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Schnabe's Schnabels

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Julian Schnabel, *Hospital Patio - Baboon in Summer*, 1979. Oil and encaustic on canvas; 90 x 144 in. Coll. Bruno Bischofberger, Zurich

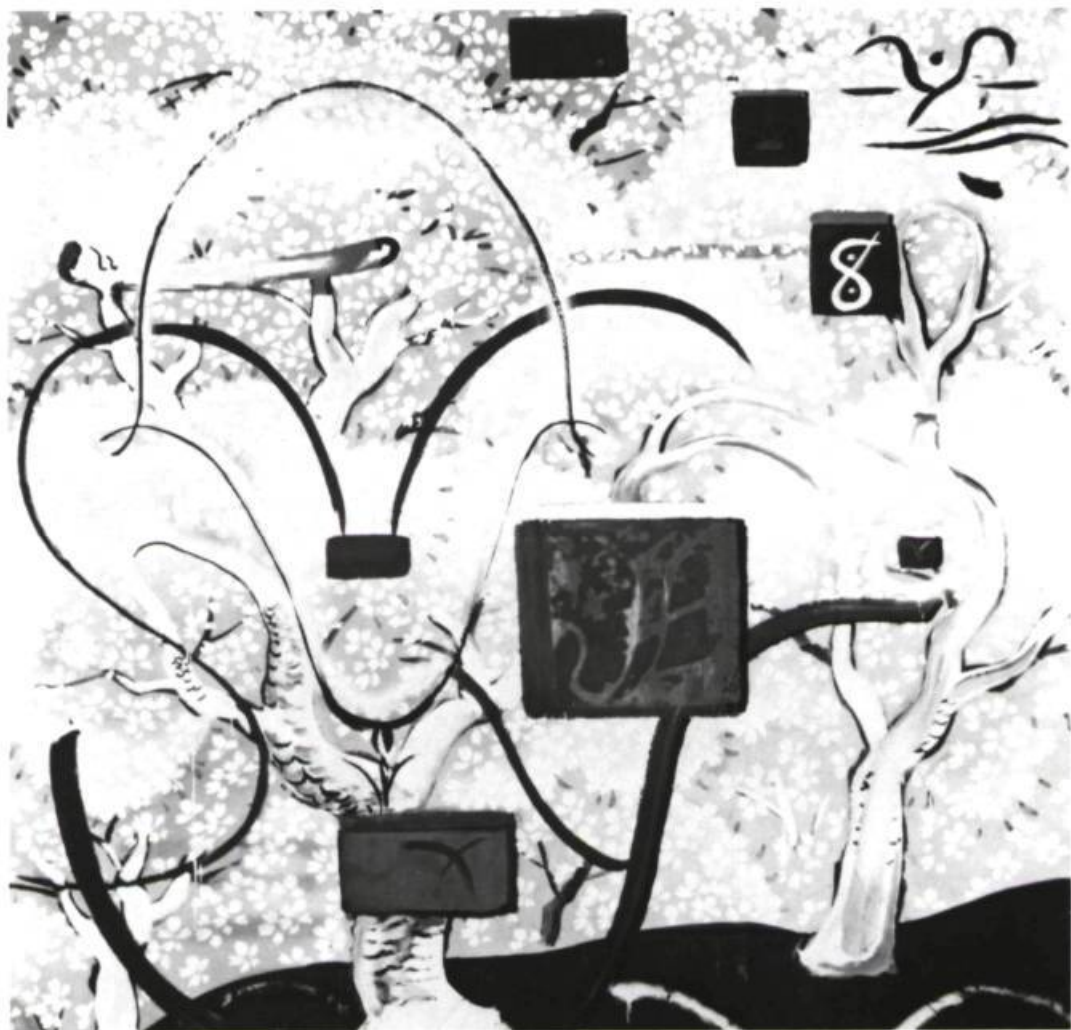
Schnabel's Schnabels

Since Julian Schnabel's dramatic rise to prominence nearly ten years ago, an ascent that both coincided with, and contributed to, an equally dramatic transformation of the art world itself, it has been difficult to separate his public persona from his paintings. Beginning with the photograph announcing one of his early shows at Mary Boone - an image that showed the artist leaping into the air from a New York rooftop (an allusion to Yves Klein's famous montage of himself diving into a street), through his myriad appearances in glossy magazines and his own statements in print, Schnabel's life has often gained as much attention as his work. By comparison, the other outstanding American figure of what used to be called "Neo-Expressionism," David Salle, seems positively retiring, a model of anonymous craftsmanship. In every generation, of course, there is at least one artist who is plucked out of the art world ghetto to become a media darling or media devil. From this point of view, Schnabel is merely stepping into the role previously played by Picasso, Pollock and Warhol. But for all the attention that has been devoted to him, Schnabel's work has not attained anything like the currency of his predecessors' in the spotlight. Although he is probably the most popular artist of his

generation, familiarity with his work is still limited to a relatively small group of upwardly mobile, urban sophisticates. While the plate paintings of the early 1980's have moved from notoriety to the status of modern classics, they have not yet attained the status of social icons.

One reason for this may be the nature of Schnabel's subsequent work. With his willingness to try anything and everything, to do whatever pleases or puzzles him, he has refused to develop the principal requirement for universal recognition: a signature style. This lack of consistency may be the most interesting thing about Schnabel's career; his way of doing what his opponents damn him for failing to achieve - subverting the myth of the great artist. But we are on shaky ground here, and it would be a mistake to attribute too much premeditation to an artist who, despite his wealth of sophistication and self-consciousness, derives his strength from the use of nihilistic vitality, a willingness to waste wall space on supremely risky propositions. Perhaps it is wrong to try to separate the life and the work, to class Schnabel among painters, his true vocation being as a kind of performance artist/Romantic hero for whom paintings are mere adjuncts to the total work. He would thus take a place in the Duchamp-Klein-Beuys tradition.

