Art in America

JULIAN SCHNABEL

IT MIGHT SEEM ABSURD to describe Julian Schnabel as neglected, given his great celebrity, his flourishing career as a film director, and his near-mythic status as a 1980s art star, but for more than 20 years his paintings have been passed over in silence by most critics and largely ignored by curators. His paradox is to be at once highly visible as a cultural figure and deeply invisible as a painter. Some of this invisibility is the result of his being dismissed by influential academic theorists as a mere resuscitator of modernist styles in an outmoded medium. Another factor has been the unexpected success of his films, which has drawn attention away from his activity as a painter; the meme "His movies are better than his paintings" has flourished almost since the release of his first film, *Basquiat* (1996).

A balanced assessment of Schnabel's achievement has been hampered by the difficulty of seeing his work in depth. Astonishingly, Schnabel has not been given a museum exhibition in the U.S. since his Whitney midcareer survey of 1987. (Recently, L.A. MOCA director Jeffrey Deitch signaled an end to what will have been a quarter-century embargo when he announced his museum is planning a Schnabel retrospective for 2012.) There have been numerous gallery shows, mostly in New York, but only a small percentage of this prolific artist's work ever made it into these exhibitions. Schnabel's penchant for painting at billboard scale has been one obstacle to a fuller presentation of his work, and so has his tendency to hold back some important works from public view.

Beyond these shores, Schnabel has not been as neglected. In 2003, the Schirn Kunsthalle in Frankfurt mounted an extensive survey of his work that traveled to the Reina Sofía in Madrid and the Mostra

Abelardo Martinez), 1990, oil on white tarpaulin, 22 feet square. Courtesy Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. Photo Ian Lefevbre.

d’Oltremare in Naples. More recently, the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) in Toronto presented “Julian Schnabel: Art and Film,” an exhibition that brought together some 40 paintings, two sculptures and eight Polaroids from 1975 to 2010. Asserting that cinema has played a central role in Schnabel’s work from the beginning, the show’s organizer, David Moos, who is the AGO’s curator of modern and contemporary art, assembled a compelling survey of Schnabel’s career in which every work had some connection to film. The exhibition coincided with the 2010 Toronto Film Festival, where Schnabel’s new movie, Miral, had its North American debut. In June, a large Schnabel show opens at the Museo Correr in Venice, coinciding with this year’s Biennale.

A visit to the AGO show last November made me realize, first, how few of Schnabel's paintings I'd seen in the past two decades, and second, how powerful his work can be when encountered in person. Everyone knows that the reliance on reproductions of artworks (and paintings, in particular) fosters highly inaccurate notions about them, but it is still very easy to base one's estimation of individual works or even entire careers on reproductions now, given their accessibility on the Internet. And more and more of our art experience happens on screens the size of placemats. All paintings suffer from reproduction, but Schnabel's tend to be depleted more than most. The enormous scale of so many of them, which one experiences almost the way one experiences architecture; the disruptive surfaces of the plate paintings, in which images coalesce or break up dramatically depending on one's viewing distance; the textures of his wildly various supports (weathered tarpaulins, pony skin, black velvet, polyester) that invite intensely haptic responses from viewers; a bounty of materials that range from encaustic and glossy resin to deer antlers and antique embroidery—these are all primary facts about the works that get lost in even the best photographic reproductions. It's almost as if the artist deliberately set out to make paintings that resist easy translation into the medium of photography. Pursuing such a strategy would be consistent with Schnabel's oft-stated belief in the importance of the viewer's presence before the work of art. In 2003, he told Max Hollein, who organized the Schirn Kunsthalle show, "Paintings are physical things that need to be seen in person. It's hard to get a painting's intensity from a reproduction."1

Every detail of Australia is painted upon an agitated surface bristling with shattered plates of all sizes and styles. That Schnabel was able to achieve any recognizable image over such an irregular surface is amazing: the protruding ceramic fragments and the layer of Bondo (an adhesive putty often used to repair car bodies) holding them onto the wood support disrupt every brushstroke. Seen up close, the painting turns into a chaotic abstraction as brushstrokes skitter across the jagged range of ceramic outcroppings, jumping countless tiny gaps, sometimes coagulating into hardened globs of paint, blithely ignoring or else artfully echoing the shapes and decorative motifs of the broken plates. Consciously or not, Schnabel invented a format that made achieving recognizable images intensely difficult. This self-imposed challenge may be exactly what keeps the plate paintings, which begin in 1978 and taper off around 1986, looking so fresh when many other Neo-Expressionist paintings have become period pieces.

