ALMINE RECH

Julian Schnabel
Jack Climbed Up the Beanstalk to the Sky of Illimitableness Where Everything Went Backwards

Oct 19 — Dec 19, 2015 | Paris

Un nouveau monde était en train de naître...
— Hannah Arendt, *Penser l'événement*, p. 178

I never thought of art as a career. I thought it was more like a monastic practice. It is something that you do—you can't not do it! If I made money doing it, I would do it; if I didn't make any money, I would do it.
— Julian Schnabel (the-talks.com)

Painting, making objects, making things that live—this brings you into the eternal present of those things. If you saw *Bicycle Thieves* by Vittorio De Sica, it'd be the first time you saw it. It doesn't matter that it was made after World War II. Or if you see a Caravaggio painting, it's the first time you see it. And if it's the second time you see it, it's still the first time you see it.
— Julian Schnabel, *Surface Mag,* Nov. 2013

People in the arts like to put people in boxes. Julian has been one of those people who is insistent that you can't put him in a box. You hear people say, 'Oh, he's really a filmmaker' or 'Oh, the films are better than the paintings.' This is all bullshit. Julian is an artist, and whatever form suits his need best is what he's going to pursue, and we need to recognize that.
— Anne Pasternak[1], quoted by M. H. Miller in *Observer*, 03/26/2013

I don't think I will soon forget the moment when, in 1981, a graduate student in art history in London, I walked into the now legendary exhibition: *New Spirit in Painting* at the Royal Academy. There I stood, transfixed, in front of the first *Plate Paintings* I had seen by Julian Schnabel. It felt like a weird experience, and an utterly contradictory sensation took ahold of me: it first felt like an aesthetic slap on the face, immediately followed with a flush of euphoria that was overtaking me. I wanted to cry, and laugh, at the same time. How many works of art could possibly produce such an effect? Ultimately, laughter took over—this was a celebratory laugh that came as a deep relief, and a hugely liberating experience—an *opening*, or what Heidegger could have called a 'clearing.' Something truly out of the ordinary had just happened: There was an artist who blatantly dared all, who seemed to have no fear, who did things that seemed to have no meaning, no relation to the past, and certainly no signs of reverence towards history, even though, paradoxically, Schnabel's pictorial practice has long been nurtured through and though by his deep knowledge of history. But at that particular moment, at the Royal Academy, his work stood up in your face with the cogency, the inevitability of a towering monument: it refused to go away! Indeed, this was like facing up to Picasso whose latest works, created just before his death, could be seen in the same exhibition, and seemed nearly as incomprehensible at the time, as Schnabel's *Plate Paintings*.

Schnabel said it: he likes to "engage in something that is the antithesis of reason." In keeping with this statement, Schnabel has been, ever since, exploring "what God left out": poetry—or, to put it differently, the anxieties produced out of the 'dizziness of freedom.' Schnabel's paintings breathe freedom, in a way that remains today incomprehensible, daunting, mesmerizing—"an abyss of pure spontaneity" (as Hannah Arendt would have put it). The exhibition at Almine Rech takes us through 30 years of Julian Schnabel's consistent, patient, doggedly obstinate, and yet, serene, pursuit of these 'abysses of pure spontaneity'—Schnabel's signature mark. This exhibition today reveals to us a few gems of this fascinating trajectory—a true artistic and human adventure; it is also the culmination of the last couple of years which have brought together a number of important exhibitions of the artist's œuvre[2]. "These exhibitions give but glimpses of Mr Schnabel 25 years ago and today, both ahead of his time and in step with it, skillfully coaxing out the inner paintings in all sorts of ready-made surfaces. It is long past time for some American museum to give him his due." Roberta Smith, « Recapturing the Past, and Then Revising It : Two Shows Offer a New Look at Julian Schnabel», *The New York Times*, April 25, 2014.

Famous (and infamous) for reintroducing figurative painting at the core of contemporary art in the late '70s (when the flagship of American art was all about conceptual art) Schnabel was seen as the bad boy of American art, meandering through waves of adulations and expressions of contempt. Few artists in the past half a century have had such a knack for polarizing the art world. There certainly was nothing conceptual, or post-minimalist about his own practice. The pure and clean American grid-like aesthetics of the '60s and '70s never had much to do with Schnabel's own aesthetics. But it seems that the artist had to pay a steep price for this irreverence his public career, as a result, has consisted in a series of vanishings and resurrections.

Today, in Paris, comes another resurrection: the presentation of a group of twelve works by Schnabel at the Almine Rech Gallery is indeed, a cause for celebration. The center piece of the exhibition is *Virtue*, (1986), which was first exhibited at the Whitney Biennial of 1987—it took six years after the exhibition at the Royal Academy for Schnabel to receive a full accolade by the New York art world, where he lives.

