

AR 695

*THE INFLUENCE OF JULIAN SCHNABEL
ON MY STUDIO EXPLORATIONS*

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“All paintings, in fact, are metaphoric. You look at one. It reminds you of something that you might have seen, a key to your imagination, not dissimilar to seeing a slogan on a wall and being able to imagine somebody painting its letters, seeing the back of his head and the stroke of his arm in the night. To those who think painting is just about itself, I’m saying the exact opposite. The concreteness of a painting can’t help but allude to a world of associations that may have a completely other face than that of the image you are looking at. The concept of Formalism imposes false limits on painting under the guise of esthetic purity, as if such a thing could exist in real life.”¹

Julian Schnabel, 1987

During my second semester as a painting graduate student I began looking at the paintings of Julian Schnabel. Despite an apparent lack of appreciation for his work among my professors and fellow graduate students, I observed a visual presence in most of his painting that I felt was somehow more intellectually and emotionally stimulating than the majority of the arguably more accessible and well crafted contemporary painting I was being exposed to. There is a strangeness and mystery in the gestalt of some of Schnabel’s paintings that causes me to feel uncomfortable but also holds me fascinated.

On a superficial level Schnabel’s paintings can appear crude in draftsmanship, paint handling, construction, and presentation, but upon further scrutiny they become rich in painterly and pictorial event, and the complexity within the overall image structure becomes more apparent. The painting *Salinas Cruz*, 1984, (figure 1)², provides a good example of this pictorial richness and structural complexity. In this work, four cherubim

¹ Julian Schnabel, *C.V.J: Nicknames of Maitre D’s & Other Excerpts From Life* (New York: Random House, 1987), p.41.

² Schnabel, p.161.

hover on a 9' x 10' expanse of black velvet. Sharing the space are a floating crown in the upper left, a heavily painted and wooden looking, tri-elliptical vertical totem at center left, and a the vaporous outline of a four-cornered, shield like form at center right. In addition, seven or eight enigmatic, roughly drawn items appear within the painting. These items include what appears to be a quiver of arrows obscuring the face of the lowest cherub; a tuning fork and small, more detailed, symbol-like drawing of the four-cornered shield like form, both of which appear on the face of the middle left cherub; what looks like a string of jingle bells hangs at the chest of the cherub middle right; a white flower is painted on a wing of the bottom cherub; and a strange white schematic design plays across the front of the upper cherub. These items merge here and there with the cherubim and in other places disconnect and assert themselves as separate entities. As a whole, the materials (oil, modeling paste, and velvet), and the iconography work together to create a painting that projects both a looming, static symbolic presence and an almost living, electrical dynamism arousing the viewer's eye to constantly shift its gaze across a charged field.

As I scrutinize this painting my estimation of Schnabel's talent grows. The black velvet establishes a painting surface that is at once lush and dense, but with the first mark of paint immediately transforms itself into an expansive void in a way that canvas, wood or paper never can. The velvet also effects the appearance of the paint; unless applied firmly and heavily, the oil creates a hazy, diffuse marking as it tracks across the pile. Schnabel exploits this effect in the vaporous luminescence of the shield like outline floating in the right half of the painting and in the phosphorescent glow imparted to the painting as a whole. Painted in warm green, yellow and white upon the black void, the

crown and the four cherubim want to optically float off the surface of the painting; they are held in place by the superimposed elliptical totem and outlined shield which rest upon the same base line. Schnabel underscores this tension by painting the parts of the shield outline that overlap the cherubim in a luminous electric blue. Interspersed throughout the tableau, the cryptically rendered, smaller imagery generate another layer of optical tension and potential meaning. *Salinas Cruz* functions as a palimpsest, pregnant with potential associations and visual metaphor. There probably is no single literal meaning to be found in this painting, instead I believe Schnabel is presenting, in an extraordinarily raw and therefore undiluted form, the elements of two-dimensional visual form that imbue painting with its peculiar emotional aura and presence. Because of his use of recognizable imagery such as faces, wings and cabalistic symbols in this painting, its impact and explication is very different from a nonobjective abstraction. Recognizable imagery immediately invites the viewer to start making associations and this is crucial to the process of experiencing the painting; it is the fuel that runs the visual machinery and compels the eye to run the gamut of the painting searching for clues to support or disqualify the mind's associations.