Australia's frontal presence—11 feet high and 17 across—is imposing, but the third and smallest dimension is equally important, and one that nearly every photograph misses. As I came around a corner at the AGO, I first became aware of the work not as a painting but as a strange brownish swelling, as if some pottery-studded mudslide had burst through the wall of the museum and been frozen there. In the years before Schnabel started making his plate paintings, Frank Stella was challenging Greenbergian flatness with the projecting elements of his "Exotic Birds" series; the Pattern and Decoration movement was breaking down barriers between high and low; and New Image painting had signaled a nascent return to figuration. But none of this prepared viewers for Schnabel's hulking pictures, at once emotionally raw and strewn with cultural signifiers. They are heavier, denser, with more stuff, more muscular expenditure, more undisguised appetite for the world, than anything else shown at the time.

Schnabel's plate paintings still offer the thrill that accompanied their initial reception—they may have a place in history but they haven't settled down into assimilated museum pieces. In this they resemble precedents such as Miró's "anti-paintings" of ca. 1930 or Sigmar Polke's "Motorcycle Drawings" of 1969–71, coruscating artworks that haven't yet been domesticated by familiarity. As such, they also transcend their origins, erupting into the present as innovative works whose challenge has not yet been fully met.

What Schnabel brought to painting was the kind of freewheeling approach to materials that had been pioneered in Post-Minimalist sculpture, and by early 1970s abstract experimenters such as Alan Shields and Harmony Hammond. He also learned valuable lessons from Polke and Robert Rauschenberg, not so much because a few of his early works deploy favorite Polke and Rauschenberg components (antlers and printed fabrics, respectively), as because he realized that their nothing-is-forbidden practice would help him escape from the relatively restricted set of resources employed in most American painting studios in the late 1970s (and since).

A SIGNIFICANT NUMBER of Schnabel's paintings are portraits. Some depict his family and friends; others are commissioned pictures in various styles; a few are self-portraits. One of the most memorable paintings in the Toronto show was *Portrait of Andy Warhol* (1982). Half of an artistic exchange (Warhol did a portrait of Schnabel), it presents Warhol as a spectral figure glowing against a black-velvet background. (Like nearly all of Schnabel's portraits, this one was done from life.) Delineated with abrupt strokes of bone white and scumbled violets and yellows, Warhol could be one of El Greco's vulnerable, sinewy saints. Shirtless, but sporting a pink truss around his stomach (a garment Warhol had to wear after his 1968 shooting), he is less a body than a transparent vessel filled with cloudy substances.

Rather than occupying the center of the canvas, where we would expect to find him, Warhol has been displaced to the left side of the horizontal rectangle, creating space for the painting's other protagonist: a flurry of white specks and squiggles of oil paint and modeling paste selectively flung onto the black velvet. In the background, some faint blue and brown lines suggest scaffolding or a ghostly room. A smear of brown paint in the upper center of the composition is an early instance of the biomorphic shapes that have intruded into many of Schnabel's subsequent pictures. (One can think of them as flattened-out Yves Tanguy blobs, drifting through Schnabel's images according to some mysterious pattern; their capacity to interfere with more rational images may relate to what the artist has called, apropos his own work and Polke's, "notating inarticulateness."2) The white flecks emphasize the fragility of Warhol's barely-held-together body, as if he had dissolved into dust, a painter surviving only via (quite literally) paint. Alternatively, the black chamber could be a movie theater and the flecks, which recall the impregnating cloud in Titian's Danae and the Shower of Gold, so much glittering dust swirling in the light of a film projector. The painting is a perceptive depiction of extreme emotional isolation.

