

Taken together, Julian Schnabel's canvases are a garden illuminated by perception, which is all Gertrude Stein's "Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose" was about—how we look at what we look at, how to make seeing into words. Schnabel's masterly Rose Paintings series, executed in 2015–17, are blooms that will never die on the vine, let alone the vine of thought. The works are a description of the ephemeral—flowers as forces in nature that expire to blossom again. By using materials meant to last—oil, paint, Bondo on wood—Schnabel creates concrete forms out of that which is meant to return to the ground. In these works, he excavates flowers, those captives of time that die with time, and makes them timeless, in pictures that draw on nature to make of it what the artist will—and does. Schnabel makes paintings that are illustrative of his nature.

The artist first attracted widespread attention more than three decades ago for work that was unlike anything else, because the Brooklyn-born Schnabel's point of view has always been unlike anyone else's. His eye is a rose. In paintings ranging from *Self Portrait in Andy's Shadow* (1987) to the *Untitled (Chinese Paintings)* series (initiated in 2003), the creator worked in a tradition that could not be readily identified because it was his own, an outgrowth of his soul.

Like flowers that cannot be classified, the Rose paintings come at you from different angles. One painting looks at the roses a little from the left, some are more centered—all of which goes to show how one's view of a thing can change the thing being observed; our perceptions change paintings, just as paint changes blank canvas. When we look up, the sky tells a different story every time we blink our eyes. As our vision shifts from moment to moment, art and nature can and often do change, too. Paintings and nature demand our vision—the

better to complete them. Little is made these days of the transcendentalist spirit in art, that ineffable process by which one's interiority casts its light on a patch of green to make roses grow in the mind. Like Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman before him, Schnabel's project has always been, it seems to me, to describe how his body, his "I," exists in relation to nature, especially as rendered through an artificial means—painting. The Rose Paintings not only reflect the artist's interest in nature, artistic form, and where the two interconnect, but also the history of art, the bodies and the stories that make it up.

Schnabel's flowers are very specific; they are roses in memoriam, inspired by those near Vincent van Gogh's grave in Auvers-sur-Oise, a town in the northwestern suburbs of Paris. Van Gogh went there to live after a spell in an asylum in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence. (His stay in the sanitarium was of course precipitated by the famous ear-cutting incident.) For a time, there was hope for Van Gogh in that good and safe place. His beloved brother and champion, the art dealer Theo van Gogh, lived nearby, as did Dr. Gachet, a physician who was sensitive to Van Gogh's needs. While in Auvers-sur-Oise, Van Gogh completed a number of portraits, including his deep and remarkable painting of Dr. Gachet and some pictures driven by narrative, too, such as 1890's *White House at Night*. In those and other works, one can see what Schnabel might have found in Van Gogh's roses, or how he wanted to render Van Gogh's roses: by emphasizing texture. Indeed, texture is one of the hallmarks of Schnabel's style. His expert use of paint, broken crockery, and more paint is a form of writing, a text that speaks to painting itself and the miracles that can grow on the canvas.

I can only imagine why Schnabel was drawn to Van Gogh's roses. As a filmmaker of the first order, he has trained his lens on artists and other figures defined by dispossession or exile,

even from their own body, as is the case with Jean-Dominique Bauby in Schnabel's extraordinary *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*. Released in 2007, that film was a painting, a series of moving images that showed Bauby as he struggled to communicate after suffering a massive stroke. Robbed of his speech, Bauby had his eyes—or, rather eye—do all the talking his mouth could not. Like his work as a painter, *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* is a testament to Schnabel's fascination with how best to represent layers of consciousness. All of his films have language or artists struggling with language at their center. His first film, *Basquiat* (1996), showed the life of the late artist Jean-Michel Basquiat, whose work was dominated by language. *Before Night Falls* (2000) was about the late Cuban writer Reinaldo Arenas, and Schnabel's most recent, *Miral* (2010), had at its center the problem inherent in translation, the politics of difference. Bauby's eye, like a painter's eye, takes in so much: not only the letters he uses to tell his story, but the beauty and care of the women who surround him, family sadness, loneliness, bursts of life-giving light. Schnabel is an elegist; he commemorates life as something that must, perforce, pass from living to death, but it doesn't sit well with him. He doesn't like the fact that even famous people like Van Gogh, like Bauby, like Arenas may be forgotten if the living don't do the work of interpreting them, remembering them. Of course, Schnabel's roses could be viewed, too, as a kind of corollary to Van Gogh's sunflowers, which are bursting with life. It would have done Schnabel no good to paint sunflowers; they live too deeply in Van Gogh's haunted eyes. The roses near Van Gogh's final resting place lend themselves to interpretation. They are there for the living to feed on, to make up their minds about, just as Schnabel's Rose Paintings are there for our delectation, to make up our minds about the inside and outside of all that history and force and death and memory. Along with paint, these are the tools artists as magisterial as Schnabel need to tell their stories, which, happily, mysteriously, always ends up converging with our own.