Some of the paintings are stories, some are maps with many layers, some are flags. They are also enormous dictionaries of marks. The list includes feathers, arrows, smudges, diamonds, snowflakes, coils, hooves. There are spirals, tendrils, soft branches, amoebae, miniature fluttering flags. Scratches, heaped-up duds, diaphanous clusters, patches of dried blood, blossoms stuck to wires. There are fluttering leaves, cluttered shorelines, falling pods, an old man wrapped in ancient mummy paper, keys.

Sometimes things have been erased or whited out and I’m dazzled and lost, the way a sudden snowfall transforms the whole neighborhood into a blank map erasing all the things that dogs love. Faced with no smells and nothing to navigate by all the dogs stand frozen on their doorsteps looking out at the world for the first time.

I don’t understand most of the writing about painting. It makes me feel further and further from the marks, the colors, the surfaces of the painting, and closer to the world of meaning representation and interpretation. As if any of this were logical. As if logic had anything to do with the way things work.

Think of bird calls – their voices urgent, joyful, full of need. “Sex!” They cry. “Altitude! Dive bomb! Food! Food! Food!” Other things in the paintings: tadpoles, the gleam and reflections on bent metal, petals and small objects being sifted down from the ceiling, a scratchy blue hair ribbon attached to a bulbous translucent paramecium. There are suggestions of melting lightbulbs. Also, a beret that has fallen down on top of a swirling tornado made of blue paint. A bearded griffin emerges from his corkscrew spine. Things shift from positive to negative. Sometimes I can see through solids. Sometimes I see a storm cloud threatening a syringe.

These things exist in a world between portrayal and symbol. I watch my mind desperately searching for words, for things. Pareidolia is the name for seeing pictures in marks, seeing faces in clouds or splashes of ink. But sometimes it seems more like an urgent need than an ability. If I were a lover of hakai I would be happy with this world where marks don’t have to look like rocks or houses – a world where masses of softly wrapped-up marks have no obligation to look like clouds. But it’s so easy to get caught in the relentless attempt to make pictures out of marks, to pretend that they represent something nameable. I switch it off.

The marks reappear. This time everything’s in motion. The things themselves are gone. Now there are only actions, gestures, traces, skill marks. There’s a stirring and shimmering, disguising glinting and winkling. Covering nothing nothing. There’s scurry and fly, diapason, exasperated piles of marks huddled lines and wavy shades. Vibrato and floaty pink transparencies that suggest enormous depth through some alchemical methods, the hidden branches and birds. The marks have become music. When I talk to Julian he says, “Maybe they’re action paintings.” Some of these actions are not things I even have the words for. Maybe the words for these actions have disappeared from our vocabularies like the verb ‘to stove’ which appeared for the first time in the 1500s to describe something that is bashed inwards to release the contents. You could stove a cask or a skull. And even though people’s heads are still getting bash ed in with heavy objects, stove itself has disappeared. Things in the paintings are stoving in on themselves.

Words

And then there are the words in the paintings. Or maybe ‘painted letters’ is a better description of them. Some are initials like MJ. There’s HAT FULL OF RAIN. A reference to the 1957 film about heroin addiction? There’s 4D – a clue that these paintings that always refer to time. A Z is stacked on top of another A Z – the alphabet twice. GOODBYE MIKE KELLEY.

DOGS STAND FROZEN AT THEIR DOOR STEPS LOOKING AT THE WORLD FOR THE FIRST TIME

Julian Schnabel in his studio, Montauk, NY

Photo by Porfirio Munoz, 2011
Isprisingly displayed over stuffed animals, an army and some diplomat figures. The huge violin stand is a mark somewhere between punctuation and painting. Maybe it’s an underlife as well as a particle stand?

For the most part the painted words are the cousins of graf- it. Big and bold – meant to be read at a distance. Simple. Decorative. Abstract. In Goya there are also words hidden under the erased surface. There’s also the word Goya but it’s not a word it’s the drawing of Goya’s signature, a nod to another pre-techno era. The only true people make by hand rise to site their name. On the other hand, the idea of the individuality of handwriting is preserved in the multitud- inous fonts presented you choose your words from a super-set of TiVo designed for you by acne creatives teams which would like very much for you to make the meaning of your individual font.

Caught in the action
The letters of HAT FULL OF RAIN fall into transparent past- elles. Some blue scratchiness falls along with something more liquid – the color of pink Pepto-Bismol. Small black knobs – alleles. Some blue scratchiness falls along with something more.