Julian Schnabel's *Virtue* (1986) did not go unnoticed by critics of the 1987 Whitney Biennial. Organized by Richard Armstrong, Richard Marshall, and Lisa Phillips, the show—which also featured an *Equilibrium* tank with basketballs and the pristine, shiny, stainless steel *Bunny* by Jeff Koons (another polarizing figure)—offered Schnabel his first significant New York institutional platform.

Virtue is a large and powerful work, executed on a dilapidated brown-olive tarpaulin upon which a banner bearing the titular phrase was attached. The modest silk banner with gold type spelling out VIRTUE appears to be almost swallowed up by the monumental tarp—the preciousness and glibness of the banner strongly contrasting with the expanse of industrial look of the fabric behind. Arthur C. Danto conceded, almost begrudgingly, that "the juxtaposition of materials and inscriptions gives a rare meaning to the vocabulary of this portentous artist." Meanwhile, Charles Bernstein, in his review, declared that *Virtue* was "simulated Dada…[A] simulation of previous art styles in such a way that their codes are alleged to be exposed while their meaning has been evacuated." William Wilson, in the *L.A. Times*, ambivalently mused that "[the painting] shows absolutely intelligent understanding of how to express conscience in visual terms but it does not participate in itself."

Virtue became an important touchstone for the painter: it was discretely kept in the artist's personal collection for nearly three decades, and, with the exception of a substantial exhibition in Mexico, has been kept away from the public eye. Now it is on view at Almine Rech, one of twelve works that form a mini-retrospective of the artist's career. In a way, the reemergence of *Virtue* almost thirty years after its initial public reception mirrors the *fortuna critica* of the artist himself. Julian Schnabel, a painter, sculptor, and filmmaker, is one of the best known living artists today; yet, one whose œuvre has been known and exposed very parsimoniously, and has only recently begun to be viewed, understood, and appreciated on a larger scale. After his initial success with wax and plate paintings in the late 1970s and early 1980s on the New York art scene, he became just as well known for his successful filmmaking career (notably *Basquiat* (1996), *Before Night Falls* (2000), and *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* (2007). His name has often been attached to a certain brand of eighties excess, with hints of neo-romanticism, or wild eccentricity (the image of Schnabel, seen in the streets in the neighborhood of his mansion-like studio in New York, wearing silk pajamas smeared with paint, is refusing to go away). He was loved, or hated, but seldom through first hand contact: typically, many of his detractors, especially stateside, had not actually seen his work in person.

"Must we learn again the simple, forthright experience of actually seeing a painting?" asks William Gaddis in his 1998 essay on Schnabel, echoing one of the artist's primary insistences: the importance of seeing works of art outside of mechanical reproductions—in the flesh.

Schnabel's works especially thrive when this imperative is followed: indeed, the compounded size, materials, and technique—the mainstay of Schnabel's artistic practice—are such that one truly obtains an ideal experience of these complex creative sums, as one stands before each work in the flesh. This exhibition at Almine Rech makes this imperative possible today, and enables another resurrection to occur.

In a series of paintings on white tarpaulin from 1990, which the artist is used to refer as the "Paintings on tarp series", he explores the possibilities inherent in taking a non-traditional approach to mark-making and seeks a freedom that must be arrived at through a circumlocution around modernist mores of abstraction. In *Untitled,* against a battered white background, Schnabel applied patches of purple with the conduit of a cloth drenched in paint. These marks become ghostly fingerprints, recalling both the drips of action painters and the automatic creations of the Dadaists. Running across the painting from the upper left corner, a pool of deep, bloody maroon oozes across these marks.

Take his recent works, for instance, wherein Schnabel has been using spray paints, from a series titled "Tour of Hell," several of which are featured in the exhibition, and let us just listen to the specific vocabulary the artist chose to describe these works:

"I wanted the paint to *impregnate* the material instead of being *on top* of the material."

His choice of words emphasizes the bodily presence of the artist *in* his works; there is something deeply sensual about Schnabel's works (which may be one of the factors for his detractors' quick dismissal, for the art world often critically lacks sensuality).

Here, "Tour of Hell", his most recent spray paintings were made on large-scale prints of photographs of a decrepit ceiling in an abandoned building. Printing the image on polyester impregnates it into the material. Rather than sitting on the surface spray paint melds into it. Schnabel hadn't been concerned with it seeping through to the backside, which he found infinitely more interesting, and reacted to by turning the paintings inside out and then modifying them, in some cases by adding more spray and white paint. Again the artist's own comments on these works are priceless, and enlightening. There goes "a willingness to embrace chance, to commandeer prior meanings for a new set of meanings, as well as the courage to gamble, sacrificing something that is good, for the sake of something [I] never could have imagined it being."

