

THE HARDY BOYS MEET THE SEA NYMPHS

Hernan Bas fills his enigmatic canvases with characters drawn from mythology and childhood stories

WHAT HERNAN BAS REALLY WANTED TO DO last summer was to fly a kite. But the Miami-based artist, a prominent name on the must-have list of many contemporary-art collectors and curators, encountered one obstacle after another. Even the basic diamond-shaped kite he hoped to fly—the kind that's common in children's drawings—proved elusive. He was in France, and all he saw in shops were "aerodynamic, crazy kites."

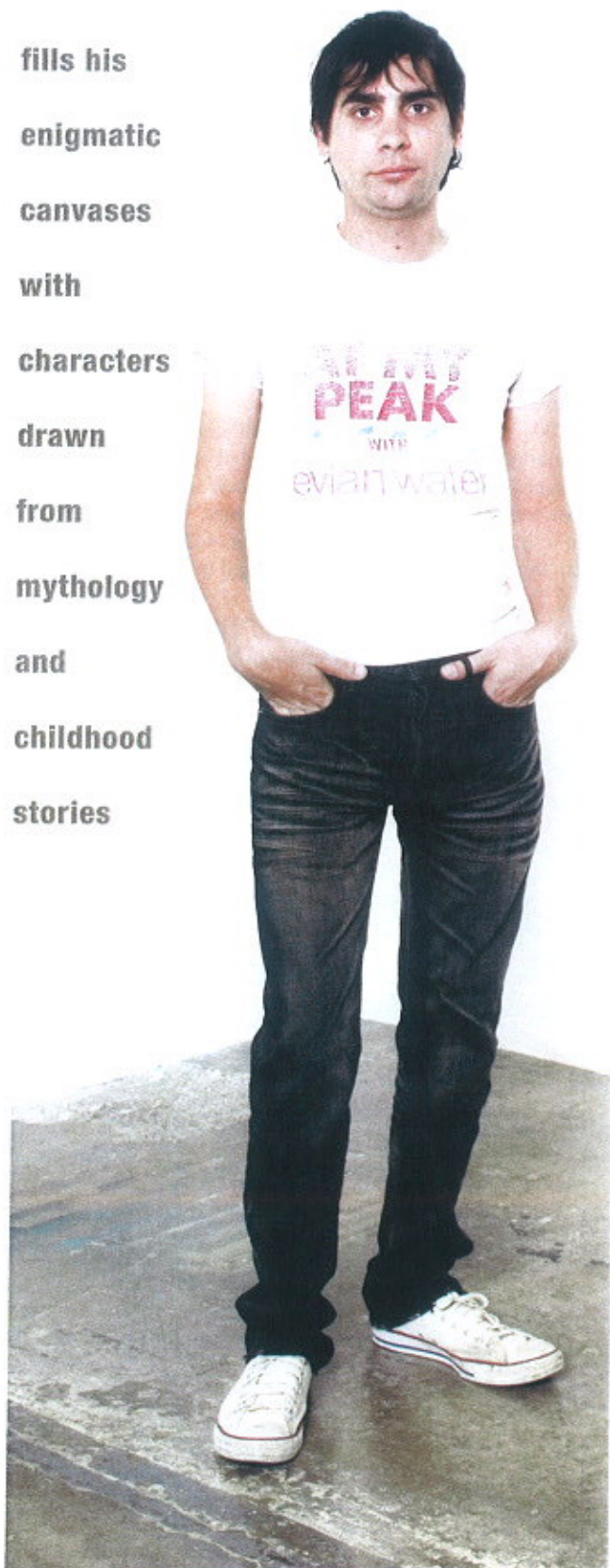
Bas didn't have much success with them. "They would crash and hit me in the head," he recalls. After many tries, he finally

found a kite to his liking, painted it black, and added a tail. Thus disguised, it played a starring

BY ELISA TURNER

role in his five-minute video loop, *Fleeting Moments*, a sequel to the kite-flying video projection in his 2003 installation *Fragile Moments*, in the Rubell Family Collection in Miami.

