

Julian
Schnabel

Forest on forest
hung about his head /
like cloud on cloud

RUDI FUCHS

In 1982 Julian Schnabel was the most famous absent artist in *documenta 7*, down the road from Derneburg, in Kassel. I was artistic director of that exhibition—and it is time now to tell and explain what happened.

We began planning our show in 1979. As the traditional name of the enterprise indicates, the exhibition was simply meant to periodically document the state of art. In post-war Germany there was a particular urgency to show modern and contemporary art. During the Nazi period all of it was declared *entartet* and had been suppressed. The damaged nation had to be returned to a normal cultural life as well. So the very first *documenta*, in 1955, had been a survey of the great modern art that had not yet been seen in the new *Bundesrepublik*—an elegiac commemoration with such iconic artists as Picasso, Matisse, Schwitters, Chagall, Beckmann, Mondrian, Kandinsky, Mirò. They were joined by younger contemporaries: Nay, Vedova, Arp, Soulages, Hartung, Moore, Lehmbruck. Only at the second *documenta* in 1959 did Pollock, Newman, Kline and other Americans quietly enter the scene. By the

time we had to figure out a narrative for our show, the balance of power had changed—too much towards America. Many young European artists felt neglected. You have to be twice as good as an American, someone said, to be considered his equal. I had been appointed because I had promised an exhibition that would redress that situation.

For people of my generation (I was forty in 1982) the American hegemony, as we used to call it, had for a while been quite acceptable. During the sixties and seventies it was normal in Holland that the major museums would devote a lot of attention to American art. By the time we began to discuss our *documenta*, most of the notable American artists had been shown in personal exhibitions. Their works had been acquired by Dutch museum collections. (Most ironically: Julian Schnabel himself had a great one-man show at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in the early spring of 1982—only months before he was omitted from the *documenta*.) There was a logic in all this. As long as one measures (as we did) the development of art by notable leaps of

dramatic and radical change, it was obvious that most of the changes had been effected in America. That could not be ignored. New York was an energetic metropolis. So, how it happened I cannot explain: first we all admired American art for its newness—then, almost overnight, we became suspicious and began to resent its authoritarian attitude. Enough arrogance. How and why had this strange antagonism come about, America *vs.* Europe? The more our suspicion towards America grew, the more we felt that America ignored contemporary European art. In the seventies, and before, many European museums had welcomed American art because they had decided that in their collections of European art room should be made for the work of the new artists from across the Atlantic. That was the proper thing to do if one believes (as one should) in cultural diversity. But almost nothing of the kind, one noticed, happened reciprocally in American museums. They were abundantly filled, of course, with Picasso and Matisse and much more—with artists that were born well before Pollock. They were no

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threat. To the American art community the emergence of Pollock meant that America now finally had its very own art that was as good as anything else. In the writing of the astute critic Clement Greenberg one could periodically read that the new American-type painting, as he called it, was fresh, adventurous and superior. Compared to it, most European art looked pale and tired. The strange thing is that some young European artists at the time felt the same. The painter Karel Appel told me how strongly he had sensed the scale and the wideness of America, once he had arrived in New York in 1956. Immediately his paintings became bigger, offering literally more space for more expansive brushwork.

From the moment that America had its own independent art, it began to focus mainly on itself. At the same time we in Europe also praised American art for what we saw as its character: radical, fresh, straightforward, matter-of-fact. Just as Americans are, we said. We loved American art. There was no antagonism. To our surprise, in 1964





Robert Rauschenberg was awarded the grand prize at the Venice Biennial. There was some commotion in the press but the other likely candidates, such as Emilio Vedova or Antoni Tàpies, took their loss with good grace. That the jury chose Rauschenberg in preference to Tàpies was actually quite fitting. Tàpies was the painter in Europe who had made the picture surface rough and heavy and dramatic—yet within the gentle esthetic of *art informel*; but Rauschenberg was just rougher and more insolent. He did not stand in awe of tradition. Though most Europeans were unable to do the same, they loved the Americans for doing it.

