

JULIAN SCHNABEL OBSERVATIONS

By Rudi Fuchs

They looked formidable and tough like a stone wall—and very different from the gorgeous paintings that gently bow before your eyes. That is more or less how I remember the art of Julian Schnabel from when I first saw it in Amsterdam in 1982: rough surfaces, crammed, heavy paint and cracked earthenware dishes. To see them I found disturbing. It was difficult at first to credit their bluff and make room in my perception of art for their boisterous energy. I was young and precocious. Because I was also an art historian I had begun to *argue* with these plate paintings instead of accepting and just believing what I saw. That one must believe in art, as children believe (without argument) the improbable, enchanting stories that fairy tales tell them, is an understanding that comes when you get older. However: at first these paintings' provocative candor confused me. I felt ambushed by their particular *bluntness*. But when an eager young artist makes new work, that work should be blunt and tough beyond belief. That is what artists always have done: make things dangerously new and utterly singular. As James Joyce said: "First we feel. Then we fall."¹ In that context of emotion maybe we can imagine how Julian arrived at the point where those paintings had to be made. They kept stirring his imagination. He made them because he wanted to see what they would look like. The fire gets going. The relentless paintings that he began to make (one after another, obstinate as he is) were tremendous and reckless. When they emerged they were unlike anything we had seen before. The rough surfaces were offensive, radical, and hard to believe. But one also felt that these bloody paintings had tremendous energy. They erupted. They were reckless because Julian did not hold back. He let all the energy flow to find out where the turmoil might lead. They were unpredictable and thus exciting. That is how I came to see them: as paintings



Installation views of *Julian Schnabel*
at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam,
January 28 - March 14, 1982
Courtesy Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam



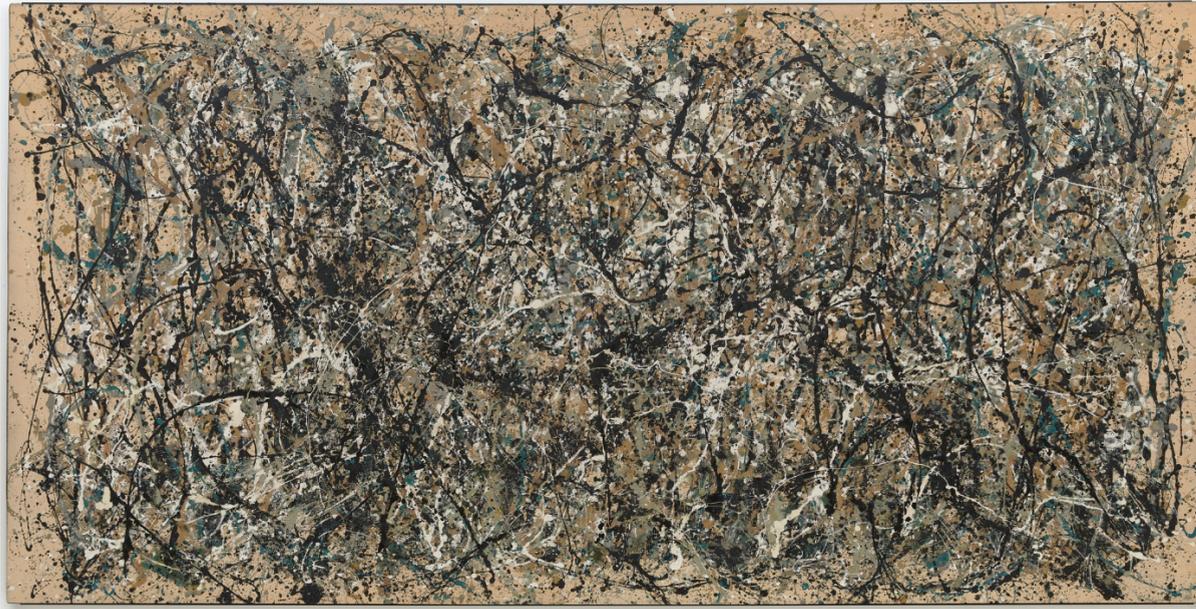
Julian Schnabel
Blue Nude with a Sword, 1979
 oil, plates, and bondo on wood
 96 x 108 x 13 inches (243.84 x 274.32 x 33.02 cm)
 Courtesy Galerie Bruno Bischofberger, Männedorf-Zurich, Switzerland

that make a spectacle. First, one sees the expanse of their boisterous surface. The paintings have wonderful bravura. The surfaces look physically quite turbulent. As we will see a lot is going on there, with a lot of stuff. That makes the surface restless and adventurous. They also seem impatient. Julian is an eager painter who cannot wait to finish a painting. Such urgency increases the restlessness of their appearance.