Bas's intention was to simulate a dreamy, drawn-out romantic suicide involving the kite, a stiff wind, and a noose. He tied the kite string to his neck, allowing for about six feet of slack. A friend held the camera as the artist's "private performance," as Bas calls it, unfolded. But the scenario didn't work, so the video and its "fleeting moments" became an account of the frustration of trying to fly a kite as it swoops, soars, and dives. "I really found myself in a trance, guiding the kite with my



SIMON HARE/COURTESY FREDRIC SNITZER GALLERY, MIAMI



LEFT, TOP TO BOTTOM *Slim-Fast*
Silhouette (Lounging
Cranapple Couple), 2000.
Untitled (exterior), 2002.
The Swan Prince, 2004.
ABOVE *Zeus Retrieving Cup*
Bearer, 2004.

neck but really with my whole body," Bas says. "The video fluctuates between short moments where the kite does something spectacular and moments where I fight to even get it off the ground."

Bas created the piece last summer while in residency at the estate of Claude Monet in Giverny, France. During his time there, he made about 40 to 45 works, including about 15 paintings on panel, in which marbled, brushy shades of green, blue, yellow, salmon, and brown loosely describe trees, sky, and water, but also swerve toward passages of pure abstraction.

"His direct predecessors are Lisa Yuskavage and Elizabeth Peyton," says Yvonne Force, president and cofounder of the Art Production Fund, which has curated and administered the Artists at Giverny Program since 1999. "He paints rather quickly. It's more of an Impressionist or Post-Impressionist feeling about the painting. It's beautiful, a fresh approach."

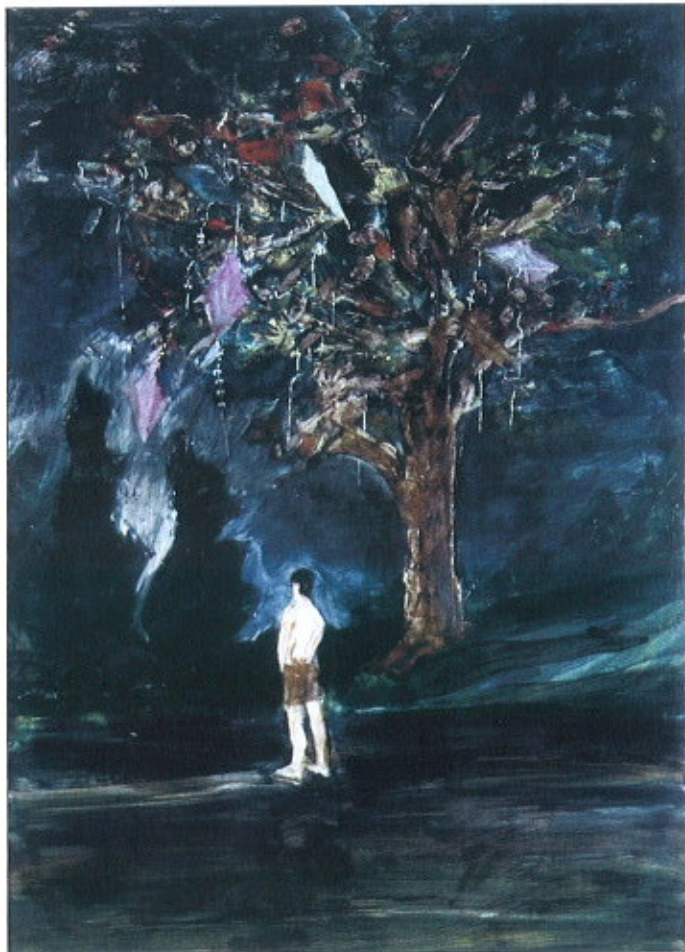
In Giverny Bas found himself tackling a new subject from mythology: giants. In his drawings and paintings, gangly, boyish giants with scraggly hair loom over their surroundings, sometimes playing with a set of blocks that resembles Stonehenge. Why this sudden fascination with giants? "I'm still trying to figure it out," Bas admits. "It's weird. I wanted

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Derelict kites snarled in tree branches, makeshift shrines, and

to go back to my earlier work—these childhood musings.”