In the early eighties *Artforum* invited me to contribute an article on the nature and identity of European art. So I began taking notes, how to go about such a vast subject—until it dawned upon me that the very question, European art, was an utterly American question. Only from across the Atlantic would they see the continent as a single cultural area. We see Germany and Denmark and Poland and Belgium and France and

Spain and Austria and England and Ireland and Italy and Holland. Within Italy the Venetians see themselves as different from the Tuscans or the Romans or the Neapolitans or the Milanese. In the minutiae of the history of Italian art the diversities between the different schools were all there to be seen. One finds such regional distinctions in any European country. To the editor of *Artforum* I then communicated that I was unable to write on the characteristics of European art. The theme was too undefined. I offered to write on the nature of the question but he declined. He had no doubts, it seems, about the relevance of the question. Typically American, I thought, no doubts. This happened shortly after the *documenta* but it reflected things I had experienced well before. More and more Americans, I felt, began to regard European art as some vague indistinct area of curious production. I felt they were unwilling to look seriously at our historical and regional complexities. We in Europe saw American art as first an offspring from European art—that then, gloriously, had come into its own. I regarded American

art, from Pollock onward, as an important expansion of our joint tradition—and I was convinced that many American artists brought a necessary radical energy to art that was invigorating. But I could not accept suggestions that the quality of American art was simply universal or that the American version of Modernism is globally normative. In 1991 I gave a small lecture in Michael Werner's gallery in New York. There I mentioned a story that the son of Sidney Janis had heard from his father: that the young Pollock had been aware of the late paintings of Mondrian (made in New York) and that he had even been to see them in old master's studio. I was well aware that this story cannot be corroborated—yet I hazarded the suggestion that seeing pictures such as *Victory Boogie-Woogie*, in which Mondrian's usual order ended up so fragmented, may have helped Pollock on his way to the drip-paintings some years later. But some in my audience of knowledgeable Americans protested loudly. The appearance of Pollock's drip-paintings had been a cardinal moment in American art. Not quite the Declaration of Independence

but in artistic matters just as seminal. I know that, but the protesters seemed to maintain that these paintings came about by Immaculate Conception and that such a great American moment must surely be untainted by anything European. Later I spent some time with Donald Judd in his place in Switzerland. Judd had once angered the European art community by saying that all art in Europe was minor, with the possible exception of Yves Klein. Now he was older and more philosophical. We were talking about the Swiss abstract-geometric painter Richard Paul Lohse whom we both knew and whose work he had begun to appreciate. *But you know,* he said, *I should have liked him earlier. However then we were so much involved with ourselves that I just took him for granted. That was wrong. We should have given him much more credit.*

I speak about Americans but that is ambiguous. Who are they? Museum people, critics, collectors, dealers, artists? I do not know. The painter Karel Appel told me about his friendship with Franz Kline and Willem DeKooning, in New York in the later fifties. There was no

antagonism then, they were all struggling. In my time many young American artists were always on the move in Europe for shows in galleries and museums. Of course they mingled with their European peers. We met in restaurants and bars and in studios. Paradoxically, they often said they felt more appreciated in the free and unorthodox atmosphere of European cultural life than in America. They liked the work of their European colleagues with whom they shared similar ideas and attitudes. Yet, even if nobody wanted it to happen, there still grew this pervasive feeling that American art was superior and more modern than anything else. For a while we in Europe believed it too. One could feel it in small absurd things: the parties for an American artist, after the opening of a museum show, were always slightly grander than they otherwise would have been. Why were we all so irritated? I think that for a while we truly believed that the American art scene was more dynamic. We wanted our best artists to join in and be part of the energy. I wanted their works in American museum collections as much as

American works were in our museums. But why? *That is simple*, someone said, *it is the most powerful country in the world. The artistic centre and the biggest market.* For convenience we were forgetting that in Europe things were not better. America, we thought, might be superior—but many European artists frequently showed in New York commercial galleries and some of them in museums as well. Towards its own artists America was certainly patriotic. How was it in Italy? In Italian museums foreign artists were hardly ever accepted. It is better now—but the first foreign artists to be accepted were Americans. It was the same in Belgium and France and Spain and England and Germany and everywhere else, Holland included. We knew all this and accepted it as the usual European condition: that the appreciation of art is always tinged with nationalism. But everywhere in Europe, American art had attained a status of unique preference, as real international art. Was it better art?

