

# An Extreme Figure by Alison M. Gingeras



Julian Schnabel in his studio with  
*The Mutant King*, 1981. Courtesy Hans Namuth

Only from its extremes can reality be revealed.<sup>1</sup>  
—Siegfried Kracauer, *The Salaried Masses*  
(1930)

Julian Schnabel has long been saddled with the word *extreme*. The adjective pops up consistently in the thirty-odd years worth of writing that has dissected his art practice, film career, personal style, and private life. The notion of extremity is applied in both positive and negative terms, and it equally mythicizes and demonizes. This descriptive has been employed by default in the reception, interpretation, and, more often than not, dismissal of the artist. “A symbol of the 1980s bombast;”<sup>2</sup> “the easy-to-whip whipping boy for so much of ’80s excess;”<sup>3</sup> “It is hard to evoke the mix of generosity, backwardness and relentless, thick-skulled self-aggrandizement that Julian Schnabel and his broken-plate paintings brought to the 1980’s art world,”<sup>4</sup> these all-too-familiar appraisals epitomize a journalistic shorthand that reduces the complex artistic career of this artist into caricature and systematically entwines his work with the economic art boom of the 1980s. In fact, it is almost impossible to find an objective art-historical assessment of his interdisciplinary practice—one that identifies and analyzes his unrivaled contributions to painting. Schnabel’s crucial role in this history so far remains unacknowledged. In fact, a careful examination of the historical record of Julian Schnabel’s work and its reception reveals a thoroughly stilted narrative, demonstrating that Schnabel’s work is not only unrecognized, it is actively repressed in the present tense.

Though Schnabel’s work has been radically omitted from art-historical discourse, a drop-cloth aesthetic is afoot that owes much to Schnabel: stains, scuffs, smears, dirt, drips, and other studio *schmutz* ground into unprimed canvas or fabric with minimal painterly intervention. Large-scale, gestural, and process-oriented painting populates the current landscape. New York galleries and auction houses and the glossy spreads of lifestyle magazines boast a new wave of fashionable painters (including Joe Bradley, Oscar Murillo, Sergej Jensen, Dan Colen, and Lucien Smith and prominent works by Urs Fischer and Nate Lowman) who embrace a material diversity and gestural audacity clearly indebted to and enabled by the early work of Schnabel as well as a handful of other artists of his generation.

The roots of the present-day painting *Zeitgeist* can be traced precisely to the last years of the 1970s, when Schnabel began to forge a pictorial language that employed unconventional methods and materials fused with emotive, optical, and tactile impact. Visceral (as opposed to cerebral), his position was at the opposite end of the aesthetic-political spectrum from Donald Judd and Robert Smithson, the discursive darlings who had defined and framed the avant-garde of the previous decade. As Schnabel quipped in recalling the oppositional nature of his stance in his memoir *CWJ*, “This type of work was not being celebrated in 1974 in New York. That was a time when everyone was talking about art and language, about the model of anonymity, mathematics, about philosophy—especially Wittgenstein.”<sup>5</sup>



Sigmar Polke  
*Ashes to Ashes*, 1992  
 Oil and ink on printed fabrics and velour  
 94<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 157<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches



Julian Schnabel  
*Maria Callas #2*, 1982  
 Oil, modeling paste, aluminum paint on velvet  
 108 × 120 inches

Despite his red-blooded American credentials (born in Brooklyn, raised in Texas), Schnabel can be credited with (re)introducing a particular strain of European postwar sensibility to the American contemporary art scene. Through his kinship with Francis Picabia and his personal exchanges with Sigmar Polke and Blinky Palermo, Schnabel championed a personal artistic pantheon that displayed an “irreverence” toward orthodox definitions of painting.<sup>6</sup> Not so coincidentally, these European figures also loom large as precedents for today’s painters. At the same time, Schnabel revived the myth of the master. Romancing the physical and emotional toil of art making and by positing his studio as a chapel or theater, Schnabel easily inhabited this archetype and built on the examples of Pablo Picasso, Jackson Pollock, and Willem de Kooning. Similarly, Schnabel resuscitated figuration, personal narrative, and references to history and mythology as valid artistic terrain. His poetic use of found materials and chance operations are among his most fundamental contributions to late twentieth-century painting—whether in dragging a canvas on the ground with a performative bravado reminiscent of the bullfighters he admired, allowing a drop cloth to absorb the environmental stains of the studio, seeking out charged found fabrics as pictorial grounds (e.g. military tarpaulins, monumental swaths of sail cloth, canvas flooring from boxing

rings, or fragments of carpet), or exposing paintings to the uncontrolled forces of weather (accumulating the traces of rain, mold, and sun) in his mythologized open-air studio in Montauk, New York. Combining all of these singular positions and postures, Schnabel established himself as an unapologetic *auteur*.