Fantastic narratives with allusions to classical mythology and supernatural phenomena have always captivated Bas. He did a series of drawings depicting young boys wandering among spooky woods and swamps, which *New York Times* critic Holland Cotter called a “homoerotic gloss on the Hardy



In the Trees, Kites, 2005.

Boys.” In his lustrous painting *The Sea Nymphs* (2004), a water-based oil on canvas, Bas shows two lithe, slender young men with flowers and candles in their hair wading or swimming in a grotto, a glimpse of ocean in the background. A few candles and flowers are clustered around the water-lapped rocks, as if they belonged to absent companions.

Bas welcomed the respite that Giverny gave him, he explained in an interview in his downtown Miami apartment. In France he couldn't be reached by cell phone. Gallerists could get in touch with him only by e-mail. “I felt like the work was starting to get away from me a little bit,” he says. “I needed to regroup and figure out where I'm going. I've had so many shows. Just nonstop.”

Demand for Bas's work has soared since it appeared in the 2004 Whitney Biennial. In the past two years he has had solo shows at Sandroni Rey in Los Angeles, Daniel Reich and Fredric Snitzer galleries in New York, and Victoria Miro in London, as well as a host of group shows from Miami to

Copenhagen. This year's events will include solo shows at Daniel Reich this month and at the Schirn Kunsthalle in Frankfurt in the spring, and a group show at the Haifa Museum of Art in Israel.

On the opening day of the Art Basel fair in Switzerland last year, Victoria Miro sold 13 oil-on-panel paintings by Bas in 15 minutes. The buyers, who paid \$20,000 each, included Charles Saatchi, Donald and Mera Rubell, and Bernard Arnault.

Miami's Fredric Snitzer Gallery first showed Bas's Slim-Fast drawings—in which the artist used the liquid and powder diet supplement to create male figures with graceful but grainy shapes—in a group show in 1998. Bas had been using Slim-Fast in various projects, including an installation of strawberry-flavored powder spilling to the floor from a corner, a deft allusion to Felix Gonzalez-Torres's piles of cellophane-wrapped candies. The Slim-Fast drawings cost \$100 each, and not one was sold.

Today Bas's mixed-media-on-paper drawings sell for \$5,000 to \$10,000, depending on size. His work has been acquired by the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum in New York, the Museum of Contemporary Art in North Miami, and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

A slim man with wavy brown hair and a boyish build, Bas, 27, resembles some of the figures in his paintings. He is one of six children whose Cuban parents left Miami for central Florida soon after he was born but returned when he was in grade school. His father, German Bas, is a musician who sang with an ensemble but retired from performing to write songs and work on books about Cuban baseball. The younger Bas is fluent in Spanish, but, to his disappointment, it didn't help him understand French television in Giverny. Still, he says, even in French the program “ER” made him cry.

“I really like television,” he says. “I watch a lot of bad supernatural shows on TV now that I have cable.” His favorites include a show about the “world's most haunted places.” He also likes fishing but hasn't had much time to do that lately.

Bas dropped out of Cooper Union after his first semester, because, he recalls, “I was basically just sick of art school. At Cooper Union they start you from scratch. You're drawing cubes and squares and ellipses for weeks on end, and I wanted to do my own work.” Bas had attended magnet art programs in Miami-Dade County public schools since middle school, graduating in 1996 from the well-regarded New World School of the Arts, which grants bachelor's degrees as well as high-school diplomas. “I didn't want to go through it all over again,” he says.

Bas also left Giverny before the end of the program, because “it was a little too long to be away.” Although he keeps a small apartment in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, he calls Miami home. “It's where my stuff is,” he says.

Soon after his quick exit from Cooper Union, Bas landed a job at the Rubell Family Collection in Miami, where he received a formidable education. He had an intense desire to learn about contemporary art, according to Mera Rubell, with whom he had “endless” discussions.

