

Julian Schnabel  
MATRIX/BERKELEY 52

University Art Museum  
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Born in 1951 (St. Sebastian)



Julian Schnabel paints on surfaces ranging from broken plates imbedded in putty to velvet, rug pad, and tarpaulin drop cloths. He uses such unexpected collage elements as antlers and candlesticks. Moreover, his style often changes from one painting to the next, or even within a single work. He is the most controversial of a group of young artists who deal with recognizable imagery, many of whom (Susan Rothenberg, Jonathan Borofsky, Janis Provisor, Joseph Zucker, Francesco Clemente, and Neil Jenney) have exhibited in recent years at the University Art Museum.

Historically, Schnabel is working within the tradition of modern expressionism which developed in France and Germany in the early part of this century. He feels an affinity with Chaim Soutine, the Lithuanian-born French Expressionist painter, whose portraits and portrayals of freshly killed animals from the slaughterhouse glow with passionate color. A more recent context for Schnabel's work can be found in the American Abstract Expressionist movement of the forties and fifties. Though he operates in a realm between abstraction and representation, Schnabel is more the spiritual grandchild of the Abstract Expressionists, particularly Willem de Kooning, than the bearer of traditional American realism as represented by Philip Pearlstein. One need only to look at Schnabel's Portrait of My Daughter in relationship to de Kooning's "Woman" paintings begun in 1950 to recognize not only a similarity in the palette of pinks and reds but in the way the figure coalesces from the expressionistically painted background (which in

Schnabel's painting also includes broken plates).

Except in the work of Willem de Kooning, imagery had all but disappeared from mainstream painting during the forties and fifties. Not until the emergence of Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns did images reappear, often as real objects. Like Rauschenberg, Schnabel sees any object as potential raw material to use in his work. In What Once Denoted Chaos is Now a Matter of Record, two candlebras nearly disappear in the general dazzle of crockery fragments, bright color and brushy paint.

Always concerned with surfaces, Schnabel's works of the mid- and late seventies are characterized by a buildup of oil, wax and plaster, influenced by Johns and Brice Marden. Lazarus (Second Painting for Aldo Moro) and Born in 1951 (St. Sebastian) from this group also demonstrate Schnabel's penchant for disrupting the two-dimensional plane of his paintings, here with gouges and ridges, which are then, like the broken plates in later works, painted upon as if they were not there, daring the viewer to ignore their presence.

According to the artist, the broken plate paintings begun in 1978 were inspired by the Spanish visionary architect Antonio Gaudi who imbedded bits of glass and crockery into the plaster walls of his buildings. The writer/critic Rene Ricard points out that the plates function like extensions of the brushstroke much in the same way the cotton balls do in Joe Zucker's paintings. They also serve to physically remove the paint from the fundamental surface of the

painting and push it, along with the relief elements, into the space of the viewer—a treatment of space that has been a part of modernist vocabulary since the cubists invented collage.

Schnabel includes several unrelated images in one work. The harp, the turbaned man, the self-portrait, and the contour drawing of a woman in What Once Denoted Chaos is Now a Matter of Record have a poetic rather than narrative relationship. Several motifs appear over and over in Schnabel's works. The cone (as seen in Lazarus) and the double or triple helix are common if ambiguous symbols in Schnabel's iconography. The jagged line, which looks like a branch or crutch in Lazarus or which can be interpreted as gashes or arrows in Born in 1951 is another favorite symbol. Like the young Italian painters, such as Francesco Clemente, Schnabel draws on art history, current events, other cultures and religion for his imagery. The classical torso of St. Sebastian also recalls the many Renaissance paintings which portray the tortured saint. A cross, or crucifix, traverses the face of both Portrait of My Daughter and Lazarus. References to martyrdom obsess Schnabel; others include St. Sebastian, who was clubbed to death by Romans, and Aldo Moro, the Italian Prime Minister who fell victim to terrorists.

Schnabel feels that by freeing himself of the necessity to be stylistically consistent, he can approach each work freshly. Not only does he paint on a wide variety of surfaces, but he alternates between monochromatic paintings such as Lazarus, Born in 1951 and Last Painting for Aldo Moro, and bright, multicolored

works such as What Once Denoted Chaos is Now a Matter of Record and Portrait of My Daughter. Finally, his line can be elegant (Born in 1951 and Lazarus) or crude (Last Painting for Aldo Moro). Commenting on the meaning of his works, Schnabel said to the critic Robert Pincus-Witten, "I have no sentimental investment in history and psychotherapy is a misuse of painting, but I am interested in madness or paranoia or angst—as they are emotional states that are meditations on death."

Born in Brooklyn, New York in 1951, Schnabel spent a lonely adolescence in the small town of Brownsville, Texas. After graduating from the University of Houston in 1972, he was accepted in the Whitney Independent Study Program in New York York where he presently lives and works. Concurrent with this MATRIX unit, Schnabel will be showing new works at the Daniel Weinberg Gallery in San Francisco.

Constance Lewallen

Works in MATRIX:

Born in 1951 (St. Sebastian), 1976-79, oil on canvas, 111 x 66". Private collection, San Francisco; courtesy Daniel Weinberg Gallery, San Francisco.

Lazarus (Second Painting for Aldo Moro), 1979, oil on canvas, 96 x 72". Private collection, Minneapolis; courtesy Daniel Weinberg Gallery, San Francisco.

What Once Denoted Chaos is Now a Matter of Record, 1980-81, oil, plates, Bondo on wood, 90 x 96". Private collection; courtesy Daniel Weinberg Gallery, San Francisco.

Last Painting for Aldo Moro, 1982, oil on tarp, 120 x 108". Private collection; courtesy Daniel Weinberg Gallery, San Francisco and Margo Leavin Gallery, Los Angeles.

Portrait of My Daughter, 1982, oil, plates, Bondo on wood, 108 x 84". Collection of the artist; courtesy Daniel Weinberg Gallery, San Francisco and Margo Leavin Gallery, Los Angeles.

Selected group exhibitions:  
Louisiana Gallery, Houston, TX '72; Holly Solomon Gallery, NYC, Surrogate/Self Portraits, '77; Hallwalls, Buffalo, NY, Four Artists, '79; Indianapolis Museum of Art, Painting and Sculpture Today, '80 (cat. pub.); Annina Nosei Gallery, NYC '80; Royal Academy, London, A New Spirit in Painting, '81 (cat. pub.); Rheinhallen, Cologne, West Germany, Westkunst, Zeitgenössische Kunst seit 1939, '81 (cat. pub.).

Selected one-person exhibitions:  
Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, TX '76; Galerie Dezember, Düsseldorf, West Germany '78; Mary Boone, NYC (two exhibitions) '79; Daniel Weinberg Gallery, S.F. '79, '82; Bruno Bischofberger, Zürich, Switzerland '80; Young/Hoffman Gallery, Chicago, IL '80; Mary Boone/Leo Castelli, NYC '81.

Selected bibliography about Schnabel:

DeAk, Edit. "Julian Schnabel," Art-Rite Magazine (May '75).

Rickey, Carrie. "Julian Schnabel," Artforum (May '79).

Ricard, Rene. "Julian Schnabel's Plate Painting at Mary Boone," Art in America (Nov. '79).

Kertess, Klaus. "Figuring it Out," Artforum (Nov. '80).

Pincus-Witten, Robert. "Entries: Sheer Grunge," Arts Magazine (April '81).

Tompkins, Calvin. "The Art World, Three Salons," The New Yorker (April 13, '81).

Ricard, Rene. "Note About Julian Schnabel," Artforum (Summer '81).

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