Such was the situation when we began discussions about our *documenta*. Surveying the scene one could see, for instance, that excellent

artists had emerged in Europe who had left the broad mainstream of international Modernism—and found roots and connections in what used to be called regional traditions. It was inevitable that this should happen and that it should be acknowledged. The resurgence, in European art, of regional inspirations had not come overnight—nor did it come as some reaction against America. It began already in the early sixties and in the case of Arnulf Rainer or Joseph Beuys even earlier. It came from various directions but most strikingly from Germany and from Italy. This is not the place to recall the history of how the art of Georg Baselitz or A. R. Penck found its vital excentric expression, or the work of Iannis Kounellis or Mario Merz—and all those around them. That history is by now well-known. For a while those new developments took place under the shadow of international (or American) Modernism. For the many observers who passionately believed in Modernism as the mainstream style, myself among them, it was at first difficult to acknowledge what was going on. Esthetic habits are tenuous.

I remember seeing for the very first time, in 1975, some raw black paintings by Anselm Kiefer. I found no way to respond to them. It took time to adjust to their utter differentness. The same happened with Kounellis. Then I began to understand that more was happening there than just another shift in style. Obviously these artists had found sources of inspiration that had led them to their profoundly different expressions. Once this was clear, that this new art from Europe was establishing itself with undeniable power, then the position of American art also changed: it became an alternative. Precisely that new relevant balance of power between two artistic practices became the central narrative of our documentary exhibition.

Because our narrative was also an argument, we wanted a precisely constructed show in which the different artistic positions would be fairly selected and carefully installed—in such a way that the positions would meet, face-to-face as it were, and could be compared. The idea was to force comparison between works of artists that previously had

only be shown separately, each in his own esthetic niche. There was, for instance, Markus Lüpertz matched with Carl Andre and Alan Charlton. Such pairings were altogether instinctive—and based on visual judgment. The show was almost entirely such a suggestive *mise-en-scène* of comparisons. Each work of art was to be brought into a situation where it could proudly proclaim its unique individuality.

So what happened with Julian Schnabel? It is paradoxical: I considered his work as eccentric in our show's context. In order to give our argument maximum clarity we choose American protagonists whose work moved well within the broad mainstream flow of American art—from Judd to Ryman, Nauman to Andre, Oldenburg to Ed Ruscha. I now realize, in retrospect, that in my mind and sensibility I probably was still too much concerned with which American artists were actually real and the most representative ones. We had invited the then eccentric artists from Europe (including emerging ones: Cucchi or Clemente or Barcelò or Daniëls or Dahn) but also the more "modernist" contempo-

raries of the eccentric ones (artists such as Richter, Buren, Long, Dibbets) and then the prime choice of rather typical Americans. At this point I have a small anecdote to tell. In the late seventies the wonderful conceptual artist Robert Barry came to see me in the museum in Eindhoven—in connection with his exhibition. There were one or two paintings by Penck on view. He disliked them intensely. He even found it difficult to see them as serious art. I remember he compared them to clumsy student painting in provincial American art schools. What he meant, I think, was that he could not accept that art in its formal and physical formulation should ever look back. That is what he felt with Penck. Art should forever aim for the uncompromising new. It should be relentlessly new: that was a very strong sentiment with many artists in America. Penck was delving into the bygone muck of history.

Finally came the question: what to do with those young Americans: Basquiat, Salle, Schnabel—who were then such hot news? When I occasionally mentioned our difficulty to a passing American artist some of





the reactions were surprising. They were, it was suggested, another generation, so different in attitude, so colourful and dandy. Why the hell expressionistic painting? This should have alerted me of course. Maybe it did: in the end, after much discussion, it was decided we would invite Basquiat and David Salle but not Julian Schnabel. The objections against Schnabel were strong and sometimes bitter. Somehow they were right: Schnabel was certainly the most outrageous painter of the three. In Basquiat one could sense a poetic and naïve sweetness, and the paintings of Salle played with cool conceptual artifice. They were clever. Salle came from the distinguished lineage of Lichtenstein and Jasper Johns whereas the raw and undisciplined Schnabel brought the wild Rauschenberg to mind. It is not unlikely that deep down we still felt that, with Americans, Modernist decorum and stylishness were the qualities to be observed. In that context the exuberant paintings of Schnabel were extremely unsettling. The misgivings of some of his older contemporaries were understandable. Even with all his glamorous

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renown, he was a dangerous outsider. I should have credited that position. At the time, however, the rough disorder one sensed in his paintings made me uneasy. Of course I should have remembered why, in Venice in 1964, Rauschenberg and not Tàpies got the big prize: because in creating those heavy, loaded, dramatic surfaces he was so much tougher. He was the artist who in all aspects of art, such as scale and exuberance and theatricality, went for the extreme—without fear or second thoughts. In the late seventies the young Schnabel at least matched that recklessness with his plate paintings. They were truly bewildering but I distrusted their spectacle. In the early eighties the vanguard of American art (the artists in our exhibition) had reached, it seemed to me, a fine moment of High Style. As a young critic and then a young museum director in Eindhoven I had grown up with these artists. I might have felt protective towards them. We had also chosen to bring that generation in close contact with their European contemporaries—Baselitz, Polke, Kounellis, Merz, and the rest of them. That was the

central narrative. I thought (wrongly of course) that the abundant paintings of Schnabel would be a disturbing distraction.