The implied religious content in the Warhol portrait, which is tempting to read as a depiction of the body and soul of a devoutly Catholic artist, emerges more explicitly in *Resurrection: Albert Finney Meets Malcolm Lowry* (1984). Inspired by John Huston's 1984 film version of Lowry's novel Under The Volcano, which featured a bravura performance by Finney as the doomed, alcoholic "Counsel," Schnabel's painting depicts El Niño de Atocha, a Christ-child figure venerated throughout the Spanish-speaking world, and particularly in Mexico, where Under the Volcano is set. Schnabel gives El Niño his traditional attributes—radiating aureole, pilgrim's cloak and staff—and deploys a horizon line and distant mountain to give the impression that the child is levitating. Executed on purple velvet, the picture is a veritable anthology of modernist painting moves: Picassoid face, Pollock splatter, Picabian superimpositions, squeegeed swaths of paint as luminous as a Jules Olitski Color Field painting, spray-painted lines that could have leapt off a canvas by Dan Christensen. Significantly, rather than concocting an eclectic abstraction with these motifs, Schnabel puts them at the service of a religious image, which he identifies, via the title, as a tribute to an imagined meeting in heaven of Finney and Lowry.

RELIGIOUS IMAGERY, mostly Catholic, is ubiquitous in Schnabel's work. In part a consequence of his desire to engage the history of European painting, it can also be understood biographically. Born in 1951 in Brooklyn, Schnabel moved with his parents at the age of 13 to the border town of Brownsville, Tex., where he was exposed to Mexican culture, and he's traveled frequently in Mexico as an adult. Discovering Frida Kahlo's collection of folk retablos at the Casa Azul in Mexico City was especially important to him, he told me in a recent conversation. This familiarity with Mexico may help give his frequent borrowings from Catholic iconography a naturalness that one wouldn't expect from a Jewish-American artist of his generation. But maybe there is more to his attraction to religious images than their art-historical references and his memories of border culture.

Recognizing El Niño de Atocha in *Resurrection: Albert Finney Meets Malcolm Lowry*, and recalling the devotional imagery that runs through Schnabel's entire oeuvre, I began thinking in a new way about the floating torsos and other fragmentary images in his early encaustic paintings such as *Accattone* (1978) and Procession (for Jean Vigo), 1979, the severed heart in *The Afflicted Organ* (1987) and the odd objects—such as Moroccan horse bridles—attached to some recent paintings. They began looking a lot like milagros, the votive

offerings left on church altars and holy shrines throughout Mexico. A milagro (the word means miracle or surprise in Spanish) can be given in thanks for an answered prayer or as a plea for a miracle. They are endowed with a spiritual power, and also serve as proof of presence, of the believer's pilgrimage to a particular holy site.

To read certain images and objects in Schnabel's work as milagros would mean that, for this artist, the painting is an altar. He clearly attributes some sort of mystical and emotional functionality to the medium: he is in the habit, for instance, of marking important moments in his life through his work; emblazoning heartfelt tributes to children and wives (he's been married twice) onto canvases; memorializing dead friends and deceased creators.

Like other viewers, I have pondered the inscriptions that erupt across so many of Schnabel's paintings, and been, by turns, puzzled, intrigued, enlightened and frustrated by them. Countless painters, including Cy Twombly (a big and long-acknowledged influence on Schnabel), have used writing as a kind of surrogate gesture, an economical method of making allusions, because they wanted to introduce an independent (even contradictory) sign system into painting or simply because they liked the way letters and words looked. The writing in Schnabel's paintings has elements of all these approaches but it also seems motivated by the artist's faith in the power of the medium to transform everything and anything it touches. Beyond their private associations, Schnabel's litany of names, initials and phrases (even intentionally dumb ones) reaffirm his continual wonderment at the ability of painting to launch wave after wave of meaning into the world.

