IT MIGHT SEEM ABSURD to describe Julian Schnabel as neglected, given his great celebrity, his flourishing career as a film director, and his near-mythic status as a 1980s art star, but for more than 20 years his paintings have been passed over in silence by most critics and largely ignored by curators. His paradox is to be at once highly visible as a cultural figure and deeply invisible as a painter. Some of this invisibility is the result of his being dismissed by influential academic theorists as a mere resuscitator of modernist styles in an outmoded medium. Another factor has been the unexpected success of his films, which has drawn attention away from his activity as a painter; the meme “His movies are better than his paintings” has flourished almost since the release of his first film, Basquiat (1996).

A balanced assessment of Schnabel’s achievement has been hampered by the difficulty of seeing his work in depth. Astonishingly, Schnabel has not been given a museum exhibition in the U.S. since his Whitney midcareer survey of 1987. (Recently, L.A. MOCA director Jeffrey Deitch signaled an end to what will have been a quarter-century embargo when he announced his museum is planning a Schnabel retrospective for 2012.) There have been numerous gallery shows, mostly in New York, but only a small percentage of this prolific artist’s work ever made it into these exhibitions. Schnabel’s penchant for painting at billboard scale has been one obstacle to a fuller presentation of his work, and so has his tendency to hold back some important works from public view.

Beyond these shores, Schnabel has not been as neglected. In 2003, the Schirn Kunsthalle in Frankfurt mounted an extensive survey of his work that traveled to the Reina Sofía in Madrid and the Mostra d’Oltremare in Naples. More recently, the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) in Toronto presented “Julian Schnabel: Art and Film,” an exhibition that brought together some 40 paintings, two sculptures and eight Polaroids from 1975 to 2010. Asserting that cinema has played a central role in Schnabel’s work from the beginning, the show’s organizer, David Moos, who is the AGO’s curator of modern and contemporary art, assembled a compelling survey of Schnabel’s career in which every work had some connection to film. The exhibition coincided with the 2010 Toronto Film Festival, where Schnabel’s new movie, Miral, had its North American debut. In June, a large Schnabel show opens at the Museo Correr in Venice, coinciding with this year’s Biennale.

A visit to the AGO show last November made me realize, first, how few of Schnabel’s paintings I’d seen in the past two decades, and second, how powerful his work can be when encountered in person. Everyone knows that the reliance on reproductions of artworks (and paintings, in particular) fosters highly inaccurate notions about them, but it is still very easy to base one’s estimation of individual works or even entire careers on reproductions now, given their accessibility on the Internet. And more and more of our art experience happens on screens—the size of placemats. All paintings suffer from reproduction, but Schnabel’s tend to be depleted more than most. The enormous scale of so many of them, which one experiences almost the way one experiences architecture; the disruptive surfaces of the plate paintings, in which images coalesce or break up dramatically depending on one’s viewing distance; the textures of his wildly various supports (weathered tarpaulins, pony skin, black velvet, polyester) that invite intensely haptic responses from viewers; a bounty of materials that range from encaustic and glossy resin to deer antlers and antique embroidery—these are all primary facts about the works that get lost in even the best photographic reproductions. It’s almost as if the artist deliberately set out to make paintings that resist easy translation into the medium of photography. Pursuing such a strategy would be consistent with Schnabel’s oft-stated belief in the importance of the viewer’s presence before the work of art. In 2003, he told Max Hollein, who organized the Schirn Kunsthalle show, “Paintings are physical things that need to be seen in person. It’s hard to get a painting’s intensity from a reproduction.”

THE BIG PICTURE

RECONSIDERING JULIAN SCHNABEL

BY RAPHAEL RUBINSTEIN

A balanced assessment of Schnabel’s achievement has been hampered not only by his distracting public image but also by the difficulty of seeing his work in depth, particularly in the U.S. A recent Canadian survey has sparked a reappraisal of the artist’s often controversial oeuvre.