In the years following, one saw his paintings around. They were always startling. Then I began to like them more and more because slowly I had found access to the high tragic sentiment that vibrates in his art—and that also led to his film-making. That sentimental pathos is there, as a manner of expression, and you must accept it. A growing familiarity with artists such as Jannis Kounellis, Bruce Nauman and Jörg Immendorff (or much later Damien Hirst and Tracey Emin) made me realize that human sentiment and an awareness of the history in the world, vague as these things may be, can play a defining rôle in making such compelling, passionate tense art. As students we were educated to be suspicious of heavy sentiment in art. You can only see what you see, I was told—but how could one see, in the late self-portraits of Rembrandt, that the artist had a deep understanding of the soul and of human suffering? Such things were only said, we were told, when

the art historian was at a loss for words. We were supposed to analyze a painting: its formal and colouristic construction, how it was put together—aspects one could actually see, not those one believed or liked to see. From an art historical point of view, observing stylistic formalities, one could easily first interpret the art of Bruce Nauman as some brilliant deconstruction of Minimal Art strategies, thus keeping the whole thing nice and distant: the artist cleverly playing with formal complexities. But when one, as I did, spend time in studios (though not the one of Nauman), one began to develop some insight into the emotional nervousness of art-making. One understands that the intensity of Nauman's art cannot be just produced from formal play. Then one misses the point: that there is, in his work, an unsettling closeness to aspects of physical violence and aggression. That is what makes the work so relentless and menacing. Certainly it was not just a cool decision to locate his work in this particular emotional context. His private emotional response to certain human behaviour led him there—or his

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own emotions brought him very close to the emotions that form the narratives in this work. Ezra Pound said that Dante's vision of the world was so real because he lived it. So it is with Nauman: such work and such vehemence cannot just be invented.

Once, in a university lecture, I came to speak about Bruce Nauman and Damien Hirst and in order to clarify the sentimental nature of their art I compared it with Caravaggio's darkest, most terrible altarpiece, the *Beheading of St John the Baptist*, in the Cathedral of La Valetta, Malta. It is a big painting (360 × 520 centimeters) that dramatically occupies the entire end wall of a chapel. The martyrdom is terrifying. It mainly takes place in the lower left part of the picture. Young Salome bends forward holding the golden plate on which the severed head is to be carried back into the feast. The old servant is putting her hands to her head in despair and horror. The bored, indifferent jailer points to the plate as if to command the executioner to hurry up—for something has gone horribly wrong. The executioner had failed to cut off

the head with a single swing of the sword. John is not dead yet but lying prostrate on the cold stone floor of the jail, the sword next to him. Now the executioner, standing over his victim, roughly pushes John's head down on the floor while, at the same time, pulling a knife from his belt. To get the bloody job done, he is going to slit John's throat, like a hog being butchered. From a window on the right two men coolly watch the scene. A trickle of blood is flowing from John's wounded neck—and in (and with) that red paint Caravaggio signed his name, the only time he ever signed a picture.

The *mise-en-scène* of this painting, the way the story is told, is unique. We cannot know how, when it was unveiled in 1608, its audience reacted. To my students I suggested that they should look how in Bruce Nauman's grim macabre piece, *Carousel*, bleak aluminum casts of dead animals are turning around and around. The casts turn around in utter silence. Only when they bump into each other there is a dry clinking sound which only makes the silence more ominous. That

silence could give them, possibly, an intimation of the horror in Caravaggio's painting. For the great artistic aspect of that picture is not the gory killing that is going on—it is the wide dark space that the master has left around and above the scene. That menacing space is what created the drama, and the sinister coldness of that space—as cold and unmoved as the space of the glass container in which the dead sheep is floating in Damien Hirst's *Away from the Flock*. The terror in Caravaggio was being reformulated in these terrifying contemporary works. That is how new art keeps old art alive. Terror is eternal.