Yet today, certain elements of Schnabel’s authorship has now been picked apart and distilled into a series of pictorial gimmicks that have been assimilated by younger artists. Instances of Schnabel’s pictorial influence on the current generation of American painters abound. Take, for example, the following emblematic descriptions of the drop-cloth aesthetic:

“The ‘paintings’ consist of white, unprimed, clearly soiled canvases, most of them baggily stretched, with all of their sundry imperfections (invasive paint splatters, unsightly folds) enhanced by the spartan compositions.”<sup>7</sup>

“[His] large-scale paintings imply action, performance, and chaos, but are in fact methodically composed of rough-hewn, stitched canvases that often incorporate fragments of text as well as studio debris such as dirt and dust.”<sup>8</sup>



These excerpts from reviews of Joe Bradley's *Mouth and Foot* and *Schmagoo* painting series in *Artforum* and *Art in America* just as easily describe the formal structure of an iconic Schnabel painting from the 1980s, such as the *The Mutant King* (1981). While Bradley's paintings certainly do not entirely mimic Schnabel's, he is clearly appropriating one of Schnabel's signature visual tropes (the drop cloth) as a cornerstone of his own practice and visual brand, without the historical baggage of his referent. Despite the glaring connection between the two painters, Schnabel is obviously absent from the discussions around Bradley's work.

In a review of an exhibition by rising art star Sergej Jensen, critic Jens Astoff articulates an artistic process as if it were new, yet it might as well have been describing Schnabel's approach to his early abstract Velvet paintings (1980–81):

The predominantly large and midsize pictures exhibited here consist chiefly of various fabrics, often of several different types, that have been sewed or appliquéd together and then stretched on wooden frames or slats. Painting in the strictest sense is used only sporadically, and is often a minimal, almost incidental element. . . . Taking these as starting points, he then selectively applies traditional painting materials such as oil, acrylic, or pastel in ways that are usually closely intertwined with the fabric's own materiality. Stains, rips, or frayed edges are also used as inspiration, and often what would otherwise be seen as defects become the focal point of a work.<sup>9</sup>

And lest these examples do not fully demonstrate the point, one could indulge in this same exercise with extracts from recent articles on Lowman's drop-cloth series, Colen's various stain paintings (raw canvases dragged in mud or smudged with flower petals or grass), Rudolf Stingel's distressed studio carpets-cum-wall paintings, and many others. Perhaps it is Linda Yablonsky, writing for *Artforum* on the occasion of the Frieze Art Fair in London in 2013, who offers the most exaggerated example of the importance of Schnabel's aesthetic to today's painters. As her snarky "diary" entry recounts:

Because they believe that Julian Schnabel is primed for a reassessment, Contemporary Fine Arts's Bruno Brunnet and Nicole Hackert hung their walls with six Schnabel paintings dating from different years. Not everyone understood the strategy. As Brunnet reported, "One big collector came in and asked, 'How much for that Oscar Murillo?'"<sup>10</sup>



Joe Bradley  
*Repo*, 2013  
Oil on canvas  
102 × 120¼ inches



Julian Schnabel  
*Untitled*, 1990  
Oil on tarpaulin  
134 × 159 inches

Without a doubt, Murillo is one of the artists on the present scene who most flagrantly borrows from Schnabel: some of the young artist's work looks like a farcical update of one of Schnabel's early "word" paintings. One could be fooled into mistaking a Schnabel for a Murillo if the words in, for example, *Pope Pius IX* (1987) were swapped with something like *Milk* or *Yoga*. Given the formal and structural overlaps between the two artists—the authentically "dirty" pictorial grounds, the oversize canvas formats, the inclusion of words in the composition, the splashes of gesso—this anecdote simply confirms that art-historical amnesia is a common affliction. The sarcasm of Yablonsky's punch line is not so much aimed at the historical ignorance of collectors—who could understandably misfire—than at the audacity of anyone trying to assert Schnabel's work into the present landscape.