“Everything has existed before. For me there's no achievement in making a graphic description of myself, my personality, on canvas. Using used things, things we all recognize, is in direct conflict with the idea of building your own specific, original signature that will isolate the image you make from all others. Using already existing materials establishes an ethnographic level in the work; it brings a real place and time into the esthetic reality. Its selection can locate a place, a culture familiar or exotic, self-made or procured. This is the platform for the mental and physical structure within the painting. This selection goes beyond the style of the signature of the artist. It is an antiheroic art. Even if the artist is viewed as a hero and even if the involvement is viewed as heroic, the tasks and the acts are ordinary. They're only profound because they already exist.

The specialness of this art is not about some solipsistic, irreducible emblem. It is about the power to take ordinary things, and by arranging them, to produce a transcendence of their ordinariness. This transcendence is not an absolute; it doesn't preclude the possibility of things questioning themselves.

We are all stained. More and more each day these stains configure into our personalities, become our character, make us recognize and search for one another. The artist's communion with already existing materials makes it possible to commandeer prior topographical meanings for a communion of psychological ones. We are then using the physical to get at an invisible communal which is about the sameness of the viewer and the artist, not about their differences. I want to be invisible. But I want you to know I'm out there. Painting makes this conversion into invisibility possible and acceptable.³

I believe that the lack of virtuosic draftsmanship in *Salinas Cruz*, as well as most of Schnabel's other paintings, is intentional. In *Salinas Cruz* the level of drawing is adequate to the function of the piece; slickly or finely rendered detail would only serve to distract and stall the viewer, undermining the experience of the painting as a beguiling and seductive whole. Recently I have grown more firmly rooted in my conviction that serious paintings should be beguiling and strange to some degree, the gestalt of the piece acknowledging the unique reality and language of the painted surface itself, as well as any depicted existential concerns. The painted surface conveys a vision somewhat alien to visual perception in the 3-dimensional world and I believe paintings that explore this difference and convey an aspect of unfamiliarity and strangeness are often able to inspire a richer and more resonant viewing experience. I place Schnabel as an artist who is exploring the unique reality of the painted image with a higher degree of sensitivity and understanding than most, as such, his art has had an influence on my own experimentation in the studio.

³ Schnabel, p.206.

Within my thesis work I see the fruition of my study of Julian Schnabel most clearly in a painting entitled *Crossing* (figure 2). One of the last paintings I completed during the Spring semester of 1997, I see it as important because I resisted the urge to describe any of the imagery by means of careful rendering, but instead utilized qualities inherent in the paint itself and in its method of application. The formal exploration concerned using the paint not as a tool for drawing in color, but as a substance with which to actually construct the image instead of depict it.

Numerous techniques were tried and developed during the execution of this painting. I began *Crossing* by sketching and composing various shapes and lines with acrylic paint on unsized canvas. In this method, as an under drawing begins to develop I start to fill in empty areas with gesso and sometimes also clear acrylic matte medium. Often I will begin a painting in this way because I like the range of surface quality that results when parts of the canvas are sized with acrylic paint and other parts are sized with gesso. This technique establishes an active layer of information in the ground itself; the first level of the palimpsest effect I see in Schnabel's work. It should be noted here that the function and material impact of the ground is very important to Julian Schnabel as a painter. He has used a wide range of materials such as velvet, animal skin, worn tarpaulin, panels of glued-on broken crockery, plaster, and wood to serve as his painting surface.

Once the acrylic underpainting/ground has dried it is given a light sanding due to the tendency of some acrylic paint to dry glossy and nonporous. Next, reacting to the activated ground, an intensive period of *alla prima* painting in oil ensues. Both heavy and thin passages are laid down, paint is allowed to blend and run on the canvas, editing is performed with rag, knife or brush, numerous application tools are utilized including

drywall spatulas, whisk brooms, spray bottles for misting glazes over wet passages, and a range of palette knives. Unconventional application of paint allied with a desire to experiment can produce visual phenomena that is impossible to render but that can sometimes convey the essence of the artist's expressive intent in ways more potent than traditional brush painting. A much wider range of painterly event also results, which I find stimulates, within my imagination, a wider and more complex range of potential compositional solutions during the painting process. Due to the thickness of some of the passages I like to work wet on wet for as long as I can in order to maintain the structural integrity of these initial paint layers.

As the paint begins to dry I will usually do some editing by cutting away portions of still soft paint with the sharpened edge of a palette knife; this imparts edges and ridges quite different from those made with the brush. Cutting paint away can also reveal parts of the underpainting, yielding visual results that can be incorporated into the overall image. As the painting dries further, sandpaper can also be used to a similar end.

