



Julian Schnabel i sit udendørsatelier i Montauk, NY
Julian Schnabel in his studio, Montauk, NY
Photo by Porfirio Munoz, 2011

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

LAURIE ANDERSON

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 daubs, 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! Sex!"

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 haiku I would be happy with this world where marks don't have to look like owls or houses – a world where masses of softly whipped-up swirls 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, skid marks. There's a rustling and shining, disguising glinting and winking. Covering revealing floating. There's scurry and fly, disintegrate and swarm. Frenetic piles of marks frizzled lines and wooly shades. Vibrato and floating 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 1590s 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 bashed 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

is poignantly displayed over stuffed animals, an army and some diplomats. The huge violet slash is a mark somewhere between punctuation and painting. Maybe it's an underline as well as a painterly slash?

For the most part the painted words are the cousins of graffiti. Big and bold – meant to be read at a distance. Simple. Declarative. Allusive. 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 a drawing of Goya's signature, a nod to another pre-techno era. The only time most people write by hand now is to sign their name. On the other hand, the idea of the individuality of handwriting is preserved in the multitudinous fonts presented so you can choose your words from a supermarket of **STYLES** designed for **you** by some creative teams **who would like** very much for you *to express* the meaning of your **message** in their individualized **fonts**.

Caught in the action

The letters of HAT FULL OF RAIN fall into transparent paddles. Some blue scratchiness falls along with something more liquid – the color of pink Pepto-Bismol. Small black knobs – maybe they are rubber bathtub drain stoppers? – have come uncorked and are flying through the air.

In another HAT FULL OF RAIN an amoeba-like creature comes sailing down through the air or maybe it's all happening in a Petri dish and the tail of the amoeba is thrashing the creature through space.

Sometimes there is a red horizon, a burnt sienna field, that indicates there might be gravity and a down direction in this floating world. Another HAT FULL OF RAIN looks like a matador. All the shapes are trying to squeeze between the words and the images into a place where they are pure marks. Sometimes light is represented. Sometimes light is the material these things are made of.

Surface and depth

Point of view shifts. Sometimes the titles of the paintings suggest that you look at them as maps.

Suddenly you fly above and are looking down at them like landscapes from a plane. Filaments and ribbons float at various depths in the Petri dish. The *Big Girl* paintings from 2013 are in a shallow space. They are paper-thin paper dolls. The folds in their clothes and the creases in their skin are painted on these flat surfaces. Sometimes the surface is the painting itself, like the cracked plates of deep green and rose in the paintings of roses.

I close my eyes again, this time ignoring the laws of physics. Now the marks are in another world. Somewhere past even the representation of depth and movement. What is this world?

On a retreat

While thinking about these paintings I went to a meditation retreat in Minnesota with my teacher Mingyur Rinpoche. The study we did on this retreat was called *nature of mind* and is, like it says, a study of the way the mind works.

Some of the instructions for the exercises we did at the retreat included

- use problems as a support for meditation
- stop labeling
- don't watch the emotion, watch the need, the craving, for emotion
- fix your mind on one thing and watch as it erases other things

My teacher sits on a dais. He breaks the top off a stem in the vase next to him. He breaks the stem into two unequal pieces and holds one of them up.

"Long or short?" he says

He holds up the other piece, "Long or short? Neither? Both?"

Relativity in the most basic premise. Things do not exist in isolation. We try to see things as they are, not as we wish them to be or think they could be.

Other things we study and learn:

The best solution is to know you are dreaming and that the dream bear will always run faster than you do until you see him as illusion.

Everything is perfect: uncertainty, loneliness, incompleteness. Everything is change, impermanence.

Use your imagination! Imagine great wisdom and imagine power. Make new nerve connections, try to carve new pathways. Your brain thinks, "Oh ! This perception, this power, this wisdom is real." In other words, fake it 'til you make it. Suddenly I open my eyes. The nature of mind meditation seemed like a way to look at paintings.

I take the paintings with me in my mind because that's where everything happens. While I'm thinking about them I go to the Gold Coast in Australia and while I'm there I do a concert with a Tibetan singer out on the lawn, a concert with many musicians and lots of gongs and singing bowls. I read text from *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Emotions come and go. Pictures dissolve and form. The text describes ways to see with your mind as well as your eye.

*Abandon all grasping, yearning and attachment,
Enter undistracted into clear awareness,
Release your consciousness into the space of the unborn
mind.*

*Leaving this body of flesh and blood,
Know it to be a transitory illusion.*

*Now the sign of earth is dissolving into water...water into fire...
fire into air...air into consciousness...*

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, dissolve 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 my computer or in my mind as I try to write about them. An absurd job really. And really, why write about these paintings when you can go and see them? Their physicality is gritty. Some of them are painted onto canvas that was used as tarp for fruit stands in Mexico. Some are sewn together, tattered like flags.

There is nothing fake in these paintings. There are things it's hard to fake such as true innocence, beleaguerement, feeling lost. These paintings are full of imagery he summons the mad gods of the old testament. Griffins in fez, old things on wheels, shattered parts. Purity. Immensity. 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 is admiration. It is very difficult to write out of because the basic feeling that goes with admiration is a passive contemplative mood."

Wait. What does 'goes with' mean here? What is the feeling that 'goes with' admiration? When I wake up to seeing 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 emergency and joy. "Food! Food! Sex! Altitude!" Anger fear and dread aren't anywhere nearby. Only the shock of seeing everything shaking, remaking itself.

My friend Julian

What else can I say about 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 frozen in criss-crossing 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 Lollabelle 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 sud-

denly 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 as 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."

"I hate painting," I said.

"Here are the brushes... there's the canvas...just go and make a painting." he repeated.

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.