Julian Schnabel standing in front of his painting El Espontaneo (For Alejandro Martinez), 1990, oil on white tarpaulin, 22 ft square. Courtesy Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. Photo Ian Lefebvre.
HAVING SEEN SO LITTLE of his work in decades I was unprepared for the physical force of a large plate painting at the AGO: Australia (1986). The subject is the 19th-century Australian outlaw Ned Kelly, whom Schnabel depicts amid a lush landscape, wearing what looks like a frock coat surmounted by a kind of knight’s helmet. (Kelly was famed for his handmade armor.) With hand on hip and his elegant white getup, he looks less like a dangerous criminal or folk hero than like a character from a children’s book or, following Mick Jagger’s portrayal in Tony Richardson’s 1970 film Ned Kelly, a defiant dandy.

Every detail of Australia is painted upon an agitated surface bristling with shattered plates of all sizes and styles. That Schnabel was able to achieve any recognizable image over such an irregular surface is amazing: the protruding ceramic fragments and the layer of Bondo (an adhesive putty often used to repair car bodies) holding them onto the wood support disrupt every brushstroke. Seen up close, the painting turns into a chaotic abstraction as brushstrokes skitter across the jagged range of ceramic outcroppings, jumping countless tiny gaps, sometimes coagulating into hardened globs of paint, blithely ignoring or else artfully echoing the shapes and decorative motifs of the broken plates. Consciously or not, Schnabel invented a format that made achieving recognizable images intensely difficult. This self-imposed challenge may be exactly what keeps the plate paintings, which begin in 1978 and taper off around 1986, looking so fresh when many other Neo-Expressionist paintings have become period pieces.

Australia’s frontal presence—11 feet high and 17 across—is imposing, but the third and smallest dimension is equally important, and one that nearly every photograph misses. As I came around a corner at the AGO, I first became aware of the work not as a painting but as a strange brownish swelling, as if some pottery-studded mudslide had burst through the wall of the museum and been frozen there. In the years before Schnabel started making his plate paintings, Frank Stella was challenging Greenbergian flatness with the projecting elements of his “Exotic Birds” series; the Pattern and Decoration movement was breaking down barriers between high and low; and New Image painting had signaled a nascent return to figuration. But none of this prepared viewers for Schnabel’s hulking pictures, at once emotionally raw and strewn with cultural signifiers. They are heavier, denser, with more stuff, more muscular expenditure, more undisguised appetite for the world, than anything else shown at the time.

Schnabel’s plate paintings still offer the thrill that accompanied their initial reception—they may have a place in history but they haven’t settled down into assimilated museum pieces. In this they resemble precedents such as Miró’s “anti-paintings” of ca. 1930 or Sigmar Polke’s “Motorcycle Drawings” of 1969-71, coruscating artworks that haven’t yet been domesticated by familiarity. As such, they also transcend their origins, erupting into the present as innovative works whose challenge has not yet been fully met.

What Schnabel brought to painting was the kind of freewheeling approach to materials that had been pioneered in Post-Minimalist sculpture, and by early 1970s abstract experimenters such as Alan Shields and Harmony Hammond. He also learned valuable lessons from Polke and Robert Rauschenberg, not so much because a few of his early works deploy favorite Polke and Rauschenberg components (antlers and printed fabrics, respectively), as because he realized that their nothing-is-forbidden practice would help him escape from the...
traits. Some depict his family and friends; others are com-
mercial painting studios in the late 1970s (and since).

A SIGNIFICANT NUMBER of Schnabel's paintings are por-
traits. Some depict his family and friends; others are com-
missioned pictures in various styles; a few are self-portraits.

One of the most memorable paintings in the Toronto show
was Portrait of Andy Warhol (1982). Half of an artistic
existence (Warhol did a portrait of Schnabel), it presents
the upper center of the composition is an early instance of the
impregnating cloud in Titian's Danae and the Shower of Gold,
so much glittering dust swirling in the light of a film projector. The
painting is a perceptive depiction of extreme emotional isolation.
The implied religious content in the Warhol portrait, which is
tempting to read as a depiction of the body and soul of a devoutly
Catholic artist, emerges more explicitly in Resurrection: Albert
1984 film version of Lowry's novel Under The Volcano, which
featured a bravura performance by Finney as the doomed, alco-
holic "Counsel," Schnabel's painting depicts El Niño de Atocha,
a Christ-child figure venerated throughout the Spanish-speaking
world, and particularly in Mexico, where Under The volcano is
set. Schnabel gives El Niño his traditional attributes—radiating
aureole, pilgrim’s cloak and staff—and displays a horizon line and
distant mountain to give the impression that the child is levitating.
Executed on purple velvet, the picture is a veritable anthology of
modernist painting moves: Pollockoid face, Pollock splatter, Picabia
superimposi-
tions, squeegeed swirls of paint as lumi-
ous as a Janie Ottick Color Field painting,
spray-painted lines that could have leapt
off a canvas by Dan Christensen. Signifi-
cantly, rather than concocting an eclectic
abstraction with these motifs, Schnabel
puts them at the service of a religious
image, which he identifies, via the title, as
a tribute to an imagined meeting in heaven
of Finney and Lowry.