When the painting is dry across the entire surface, (usually two weeks minimum), I begin a new session of painting, being careful to score into any areas of thick and not fully dry paint. A fresh paint mark on a dry passage does not integrate well but appears superficial; this effect can be used to advantage when imparting or emphasizing illusions of space. The tree like forms in *Crossing* were put in wet on dry. A dry surface is also necessary for controlled glazing. Glazing layers were applied throughout *Crossing* to suggest atmosphere and to harmonize dissonant color areas.

It has been typical for me to spend six months resolving a painting. During the painting of *Crossing* I probably repeated the above mentioned sequences two or three times before reaching final resolution. The final painting has a mirage like quality. Shapes seem to emerge and then evaporate; reflected light appears to shimmer as though the heat of the desert landscape is dissipating as the sun begins to set. This indistinct, mirage like quality of image can provoke a set of different spatial and contextual readings within a single viewing of the painting. I find that paintings that exhibit some flux and change in my visual perception and conceptual analysis of them tend to hold my attention longer, and remain satisfying over repeated viewings. The formal aim in many of my paintings of the last year has been to achieve a coherent visual synthesis of seemingly disparate methods of paint handling within a single work. This aim has been partially inspired and influenced by looking at the work of Schnabel, as well as that of David Salle. Both painters explore the visual results of utilizing disparate paint handling, drawing style and iconography within single works.

Schnabel's use of relief, found object assemblage, and collage has also inspired avenues of exploration in my work. Schnabel's painting *The Raft*, (figure 3)⁴, from 1982 is a good example of his use of a sculptural assemblage, in this case broken crockery and *Bondo* on wood panels, as a visually active painting ground. The broken plates serve a dynamic role in the visual structure of the painting. They possess a potent symbolic presence in themselves, and they catalyze an optical tension by both lightly carrying the overlaying painted image and fragmenting it by asserting their presence to the fore. An

interest in the visual effects of painting on assemblage inspired a small series of three paintings of my own here at Colorado State University.

The painting entitled *Memorial*, (figure 4), is one of these. Done on masonite, *Memorial* is more a landscape of sensations than of faithful visual description. In this regard it is as much a work of expressionism as one of symbolism. A departure for me stylistically, the figurative elements are not drawn but suggested and even manifested by the application of material objects; the authentic handmade arrow, the aluminum-can sun, and the forest made out of actual tree branches.

To construct this painting I first sanded the smooth surface of untempered masonite to promote better paint adhesion. I then also built a light wooden support upon which to mount the masonite to discourage warpage. Possible shapes and compositional schemes were then painted on with acrylic and an intensive period of simultaneous assemblage and painting began. Acrylic paints, mediums, modeling paste, and gels are the preferred medium for this type of work due to their excellence as a collage glue, their ability to act as a preservative on the sometimes ephemeral materials used in the assemblage. And their high degree of stability and compatibility when used thickly and in conjunction with other materials. In my studio assemblages I usually incorporate all manner of things, including paper, cloth, canvas, wood fragments, shells, glass, discarded paint tubes, and other assorted studio detritus. With practice, the acrylic gel medium can allow a painter to get quite sculptural with the materials being applied.

Once the assemblage is complete I approach the work as a painting and apply passages of paint where I feel necessary. Either oil or acrylic may be used on the dry,

⁴ Schnabel, p.101.

acrylic bound assemblage, but it is ill-advised to use acrylic over areas of oil paint. Oil and acrylic dry to noticeably different texture and sheen, by using oil on top of dry acrylic I find the range of visual event can be expanded. On *Memorial* the final painting was done in oil.

Lastly the arrow, sun, and branches were arranged and applied. The aluminum can I cut into a radial figure was scored on the back and glued on with acrylic gel. The arrow was tied with sinew onto small mounting supports that I fabricated out of old wooden paintbrush stems. The cut stems were grooved and drilled to hold and tie the arrow. The narrow ends were then inserted with glue into wholes drilled into the support and backing. The branches were tied on with sinew.

I find this painting successful. The unpainted objects placed upon the heavily painted, sculptural backing produce a dramatic effect and pull the painting together compositionally. Due to their literal quality the unpainted objects also spark associations which influence and direct the way the painted shapes are read.

I find Julian Schnabel to be a thought provoking painter. This paper has been an attempt to document how his work has had an influence on my studio exploration.

Figure 1.



Figure 2.



Figure 3.



Figure 4.