There is a poem by Wordsworth about a leech-gatherer wading in dark water on the moor. This is how it begins: “There was a roaring in the wind all night / The rain came heavily and fell in floods.”² The setting of the poem is a sober landscape under gray skies. Together the stormy weather and the steadiness of the rain becomes an image that quietly unfolds itself. It is wide as a landscape with a dark sound in the middle of it. That image (so simple) helped me to understand that the essence of these paintings’ surfaces is their restless turbulence. Imagine for example: gurgling water,

after a sudden downpour, slithering between the gray stones of a cobbled street and streaming downward to the narrow bridge over the bursting river. The image is noisy to look at and comes to life as a slow cataract. Then the bubbling lava-like flow slows down and stops. The choppy surface becomes hard ground. That is what I see. Of course this piece of narrative does not describe the imagery of an actual Schnabel plate painting. He is not a story-telling painter. His paintings create particular turbulences and visual disruption. The paintings’ imagery grows from the material condition of the surface—preparing the spectacle. In Julian’s case that condition is dense, abrupt, interrupted. They do not flow. They are rugged and heavy and hard.

What I found troubling in 1982 was this roughness of surface and all the unpredictable asymmetries that they caused in the painting. Mainstream modernist painting (an American invention if ever there was one) was smooth and diaphanous. That was the melancholic legacy of the spatial transparency created by the slender swirls of color that Master Pollock arranged in the whiteness of a blank canvas. In that volatile web of traces, colors came miraculously to life. The surface is so light because the colors were not put on the canvas by the pressure of a brush. Instead, when poured, the drops of paint were left to fall and float and find their way to the canvas (on the floor) by their own light weight. These paintings were brilliant. Their abstractness was wonderful. They were wide and big and majestic as slow clouds high in the sky. In American art they became the standard of quality and style—so one understands why the thick, heavy surfaces of Julian’s paintings were provocative. They threatened an already marvelous art. As I said, in 1982 I had begun to argue with the paintings because I felt that, by being so rough, they threatened other art. That is what art historians sometimes do when they must come to terms with *sudden*, blunt, new painting. So one looks at those paintings which had never been seen before with the general state of affairs in art in one’s mind. Julian constructed and created abrupt visual turmoil on heavy and rough surfaces. That I could see—and now I wanted to find out how those blunt paintings related to the *general* development in current Modernism. I had noticed of course that the surfaces of modernist paintings were physically discreet and smooth—to not



Jackson Pollock (1912-1956) *One: Number 31, 1950*. 1950. Oil and enamel paint on canvas, 106 x 209 ⁵/₈ inches (269.5 x 530.8 cm). Sidney and Harriet Janis Collection Fund (by exchange)
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disturb the fluent flow of shape and luminous color. I wanted to *explain things*, but forgot that an artist at work is not at all concerned with the state of art *in general*. That is art that already exists. Julian in his studio, however, was looking for a painting that had never been made before. Nothing less. There are no rules for new painting. Maybe there is an instinct. Ezra Pound said: “Make it new.” To obey that sacred command, the artist must first find a brutal and irreversible intervention in current practice. What then? Surely the first decision, when he begins, is how to make the basic surface: size, shape, physical conditions and in what ways to use it. To make his painting new, Jackson Pollock decided on large canvases that he loosely laid down on the floor. That decision was daring and brilliant. Then, at that reckless moment, it changed painting completely. Pollock’s move confronted painting’s traditional habits. Also thinking maybe of the reckless Pollock (there is a kinship in temperament), Julian’s answer to Pound was resolute: *make it heavy*. That is how his art became outrageous.

These paintings were visually sturdy from the beginning. Their large surfaces were on panels of wood as they had to carry the weight and volume of their figuration. How the surface (*The Death of Fashion*, 1978, Plate 2) is constructed is decisive for how compact the images will look. Earlier the words “expressionism” and even “bombastic” were used for their appearance. But these heavy images cannot be produced by sway or florid movement of brush. The materials are too resistant. The paintings are constructed with exactly the slowness that was required for these materials. So we also must look at them with slow care. It requires attention to see their turmoil and to appreciate how carefully they were built. The essential source of the loose pattern of their lively look are of course the earthenware plates, in various fragmented shapes of brokenness, that Julian employed to obstruct the smoothness of the surface. One material condition leads to another decision. To secure and fix the plates on the surface, he used a commercial putty called Bondo, as glue. The pieces of plate were fitted and pressed into layers of thick paste. The stuff hardened like frozen ground. At some point in the making of the painting color was added with oil paint. Against a darker ground of color the shards of plate, usually white, form an irregular pattern of *interruptions*. The figuration in the painting, where that happens, somehow emerges from between and among the intervals that have grown between the shattering of plates. Then more color is added. The plates and fragments of plates obstruct the *fluency* of the surface. The pattern looks sometimes stiff and then also the figuration (*Blue Nude with a Sword*, 1979, Plate 6) can seem crude and awkward. That happens when an artist with heroic determination begins to force his manner of painting towards the unknown. Even stranger shapes could come to life.

Here ends the sermon.

¹James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (New York: Penguin Group, 1999), 627

²William Wordsworth, *Resolution and Independence*, 1807



PLATE 1

The Patients and the Doctors, 1978
oil, plates, and bondo on wood
96 x 108 x 12 inches (243.84 x 274.32 x 30.48 cm)
Courtesy the Artist