INTRODUCTION

SEEING PAINTINGS EVERYWHERE

MAX HOLLEIN

What constitutes a painting? This is the primary question underlying Julian Schnabel's artistic practice. Emerging in the late 1970s from an American artistic tradition that deliberately challenged reigning ideas of surface and form in paintings, the artist has sought to transform the realities and possibilities of the medium: what a painting is, what it can be, and how it can be done.

For Schnabel, the process of painting starts long before any paint is formally applied to the canvas. He begins by devoting acute attention to both his everyday surroundings and the remote places he travels, voyages he takes both out of curiosity and as a genuine expression of openness, sensuality, and excitement. When the artist says, "I see paintings everywhere," he is summarizing this particular condition and its resulting attitude that not only can anything be an inspiration for a painting, anything can be a painting.

Schnabel's paintings frequently reside in pre-existing manifestations whose configurations evince their own logic and integrity. They may be found in a tarp covering a Mexican fruit stand or in something as immaterial as a poem narrated in another language. Rather than inhabiting a rectangular picture plane, the pictorial space within the artist's work is charged and defined by such pre-existing materials' size, shape, and history. For example, Schnabel's encounter with Egyptian felucca sailboats on the Nile River resulted not only in the artist's use of sailcloth as a painting canvas but also in his retaining the size and shape of the original sail and incorporating the name "Jane," already written on one of the sails, into his *Jane Birkin* series of paintings.

Schnabel's painterly practice is one of reacting to particular surfaces—their materiality, shape, color, and narrative—and integrating them into his work or, sometimes, simply drawing attention to them through the process of selection. In one sense, Schnabel does not develop his own personal language as much as locate himself in the language of the everyday; the artist's work constitutes an intensely idiosyncratic selection from this grander lexicon, as he transforms the mundane into something ambiguous, emotionally charged, and overwhelming to the senses.

Schnabel does not paint in the classical sense. Many of his works have minimal or obscure gestures that coalesce into a unique and mysterious painterly language. Digging into his over-five-decade-long oeuvre, one observes him working through questions of paint's physical qualities, paintings' possible surfaces, and how a painting's materiality may trigger different kinds of artistic mark making. Schnabel paints with a stick, with a hose, with cloth, with his hands, responding to and interacting with the contingencies of his surroundings.

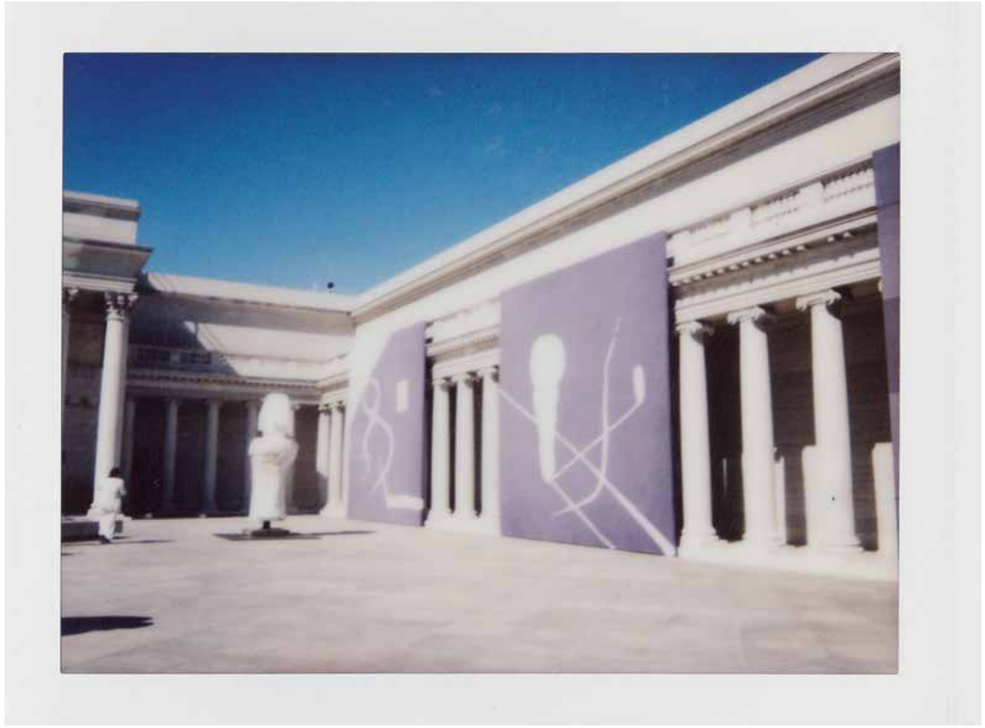
Spontaneity as a creative catalyst and speculation about the nature of perception are at the core of Schnabel's working methods. Dissonance and harmony may inhabit the same picture plane; ambiguity and decisiveness may become synonymous. Painterly marks can be as artificial and inconsistent as they are organic and logical,

as the artist smears color on the canvas in deliberately ambiguous gestures, imperfect by nature. Free of precisionist or calculated formulas, Schnabel's works become receivers for a poetry that is both personal and universal. In his case, intentionally painting the unknowable yields a more faithful representation of experience than any attempt to realistically depict the physical world ever could.

Few artists have a better sense of a particular moment than Schnabel does; his understanding of the feeling, sentiment, or story embedded in a serendipitously encountered object or idea is nearly unparalleled. Banal objects, randomly uttered words, vague notations on a wall, even constellations in the sky: all carry a sensuality, a poetry, that he can use, absorb, and express via painting. Neither the artist himself nor his work hides behind a shield of cynicism or aloofness. Rather they prod us, asking us to notice the world around us and to open ourselves to the ways it unfolds.