“Herman was extremely focused on understanding the whole breadth of the collection, not only the way it looked, but how it was made,” Rubell recalls. “When you see someone so devoted, you don't know whether you are dealing with a big tal-

Victorian hair ornaments are merging in Bas's imagination

ent, but you can tell you are dealing with someone who brings a strong commitment to the universe of art."

At the Rubell Family Collection from 1998 to mid-2000, Bas installed artworks, kept records, and occasionally gave tours. One memorable moment was when he installed *Oh Charley, Charley, Charley* (1992) by Charles Ray, which consists of eight cast-fiberglass nude males made in the image of the artist. Bas recalls how "carrying a nude mannequin in my arms alone on a dim-lit freight elevator bordered on creepy." He also remembers how interested he was in the early work of Robert Gober and Cecily Brown in the collection.

These days Bas is fascinated by the French Symbolists Gustave Moreau and particularly Odilon Redon, in whose work he sees a kinship to his own. He is taken with the way Redon "treats his surfaces—not necessarily the content, but the modeling, just the way he uses paint. He also has this streak of doing these black-and-white weird drawings that make no sense at all. For a long time he did black and white, very similar to me," Bas says. "I started out using only these two-tone colors, black and white or sepia and white. And he went from that to doing these insanely, almost floral-bouquet paintings."

As he talks, Bas leafs through a book about Redon, and he stops at a drawing of a large eyeball hanging from what seems to be a hot-air balloon basket holding a human head. He reads the title of the drawing, *The Eye Like a Bizarre Balloon Moves Toward Infinity*. "OK!" he says with some amusement.

Both Moreau and Redon, Bas notes, are mentioned in an 1884 classic of French literature, *À Rebours* (Against Nature), by J. K. Huysmans, about a decadent dandy who collects Redon's art. "It wasn't until I had read that book 15 times that I started to look at the paintings," Bas says. One of his recent installations, *The Aesthete's Toy* (2004), which is owned by the Rubells, is based in part on his reading of *À Rebours*.

Despite demand for his two-dimensional work, Bas wants to focus on making more installations and videos. In his upcoming show at the Schirn Kunsthalle, he will use discarded objects found in Frankfurt junk shops for what he describes as a "reincarnation" of "It's Super Natural," his first solo museum show, at the Museum of Contemporary Art in North Miami in 2002. That show featured an installation that on the outside resembled a boys' clubhouse, with cigarettes and a skateboard stashed against the wall, but on the inside looked like a gay man's stylish apartment, containing photos of male models, a book on Oscar Wilde, and a Ouija board. The show also included drawings based on Franklin W. Dixon's "Hardy Boys" mystery series.

The show recalled an era in which gay imagery in popular culture was more covert than it is today, while ingeniously mixing metaphors of coming of age and coming out. "Young gay boys had to develop a certain creative ingenuity when attempting to find images of same-sex affection," Bas says

of the show. "Today's gay youth has a much easier time."

He says he is more interested in making installations because "so much of what I draw and think about is almost like relics. It makes sense to make physical ones, too—almost like memorials." A new obsession is trolling Web sites for Victorian jewelry and other vintage pieces woven with human hair. He



The Giant's Watering Hole, 2005.

recently ordered a hair wreath from 1855 that is 19 inches in diameter. "It's huge," he says. "The whole culture just amazes me." He is drawn to these meticulously crafted artifacts because they have an aura, a memorial feeling, suggesting stories of past lives. He hopes to evoke this quality in his own art.

"Everything that dies leaves something behind," Bas muses. For him, ragged kites snarled in tree branches are especially evocative. "I call them skeletons of kites, once the paper has broken away and the supports are stuck in the tree," he says. "It's the idea of this beautiful thing that's dead now. It's basically a skeleton of something that was really beautiful."

Tree branches, kites, and Victorian jewelry woven from hair are merging in Bas's imagination. "I want to make a giant weeping willow out of hair," he says enthusiastically. He plans to use fake hair sold in Miami salons. At the willow's base, he imagines putting something with candles that resembles the memorials people place on trees after a car accident. "And," he adds, "there will be a kite stuck in the tree, probably." ■