Exercises like these, looking closely at these three different artworks, taught me something essential about the art of Julian Schnabel. I remember seeing his show in 1996 at Pace Wildenstein, New York, of the *Paolo Malfi* paintings. I had always wondered why many of his pictures were so big.

With the Caravaggio in mind I began to understand. The artist Paolo Malfi had been Schnabel's friend and he had died. The set of

pictures was painted in his memory: they were mournful. They were strangely disjuncted orchestrations of shapes, evoking the soul of the dead one—dense shapes of colour floating in a deep wide space. That is why these paintings have to be big. Not to show off, as I might have thought before, but to create an echoing space, literally, for the great lamentation, the sentiment, that Schnabel had to let loose. Room for the lamentation to reverberate as in the painting of Caravaggio—or as in a requiem mass the music slowly gains volume and then soars upwards to spread out into the high vaults of the church.

In early 2004 I went to see Julian Schnabel's show at the Schirn Kunsthalle in Frankfurt. I had seen a previous exhibition in 1996 in Bologna. Because of the installation there, as I remember, in grey, dimly-lit, small cubicle-like spaces, one was very close to the paintings. One could easily concentrate on single works which was just as well, as my interest there and then was for Schnabel's actual painting—the craft, the brushwork, the intricacies of shapes and lines, subtleties of colour.



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Julian Schnabel,
Golgotha (Jacqueline at 104 Degrees), 1980
2 panels, oil on velvet, 90 × 68"
(229 × 173 cm)



Julian Schnabel, *The Unexpected
Death of Blinky Palermo in the Tropics*, 1981
Oil on velvet, 116 × 164"
(295 × 417 cm)

It was time to disregard the theatre and the pathos and scrutinize the surface where, after all, a painting comes to life. There were two pictures I knew best because they were in the museum in Amsterdam: one was called *Golgotha (Jacqueline at 104 Degrees)* and the other one *The Unexpected Death of Blinky Palermo in the Tropics*. They were made only a year apart, in 1980 and 1981, yet the pictorial surface was different between them. *Golgotha* offers a wide view. The painting is mostly very dark blue velvet. In this very silent colour of the night four slender T-shapes appear, different in height and depth, painted with slow ceremony. Among that stately rhythm of posts and cross beams we see narrow rectangular shapes in clear bright yellow (one is black) — floating up and down, majestically, while the fluttering of other smudges, patchy and white, is more erratic. Most elements in the painting behave rather solemnly. Solemn as well is the soft velvet. The subtitle refers to Jacqueline, the artist's wife being seriously ill with a high fever. Once that reference is in one's mind it will not go away and then it sets conditions on how

to look at the picture. I reflect on its wonderful serene sparseness. Unusual for Schnabel (whose art was notorious for material opulence) *Golgotha* is thinly painted, held-back, and without clamour. The slow silent brushwork, it seems to me, is the form in which the content of the painting is formulated—like the cadence of a voice speaking a line of poetry, also giving form and resonance. The sparse restrained painting is like a prayer or a supplication. That sentiment is written out in the carefully employed brushwork and in the brushwork's very controlled rhythm. Many strokes are drawn-out and sustained. The white patchy shapes are austere—so is their formulation in paint. Their solemnity is the more striking as one then looks at the densely entangled display of very active brushstrokes in the *Blinky Palermo* painting. They are short, pliant, decisive. They easily switch colour. With this fluency they evoke a blurry convoluted space like a jungle of knotted smears and curls of dark colour—in which faces (almost masks) appear or maybe disappear. Is that the main intended effect?

The point to make, though, is that Julian Schnabel in two different paintings, with different subjects, effectively employs two different systems of brushwork—as a composer chooses the proper musical key and tempo that will fit the music. In fact these aspects, tempo and key, are next to melody the essential formative elements in the music's performance. When in Bologna I went from cubicle to cubicle, looking closely (as I did at *Golgotha*), and I discovered an array of systems of expression, each of them in a particular atmospheric mode. Other modern artists have abruptly switched between modes as well. Sigmar Polke comes to mind yet in his case it was about stylistic caprice—he likes to mock the high seriousness of painting. Most painters, when they switch subject, still maintain their style. Think of Cézanne doing still life or mountains or bathers—but the obsession was to do them strictly in his manner. In that sense manner, for painters, was never a straightjacket or a limitation (not even for Mondrian). It is something one gradually develops and as it becomes more refined and malleable the painter set-

