Administration, she felt that the climate was such that she couldn’t be out there doing her thing. I thought it was really interesting that she made that comment. In talking about unpopular forms of expression, drag queens may be one of the top ones. I thought it felt timely to look back at that time period and relate it to the future. It’s also, coincidentally, the 100th anniversary of Futurism. I swear I didn’t know that when I started doing the work.

What led you to this fascination? I was sent a book on the history of absinthe and artists. People always talk about the hallucinogenic properties of absinthe, and it’s really that Gauguin and many other artists just drank so much of it. I learned about Alfred Jarry who is an Absurdist playwright who wrote the Ubu Roi. One of the paintings is based on the Absurdist play by the same title, which was the first absurdist play in documented history. That led me into the whole realm of Absurdist

Theater and weird accents, and that led to Futurism and early Dadaist performances. I overlooked so much of this work myself, because the Dadaists and Surrealists were so popularized through high school and art school in the same way that college kid posters rape Gustave Klimt. I found out, to my detriment, that it was important for a reason. Just because it can be a little tacky, doesn't mean that it should be overlooked.

I also wanted to reinvestigate the painting elements of these periods. One of the paintings here is based on a Russian Futurist play called, *Mystery Bouf*. In the play, based on turn-of-the-century Russian politics, the whole world gets flooded, except for Antarctica, and only seven people from the Bourgeoisie class and seven people from the working class survive. They all go to Antarctica to battle it out for supremacy and, of course, the Bourgeoisie loses. The working class builds this monument dedicated to Futurism and the new ruling class. I painted the scene in Antarctica of them building the future temple, or the Kingdom of Heaven, as they called it. I like the reactions people have to political struggles and how they dealt with this on an Absurdist level. I think that's something that's lacking on a contemporary level, and it goes back to RuPaul, I think she is an Absurdist protester.

And what does the show's title refer to? The title of the show is *The Dance of the Machine Gun*, and in 1914, people were doing performances that you wouldn't see as radical today, but they were in 1914. There was a performance called "The Dancing Machine Gun." The only instructions were that you were to walk on stage as the performer, get on all fours, lift your hands up, put them together like a machine gun and pretend to shoot the audience for 30 seconds. Overall, for this show, I wanted to turn Absurdist Theater, performances and plays into something akin to historical paintings. Like Napoleon crossing the Alps, or the king leading his troops to war with Poland.

When were these paintings made? They're all 2009. I'm a workaholic. I basically work like 14 hours a day, every day of the week.

Loners have played a significant role in your works. I wasn't quite expecting to see a bagpipe player, though. I was thinking that I couldn't paint a mime yet, as an example of unpopular forms of expression in performance. A bagpipe player also falls into this thinking. Unless you're in Scotland or you're at a wedding where someone Scottish is getting married, it's not a very popular form of expression. It's sort of obnoxious. I call it "The Bagpipe Player in Exile (or, the sad wind)." I thought of him in South America, maybe the most unpopular place for a bagpipe player to be. This one also has a little less to do with the character. It was painted at the beginning of these works when I was figuring out how to handle large paintings and I was figuring out a lot about painting itself and dealing with the hard edge. I love the sky more than anything else in this painting.

Do you feel like creative types were sort of in exile during the last eight years? To an extent. My career came of age during those eight years, but at the same time, I feel that much of the crazier work at FIT or the New Museum was literally in hiding for those eight years. Someone like Ryan Trecartin was in exile. I think my work survived that period in the safety of painting. Painting can be a little controversial, but if it looks classical or looks like if your grandmother walked in, she wouldn't immediately think, "Oh this is a gay artist," you can slide under the curve.

The same way Félix González-Torres got away with the mentality that you can't complain about an artist who's talking about AIDS if all you see when you walk into a gallery is two clocks on the wall and a stack of white paper with a word on it. You can't bitch and moan. He did that in the '90s when Helms was raising all this fury and Mapplethorpe was showing cocks. I feel like my work managed to [avoid that controversy] because it's still romantic painting.

It can be a little more subversive in that way, too. I think it's a fun way to do it. I always call it the "Madonna Record in the AC/DC Sleeve." I think there's a sort of charm in closeting it.