On a retreat
Everything is change, impermanence. Everything is illusory. Nothing is permanent. Everything is impermanent. Everything is like a way to look at paintings.

As I read these words hundreds of Australians are sprawled on the lawn. The sun gradually set and an almost full moon rose. People try to see things in their minds. Try to let them change, desist to nothing. Experience seeing and knowing.

Size
Something to keep in mind with these paintings is that they are enormous. It is silly to look at them on your computer or in your mind as you try to write about them. As odd a job really. And really, why write about these paintings when you can see and go and see them? Their physicality. Out of the hundreds represented or cans which was used for tea stood in Mexico- pie sex. Are some other things.

There is nothing fake in these paintings. There are things it’s hard to fake like this thinglessness, beleguoning, feeling lost. These paintings are full of imagery he summons the most gods of the old testament; Griffins in fez, old things on wheels, shattered parts. Purity. Immaturity. I am in love with these paintings.

In the back of my mind I hear the words of Susan Sontag, “The best emotions to write out of are anger and fear and dread. The least energizing emotion to write out of admira- tion. It is very difficult to write out of because the basic feeling that goes with admiration is a passive contemplative mood.” When, What does ‘goes with’ mean here? What is the feeling that ‘goes with’? What is the feeling of not being to see things it is not passive contemplation but a feeling that I am seeing the world being born, seeing things for the first time with a sense of emotion and joy. ‘Food: Food: Feel: Attitude’. Anger fear and dread aren’t anywhere nearby. Only the shock of seeing everything shaking, remarking itself.

My friend Julian
I should say he’s one of my dearest friends which I haven’t mentioned yet. I should tell you that when I have a problem or when I’m depressed I
think: what would Julian do? And the answer is usually: make something!

At Julian’s studio in Montauk
The floor of the studio is a wooden deck which is now a complex painting itself splattered with a time-lapse representation from fifteen years of painting here. All sorts of marks and pools cover the deck – dotted lines tracing the trajectories of jars of paint that were jettisoned sideways, thick glistening puddles, skid marks and paint that has dried into heaps of phosphorescent rubble. Streams of white that look like liquid porcelain have blown in cross-hatching patterns. These streams of milky white were from the mammoth Big Girl series pictures of a huge girl in a blue dress and pinafore whose glassy doll-like eyes bulged out at you until Julian covered the eyes with thick swaths of white paint.

If you look at something long enough and hard enough it will eventually begin to look back at you. Didn’t Gerard Manley Hopkins say something like that?

Lou and our dog Lollabelle and I watch as Julian paints. Lou has been sick and Lolabelle is swollen from the treatments she’s taking for liver cancer. We lean against each other breathing slowly. Julian is striding around the deck, talking and asking our opinions. “Is this too pink? What about the background? Now! Now look at the way the light is hitting this. It’s completely different than it was.” We are his only audience at the moment. “And what about now?” says Julian. “Completely different! Look at what happens when the light starts leaving. Totally different thing!”

The light has shifted again and it’s harder to see the paintings. More people come by. Julian makes a few marks and then stands back or sits in front of the painting – virtually motionless. He jumps up to put a record on an old turntable. R&B blasts through the walls and trees. The nearby kitchen is suddenly full of swimmers and cooks. Vats of pasta steam as Julian stops to stir a tomato sauce. A surfer comes by and asks if we want to go to the screening of some surf films. Later when it’s dark Julian goes out to look at the paintings again. “See!” he says, “Totally different. Now you can really see the scale.”

Some of my friends who know Julian but have never been to his studio talk about how amazing it is that he can switch from painting to film making. How can he do something as seemingly solitary and private as painting and then turn around and make something so social as film making? They’ve never been in the painting audience.

The next day we come to the studio again. In fact, most days we’re there. I put my arm on Lola’s head and her eyes close. Lou is sleeping now and I put my arm around him. There’s no fourth wall to the studio, against our backs is a lattice laced with bougainvillea. In the middle is a gate that opens directly onto a diving board. Far below is a concrete pool of dark turquoise water with a small island. Taking up most of the island is a white lightning-blasted tree covered with ropey vines and roses. The paintings are changing before my eyes, morphing for one thing to another like the setting sun. The afternoon is wearing on and on.

One late afternoon Julian said, “OK. Here are the brushes… there’s the canvas. Go and make a painting.”

“My first painting was a black and white car crash, the passengers – a man and a woman – had been flung out of a car and were cartwheeling through the air, tires spinning. Everything in motion. For the rest of the summer I came every couple of days to the studio to make paintings. Nothing is ever finished. But that’s another story.