bles into it, comfortably and confident. Over time it may change again, take a somewhat different course because the artist feels a necessity for change. Art historians point to Rembrandt changing maybe more than anybody else—doing away with superfluous ornamentation, finding shortcuts in formulation. He was looking for sober intimacy. The difference, however, between an early and a late Rembrandt is never as big as the difference between *Golgotha* and *Blinky Palermo*. In Schnabel's art, apparently, the telling of stories with sentiment and pathos is a driving motivation for making paintings. That is why he changes modes of expression as the painting requires it. In Frankfurt the pictures were installed in two or three long galleries. One could see them grouped together: rows of grand spectacles.

Once more I recall the Caravaggio altarpiece in the cathedral of Malta. With what I have learned about Schnabel I recognize how Caravaggio designed the stark somber space of the painting to let it function as a stage in which the grisly event relentlessly unfolded. The austere

economy in the grim storytelling is uncanny. Add to that the theatrical way the painting is installed. It covers the entire end wall of a rather narrow chapel—as high on the wall as the screen in a modern cinema. There are red curtains at both sides that at certain liturgical moments can be closed. Maybe these were added later but they are consistent with the intense dramatic character of the painting's installation. The painting was setting a stage. That is precisely what Schnabel does in his images—that often are also as big as a stage. The Frankfurt show opened, in the downstairs entrance hall of the Kunsthalle, with a vast painting from 1989 in a very commanding position: *Untitled (Treatise on Melancholia)*. It is made of large rectangular pieces of heavy tarpaulin stitched together in such a way that the architectural space of a theatre is suggested. The entire lower vertical stretch of tarpaulin (roughly one-fifth of the total height of the picture) is painted tarry black and represents the base of the stage-construction. On either side a vertical side wing is located; these wings are connected, along the upper edge of the picture, with a

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Julian Schnabel,
Untitled (Treatise on Melancholia), 1989
Oil, gesso on tarpaulin, 180 × 180"
(457 × 457 cm)



Julian Schnabel,
Untitled (Treatise on Melancholia), 1989
Oil, gesso on tarpaulin, 180 × 180"
(457 × 457 cm)

horizontal band of tarpaulin. This leaves the rear backdrop in the centre: horizontal stretches of tarpaulin again. The architectural articulation of this space is subtly enhanced by slight differentiations in the olive-grey dye of the cloth. The space seemed to be filled with diffuse twilight. Then, in this wide and delicate interior, a performance of painting begins to happen. I look at it and think of this: on a Good Friday in the late 1780's the music of Joseph Haydn, *The Seven Last Words of Jesus Christ*, was performed in the cathedral of Cadiz. There is a contemporary description of the event. I quote from memory: *Shortly before noon the altars and the statues of the Saints were covered with black veils. At noon the cathedral doors were closed—and the music began...* I imagine the silence in the church, the softly shuffling feet of the priests the only sound, and then the airy plaintive music. Thus appears in the centre of the painting, horizontally, an elongated white mysterious shape, floating like a ghost (or maybe a thought?). Below it smaller fuzzy black shapes have silently arrived. Other black shapes, smaller still, drift upward to the right. Above all

this there hangs another narrow band of white, slightly curved. Its edges are defined by the torn edges of the pieces of tarpaulin that apparently were fixed there when some white shape was already in place. The one large white shape then floats freely while the other, narrower one appears almost stealthily. Painting being performed, I said. Once, impatiently, I perceived Schnabel's art as boisterous and full of expansive turbulence. Now, particularly looking at this painting, it is the slowness of what is going on that keeps intriguing me. First setting the stage, then the painting begins. Time is an essential aspect of its formulation. One imagines Julian Schnabel actually waiting for these shapes to arrive. When they arrive he paints them attentively, as if they may pass by and do not stop at all. But everything in this painting is static, dormant. In *Hyperion* John Keats saw Saturn sitting *in the shady sadness of a vale*, in utter distress and loneliness, and to project the feeling of dejection he created an image of melancholic and physical weight: *Forest on forest hung about his head / Like cloud on cloud*. This image subtly fits the white



Julian Schnabel,
Untitled (Treatise on Melancholia), 1989
Oil, gesso on tarpaulin, 180 × 180"
(457 × 457 cm)



Julian Schnabel, *Ozymandias*, 1990
Oil, paint, gesso leather, resin on sail material,
156 × 216" (396 × 549 cm)

shapes, cloud on motionless cloud. While looking at paintings or reading poems, garlands of unexpected thoughts and memories intersect in one's head. They are inescapable. The suggestions transmitted in the fine atmospheric interplay of black and white and grey in this painting are irresistible. They may be vague, I have decided not to resist them anymore.