TOWARD THE END OF THE 1980s, as Schnabel began painting on giant weathered tarpaulins, the scale of his work grew dramatically. I remember seeing a group of tarpaulin paintings titled “The End of Summer” (1990) in New York in 1992 and understanding immediately that they were building on the legacy of Abstract Expressionism. What I didn’t appreciate at the time, perhaps because I was too caught up in an older standard of skill, was Schnabel’s resourcefulness as a painter. His pours of paint or large gestures seemed to me at the time overly dramatic; the passages of painterly brushwork clumsy, unequal to the artist’s ambitions. Twenty years later, these paintings still look dramatic but not excessively so, and Schnabel’s techniques seem perfectly keyed to the paintings, expressions of an artist’s fully developed style rather than the belated imitations I initially took them to be. (Another group of early ’90s tarpaulin paintings by Schnabel, the “Hurricane Bob” series, are currently on view in the lobby of the MetLife building in New York; although the viewing conditions are far from ideal, it’s an opportunity to see some of his large-scale paintings in person.)

As the size of his paintings grew, Schnabel had to find a way of scaling up his gestures. One method was to slap paint-soaked tablecloths against the tarpaulins. This low-tech imprinting is seen to best effect in three 22-foot-square paintings first shown at the Maison Carrée, a Roman temple in Nîmes, France. While serving as dynamic abstract shapes, the resulting feathery marks also summon up centuries of European art, from the drapery in Classical sculpture to the wings of a Renaissance angel or the putti of Rococo painting. At the AGO, the Maison Carrée paintings—Anno Domini, Catherine Marie Ange and El Espontaneo (For Abelardo Martinez), all 1990—were installed in one of the big Frank Gehry-designed galleries. My favorite, El Espontaneo, features dense pink brushwork, floating imprints of Mars yellow, a pair of arcing dark violet bands and, in the center, a moth-eaten antique brocade banner glued onto the slightly yellowed tarpaulin. As so often occurs in Schnabel's abstract paintings, the forms seem to be caught in mid-voyage, drifting across the surface of the picture. Together they create an exhilarating pictorial space that strongly recalls a Tiepolo ceiling fresco, although the artist is more likely to cite Nîmes's Roman amphitheater and the bullfights he saw there as an inspiration. Schnabel has been criticized for the enormous scale of so many of his paintings, accused of making things big out of a taste for the grandiose rather than artistic necessity, but when one sees the Maison Carrée paintings in the flesh, their scale seems justified. Their size is less an index of Schnabel's "ambition" than of his desire to engage with historic painters who worked, on commission by Church or state, at an architectural scale,

or with those who created the “big paintings” of postwar America.

Schnabel has long been a connoisseur of unusual fabrics suitable for recycling as painting supports. During a voyage on the Nile in 1988 he bought several felucca sails that give the “Jane Birkin” paintings of 1990 (titled for the Anglo-French entertainer whose name is inscribed on them) their unusual triangular shape. A series of recent paintings were done on tarpaulins that over time acquired an imprint of the floorboards they were lying on in a friend’s studio. Ghostly lines emerge from the fabrics like images in a Surrealist decalcomania or, perhaps more to the point, the Shroud of Turin. In preferring used tarpaulins that have acquired mysterious images to pristine new canvases, Schnabel connects his work to contradictory realms, the quotidian and the magical.

One of the things I appreciate in Schnabel’s work is his readiness to gamble that something might succeed as a painting despite the flimsiness of its premises. Hanging at the AGO was a pair of 20-by-15-foot paintings from 2006 in which spare brushstrokes of water-soluble gesso (partially washed off with a hose) have been added to

giant photographs of a surfer riding a monster wave at the Banzai Pipeline off Oahu. (The titles of these works, Painting for Malik Joyeux and Bernardo Bertolucci V and VI, signal the artist's twin admiration for Tahitian surfer Malik Joyeux, who drowned off Oahu in 2005, and the Italian film director.) The attempt to wrest a painting of some kind from the confrontation, at epic scale, of a dramatic surfing photo and a few seemingly random abstract gestures is at once audacious and self-effacing. Schnabel's gestures barely disturb the image; their role seems to be to gently escort it into the realm of painting. We couldn't be further from Gerhard Richter's altered photographs, in which landscape shots are nearly obscured by luscious smears of paint. Richter seeks a purely pictorial transformation of the banal underlying images, while Schnabel's more discreet intercessions are at least as symbolic as they are pictorial.