While an examination of current criticism reveals Schnabel's conspicuous absence from the discourse, this extreme exclusion is not limited to criticism—it is repeated in the curatorial world. His painting has been systematically omitted from encyclopedic overviews of postwar art, such as in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art (which does conserve a copy of his feature film *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* (2007), as well as relatively minor works on paper, an aquatint and a screenprint), as well as in recent revisionist exhibitions addressing the legacy of the 1980s. Even though it explicitly aimed to review the diversity and simultaneity of artistic practices and to deliberately confront the "canonical and almost forgotten," the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston's show *This Will Have Been: Art, Love & Politics in the 1980s* pointedly overlooked Schnabel's contributions to the decade. This type of amnesia is not viral—it is the politics of art discourse in action.

Politics and polarity have always been part of Schnabel's brand. Early on, he was pejoratively grouped with other painters of his generation under the label of Neoexpressionism. While affixing a label or movement to any artist's oeuvre is often reductive or dismissive, the "expressionist" category is particularly fraught with implicit negative value judgment—artists oriented towards expression (and the self) are understood as the binary opposite of "political" or "critical" artists.<sup>11</sup> As art historian Isabelle Graw argues, these artists were accused of regression to "an essentialized vision of painting" (heavy impasto, excited brushstrokes, and "other codes of painterly authenticity").<sup>12</sup> As she writes:



Sergej Jensen  
*Untitled*, 2007  
Acrylic on burlap mounted on canvas  
47 3/8 × 43 3/8 inches



Julian Schnabel  
*Abstract Painting on Blue Velvet*, 1980  
Velvet on velvet with welded steel frame  
90 × 84 inches



Julian Schnabel  
*Jane Birkin (Egypt)*, 1990  
Oil, gesso on sailcloth  
204 x 229 inches



On one side were the advocates of the “Pictures Generation,” influenced by post-structuralist theory and favoring media such as photography and video; and the other, their ultimate bugbear, the Neo-Expressionist painters. Progressive critics were occupied primarily with denying the artistic legitimacy of the kind of painting that they believed was flooding the market.<sup>13</sup>

As a symbol of the decade’s return to painting, Schnabel became in Graw’s words “the enemy incarnate.” Pouring fuel on an already fiery situation, Schnabel’s well-publicized early financial success and his unapologetically high-profile public persona reinforced the antagonism. Infamously proclaiming, “I am as close to Picasso as you’re going to get in this fucking life,” Schnabel cultivated a hyperbolic self-image that alienated numerous curatorial and critical factions who silenced supportive voices. This phenomenon was well articulated in Janet Malcolm’s notorious *New Yorker* profile of Schnabel’s Neoexpressionist compatriot David Salle, “The idea of a rich avant-garde has never sat well with members of my generation. Serious artists, as we know them or like to think of them, are people who get by but do not have a lot of money.”<sup>14</sup> Schnabel was doubly condemned: he was found guilty of both reviving the authenticity of painting and betraying the model of the authentic, bohemian artist. His uninhibited social climbing and financial success—which his Academy Award-nominated forays into Hollywood filmmaking only bolstered—compromised his credibility within the critical community.

Painting has always been subject to the shifting winds of context. More than any other medium, it is a battleground for politics and meaning. It is easy to forget, for example, that Martin Kippenberger was found guilty of similar transgressions: his unapologetic embrace of expressionism and figuration, relentless self-mythologizing, and investment in narrative and myth are clichés of the macho European male artist. Yet “Kippy” was redeemed because he died young. At least as a result of his untimely demise, however, Kippenberger’s initial reception has been overhauled; gradually, he has acquired cult status, and his paintings have become hot commodities. Posthumously Kippenberger has been rehabilitated and rebranded—his brushy, messy, materialist canvases are heralded as a groundbreaking hybrid of conceptualism and expressionism. His public behavior, which in his lifetime was considered repellant, antagonistic, and even abusive, is now canonized as a deliberate work of performance by a brilliant *selbstdarteller* (self-publicist/self-promoter).<sup>15</sup> The very same political factions and critical

mouthpieces that once chastised Kippenberger have anointed him as seminal figure. Graw has acknowledged such discursive hypocrisies in the case of Kippenberger, “who had been quite controversial when alive and rather unpopular in large sections of the art world. Even the most incorrigible Kippenberger haters of yore now seem to cite him as a favorite artist”—a revelatory admission.<sup>16</sup>

We are thus back to the question of extremity. Enlisting Siegfried Kracauer at the start of this essay, a great Frankfurt School sociologist and film theorist, to introduce a discussion of an artist who has long been pigeonholed in opposition to “critical” art is admittedly perverse. Yet this succinct rhetorical move points to a truth: Kracauer’s maxim can illuminate the underlying hypocritical value system that has long suppressed Schnabel’s role in art history even while the ramifications of his legacy are so visible.

