ALMINE RECH

Julian Schnabel
Re-Reading

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“Do I contradict myself? Very well then, I contradict myself, (I am large, I contain multitudes.)”
–Walt Whitman, Song of Myself, 1855

"I am as bad as the worst, but, thank God, I am as good as the best."
–Walt Whitman, Preface to Leaves of Grass, 1855

Almine Rech gallery is pleased to present **Re-Reading**, featuring recent works by Julian Schnabel. The title of the exhibition, **Re-Reading** refers to works on paper; reproduced found images on cardboard, reproductions of wallpaper that have been recycled and reenlisted serving as a palimpsest and ground for a stasis where anything can occur; two chairs, and spray painted Plexiglas works that cover found enlarged photos from a book on Ernest Hemingway’s house in Cuba.

Schnabel is an artist whose practice(s) transcend(s) all known genres or media: we all know about his dual interest in filmmaking and painting; not many, however, know that he is also an interior designer, an engraver, a musician, and a furniture maker. Indeed, he is also a writer, and—the accurate word doesn't exist in English—**a reader**. He is a 'reader' in a greater sense than the word conveys: one who is actively engaged and compelled, and himself compelling, one who turns reading into something more than a mere daily instrumental activity. Schnabel, in Flaubert's sense, is a **liseur**. At Almine Rech, Schnabel will invite us to become liseurs ourselves throughout this visual and literary dialogue.

Naturally, the relationship between painting and writing is one of the more vexing ones, but in Schnabel's practice, it takes a very nurturing path. “Painting's logic supersedes our everyday logic and intention,” Schnabel recently said to me. This quest for a new logic in painting not only transcends the old (and now somewhat tired and hackneyed) distinction between representational and abstract art—we know that Schnabel vehemently refuses to be trapped within this binary logic—but it also goes way beyond it: Schnabel's unique 'logic of painting' transports him beyond the confines of painting itself.

Hence, the paintings on paper in the Whitman series and the “monoprints” are as much paintings as they are not paintings. They carry marks of paint, yet they are actually carbon prints of the actual painting: remarkably faithful renderings of the original marks. They hover between actual mark making and digitally perfect renditions of such marks, so that it occasionally becomes difficult to discern what is what. Within Schnabel's visual vocabulary, they all exist in the same universe. Original mark making, mark replication (via diverse printed media), and new layers of hand-made marks upon the surface of digital impressions are all nearly indistinguishable from one another. As Schnabel has said, this synthesis of opposites “is really a Whitman-esque concept where all things have an equality and can be interchangeable in some way.”1 The marks themselves map a constellation of accidents, inviting the viewer to enter Schnabel’s visual arena and experience sheer joy. The logic of Schnabel’s painting is one of the uncanny: it makes the unexpected strangely familiar—until it is impossible to discern —a Kafka-esque reality. What is to be "looked at" in literature? Or, what is to be "read" in Schnabel's paintings? (The answer suggested through this exhibition is: everything.)

Harold Bloom once brilliantly compared both Whitman and Hemingway and his words bring them in close proximity to Schnabel's creative imaginary forces. Whitman "could write love poems to 'sweet soothing death,' and become whole in the spirit of total communion." Whereas, Bloom wrote, "Hemingway's book on bullfighting [*Death in the Afternoon*, 1932] is a kind of love song to killing that insures him the role of eternal opposition." The precise terms chosen by Bloom to depict Hemingway's literary energies also conjure up Schnabel's artistic forces: "Action and reaction, force and shock, challenge and response, these are the relentless antagonists that will engage in dubious battle throughout Hemingway's fiction; the battlefield, the locus of contact and the point of arrest, is the willed awareness of the human spirit, Hemingway's spirit." No doubt that Schnabel's spirit abounds in the present exhibition.

A more muted, opaque fight is seen in the photographs layered with spray painted Plexiglas depicting Hemingway's residences in Cuba from a book of photographs, *Museo Hemingway* (1985). The images are devoid of people, ghostly, spurting sprayed, lassoing streams of white, orange, ochre, evergreen, black, and pale blue lines responding to empty rooms and outdoor spaces. Schnabel reactivates and reloads them with a charge of energy that their inhabitants would have been turned on by.

We encounter the same sort of dialectics at work in the *Whitman* series. New pictorial languages are created with existing materials, such as reproductions of the early 19th-century wallpaper by the French manufacturer Joseph Dufour. Abstract gestures—Rorschach-like purple inkblots—are layered on top, transgressing the coherence of the images beneath. Trees are cast in dark shadows, and a mysterious goat (an homage to his fellow artist Mike Kelley) mounts a peak just out of frame; curious pieces in an absurdist puzzle. These abstract gestures also seem to embody fleeting sensations—as if an imprint of Schnabel's subconscious. Purple inkblots are watered down with a hose, gesso becomes paint, paper is sliced open and a painted canvas delicately placed underneath. To disrupt surface of the image with such constrained vigor is to test what can be done to painting—on paper.

"Using used things, things we all recognize, is in direct conflict with the idea of building your own specific, original signature... Using already existing materials...brings a real place and time into aesthetic reality."

–Julian Schnabel, Madrid Notebook, 1978

Joachim Pissarro