

# Michael Mazur at Barbara Krakow Gallery



Michael Mazur's "Explosion" 2007, Acrylic on canvas, 80 x 70 inches

By Nate Risteen

I hesitate to write about Michael Mazur, as the harm I can do to myself far outweighs any help that I could give his reputation. But since this show is not a retrospective but a concise exhibition of late and pointed work, I feel that it's worthy of attention because these paintings so clearly encapsulate a specific time and place. The works in this exhibition all date from 2007 and 2008, and it's this narrow focus of time that most interests me.

Art from about 2005-2008 is starting to seem like a distinct period, even though this could almost be seen as contemporary. From the very different viewpoint of 2011 it appears that many artists were voicing an overwhelming sense of gloom in these years, peaking in late 2008. There is little doubt that the wars, economic disaster, and a general sense of living in a declining and loathed country were largely to blame, and Michael Mazur has summed this up well, creating a brutally dark series of spray painted stencils, prints, and mixed media pieces with the unquestionable message that the empire is falling. Stencils of statues descend toward a pillared ruin, while headless horsemen illuminate the sky. The wreckage of

the Twin Towers appears looming in a foreground, while the detritus of a crumbling society spins around it.

A white rabbit dominates one scene of conflict, which I find less blatant and therefore more intriguing because the lineage of references to the White Rabbit don't quite seem to fit here. Is there some intended comparison between the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and *Alice in Wonderland*? Is this a comment on delusional leadership and a topsy-turvy world? Or, as an extension of this, a reference to the drug culture of the Vietnam War and therefore that war's similarities to the present conflicts? I don't know, but I appreciate how this ambiguity stimulates a longer reflection, as this menacing creature refuses to be ignored. Art of the late Bush years seemed to often employ a direct, this-equals-that symbolism, perhaps from an overwhelming need to express a widespread discontent. But the moments where broader interpretation is possible are what hold my interest, and these are what still feel relevant today.

Michael Mazur has always been formally masterful, and these works are no exception. What is more remarkable is how his formal shift toward spray painted stencils is a further example of the harmonious social climate in

these years. 2005-2008 saw a peaking of the street art movement, with political stencils overtaking cities around the world. To think of Mazur, who was far from an emerging artist, dawning a respirator and stenciling his political discontents at the same moment as Banksy, is a delightful example of how a social and creative impetus coalesced in this brief period.

But that period is over, and some of its quid-pro-quo symbolism can feel heavy handed. The works currently on display at Barbara Krakow offer a powerful expression of that time, and they feel like a valuable addition to the lineage of cultural expression. Another sad aspect of Mazur's passing is that we will not get to see his interpretation of the next historical period.

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**Michael Mazur  
Black Paintings**

At: Barbara Krakow Gallery,  
10 Newbury St.,  
through June 7th.  
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barbarakrakovgallery.com

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