RELIGIOUS IMAGERY, mostly Catholic, is
ubiquitous in Schnabel’s work. In part a
consequence of his desire to engage the
history of European painting, it can also be
understood biographically. Born in 1951
in Brooklyn, Schnabel moved with his par-
ents at the age of 13 to the border town of
Brownsville, Tex., where he was exposed
to Mexican culture, and he’s traveled fre-
quently in Mexico as an adult. Discovering
Frida Kahlo’s collection of folk retablos at
the Casa Azul in Mexico City was especial-
ly important to him, he told me in a recent
conversation. This familiarity with Mexico
may help give his frequent borrowings from Catholic iconog-
raphy a naturalness that one wouldn’t expect from a Jewish-
American artist of his generation. But maybe there is more to
his attraction to religious images than their art-historical refer-
ences and his memories of border culture.

Recognizing El Niño de Atocha in Resurrection: Albert
Finney Meets Malcolm Lowry, and recalling the devotional
imagery that runs through Schnabel’s entire oeuvre, I began
thinking in a new way about the floating torsos and other
fragmentary images in his early encaustic paintings such as
Accatone (1978) and Procession (for Jean Vigo), 1979, the
severed heart in The Afflicted Organ (1987) and the odd
objects—such as Moroccan horse bridles—attached to some
recent paintings. They began looking a lot like milagros, the
votive offerings left on church altars and holy shrines through-
out Mexico. A milagro (the word means miracle or surprise in
Spanish) can be given in thanks for an answered prayer or as

Right, Resurrection; Albert Finney Meets Malcolm Lowry, 1984, oil on velvet, 10 by 9 feet.

Opposite, Portrait of Andy Warhol, 1982, oil on velvet, 10 by 10 feet.

TO READ CERTAIN IMAGES AND
OBJECTS IN SCHNABEL’S WORK AS
MILAGROS WOULD MEAN THAT, FOR
THIS ARTIST, THE PAINTING IS AN ALTAR.
LIKE OTHER VIEWERS, I HAVE PONDERED THE INSCRIPTIONS THAT ERUPT ACROSS SO MANY OF SCHNABEL’S PAINTINGS, AND BEEN, BY turns, PUZZLED, INTRIGUED, ENLIGHTENED AND FRUSTRATED BY THEM.

TOWARD THE END OF THE 1980s, as Schnabel began painting on giant weathered tarpaulins, the scale of his work grew dramatically. I remember seeing a group of tarpaulin paintings titled “The End of Summer” (1990) in New York in 1992 and understanding immediately that they were building on the legacy of Abstract Expressionism. What I didn’t appreciate at the time, perhaps because I was too caught up in an older standard of skill, was Schnabel’s resourcefulness as a painter. His pours of paint or large gestures seemed to me at the time overly dramatic; the mysterious images to pristine new canvases, Schnabel connects his work to contradictory realms, the quotidian and the magical. As the size of his paintings grew, Schnabel had to make allusions, because they wanted to introduce an independent (even contradictory) sign system into painting or simply because they liked the way letters and phrases (even intentionally dumb ones) reaffirm the artist’s faith in the power of the medium to transform everything and anything it touches. Beyond their private associations, Schnabel’s litany of names, initials and their scale seems justified. Their size is less an index for the grandiose rather than artistic necessity, but when one sees the Maison Carrée paintings in the flesh, their scale seems justified. Their size is less an index of Schnabel’s “ambition” than of his desire to engage with historic painters who worked, on commission by Church or state, at an architectural scale, or with those who created the “big paintings” of postwar America. Schnabel has long been a connoisseur of unusual fabrics suitable for recycling as painting supports. During a voyage on the Nile in 1988 he bought several felucca sails that give the “Jane Birkin” paintings of 1990 (titled for the Anglo-French entertainer whose name is inscribed on them) their unusual triangular shape. A series of recent paintings were done on tarpaulins that over time acquired an imprint of the floorboards they were lying on in a friend’s studio. Ghostly lines emerge from the fabrics like carried by them. Countless painters, including Cy Twombly (a big and long-acknowledged influence on Schnabel), have used writing as a kind of surrogate gesture, an economical method of making allusions, because they wanted to introduce an independent (even contradictory) sign system into painting or simply because they liked the way letters and words looked. The writing in Schnabel’s paintings has elements of all these approaches but it also seems motivated by the artist’s faith in the power of the medium to transform everything and anything it touches. Beyond their private associations, Schnabel’s litany of names, initials and phrases (even intentionally dumb ones) reaffirm the continual wonderment at the ability of painting to launch wave after wave of meaning into the world.