Although Schnabel is fascinated by how little it takes to make a painting—a surprising stance for an artist who became famous for making intensely overworked canvases—he hasn't forsaken the physicality of oil paint. In some recent works, thick brushstrokes are laid down over a reproduced image of the Hindu god Shiva so that the paint seems to pour from (or into) the deity like Technicolor ectoplasm.3

On my recent visits to Schnabel's New York studio, the artist has shown me this and other painting experiments. The moody "Atlas Mountain" paintings feature woven Moroccan horse bridles attached to old tarpaulins; for another series, blowups of vintage medical X-rays (discovered in Brittany during the shooting of his 2007 film The Diving Bell and the Butterfly) have been washed over with violet paint. Among the most audacious paintings are several in which a cartoony oil sketch (copied from a thrift-store find) of a '50s guy in front of an easel has been painted onto huge color photos of Sheikha Mozah, the current first lady of Qatar. In one, the photo is turned sideways and Schnabel has painted a string around a long white shape, turning an abstract form into a suspended bone; the Sheikha appears to be gazing at the painting on the easel. What's going on here? An allegory of painting? A commentary on the cultural rise of the Gulf States? A surrealist non sequitur? I don't pretend to know, but I recognize that the painting looks like nothing Schnabel has done before and that it's full of visual wit.

I WONDER WHAT THE HISTORY of painting would have been in this country over the last 25 years if Schnabel's work had been given more serious attention. (It is an index of Schnabel's invisibility that New York's Museum of Modern Art doesn't own a single significant work of his: their holdings are two prints and one drawing from 1990.) We might not have spent so much time playing out the endgames of abstraction; we might have seen the physical components of painting subjected to the same explosion of resources

that occurred in sculpture and installation art; we might have enjoyed a wealth of art driven by emotion and empathy rather than by style and theory (but still historically savvy and restlessly experimental).

We would also now have, I suspect, a different relationship to the most important American art movement of the last century, Abstract Expressionism. Of course, there are large numbers of artists who have learned from Abstract Expressionism, and made something new on its foundations, but some key features of the movement have gone missing from mainstream painting of the last 30 years. One is the risk of failure that the Abstract Expressionists not only tolerated in their process but actively pursued.

Another is the emphasis on feeling in their work. A third is their belief in the redemptive power of art. In his willingness to improvise, in his bold emotionalism, and in his underlying religiosity, Schnabel has carried on these tenets. He may be the only well-known painter of his generation to have done so. I suspect that Schnabel's insistence on what many dismiss as the romantic side of Abstract Expressionism partly accounts for his marginalization; he's like the inconvenient relative who reminds us of a piece of embarrassing family history.

In art, as in other domains, belief can lead to doctrinaire behavior, to unthinking reiteration of the articles of one's faith. If Schnabel were simply another "believer in painting," I don't think his work would be so stylistically various or so frequently speculative. (Nor would he be so unapologetically "impure," painting portraits of the wealthy and famous, alongside his more personal work; working in so many painting modes simultaneously; throwing himself into filmmaking.) He is, rather, a believer who must constantly test his faith. Thus his attraction to making works where the amount of "painting" is at a radical minimum, as if he were saying to himself, "Could this be a painting? . . . And this? . . . And this?"

If Schnabel's work reemerges into wider public view in this country (maybe with the planned L.A. MOCA show) and thus becomes available as an influence on younger artists, and as something that critics and art historians have to directly confront, it will be fascinating to watch the results. In the meantime, his paintings, in all their messy grandeur and devotional passion, will be out there somewhere in the universe of painting like a kind of artistic dark matter, hard to detect but dense with gravitational mass.

1 “Julian Schnabel Talks to Max Hollein,” *Artforum*, April 2003, p. 59.

2 “Modern Art: Julian Schnabel interviewed by Matthew Collings,” *Artscribe International*, September/October 1986, p. 27.

3 One work in the series includes the name “BEZ” inscribed on a turdlike brown shape, an allusion to the blissed-out dancer who accompanied the Manchester band Happy Mondays. This isn’t Schnabel’s first tribute to a Manchester band: in 1980 he painted Ornamental Despair (Painting for Ian Curtis), an elegant, moving elegy for Joy Division’s singer. “Julian Schnabel: Art and Film” appeared at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, Sept. 1, 2010–Jan. 2, 2011.

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