

The mystery of what we see



Michael Mazur's "Mindless" 2007, Acrylic on canvas, 72 x 72 inches
 "Michael Mazur: Black Paintings" exhibit is at the Barbara Krakow Gallery.

By Cate McQuaid
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Michael Mazur, a soulful painter and printmaker who died in 2009, was a restlessly experimental artist in his technique and subject matter. His first body of work to garner attention was the harrowing 1960s print portfolio "Images From a Locked Ward," which portrayed patients at a mental hospital. But he is also known for gorgeously layered, watery landscape paintings and monotypes, often dramatic with color.

Barbara Krakow Gallery is exhibiting Mazur's "Black Paintings," as well as a couple of prints. Mostly made in 2007, these brooding and astonishing works contemplate the moral ravages of war. His final body of work, in a show at Mary Ryan Gallery in New York last year, was more peaceful: rain paintings.

Mazur, who lived and worked in Cambridge and Provincetown, had a particular talent for conveying deep and nuanced space.

Here, he does that through layering, stenciling, dripping, and airbrushing. Black bars crisscross over the surface of "Explosion" like the skeleton of a caved-in house. The space beyond is a glowing fog, breathy white above, scattered with sharp, tumbling dark shards and a spray of shrapnel, made by using the gouged-out bits and sawdust from a printmaking woodblock and spraying pigment over it. To the right, the canvas is gray with layers of stenciled birds, a flock startled into flight. Shadow and light together create a porous field, so that here the shadow is a form riding on the light, and there the light has taken shape against the shadow.

"Mindless" has at its center an enormous, glowing white rabbit, placid but ominous - a god, icon, or overblown leader. Stenciled men with rabbit ears march across the canvas below, high-stepping and stoop-shouldered. The atmosphere - call it the fog of war - deepens the mystery of what we see. Are the rabbits men passing behind the giant rabbit or in

front of it? Is the rabbit translucent? What is real and what is shadow? Pale gray and white shreds float down from the top into the mire at the bottom.

Despite the density of visual information in these works, nothing ever becomes muddy. Every patch of canvas is breathable. The subject matter may be heedless destruction and slaughter, but the space is breathable. And the more you peer into that space, the more you see.

**Michael Mazur
 Black Paintings**

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