

Paintings and Their Surroundings

Max Hollein

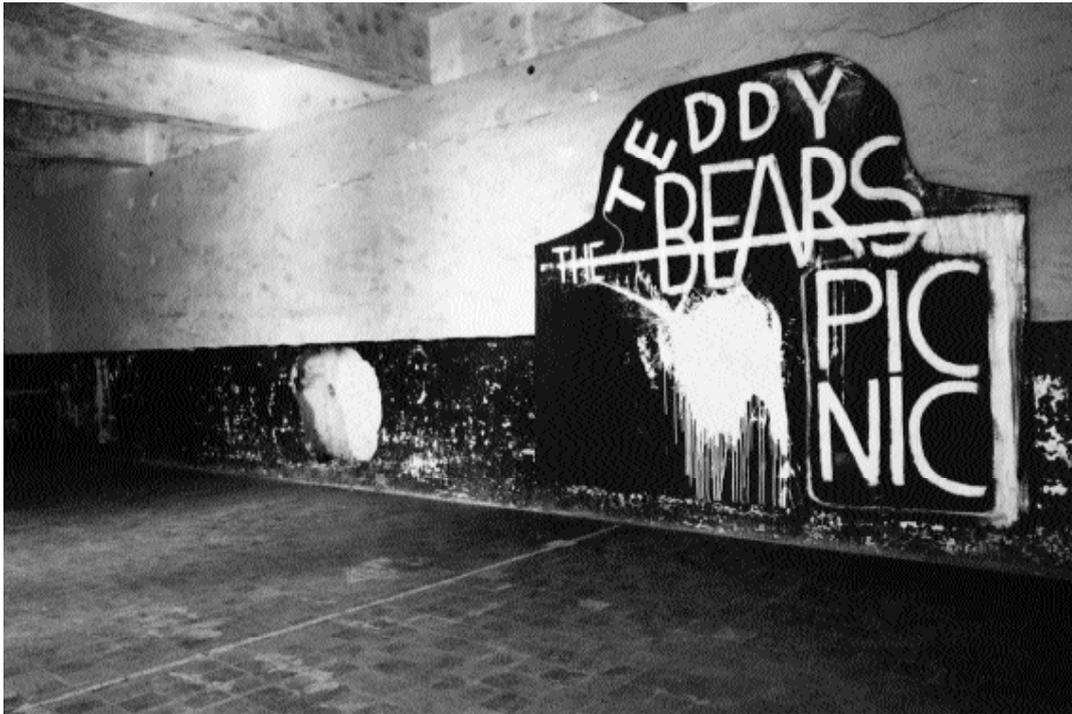
There are artists who consider their work finished when it leaves the studio door, and there are artists who understand the notion of display and spatial context as an ever-changing but integral part in the never-ending evolution of a work of art. Julian Schnabel is certainly not only part of the latter group, but is one of the artists who excels way beyond most others in exactly this notion.

Exhibiting his works in different places like pristine white-walled galleries, major museums, and extraordinary historical sites such as the Cuartel del Carmen in Seville, the Tabacalera in San Sebastian, or the Palazzo Venezia in Rome, Schnabel likes the changing effect, the interpretation that architecture can give to a painting, the marriage between the painting and location. Not every artwork could stand up to this constant challenge. Schnabel's paintings certainly have the capacity to do so.

Schnabel, who is a painter with an extraordinary understanding of architecture and design, searches for the emotional quality of these spaces, their specific moment in history, and their continuous existence as a building of memory, substance, and unique spatial feel. The architecture that he is most interested in seems to be spaces where time stands still, locations that exhale the time gone by but which are nevertheless of timeless beauty, relevance, and contemporary attitude—qualities that you can find not only in architectural monuments, but in an important old master painting as well.

Mies van der Rohe, when once asked about the most difficult building types to design, replied: "A church and a bar." Both are—if well done—defined by an emotional quality of the architecture and a direct impact on the spiritual sphere of the human inhabitant that goes way beyond spatial configuration. In a way, this is exactly what Schnabel, whose sensibility for atmospheric quality is obvious in all his works, paintings, sculptures, photographs, movies, and designs, is also looking for. Like the prayers in a cathedral or the customers in a cozy bar, his paintings, when inhabiting such a space, bring the drama, the emotion, and the spirit of these areas to life. This assemblage and interaction of painting and surroundings is an extension of the collage technique. Regarding the inclusion of objects in his paintings Schnabel said: "Using already existing materials establishes a level of ethnographicness in the work. I mean, it brings a real place and time into aesthetic reality." The same answer would be true for the use of already existing, very specific, non-neutral spatial arrangements for the presentation of the work itself.

Schnabel, from the very beginning of his career, has been a "traveler," an artist who has gone to other significant places to find inspiration and authenticity. In his book



The Teddy Bears Picnic (1987) painting in the Cuartel del Carmen in Seville, 1987

CVJ, he describes his travels through Italy, stressing the impact of seeing the frescoes by Giotto in Padua. But it does not necessarily have to be an encounter with a Renaissance master; Schnabel carries with him memories and moments from any place he has been to—be it India, Mexico, or even the restaurant next door. Elements from these areas form the geography of a painting and its personal and universal meaning, establishing a link that is both invented as well as extremely authentic.

According to this concept, paintings only become complete with a precise surrounding. Similarly, Schnabel uses existing material such as pottery, antlers, pieces of wood or felt as important elements in his paintings. He paints on existing surfaces, such as Kabuki theater backdrops, the covering fabric of a boxing ring, tarpaulins, or surfboards that already possess their own—even sometimes—troubled history. Schnabel uses the extraordinary and unusual location to install and hence finalize the meaning of his paintings.

In this process, Schnabel's paintings do not play a passive role. Quite the contrary—they take immediate possession of their surroundings. This capacity to modify the area that surrounds them and at the same time become an integral part of it is one of their utmost intrinsic qualities. Real space and pictorial space become intimate and merge into one. Painting and its reference to space as well as its ability to trans-

form both the physical and the psychological space is one of the core issues of Julian Schnabel's oeuvre. Often the result is a major achievement and an overwhelming drama of the highest order where all senses are channeled into one singular experience. In order to make such an undertaking more interesting, more challenging for all—the artist, the artwork, the architecture, and the viewer—Schnabel selects the surroundings of display with utmost care, being extremely keen on a challenging and in the end rewarding environment (these sites can be a major historical building or an intimate restaurant, a palazzo or a rundown tennis court, a public hotel or the artist's own apartment).

When choosing a location, Schnabel's decision often also has to do with the intent of resurrecting the dignity and power of precisely that space. An exhibition of paintings can in this case be about both the potential of the artworks and the potential of the space. Sites that have been forgotten even to the local community, rooms that have been misused or not understood in their spatial capacities, areas that seem to be destined for change and demolition can be reconsidered, reused, revived, reformulated, refocused through an intervention of an artist like Julian Schnabel. Along with such an act comes a new understanding of an old location and new excitement about its history, its potential, and its relevance for the here and now.

Schnabel is an extraordinary transformer—making history out of the everyday and making the familiar historical. It requires a body of work that has a strong metaphoric quality, an art that is about illusion, association, imagination. Even when his paintings are most abstract they are all about content, history, and emotion. Expertly installed and linked with its destined surroundings, Schnabel's work can bring about the utmost stereophonic impact on the emotional state of everything—the architecture, the painting, the viewer.

Max Hollein is Director of the Städelmuseum, the Liebieghaus, and the Schirn Kunsthalle in Frankfurt.