In the paintings of Julian Schnabel imagery also comes together when lines of thought and memory intersect and when images or fragments, magnetically drawn towards each other, begin to thicken. Or a certain poem, in itself a coagulated image, can be the source for a formal plot of a picture. Another great painting I saw in Frankfurt was called *Ozymandias* which, I believe, refers to a famous sonnet with the same title from Percy Bysshe Shelley. Here it is:

*I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone*

*Stand in the desert...Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tells that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed:
And on the pedestal these words appear:
'My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings:
Look upon my works, ye Mighty, and despair!'
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.*

I contemplated the picture as the traveller's tale made me contemplate the scene before him. Essentially I saw the painting come together in two or three movements. It is large wide stage. One shape, on the right,

dominates the scene—a vigorous shape, in white paint, of a sturdy leg. The foot is cut from a piece of canvas and stands firmly on the picture's lower edge as if it was the ground. It has the fawn colour of sand which is the dominant colour of the entire picture space. When seeing this I was amazed at first: since when, in contemporary art, did painters react so literally to visual details in a poem? On the desert sand a trunkless leg. Then, left in the picture, a narrow triangular shape entered the scene from below, wedge-like, off-white—to be met halfway by a tougher and rougher shape in brown. There in the centre then, between the brown shape and the standing leg, a turmoil of paint and blunt hectic brushwork was taking place: brown, yellow, white, blue, mixed-up. In the upper part one saw other blurry shapes floating, in white and red and yellow, unsettled and disconnected—as if in the centre there had been some kind of explosion. Now fragments of an unknown form were flying about and slowly falling down. Among these large shapes one also noticed torn fragments of cloth or parts of torn

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clothes—many on the leg, crumpled into the white paint, but more further away in the painting's agitated space. Across the entire lower part the name *Ozymandias* was written, as an evocative prologue, the letters gradually becoming smaller towards the right.

After discussing these two pictures, I rest my case. One picture is about the sentiment of melancholy—a moody, reflective state of mind historically often associated with artists; the other picture is about the tragedy of hubris, a sculpture too heavy to carry its own weight. It would be too speculative to go into the symbolic implications. The paintings, as grand orchestrations of emotional modes, indentify the narrative and theatrical nature of Schnabel's art: expansive and exuberant and dramatic. But as I surveyed the range of staged pictorial event or performances, on view in Frankfurt, qualifications such as *wild* or *outrageous*, words that I was inclined to use twenty-five years ago, did not come to mind. Yet, as then, somewhat an outsider, I have always, in the famous straightforward matter-of-factness of American painting felt a sense of



restraint—an attitude that is deeply associated with realistic descriptive painting. In abstract painting this attitude exists as well. In the paintings of the great Robert Ryman one can see how closely he keeps to the procedure at hand. The brushstrokes of white paint are as neat and judicious as those of a Dutch Old Master painting the curly petals of a tulip. That is the attitude I mean. Instead, Schnabel makes paintings, or rather resounding images, with no holds barred. His work is the amplification, so to say, of Robert Rauschenberg. Schnabel is unrestrained and sentimental. Whatever grandiose or complex image gets into his head, in whatever emotional mode—he will try to make it: breaking every rule of style and decorum, bending art where it has to go. I can think of only one American artist who is like Schnabel—and that is the poet Ezra Pound. In their loud ecstasy or lamentation, the row of paintings in the long Frankfurt galleries, looked like *Cantos*. To give only an idea of their grand flow of imagery and exalted artistry, why not how they start:

*And then went down to the ship,
Set keel to breakers, forth on the godly sea, and
We set up mast and sail on that swart ship,
Bore sheep aboard her, and our bodies also
Heavy with weeping, and winds from sternward
Bore us onward with bellying canvas,
Circe's this craft, the trim-coifed goddess.
Then sat we amidships, wind jamming the tiller,
Thus with stretched sail, we went over sea till day's end.*