

Days of Life
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On July 5th, 2011, the day of Cy Twombly's death, Julian Schnabel painted three large cruciform works, entitled respectively *On the Day Cy Died (Sleepwalking Limousine)*; *On the Day Cy Died (Lunar Dust Covered Rose Bushes)*; and *On the Day Cy Died (His Right Arm Bent Under His Head as a Pillow)*. All three works are made of white gesso, poured and painted with a broom onto green tarpaulin. As the artist was grieving the loss of a dear friend, of an early inspiration for his own painterly mode, he offered a very straightforward statement of what his art is: the feeling of life, a conception of life, in front of everything that antagonizes it—that is: death. Not simply the end of life as a cycle, but emotional death, personal death, living death, death that is part of so many human beings' lives.

Julian Schnabel is alive, and he is lively—he turns lively into the very definition of being alive. And the three aforementioned paintings epitomize his conception of art and life. First of all, they are painted over a dark backdrop and their colour is pristine white; as if life could only be sensed in regard

to the awareness and knowledge of death—that is: grief. Here, the positive exists in conflict—and eventually in dialogue—with the negative and constitutes itself from the confrontation with the negative: it is not isolated in a separate space of coherence. The white is made whiter from the dark green context in which it is located and the green is made darker from the white body of paint that has become part of its image, for eternity. Painting, as the artist experiments with it, is inclusive. It is not a blunt statement of life in the silence and the oblivion of death. Death exists and therefore life is even more important, to be cherished even more.

This tension between the backdrop and the paint, and the way the two components in each work interact, is in itself an extremely important part of Schnabel's work: often, the primary elements—before they are brought together in the painting—can be considered profoundly dissimilar, and in a sense, visually contradictory. It could even be argued that the backdrop itself may often be considered “dead” imagery—imagery that is not generally thought to be deep enough, interesting enough,

visually compelling enough. Paint is the element that brings it all to life. Let us think of the series titled *Basic Boating* from 2013—images of a half-naked girl on a boat—and another group of paintings on found flags. The works can hardly qualify to the general audience as creative life. The flags are cheap material by definition, as they were found. The very fact of being found signifies that no one wanted them, that they were left, and the artist seized them. They were dead material. And so were the pictures of girls on boats, which, while being blown-up on the canvas, still look old, a vague remembrance of a previous time.

In a sense, both materials were once deeply part of one's contemporary life: flags allude to the power of nations and the constitution of countries; the photographs with half-naked girls remind us of the tradition of sexy pictures that were once very arousing, but have since been replaced by actual porn culture. Therein ties an important connection in Schnabel's work: the association of what is generally considered cheap and what is generally considered dead. The flags are cheap, and they are dead. Before they were blown-up, the

pictures were cheap, and they were dead. He brings them to value—artistic, even commercial—at the same time as he brings them back to life.

Schnabel confronts these common notions and, by the use of paint, turns them upside down: the tiny purple sfumato on the blown-up picture challenges us, and at the same time as it alters the underlying image with the addition of colour, it brings the image to life. We are forced to look at the image underneath, and to ask ourselves why it was selected, turned into the material of art. From the very fact of being there, it becomes part of art itself, and somehow it becomes art in its own right. It is not cheap imagery anymore: it is part of the human miracle of creation.

One could argue that being the underlying material for a painting does not necessarily qualify for metaphysical dignity as such. After all, the painter is the one who grants it that life. The tiny purple sfumato, the white drop, is what enables us to look at it, really. The artist is showing us the way to look at the world as if it were art. Perhaps all this is nothing but a performance of the painter's power, but that would be a non-

Schnabelian way to look at the world: Schnabel is inclusive; he is not exclusive; he is not dogmatic; or if dogmatic, it is in his passion for not being dogmatic. The fact that the artist would be our Virgil in regards to the world of imagery does not mean that this world is not exciting, enticing, and full of marvels if one is to do more than glance at it, if one is to be immersed in it, and to be passionate about it.

Schnabel is often said to be pantheist—God is in everything, everywhere, if you sense that He is there. And his painting certainly is: the material for the metaphysical understanding as well as transformation of things is omnipresent, but one must be able to see it. And that is what the Schnabel does—it is a very simple, very difficult, very passionate, very quiet, very animalistic, very philosophical mission. This pantheism has to do primarily with truth, and with life. After all, in Schnabel's world, the three great abstractions—God, truth, life—are synonymous. Life is true; truth is lively; God is life when it is true. And, of course, since he is inclusive, the opposite is accurate as well: death is true; death is lively; God is death, or

at the least the true possibility of death that makes life even more essential, because the end of it is around the corner.

This inclusiveness—this existential and artistic pantheism of life—is perceived in the materials Schnabel uses for art, which he can find anywhere, at any given time. It can also be perceived in the way he paints: from figurative portraits, such as the 1997 painting of Rene Ricard; to large abstract paintings, such as the Jane Birkin series, painted on sailcloth; to the very tiny sfumato, which is often amplified. And then, since life is indeed pluralistic, there can be combinations: white paint expands across the portrait of Rene Ricard, depicted as a Spanish priest; *Jane Birkin #4* (1990) becomes a landscape.

Schnabel pushes the inclusiveness to the point when his own work evolved into material for him to intervene on—as it is in the portrait of Rene Ricard, his longtime fellow traveller. The image of Ricard too becomes material for painting, and in a certain way the very fact of it being material enables us to look at him differently: to see traces of art and poetic life in the tradition of priests, to sense how

this situation could be altered, and how priesthood and sanctity only exist when they are the result of the experience of everything, including what they apparently are not, and what they actually are—abstraction, temptation.

In a sense, it is all about life, and Schnabel's existence and work is a paean to life: the three Cy Twombly paintings are expressions of life on grief. And this life is pluralistic in the display of its architecture: the drops of white are placed on the left, at the centre, and on the right of the painting, respectively. The three of them, separately, and brought together, cover all the space, and draw a line inside the cross. The three different expressions of existence in painting are separate, and yet they belong to a series. They are three expressions of life, that is truth and of truth, that is life—the truth of a moment when the artist felt that life could end, and that therefore it was to continue, more intensely, more acutely, everywhere, at any time possible. The titles, all so different from one to the next, but emanating from the same literary source, proves to us that in the darkest hours there is always light.

“I owe you the truth in painting

and I will tell you so,” Cézanne's phrase remains an enigma. Did he mean that he would tell the truth of painting? Or that painting was to be the mode of unveiling truth? Both, perhaps. At least Julian Schnabel, painter and artist, means both. Somehow, he feels the need to extract the truth of stuff, and to prove to us unbelievers that stuff can be as noble as any system; that stuff, if understood properly in its plurality, could be a system. The day Cy Twombly died was a moment of grief, and therefore it was a moment of life. It carried within itself the sense of an interruption, and it led the artist, once again, to engage anew in continuity. Every day in art is a day of life: the life of the artist and the life of everything the artist shows us, and therefore brings to equal existence. Every day all can disappear; every day everything continues, until the end, if it ever comes. And even then, other lives carry on, from the works, into the world.