

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

ARTFORUM

Julian Schnabel

Robert Pincus-Witten



*Julian Schnabel, Untitled, 1990, resin and gesso on burlap, 120 x 108"*

Julian Schnabel's "View of Dawn in the Tropics, Paintings, 1989–1990" exhibited twelve large—no, huge—works that reveal yet again that, for this artist, everything is up for grabs. Take, for example, the drop cloths, tarpaulins, and the paint-saturated sailcloths Schnabel used as brushes to spread paint upon his grounds—themselves fashioned from canvas or burlap or what have you—that become, in turn, new grounds or surrogate passages of paint.

For instance, the deeply impressive *Ozymandias*, 1990—at thirteen by eighteen feet, rather the star of the show—recontextualizes a wrung-out rag of paint-saturated sailcloth as both relief element and painted passage smack dab in the middle of the work. The title nods to Shelley's king of kings ("Look upon my works, ye mighty, and despair") and to Cy Twombly, who first cleared a path for Schnabel by incorporating verbal cues, names, and references to poetry in his paintings as a reaction against the associative insufficiency of purely formalist values—abstraction's "not-enoughness," so to speak. Twombly's sanctioning is evident in Schnabel's red, text-infused works of 1990–91 (known as the "Buen Retiro Paintings"), three of which were included here.

There are no demonstrable rules governing the proper constituent features of any painting; Schnabel is driven by a pure *kunstvollen*—his own will to art. The artist works within an open field of options, a space disencumbered of the inhibitions of settled good taste. This has led to a quarter century of carping about his "absence of an editing consciousness," an indurated misprision arising from proscriptions innate to the critical community (the painter's celebrity

notwithstanding, quite another matter entirely). The deep-rooted and abiding bias against Romanticism and Expressionism has resulted in reductive readings of the artist's work.

Schnabel uses seemingly repellent substances: heavy resins, for example, which entomb the occasional bug while still wet and pucker like elephant hide as they age. Such materials transform the art of painting into one of cancellation, of the revoking of the privileges of a once-vaunted methodology of brush and paint. Though such privileges have been voided again and again throughout the postwar period, Schnabel's near-bellicose self-assurance is incomparable in our time to all but that of, say, of Sigmar Polke. Risk big. Win big.

Given the painter's Cookie Monster orality, perhaps it is not so staggering to realize that all but one of these fifteen works were created in a single year, give or take a month or two. I choose as outstanding among them (a choice governed by my own classicizing predilection) three works, all untitled, that were made from the application of resin and gesso to burlap (and recall the outsize gestures of the Maria Callas velvet paintings of 1982). The "best" of these works—not that there really can be such a wonder—incorporate an ejaculatory sprawl, a spurting form reminiscent of a wind-tossed palm frond. In 1990, three of these remarkable paintings were photographed, arrayed one beside the other, on the sands of the artist's Palm Beach, Florida, studio; in that sunny and humid context, "Dawn in the Tropics" is hardly a far-fetched association. In another group of paintings, which feature dark-purple gestures on dank-green tarpaulins—a rather bruised range of color, to say the least—the sense of a dragged and thwarted hue is particularly marked. One such piece features marks mimicking the paw prints of the artist's dog Bingo, a name bringing to mind the aleatory, games of chance.

In the end, there is no confusing Schnabel's work with anyone else's—it is "signaturized" from the outset, perhaps awkward at times, but completely unique and much larger than life—in short, Ozymandian. Indeed, one ought not forget Shelley's dire conclusion: "Nothing beside remains. Round the decay / Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare / The lone and level sands stretch far away."