When did you come out? I was 19. It's progressed so quickly. Now I have friends in Miami who are the age that I came out, but they were out at 11. I want to shake them and say, "Do you realize that if you were in Kansas, you'd be dead right now?" They're so over-the-top, and that's not a bad thing, but I ask them if they realize how lucky they are. They're all cute, little Twinkie kids.

What are your favorite places in Miami? I like to go to Pop Life and there's a bar where artists hang called Kiss 14 near downtown. It's as close to a dive bar you can get on the mainland, and not have to pay \$30 a drink.

What's the vibe like there? It's a lot of off-the-wall local bands, like Schematic records and all these kids who play bongos and weird ass shit. It's a local old haunt. On the beach, the Deuce Bar is the classic dive bar. In the last couple of years at Basel, it gets flooded, and I can't go because it's the hipster capital of the world. Because of that, we go to the Deuce and Kate Moss is across the bar.

What was Basel like for you this year? It was pretty laid back. Everyone was so freaked out about how the economy was going to destroy the world, and the art world in particular, and everyone was on their best behavior in a weird way. As much as you can never be ostentatious in Miami, people were trying not to be. The over-over-over-the-top parties were just over-the-top. That was the big difference this year. It's always weird for me, because I've become the unofficial dignitary of the town. Basel turns into a lot of interviews and all my friends thinking I can get them every drug in the planet. I'm always like, "I'm not a drug dealer, by the way." I may want to skip Basel this year and go skiing, even though I've never been skiing in my life.

The art world and the pop world really commingle at gatherings like Basel. Any good recent celebrity encounters? I'm not a big celebrity gawker, but I went to the Waverly Inn a few nights ago. I knew it was a celebrity hotspot, but I expected to see David Schwimmer at a table. Diane Von Furstenberg was there, and Russell Simmons was there. And as we were getting up to leave, I bent down to pick up my boyfriend's sweater from the floor, and I bumped into someone directly in my ass. I turned around, and it was fucking Madonna. I bumped into Madonna's ass—of all people to back into. That's pretty high up on the tier of celebrity sightings. I love that she's dating someone named Jesus. Jesus, Madonna.

Does your interest in fashion filter into the work? I like to pay attention to the level of how fashion works and how it makes you look at an image. I feel like the bagpipe player is kind of sexy in a fashion way. And I like the way that you can be someone like Juergen Teller and make weird ass fashion photos, but there's something about them that makes them marketable, even though it's off and weird.

Well, your bagpipe player is a fashionable, beautiful loner. Especially wearing an Issey Miyake scarf. I put styling into my characters.

Maybe you can get some sort of co-branding deal! Maybe I'll make more money then—I'll dress them all in Marc Jacobs.

Did your nod to Hedi Slimane in an early work lead to a friendship? I met Hedi a couple of times, and he's asked me to collaborate with him on a couple of magazine projects. He's adorable, and I hate Dior now that he's gone (aside from the sneakers). He just asked me if he could use my images. Fashion-wise, I don't really care about Dior anymore. Lanvin styled me for the Brooklyn Museum opening. That was very nice. I like feeling pampered.

To me, much of your work has a romantic, sometimes Goth quality to it. It makes me wonder what music you are into. I'm across the board right now. My favorite band of all time is the Magnetic Fields. Now I'm having an affair with Antony and the Johnsons. The new album is so good. I think he falls in that lineage of Divine. And Santigold. I've been pumping that in the studio. That's my "I don't want to be depressed" music.

How does being in Miami affect your work? I think Miami helps me because I don't find it distracting at all. Economically, it makes more sense. The studio I have in Miami is 4,000 square feet, it's massive and what I pay in rent would get me a closet in New York. I like looking out the window and seeing pelicans. There's something magical about that. The façade of the building next to my studio is built like a castle, with pyres and everything. So I look out my window and there's a castle and a sunset. I'm like, "Where the fuck am I?" It's also not the best neighborhood in the world so it's like: pelican, castle, crack-head. Miami is weird because you can walk 10 blocks and be in the heroin pit—like the Lower East Side, circa 1980. Then you go five blocks the other way and you're staying at the Fontainebleau.