In the pair of untitled works from 2015, the thickets of brightly-colored spray paint dance within the inkjet print that forms the underdrawing for the work—its armature. The reds, greens, blues, yellows, and purples seem both deliberate and haphazard, both beyond the painter's control and entirely of his making.

A general appeal and tendency towards the aleatory, the discarded, and the unlikely have informed much of Schnabel's choices in executing his paintings. The *objet trouvé* is as key to his career as paint itself. His website lists among his categories of works "Paintings on Found Materials" and "Paintings on Found Objects." Many of the paintings in the current show fall into the former category, created on tarpaulin, a heavy-duty, industrial, rugged cousin to traditional artist's canvas. Tarpaulin supplies the work its architecture and places it into a push/pull between object and picture. In one series, *Hurricane Bob,* the artist drove and dragged a large swath of tarpaulin behind his car: friction with the asphalt creating marks on the material. The use of such support immediately imbues these works with a swagger, as well as a contradiction, that such a durable material also appears less permanent, the tarp providing an almost heuristic quality to artmaking. "I decide what materials I am going to work with and how it begins, nothing is known beyond that - there's no rehearsal," Schnabel told *Vogue* in 2014.

Schnabel has used both tarpaulin and spray paint for over thirty years, for instance in the works in the series mentioned above as *Paintings on tarp series*, though those and other facets of the artist's output have been little seen until recently. Since his 1987 Whitney exhibition *Paintings: 1975-1987*, the artist's works have been almost criminally under-exhibited in his home country. But for over more than three decades, the artist never stopped creating, eschewing an easy iconic painting signature and instead ceaselessly exploring the medium's possibilities. "It's what I do to survive or get through a day or exist in this world is to make paintings," the artist has said, bringing to mind the Austrian art historian Alois Riegl's somewhat untranslatable concept of *kunstwollen*, perhaps best understood as art willed into being by an urge for production. The critic Robert Pincus-Witten noted this will to produce, placing Schnabel in an artistic genealogy following the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley and the artist Cy Twombly, whose poetic inclusions in his canvases were a romantic gesture against formalist dogma.

In the 1980s, an entrenched critical bias against Romantic and Neo-Expressionist tendencies had lead to a general neglect of Schnabel's career that is now mercifully being rectified. A 2013 retrospective at the Brant Foundation in Connecticut was an important step to better understanding the breadth and depth of his work. Also fundamental has been a recognition that many of today's working painters – including Sterling Ruby, Joe Bradley, and Oscar Murillo, all produce in modes and materials that reflect a deep awareness of Schnabel's presence. As symbolic *principe* of an unofficial painter's academy, Schnabel is perhaps like the scape goat in his recent series of paintings, three of which are in the exhibition. These works feature a goat – a potential avatar for the artist – standing over a cliff, looking over a monumental—romantic, one might say—landscape. The A bunny is placed precariously on top of the goat's head. Upon these works, a spray of purple ink is literally hosed, an impulsive mark-making, about which the artist says: "The added abstract glyph implies another temporality. It annotates and becomes a new ground that commandeers the painting's proper set of meanings." There are three such goat paintings in the show, each using the same printed backdrop (clones of each other, in a way, like the famous cloned sheep Dolly). Along with the washes of purple ink, impressionistic pink dots mark the painting's surface.

Time has been a constant theme throughout Schnabel's career. The artist has spoken about exploring possibilities outside the traditional chronology of modernism. This past March, The Museum of Modern Art in New York announced it had acquired its first Schnabel painting. They attributed this renewed interest in the artist's work to the fact that Schnabel's importance to today's generation of artists is undeniable -- and ever increasing. A fresh re-appraisal of Schnabel's work in the context of contemporary painting is, therefore, in order. For an artist who has always been seen as being either forward, or behind, outside, or ahead of his time, for once, after two years of important and impressive shows, this exhibition at Almine Rech is telling us that **now** has become Julian Schnabel's time.

Joachim Pissarro

[1] Anne Pasternak was since 1994 the director of Creative Time—a New York-based institution that has fostered powerful and innovative public art projects in the city; she has just been appointed director of the Brooklyn Museum, one of the oldest and most important museums in New York. Pasternak has always been noted for the courage and clear-sighted positions she took: she belongs to a small group of museum directors and curators who highlighted Julian Schnabel's work for its rare and cogent creative force.

[2] University of Michigan Museum of Art, Michigan (show traveled from The Brant Foundation); Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York; Museum of Art, Fort Lauderdale; Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Texas; MASP, São Paulo; Dairy Art Centre, London; Gagosian Gallery, New York; Dallas Contemporary, Texas; Karma, New York; The Brant Foundation, Connecticut; Willumsen Museum, Denmark.