Some artists consider an artwork finished when it leaves their studio. Other artists understand that a work's display and spatial context can function as a dynamic and integral part of its ongoing evolution. Schnabel embraces this latter position, even taking it to extremes by designing a show for a particular building or emotionally charged spatial environment. Sometimes, as in the case of the artist's exhibition at the Legion of Honor, his artworks become infused with their experience of a particular site and their exposure to the environment there. Such histories are not merely a patina applied to the works' surfaces but a fundamental expansion of their capacities. Like dramatic plays with various interpretations that can be staged in different surroundings, Schnabel's works transform in such circumstances, revealing previously unseen facets of themselves in response to new conceptual filters and physical settings.

Exhibiting his works in places ranging from white-cube galleries and major museums to historic sites such as the Cuartel del Carmen, in Seville, the Tabakalera, in San Sebastián, Spain, or the Palazzo Venezia, in Rome, Schnabel appreciates how unique or unfamiliar architectures can bestow an additional layer of interpretation onto a painting. In such installations, voices intersect, as paintings are placed in concert with other elements. Not every artwork could



stand up to such a challenge. Schnabel's paintings do, not only enduring such conditions but evolving and growing because of them. Rather than inhabiting a flat plane, they possess a sense of presence, volume, and spatial complexity; they are not windows onto other worlds but objects within our own. Given their size, shape, and materiality, they are by definition architectural—works of significant physicality whose human scale initiates a relationship with the viewer that is enveloping and encompassing in nature.

As a painter with a sophisticated understanding of architecture and design, Schnabel is concerned with the emotional and historical quality of the spaces his works are installed in. He is interested in the specific moments where the locations dwell and in their continued existence as sites of memory and substance. He is most drawn to those spaces of unique physical integrity and beauty where time appears to stand still, places that exhale the dust of history but are still relevant to the contemporary moment.

Upon being asked what is the most difficult type of building to design, the pioneering modernist architect Mies van der Rohe replied, "A church and a bar." Such structures are not as different as they may seem. When well designed, both are defined by the impact of their architecture on their human inhabitants, an effect that goes beyond the merely physical to include the emotional and spiritual realms. It can be said that all of Schnabel's creations—whether paintings, sculpture, photography, movies, or design—aspire to the same heights of atmospheric experience. As the incantation of prayers in a cathedral or the chatter of customers in a cozy bar animate their respective environments, Schnabel's works introduce a depth of feeling and spirit to the places they inhabit.

In Schnabel's case, the osmosis between a painting and its surroundings can be understood as an extension of the technique of assemblage. Speaking of his practice of including objects in his paintings, Schnabel said, "Using already existing materials establishes a level of ethnography in the work; it brings a real place and time into aesthetic reality." The same could be said of his tendency to

exhibit his work in sites with strong physical and historical auras: such locations impart a sense of lived experience and time's ongoing passage to the works installed there.

Since the beginning of his career, Schnabel has been a "traveler." He is an artist who journeys to places far-flung and nearby in search of inspiration and authenticity. In his book *CVJ*, he recounted his travels through Italy and the profound impact that seeing Giotto's frescoes in Padua had on him. But Schnabel's meaningful encounters are not limited to his experiences with the works of Renaissance masters: he brings back memories, objects, and moments from all of his travels, whether to India, Mexico, or to the restaurant next door. Elements from these experiences inform his paintings' geographies and meanings, forging a link between them and the surrounding world that is both explicitly artificial and effortlessly authentic.

Proceeding in this vein, Schnabel's paintings can be considered complete only when they are situated within their intended surroundings. Just as the artist incorporates diverse materials—pottery, antlers, pieces of wood and felt—into his paintings, he draws on extraordinary locations to instill meaning in his works, using charged items that suggest their own rich, place-based histories: Kabuki theater backdrops, weathered tarpaulins, the fabric floors of boxing rings.

Through this process, Schnabel's paintings cease to play a passive role; instead they modify their surroundings while acting as an integral component of them. Real and pictorial space intersect and become one. This dynamic is central to Schnabel's work, thus he carefully selects his exhibition sites with an eye toward finding the most rewarding environment, despite its potential challenges. It may be a major historical building or an intimate restaurant, a palazzo or a run-down tennis court, a public hotel or the artist's own apartment. His desire is to dramatize every element of the experience: the artist, the artwork, the viewer, and the architecture.

Schnabel's choice of site often reflects his interest in resurrecting the dignity and function of a particular space. In such a case, an exhibition of his paintings may be concerned with the potential of both the artworks and the space itself. Locations forgotten by the local community, rooms misused or misunderstood, places seemingly destined for change or demolition: such spaces can be uncovered, reused, reformulated, and revitalized through the interventions of an artist such as Schnabel. Such acts can effect a revised understanding of a neglected location and foster renewed excitement toward its history, potential, and contemporary relevance.

Ultimately, Schnabel is an extraordinary transformer—an artist who sees history in the everyday and the extraordinary in the familiar. Such a perspective makes itself known in a body of work that necessarily embraces the mythic and the symbolic, an art that traffics in allusion, association, and imagination. Even when Schnabel's paintings are at their most abstract, they are rich with content, history, and emotion. Conceived in relation to and expertly installed within its eventual environment, Schnabel's work evokes a multisensory experience, one emotional and physical, encompassing the viewer, the painting, and the architecture alike.