Much has changed since the long lost days of caustic ideological divides and politico-aesthetic debate. Long-standing oppositions are now defunct, and Schnabel’s painterly ambitions no longer need to be seen as in conflict with his more pure conceptual gestures. His unapologetic, painterly marks—as well as his unrepentant *auteur* status—certainly seem as relevant to Richard Prince’s large-scale gestural and smudgy *Joke* paintings as the dry wordplay of *Art and Language*. The iron curtain between “painting” and “conceptualism” has fallen.

The critics once tried and convicted Schnabel in a court of opinion, but Schnabel-style transgressions have since been decriminalized and the statute of limitations for his offenses has passed. It is time to recognize that the contemporary *schmutz-geist* is directly indebted to his formal legacy; young painters can be spared the extreme disavowal of it. In our current age, when it is impossible to disentangle market value from so-called pure artistic or critical value, it is quaint, if not laughable, to imagine an artist being either dismissed as invalid for monetary success or ostracized for his celebrity status. Both camps (and their present-day hybrids) are ambivalent bedfellows in the pluralistic art world—equally regarded as legitimate in the museum and the marketplace. Graw makes this point by extrapolating from the work of sociologists Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, “the art world today presents itself to us as a ‘network world’ that has broken into different segments existing side by side in peaceful competition—a whole host of micro-universes illustrating the transition from antagonistic to pluralistic struggle.”<sup>17</sup> Now that there is some potential for its validation in this age of plurality, Schnabel’s work might actually become visible again.<sup>18</sup>



Julian Schnabel’s studio, Montauk, 1991

1. Siegfried Kracauer, *The Salaried Masses* (1930; London: Verso, 1998), 25. This quote came to my attention in Isabelle Graw’s *High Price: Art between the Market and Celebrity Culture* (New York: Sternberg Press, 2009), 81.
2. John Seabrook, “Master’s Voice,” *New Yorker*, May 7, 2007, 27.
3. Andrew Russeth, *Gallerist*, online at <http://galleristny.com/2014/01/julian-schnabel-at-the-brant-foundation-art-study-center/>, consulted March 19, 2014.
4. Roberta Smith, “Julian Schnabel: ‘Plate Paintings, 1978–1997,’” *New York Times*, May 21, 1999, <http://www.nytimes.com/1999/05/21/arts/art-in-review-julian-schnabel-plate-paintings-1978-1997.html?ref=julianschnabel>
5. Julian Schnabel, *CWJ* (New York: Random House, 1987), 32.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Nick Stillman, “Joe Bradley,” *Artforum* 47, no. 5 (January 2009), 213.
8. Brian Boucher, “Joe Bradley,” *Art in America* Vol. 99, Issue 3, (March 2011), 145.
9. Jens Asthoff, “Sergej Jensen,” *Artforum* 50, no. 5 (January 2012), 233.
10. Linda Yablonsky, “More to Love,” *Artforum*, “Diary,” October 23, 2013 <http://artforum.com/diary/id=43613>.
11. As Benjamin H.D. Buchloh writes, “Politically committed producers become singularized and classified as ‘political’ artists, in opposition to formally oriented artists or ‘self’ and ‘expression’ oriented artists.” In *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1955 to 1975* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2000), 350.
12. Isabelle Graw, *High Price: Art Between the Market and Celebrity Culture* (New York: Sternberg Press, 2009), 96–7.
13. *Ibid.*, 98.
14. Janet Malcolm, “Forty-one False Starts,” *New Yorker*, July 11, 1994, 52.
15. Graw, 99.
16. See Alison M. Gingeras, “Performing the Self: Martin Kippenberger,” *Artforum* 42, no. 2 (October 2004), 253–55; 304.
17. Graw, 37.
18. In writing this essay, I am a willing participant in the strategic deployment of the network of power. Such shows of support can be used not only to make visible or valid an artist such as Schnabel, but also to reinvigorate his marketability.