Certainly part of what makes Schnabel's work compelling is the knowledge that it is by Julian Schnabel. Both artist and audience know that each painting is



Julian Schnabel, *Rebirth III - The Red Box* (painted after the death of Joseph Beuys), 1986. Oil and tempera on muslin, 148 x 134 in. Private Collection; courtesy, The Pace Gallery, New York

executed in the charged and pressured atmosphere that goes with a reputation like Schnabel's. He is important, and anything he does is important; we are all, the artist included, fascinated by what it's like to be Julian Schnabel and this cannot help but influence the creation and reception of the work. A cinematic parallel comes to mind here. In *Last Tango In Paris*, purportedly one of Schnabel's favorite movies, it becomes impossible for the audience to separate the role played by Marlon Brando from the knowledge that it is Marlon Brando playing the role, and much of the film's power derives from the intrusion of the real Brando into the role of "Paul." So it is with Schnabel; an awareness of the artist himself intrudes into each work, personal fate becomes inextricably tangled with aesthetic design.

Given this background, the current Schnabel retrospective at the Whitney Museum possibly offers a chance to see his work objectively. A retrospective laid out in the highly public space of a museum, where what you see is what you get, cannot help but focus attention on the work itself. With this show Schnabel becomes the last of the Boone triumvirate to check in at the Whitney, following Fischl and Salle. The show opened with three large, banner-like paintings inspired by Schnabel's reading of the William Gaddis novel, *The Recognitions*. Like much of Schnabel's recent work, there is a minimum of actual painting involved, with much of the impact of the work deriving from the weathered tarpaulin material that is the latest of the

artist's canvas substitutes, following plates, velvet, silk, pony skin, wooden signs from Mexico, Japanese theater backdrops, etc. Schnabel uses tarpaulin for his largest scale works, which in the Whitney, included what must surely be one of the biggest paintings in existence, *War*, 1987. Failing an iconographical grasp of the figuration that occupies a small area of *War*, almost as if it were an afterthought, one can only marvel at Schnabel's unflagging appetite for grandeur, a grandeur that is paradoxically produced with abused, poverty-stricken materials. *War*, together with two other large tarpaulin works, *Muhammed Ali*, 1987, and *Fresh Eggs* (for Alexander Achilles McEvilly), 1985, were the paintings that came closest to meeting one's impossibly high expectations. On a smaller scale, Schnabel showed two recent abstractions, *The Tunnel*, 1987, and *The Migration of the Duckbilled Platypus to Australia*, 1986, that were refreshing for their lack of importance with a capital 'I', suggesting that Schnabel doesn't feel he has to stop the world in its tracks with each and every painting. Perhaps the biggest surprises of the show were two easel-sized paintings from 1987 done in the broken-plate technique that first made Schnabel's name. This return to an earlier style raises the specter of De Chirico, who scandalized the art world by repainting his early metaphysical landscapes after a hiatus of several decades. It is unclear what prompted Schnabel to return to plate painting, but it is clear that he is not simply repainting earlier works. Both paint-



Julian Schnabel, *Eulalio Epiclantos After Seeing St. Jean Vianney on the Plains of the Cure d' Ars*, 1986. Oil and tempera on muslin; 135 x 173 in. Private Collection

ings are portraits of women rendered in a chic, magazine-style illustration. Despite the presence of broken plates these pictures possess the one quality that Schnabel's earlier plate paintings were stridently devoid of: tastefulness. They have none of the surging ugliness, the impassioned recklessness of the work from the early 1980's. They look, in fact, like well executed imitations of early Schnabel that have missed the whole point.

Despite the impact of several works especially *The Tunnel*, *Muhammed Ali* and *War*, one left the show with a feeling of dissatisfaction. So many large claims have been made for Schnabel's work that perhaps a feeling of dissatisfaction was inevitable. No one, not even an artist as Faustian in his ambition as Schnabel, could live up to such expectations. One went expecting something so transcendent, so epic, that it was a shock to see that it was only a matter of paintings: some famous, some fascinating, some weak, some strong, but all of them just paintings, but perhaps this is exactly what is needed. This show may end up performing the laudable function of rescuing Schnabel from the prison-house of fame and placing him once again in the community of artists, a painter among other painters. I say this not out of any resentful envy, though we have all, artists and non-artists alike, approached Schnabel with such thoughts, rather because I think Schnabel may be approaching a dead end along his current path. His societal situation seems to have taken control of his

development, "politics" taken the wheel away from painting, leaving him with only one avenue of escape - to continually push the limits of the permissible by making works which are more and more truculent. It is almost as if he is bent on self-destructing his career, playing a game of chicken with the powers-that-be by saying "So you think you liked that painting, well what about this one, I dare you to swallow it." Unfortunately there is probably no limit to his acceptance and each success/failure will only push him to further extremes. Perhaps for an artist as committed to breaking rules and causing trouble as Schnabel this is the only honorable response to such perfect success.

Meyer Raphael Rubinstein

Due to difficulty in transporting work from Europe, where the show originated (first at the Whitechapel Gallery in London), the Whitney opened on November 5th with an incomplete selection, filled out with works borrowed from the artist's own collection and other sources. Although the Whitney will shortly install the complete show, due to deadline requirements this review is based on the first, provisional version. Some of my conclusions, therefore, may shift when a more representative selection becomes available. Yet the *New York Times*, for November 6, 1987, quotes Schnabel as saying he is "really glad the paintings didn't come" because it gave him a chance to "make a show of things I had always thought about showing." If it were up to him, he "wouldn't change the show. It seems lean and strange. And it's me." M.R.R.