Like other viewers, I have pondered the inscriptions that erupt across so many of Schnabel’s paintings, and been, by turns, puzzled, intrigued, enlightened and frustrated by them. Countless painters, including Cy Twombly (a big and long-acknowledged influence on Schnabel), have used writing as a kind of surrogate gesture, an economical method of making allusions, because they wanted to introduce an independent (even contradictory) sign system into painting or simply because they liked the way letters and words looked. The writing in Schnabel’s paintings has elements of all these approaches but it also seems motivated by the artist’s faith in the power of the medium to transform everything and anything it touches. Beyond their private associations, Schnabel’s litany of names, initials and phrases (even intentionally dumb ones) reaffirm the continual wonderment at the ability of painting to launch wave after wave of meaning into the world.

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1 I SUSPECT THAT SCHNABEL’S INSISTENCE ON WHAT MANY DISMISS AS THE ROMANTIC SIDE OF ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM PARTLY ACCOUNTS FOR HIS MARGINALIZATION.

Another is the emphasis on feeling in their work. A third is their belief in the redemptive power of art. In his willingness to improvise, in his bold emotionalism, and in his underlying religiosity, Schnabel has carried on these tenets. He may be the only well-known painter of his generation to have done so. I suspect that Schnabel’s insistence on what many dismiss as the romantic side of Abstract Expressionism partly accounts for his marginalization; he’s like the unthinking reiteration of the articles of one’s faith. If Schnabel were simply another “believer in painting,” I don’t think his work would be so stylistically various or so frequently speculative. (Nor would he be so unapologetically “impure,” painting portraits of the wealthy and famous, alongside his more personal work: working in so many painting modes simultaneously: throwing himself into filmmaking.) He is, rather, a believer who must constantly test his faith. Thus his attraction to making works where the amount of “painting” is at a radical minimum, as if he were saying to himself, “Could this be a painting…? And this…? And this?” If Schnabel’s work reemerges into wider public view in this country (maybe with the planned L.A. MOCA show) and thus becomes available as an influence on younger artists, and as something that critics and art historians have to directly confront, it will be fascinating to watch the results. In the meantime, his paintings, in all their messy grandeur and devotional passion, will be out there somewhere in the universe of painting like a kind of artistic dark matter, hard to detect but dense with gravitational mass.

Although Schnabel is fascinated by how little it takes to make a painting—a surprising stance for an artist who became famous for making intensely overworked canvases—he hasn’t forsaken the physicality of oil paint. In some recent works, thick brushstrokes are laid down over a reproduced image of the Hindu god Shiva so that the paint seems to pour from (or into) the deity like Technicolor ectoplasm.3

Although Schnabel’s gestures barely disturb the image; their role seems to be to wrest a painting of some kind from the confrontation, at epic scale, of a dramatic surfing photo and a few seemingly random shots are nearly obscured by luscious smears of paint. Richter’s gestures barely disturb the image; their role seems to be to wrest a painting of some kind from the confrontation, at epic scale, of a dramatic surfing photo and a few seemingly random shots are nearly obscured by luscious smears of paint. Richter’s altered photographs, in which landscape images, while Schnabel’s more discreet intercessions are at least as symbolic as they are pictorial.

30 October 1986, p. 27.

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